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THE CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS. ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA WAR IN UKRAINE 2014-2022

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of the Internet changed society and led to the emergence of new technologies such as social media platforms. They offer opportunities for data exchange at such a level, unimaginable before the information era. At the same time, the anonymity of online users opens new silent back doors for those who want to disrupt society through systematic manipulation of social networks. The paper analyzes a series of events and actions of manipulation, disinformation and propaganda directed against NATO member countries and allies, in which social media were used, including aspects of the current social media war in Ukraine.

KEYWORD: Ukraine war, propaganda, fake news, social media, narrative, disinformation

1. Introduction

The expansion of the Internet has generated opportunities in the field of communication and social relations. Easy access to information and online sharing of data between people have changed old habits of news consumption and enabled the emergence and expansion of a disruptive technology such as social media news (Donoghue, 2016). The tools of mass communication have become almost completely digitized and the Internet has enabled the emergence of social media platforms. Social media platforms satisfy the needs for connection and social networking and even manage to influence individual decision-making through social media posts (Grover, Kar & Dwivedi, 2022). The proliferation of misinformation, fake news, and hate speech are some of the major challenges on these platforms (Manish & Gupta, 2022).

The reasons people use social networks to stay in touch with friends and family or to spend their free time are followed by reading news stories in some statistics (Figure no. 1).

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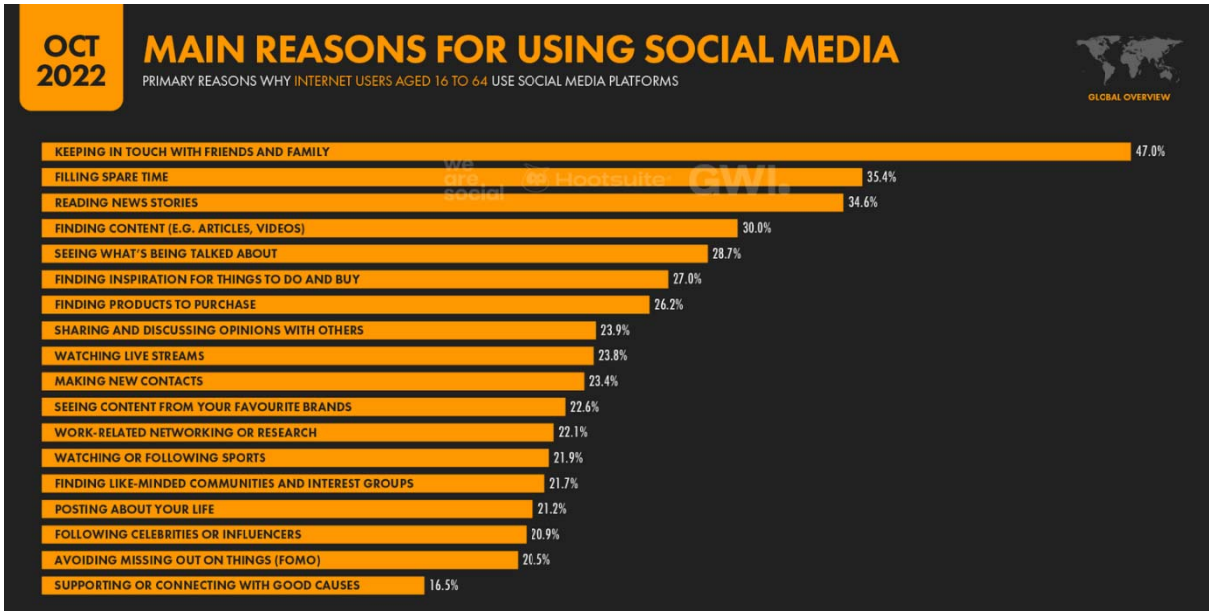


Figure no. 1: *Statistics regarding the main reasons for using social media – October 2022*
(Source: Global Social Media Statistics, 2022)

The combination of military force by the "little green men" with online manipulation and disinformation of public opinion, enabled Russia's easy annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, which some have already called a malicious use of social media (Willemo, 2019). The negative effects produced by the Russian propaganda machine (e.g. Russia's involvement in the 2016 U.S. election), must lead to the inclusion of misinformation and disinformation in the top international security agenda.

The plethora of social media propaganda carried out by the Kremlin in Eastern Europe are factors that highlight not only the consequences and significance of hybrid threats but also the challenges for Western states.

Russia's strategy for the online environment is based on its efforts in two main areas: controlling (in the sense of censorship) the flow of information on the Russian Internet network (Runet) and external information operations that are not limited to Ukraine or its immediate neighboring territories. This paper does not analyze the internal pressure operations of the Kremlin government with the help of certain institutions, such as Roskomnadzor (Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media) to gain supremacy in Runet. The paper analyzes the social media war during the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the military invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

2. Propaganda and Disinformation in Ukraine 2014

The activities on the social platforms of pro-Russian online trolls were extremely active in Ukraine, especially during the forced annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (2014). The NATO Strategic Communication Center's analysis of Russia's information campaign against Ukraine (NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 2015) has identified a number of specific misinformation actions such as:

– The "Polite people" campaign (NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 2015) used images in which the local Crimean population supported "little green men". The pro-Kremlin trolls posted messages, stories, comments to turn the invasion into a liberation movement.

They also used these images to recruit volunteers for the Ukrainian front.

– The story of the doctor from Odessa who represents the "narrative" of Igor Rozovskiy, a 39-year-old doctor, who witnessed a crime committed by pro-Ukrainian forces in Odessa (NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 2015). He describes the false story of citizens with pro-Russian political views who were beaten and later burned alive by pro-Ukrainian forces. When he tried to intervene, he was stopped and abused in a manner comparable to the brutality used during the Nazi occupation. The Russian social network Vkontakte (Russian Facebook) gathered over 5,000 distributions, from the first day of the message, and it was later translated into German, English and Bulgarian. Bloggers investigating the story found that the doctor's picture was actually the picture of a Caucasian dentist copied from a medical clinic brochure. When the story was revealed, the so-called doctor's Facebook account was deleted.

– The news about a pregnant woman (NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 2015) killed by strangulation by pro-Ukrainian extremists, which was posted on social media, until the Kyiv Post investigated the case and concluded that it was "fake news".

– Narratives of alleged atrocities of extremists planned in eastern Ukraine were posted and shared on social media. These posts referred to the poisoning of drinking water resources, the deployment of military camps near the city of Donetsk or fascist snipers hidden in the forests near the cities of Ukraine (NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 2015).

– Public execution in the city of Slovyansk (NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 2015). Channel One, actually run by the Kremlin government, told the story of a woman (Galina Pyshnyak) who claimed to have witnessed (along with other locals) the torture and crucifixion of a 3-year-old child in a so-called execution, led by the Ukrainian military in the public square in the city of Slovyansk. The video with her testimony was published and intensely publicized on social media, but subsequent investigations of journalists from various media publications (TV Dozhd, Navaya Gazeta) failed to identify any witnesses to support the story of the woman, and the locals in Slovyansk did not confirm the incident.

The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula without any armed military confrontations has shown that this concept of disinformation influence operations is an essential component of Russia's military strategy. In the Crimean campaign, the pro-Kremlin trolls used information to reach the sensitive side of compatriots such as national pride, ambitions and memories of the old Russian empire or, negatively, the atrocities of World War II Nazis. They have been adapted to the specifics of the regions where Russian-speakers and former citizens of the USSR live, which makes it impossible to "decipher" them and produce universally valid countermeasures. The conduct of confrontations in other regions of the globe will certainly be adapted to their specificity and will include other elements than those identified above.

3. Russia's Invasion of Ukraine (2022)

War in Ukraine has been called the "first social media war" because of its technological capabilities to transmit real-time data and information from the ground (Suciu, 2022). The same article identifies the relationship between past wars and mass communication tools, such as:

– The Spanish-American war – the first "media war" (the main media tool – newspapers);

– Vietnam – the "first televised war";

– Yugoslavian civil wars of the 1990s – the "first Internet war" (Suciu, 2022).

Technological advances, especially the ability to use a smartphone as a sensor

to collect and instantly transmit instant data and information in the midst of military operations, make this conflict the most televised war in human history.

Both Russia and Ukraine have understood and recognized the importance of social media and have used and are using all available social platforms to promote their interests. The Kremlin's propaganda mainly sought to justify the military presence in the field as part of the so-called "special operation", relying on some arguments already identified in the "active measures" pattern (e.g. the United States is developing biological weapons laboratories on the territory of Ukraine and will use them against ethnic Russians (Минобороны РФ, n.d.)) but also the use of new false narratives such as the "Nazification of Ukraine" (Troianovski, 2022) or the threat posed as a result of "expansion of the NATO bloc to the east, including moving military infrastructure to Russia's border" (Weber, 2022).

On the other hand, Ukraine has learned the lessons of the past and seems to be winning the social media war. Even in the first few days, the importance of social media platforms was evident from President Zelensky's voice on Twitter. Moreover, the entire activity of the Ukrainian President on social media (Volodymyr Zelensky/ France 24, 2022) has generated not only global sympathy for Ukraine but also military support from NATO. All social media platforms have been used by both the military and civilians, to achieve the two main goals: motivate the population to resist the Russian invasion and gain external support.

Civilian volunteers post intensively on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Tik Tok platforms to document daily life under the bombings. Soldiers upload media content (pictures and short clips) in which they dance and laugh, in an attempt to relieve tension, anxiety, and fear, typical of military operations (TikTok Search, n.d.). Vloggers, singers, athletes or other public figures have used their influence by becoming fighters on social media (Trouillard, 2022). Certain media contents have affected the image of Russian soldiers "responsible for stealing from and murdering people in Ukraine" (Meduza, 2022) and others, like Bucha's, are likely to be used later in war crimes trials (Frontline, 2022; Bucha, 2022).

There were certainly actions of disinformation or misinformation, right at the beginning of the invasion. The news about the Russian tank crushing the car of an innocent civilian in Kyiv (Viačorka, 2022) was intensively promoted, although the subsequent analysis proved that the armored vehicle belonged to the Ukrainian armed forces, which later did not return to deny the news (Bamas, 2022). Nor did the "13 border guards" who defended Zmiinyi (Snake) Island on the first day of the Russian invasion, defying the Russian fleet with the already famous "Russian warship, go f*** yourself", die heroically, as proclaimed by President Zelensky (Shukla & Kolirin, 2022), and the "Ghost in Kyiv" seems to be just another narrative that gave courage and hope to the people of Ukraine during wartime (Eisele, 2022).

The media campaigns on the social media platforms with all their content characterized by short videos, jokes, irony and memes had a double effect on the Russian invaders.

First of all, they managed to attract the indignation and anger of the international community, which could immediately see the tragic impact on the Ukrainian military. The events in which brave soldiers were ready to face death for their country were intensely mediatized (e.g. Azovstal fighters case) and in the case of ordinary citizens who were mobilized, methods were found to express the tragedy they were going through (fathers forced to fight far away from their families (Berger & Levine, 2022), animal lovers (Tucker, 2022),

IT people who traded laptops for guns or drone joysticks, people who abandoned their businesses or even students who volunteered to fight on the frontlines (Bowen, 2022).

Secondly, they aroused the international community's compassion for collateral victims such as the millions of civilian refugees separated from their families or those who stayed in Ukraine and broadcast live from their living rooms destroyed by the bombings.

4. Conclusions

The facts described in this paper highlight the role of social media platforms that have changed society's news consumption habits. Social media managed to influence individual and collective decisions during the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, and will continue to play an important role in the Ukrainian war: Disinformation operations supported by the Kremlin's intelligence services will continue to be directed not only against the population of Ukraine, but also against neighboring countries or even the Western part of the European Union. The future disinformation campaign will continue to exploit social, political or economic inequalities to undermine the confidence of the masses in their own government. It will launch social media campaigns that create confusion and generate tension among the population. They will disrupt security by polarizing the masses and inciting riots or other events to justify their actions. The positive results of the Ukrainian and NATO forces in recent times should not cause us to become careless. The numerous cases of misinformation make us realize that the Russian propaganda machine will not stop and propaganda can appear in complex forms and manifestations, which are difficult to predict due to the anonymity of social media platforms, which the Kremlin intensively exploits.

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