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<div align="center">The Russian Invasion of Ukraine: A War of (Dis)Information in the Internet Age</div>

War has changed over time. From chariots to tanks, guerilla warfare to cyberwarfare, changes in warfare reflect broader changes in society. Running parallel to every physical war is a war of information: a battle of control for the narrative of the causes and effects of the fighting. And just as in physical warfare, this war of information has changed drastically in the age of the internet, shown by both the intentional and unintentional exploitation of the online world throughout the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Limiting propaganda has become near-impossible, given the internet's status as a haven for questionable information. The internet is much of the world's primary source of communication and information, allowing for greater spread of propaganda, and simultaneous challenges in its regulation. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has made clear that, with the rise of the internet, both the utilization and control of propaganda are becoming increasingly complex and challenging.

Most Americans have heard of Russia's systematic restriction on information, working in concert with the steady-stream of state-approved "news," more aptly referred to as propaganda in the United States. Though censorship has always been a hallmark of Putin's reign, its implementation in relation to the Ukrainian invasion is noteworthy in both its breadth and depth, as well as in the international response it has incurred. In 2016, when Russian trolls were spreading Kremlin-approved propaganda regarding the US election, social media sites did little to stop this spread. In 2022, social media sites proved to be much better equipped to deal with the influx of Russian propaganda, banning accounts posting large amounts of this content (Bushwick). These accounts post conspiracy theories surrounding Ukraine, including their

supposed use of "dirty bombs," overstated Nazi involvement, and fabricated war crimes. These posts can spread like wildfire, gaining particular popularity in places already in support of Russia.

Much of these accounts are Russian trolls, paid by Russia's Internet Research Agency to post and comment inflammatory pro-Kremlin ideas and talking points (Silverman et al.). Such posts have reached millions of users, many of whom's interactions with these pages leads to further connections with Russian users. Despite efforts from sites such as Twitter to ban these troll accounts, such efforts can quickly turn into a kind of virtual Whack-a-Mole. New troll accounts pop up on previously inactive or benign accounts, kept by the Internet Research Agency as "sleeper accounts" to activate and use as trolls without attracting unwanted attention (Klepper). And even when sites are able to effectively limit Russian propaganda, the resolve and pride of everyday Russians surrounding the war only increases. Many Russian citizens already see the West as unfairly discriminatory against Russia, and see Western companies' restrictions on Russian disinformation as further proof of their hatred for, and fear of, Russian ideas. In this way, attempts to limit Russian disinformation are destined to end poorly, in one of two ways: a failure to limit conspiracy theories and harmful information surrounding the war, or adding fuel to Russian distrust of the West.

As social media companies are limiting Russian postings, the Russian government is simultaneously limiting access to these social media sites. Following a law banning what the government considers to be "false information" about the Ukrainian invasion, both Facebook and Instagram have been banned entirely from the country, with limits on Twitter and TikTok effectively blocking their function in Russia (Jack). These restrictions leave few options for social media. The lone survivors, such as Telegram, an app valued for its lack of regulation and heavy-duty encryption, have since skyrocketed in popularity, becoming dominated by pro-Russian content
(Bond et al.
). This app is hugely popular in many countries supportive of Russia, but also in Ukraine, where citizens are often overwhelmed by Russian propaganda. In areas with a strong Russian influence (such as Donbas and Crimea), this disinformation can cause real-life support for the invasion.

Russia's near-complete control of the narrative surrounding the invasion allows the government to create its own version of events, malleable to any given situation (Clark). Following a Russian bombing on a Mariupol theater being used as a shelter for Ukrainian women and children, Russia released a report stating that the theater was a meeting place for a Ukrainian resistance group. Once this report was rapidly and widely proven to be false, the Russian propaganda switched, with state-sponsored news and social media accounts instead arguing that the same Ukrainian resistance had in fact been responsible for the bombing, with no Russian involvement (Person). These sources are often Russians' only source of information, making claims that are blatantly false and inconsistent to the rest of the world unquestionably true for citizens. For Russia, the unwavering support of citizens is not only an end goal in the use of propaganda, but an important tool in and of itself, as it is Russian citizens, not paid trolls, that do most of the heavy lifting in the sharing of misinformation.

Beyond its own citizenry, Russian propaganda targets various international countries. RT News, the primary state-sponsored news source in Russia, is incredibly popular both inside and outside the country. Western countries generally have little trust for RT given its unreliable reporting and consistently pro-Kremlin narrative, with several social media platforms banning RT. Despite this, RT News is hugely popular internationally, with separate websites for the publication in Arabic, Spanish, and other languages. In fact, RT Español is more popular than both the English-language RT and CNN Español, with 42% of this popularity coming from countries that have expressed support for the Russian invasion in Ukraine (Myers et al.). Russia is well aware of the preexisting dislike for the United States in various Latin American and Middle Eastern countries, intentionally questioning American actions to garner support from these nations. This anti-Western rhetoric, combined with misleading (or entirely untrue) information regarding the "special military operation," has led to sizable Russian sympathy in citizens, translating to government ambivalence or support for Russian actions.

The Russian government's use of propaganda is marked by a desire to control the narrative of the Ukrainian invasion. Russian citizens, and more specifically their online presence, are a type of marketing for the country, proving to the international community the strength and effectiveness of the Russian

government. These "marketing efforts" are not directed primarily towards big-name Western countries with the ability to support the Russian invasion, but rather towards the countries on the border between Western and Eastern influence. Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a part of a larger war: that against the perceived encroachment of Western influence on countries within the Russian and Eastern spheres of influence. This wider goal shows itself in Russia's use of internet propaganda. The country is focused on showcasing a strong, united Russia through both its citizens and its own projects.

Russia's use of the internet to control the image of the invasion is not unique. Ukraine has been utilizing many of the same techniques of propaganda that have been around for centuries. What is new, however, is its changing scope, format, and consequences, a result of the country's use of the internet. Shortly after the Russian invasion, Ukrainian leaders and citizens alike recognized the importance of controlling the narrative of the war, both inside the country and internationally. Banda, a Ukrainian advertising company, began a partnership with the digital ministry of Ukraine focused on raising support for the country (Watson). The company donates all of its time to campaigns focused on raising support for Ukrainians, utilizing digital billboards, creating short films available on YouTube, and advising the Ukrainian government on social media usage. The majority of these efforts are available in various languages, and can be accessed internationally.

 Initially, these campaigns contained over-inflated tales of almost supernatural Ukrainian bravery. The story of "the Ghost of Kyiv" gained mass media attention, and was shared by official Ukrainian social media profiles. It was later revealed that the story was false, and the video showing the supposed Ghost in action was ripped from a video game (Shelton). This incident made the international community increasingly skeptical of Ukrainian information, a mistrust Ukraine could not afford, given its dependence on foreign aid. Ukraine has realized that the spread of information through the internet is an invaluable tool in obtaining not only foreign sympathy, but aid. Unlike Russia, Ukraine cannot spread easily disproven information for risk of losing the favor of Western countries.

Perhaps even more influential than government-sanctioned propaganda is the contributions of everyday Ukrainian citizens to the mass of online information regarding the war. In February 2022, the

Ukrainian government announced the creation of an "IT Army," composed of volunteer citizens hacking and interfering with pro-Russian websites (Shore). Even in the absence of such governmental structure, the group efforts of citizens have proved invaluable in Ukraine's war effort. Social media allows everyday Ukrainians to share images of destruction with a global audience, and keep records of Russian actions for potential war crime charges (Pandit). With Russia's ban on Instagram and other social media sites, the majority of online information comes from Ukrainian sources, bolstering Ukraine's international reputation as the spirited, courageous, underdogs.

Like most countries in times of war, Ukraine has issued a number of limitations on the information that can be shared about the war effort. In 2017, Ukraine banned a number of Russian social media apps, including VKontakte, which had been used daily by a majority of the population, in an effort to reduce Russian influence in the country (Hajjajil). Though this has greatly limited Ukrainian citizens' exposure to Russian opinion, it has also limited Russian exposure to Ukrainian opinion (Golovchenko). In February 2022, Ukrainian citizens able to access VKontakte through VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) flooded the site with pro-Ukrainian posts attached to popular Russian hashtags, hoping to counteract the effects of Russian propaganda on Russian citizens. On Facebook, prior to and after the Russian ban on the app, Ukrainian companies bought advertising space to target pro-Ukrainian information at Russian citizens. Advertising space owned by Ukrainian companies transformed from promoting Kyiv music events to spreading evidence of Russian war crimes (Millman). The power of Ukrainian citizens to publish their own propaganda, not only aimed at their fellow citizens, but also at Russians, shows the massive power propaganda can have once on the public internet.

Ukraine's use of internet influence, much like Russia's, is centered upon controlling the narrative of the invasion. Their control of the narrative, however, is done for an objective opposite to Russia. Instead of positioning themselves as a courageous defender in a battle against the West, Ukraine aims to be viewed as a dedicated friend of the West, in need of support and protection. Similar to Russia, this goal necessitates not only efforts from the government directed at foreign countries, but also efforts aimed

towards Ukrainian citizens as a kind of intermediary between the government and the international community.

Russia and Ukraine's intentional use of social media to sway public opinion regarding the war is one clear example of the influence of the internet on war. But beyond these intentional efforts, it is important to note that social media and its users take on actions of their own. Foreign citizens can effectively shape the course of the war without leaving their living room, simply sharing or liking a post reflecting a specific viewpoint. Showing public support for certain viewpoints influences the governmental response, and therefore the aid (or sanctions) of that country. It has long been noted that the internet is a connecting force across all countries, and with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is becoming increasingly clear that war will never again be fought merely on the battlefield or with flyers. It is essential to acknowledge the role of the internet in not only the Ukrainian invasion, but all future wars. No matter how much propaganda is shared online, it is meaningless without citizen support. Therefore, more so than ever, it is essential that individuals question the information they receive online, and question the impact a "like" may have on human lives thousands of miles away.

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Commented [2]: Very interesting paper!

Can you add in-text citations in order to identify the source of your info?

Commented [3]: Thank you for your feedback! I added some more citations that I had not included, and some in-text citations :)

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