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The Effects of Social Media On The War In Ukraine

War is not a new phenomena. Since the beginning of time, mankind has known conflict. In just the last century, we've seen and experienced the devastation of a World War. However, there has always been a certain mystery pertaining to the issues, battles, effects, and overall conflict during wartime. Now, in more modern times, this is not as much the case. Social media has allowed for worldwide conversation and the exchange of information on a scale that would seem unimaginable only a few decades ago. The war in Ukraine is a prime example of this.

There has been a great deal of news coverage on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The more modern forms of sharing information, like online articles or news stations, allow for information about the war to be accessible to anyone, regardless of where they live or whether or not they are even being affected by it. Major news stations, like CNN, MSNBC, and Fox, have been reporting on the war since before it even started in February of 2022. Some of the most influential forms of reporting is interviews. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine has done many interviews with major news organizations, one of the most memorable being an interview he did with CNN from a bunker in which he "shed more light on his talks with Russia" (National). Watching the president of a country speak from a bunker, with loud noises sounding

off occasionally in the background, makes the reality of the situation more evident to people who may not have thought it important before. It helps spread awareness to and garner support from the rest of the world.

Information about the war is also easily accessible on public social media accounts. Tiktok and Instagram in particular have helped users to share their stories and raise awareness. Citizens of Ukraine can and have shared images and videos of their cities being destroyed or stories of how they were able to flee to another country, all of which further helps to raise awareness. Seeing the emotional personal struggle of one individual can often have more of an impact than a long article written by a major organization. While the work done by these major news stations to share real time information is very important, social media's ability to give a voice to the citizens of Ukraine is just as if not more important. Consuming first person accounts of war in realtime is something we as a society have never experienced on such a large scale, and it helps raise awareness by providing more personal accounts for citizens of other countries to connect to.

While social media has had positive effects during this time of war in Ukraine, it also has many negative effects that people must be wary of. One of the most dangerous is the spread of propaganda and misinformation. In times of war, gaining support is crucial. So, while citizens are sharing their stories on social media, or the president is doing interviews, there are those in the opposing country or other supporting countries that are doing what they can to sow doubt. Russia's propaganda campaign against Ukraine, for example, has been in full-swing since months before active conflict even started. Through news sources and social media, Russia has

spread misinformation in order to garner support for their cause, like “falsely accusing Ukraine of planning a dirty bomb attack” (Barnes) or spreading “unsupported allegations that the Ukrainian government intends to destroy a dam in its own territory” (Barnes). These claims are not backed by any reliable sources, yet are spread to the masses as though they are fact, causing great confusion and wrongly earned support.

Another example is the use of “deepfakes”, “a form of artificial intelligence called deep learning used to make images of fake events” (Sample). They can be both a video or an image of a person which is digitally altered so that they seem to be someone else or saying something they aren’t actually saying. “Deepfakes” are almost always used solely with malicious intent or to spread misinformation. They are especially dangerous because, when done well, it looks and or sounds exactly like the person it is trying to imitate. One example of a “deepfake” is one shared on Twitter in mid-March of 2022, which shows what seems to be President Zelenskyy giving a speech from a podium in which he calls upon his soldiers to lay down their weapons. The video was entirely fake, but was so lifelike that many people assumed it to be real.

Misinformation spread through digital media doesn’t always require an entirely fake image. “Often images are stolen from earlier wars or other parts of the world and relabeled.” (Brumfiel). For example, an image of a young, injured child taken years ago in Syria was spread around during the beginning of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, claiming to be a photo of recent events. Another example is on the social media platform Tiktok. A video of a woman showing how to start a Russian armored vehicle was shared after war had officially begun and got over seven million views. The video caused great upset, fear, and confusion among users of

the platform who took it as a threat of violence. In reality, however, the video was filmed years prior by a Russian auto mechanic simply trying to share her skills.

The war in Ukraine is not only being fought with weapons but also with words online. The spread of information in general requires an audience, and there are billions of people all over the world that are following the war through social media and online news. There are positive aspects of this phenomena, like the voice it gives to individual citizens to share their stories and the awareness it raises about pressing wartime issues. However, there are also negative aspects. In addition to the physical war, the Social Media War is also being fought, but instead through the spread of propaganda and misinformation. People following the war online are very impressionable, and all it takes is one false story or accusation to skew someone's views and garner support for the wrong cause.

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