

The Role of Social Media Sock Puppets in Spreading Propaganda: A Study Concerning the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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Introduction

Marshall McLuhan is remembered as having said: "The medium is the message." However, McLuhan also playfully said "the medium is the message," a play on words by which he suggested contemporary audiences enjoy mainstream media as soothing, enjoyable, and relaxing.

Nonetheless, the pleasure found in the mainstream media is deceiving for the reason that the changes between society and technology are incongruent; they have created an age of anxiety concealed within pleasure. There is no doubt that Marshall McLuhan was a man far ahead of his era to put forward such a sophisticated understanding concealed within a memorable play on words.

At present we are living in the digital era driven by social media. Even though social media has emerged as the medium of paramount influence, the medium has equally developed into the primary source for spreading propaganda, for this medium has no formal regulators of information sharing. The overall aim of this chapter is to examine the role played by *social media sock puppets* in spreading propaganda - as regards the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Definations and Discussion of Key Terms

Social Media

It is a universal truth that humans alone have communication

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abilities that animals do not. Communication is a joint activity that largely depends on the ability to keep common attention - to share the relevant contextual knowledge and joint experience to get the content across and make sense in the exchanges. As the author argues, social media has different angles of understanding.

Considering many angles of social media, the author defines social media as below:

"Social media can be defined as the Internet applications that allow users to generate and share content or to partake in social networking as a means of human communication, which is active as an art form and rational as in science - to conclude the discussion with its consequential ending as the truth."

War

In the widely held nous, war is a conflict among political groups involving resentments of substantial duration and degree. The meaning and usage of the word war vary significantly across academic subjects.

Various terms are used for the armed conflicts ranging from mild to strong in intensity. Armed conflicts of powerful countries with isolated and powerless peoples are usually called pacifications, military expeditions, or explorations. Correspondingly, in the case of small countries, they are termed interventions or reprisals; and with internal groups, they are referred to as rebellions or insurrections. In all the above-cited incidents, if the confrontation is adequately strong or long-drawn-out, they may lead to an enormity that entitles such confrontations to the name of *the war* (Suman Kumar Kasturi, 2019: 15)

Above and beyond so many prevailing definitions, the author sees two important aspects of war. According to the author (Suman Kumar Kasturi, 2019: 16):

War is not only the science of armed fighting, which is essentially a professional activity; but it is also an art of methods or principles of instigating armed conflict.

The aforementioned definition of war is taken as the operational definition of war, throughout this chapter.

Propaganda

It is a commonly accepted definition that propaganda is a mode of communication used to influence or inspire to alter the opinion of groups to support a specific cause or belief. Over the eras, propaganda has taken various forms of communication - the form of speeches, films, artwork, poetry, and music - although it is not restricted only to these forms of communication.

For sure, propaganda comes in a wide range of forms. It can be used for dissimilar reasons in diverse situations. The most simply distinguishable and comprehensible use of propaganda is during times of war, in which victory or defeat can depend a great deal on public support. So many varieties of information sources and media are used to pass on propaganda messages. In recent times, the digital age has brought about new ways of promulgating propaganda - bots and algorithms are vibrantly used to generate computational propaganda including counterfeit or inclined news and blowout it on social media.

Sock puppet

In a nutshell, a sock puppet is an alternative and unconventional online account meant exclusively for deception, including the spread of propaganda. The bots used for such drives pretend to be living entities. There is a significant difference between a pseudonym and a sock puppet; the latter pretences as a third party self-regulating of the cyber skill.

Having understood the definition and dialogue of key terms, let us discuss the six phases of warfare in the ensuing session for acquiescent the significance of the suitable phase of the war to adopt dissemination of disinformation - means of propaganda through 'social media sock puppets.'

The six phase of warfare

In general, there are six phases of warfare. They are:

- Phase 0 - Shape
- Phase 1 - Deter
- Phase 2 - Seize Initiative
- Phase 3 - Dominate
- Phase 4 - Stabilise
- Phase 5 - Enable Civil Authority

This archetype turns out to be a dominant paradigm for operations in a six-phase planning construct (Eric Patterson, 2012:99). This denotes a linear progression of conflict through a closing phase (phase 3) of major combat operations, and then a post-conflict period of steadiness and changeover. Within this paradigm, the dominant crucial point is supposed to be phase 3 - the majority of a country's responsiveness for resourcing, modernizing, training, and allocating risk is unearthed in this phase. Further, phase 3 is very crucial as far as the spreading of propaganda by 'social media sock puppets' is concerned.

To familiarise the readers with the phases of warfare, Figure 1 is included in this part. While the horizontal axis denotes a degree of activity or work done by the armed forces, the vertical axis denotes the level of military planning and implementation of any specific or even notional plan (Suman Kumar Kasturi, 2019: 4). It is very imperious to comprehend the fact that phase 3 (dominating activities) is the crucial phase for either side of the war to spread disinformation through the sock puppets on social media platforms.

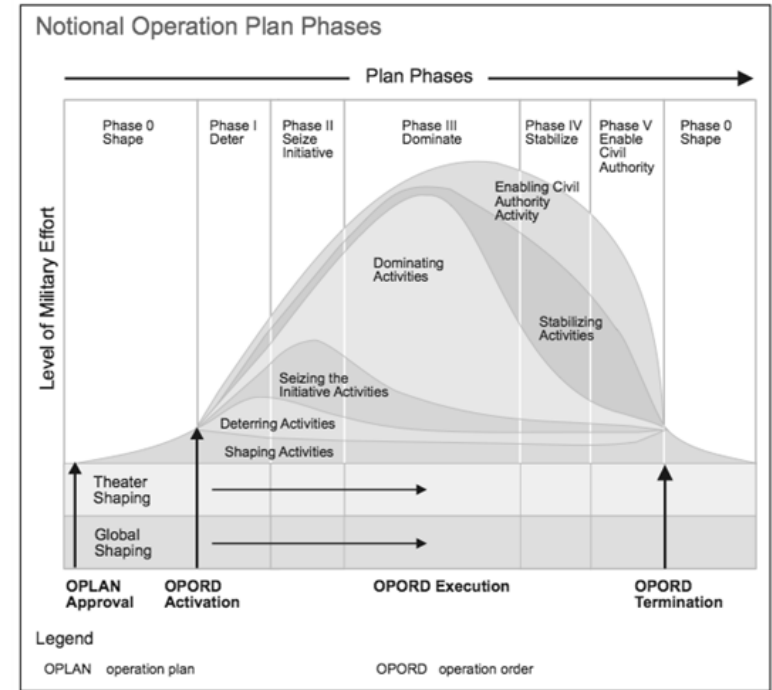


Fig1. Phases of a Notional Operation Plan vs. Level of Military Effort (Source: Personal Files of the Author)

This pictorial representation is self-explanatory and is well-understood by people with even minimal knowledge about warfare. The major inadequacy of this model is the steady desertion of the operational level of war. The volatile growth of communication and a globalized world finds even the lowest-ranked military person to affect global change at the lowest and most direct levels. This change was characterised in 1999 by U.S. Marine General Charles Krulak when he introduced the concept of the strategic corporal and the three-block war.

In contemporary armed conflicts, due to globalization, social media has been playing a dominant role in spreading information as well as disinformation. It is not an overstatement to state that the side which has the dominant social media has always the upper hand. However, it seems that social media is overenthusiastic at

times as far as propaganda in reporting conflicts are concerned. Let's examine globalization through social media.

Social media influence on activism

Social media is an astounding tool that can be easily used by those who have access to it. Social media creates vast opportunities for those who are coming out with innovative and unique ideas, as its access is expanded worldwide. At this time, social media is put into practice the transformation - the effectiveness of using social media as a dominant form of activism.

In his essay *Small Change*, Malcolm Gladwell, a notable writer who writes for *The New Yorker* and the *Washington Post*, critiques the use of social media activism. According to him, social media is an effective tool to use for activism. However, in his opinion, social media cannot make a revolutionary change when compared to traditional activism.

In the same vein, in their book *The New Digital Age*, Eric Schmidt, the executive chairman of Google and Jared Cohen, the director of Google, discuss the use of social media for activism in the chapter titled: *The Future of Revolution*. The main focus here is on the advantages and drawbacks that come with social media activism.

Social media activism for some people is about only limitations, but these shortcomings will not keep it from surfacing further. As technology advances and becomes a resource worldwide, global connections will get bigger and be used as a fundamental tool for social media activism.

Social media can serve as a better tool for protest in the present and future revolution, as it is very effective at the diffusion of information swiftly to a broad audience. Due to the ease and spread of wide-reaching technology, social media is becoming more profuse. The availability to use social media creates global connections and make it possible for countries to express new and old concerns to all. In some countries, modern advancements due to newfound accessibility to information are the source of disorder. This exposure to new sources of information provides the reason for many countries to

protest. The desire to act is overwhelming. According to Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen as explicated in *The New Digital Age* (p. 348):

With new access to virtual space and its technologies, populations and groups all around the world will seize their moment, addressing long-held grievances or new concerns with tenacity and conviction. (<http://www.co-lingua.com/content/easier-start>)

Social media networks provide vast opportunities because of their ease of use. To their advantage, many people will use technology to start a social movement, due to the worldwide spread of social media networks. Social media makes activism easy to start. This point can be well explained by taking Euromaidan Revolution into account.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has posed so many questions concerning the spirit of free speech over social networking sites. Within no time, what was originally on track as a trickle - stopping Kremlin-backed media outlets from ordering advertisements on Facebook and YouTube - has turned within days into a downpour of limitations aimed at regulating the Kremlin's use of the Internet-driven social media for political and warfare advantage.

The demand of various leaders from Ukraine and other countries that backed Ukraine have intricated even the social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter. As the political and public clamour for action enlarged, calls of the executives went further in curbing Moscow's online influence drives than many had originally measured potential.

Yes, the action taken against the Kremlin, social media networks has indeed accepted policies that could become the de facto norm for future conflicts. These pronouncements could essentially change the relationships of companies with governments that are being forced to concede the influence that social media exerts in a time of war.

Notedly, Meta, YouTube and TikTok have banned Russian state media organizations during phase-3 of the Russia-Ukraine warfare from using their platforms within the European Union, following the aforesaid decision. Twitter tugged its algorithms to restrain the spread

of Russian government agenda points and propaganda on its global social network.

Free speech advocates across the globe, including those from Russia, have raised their concerns over such restrictions imposed on Russia. The outcome of the ban imposed by the social media giants clamping down on pro-Kremlin propaganda could lead to greater censorship not only in Russia but also in other non-democratic countries - leading to blocking out many from self-determining sources of information.

The abovementioned discussion signposts the intensity of propaganda over social media by the sock puppets - utilization of social media as an instrument of the state.

Social media as an instrument of the state

If we examine the overall picture of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, social media has played a decisive role since the commencement of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. All the social networking sites have been flooded with testaments of war victims and refugees. Besides, videos of battles and bombings, memes and messages about the conflict flooded the social media webspace. It has been through social media deliberations that initiatives of support for the victims have stretched their peak.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has led to organized propaganda campaigns that were diffused rapidly around the globe. The total situation has paved a way for another concurrent case study of how social media sock puppets play a role in information warfare. But in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, information warfare has not been limited to conventional propaganda. It correspondingly banks on deplatformization, meaning the denial of access to delivery channels including social media networks. The Russia-Ukraine conflict exposes the extent to which social media platforms become significant backers in geopolitical conflicts and information warfare; thereby turning these platforms into increasingly useful tools of the state because of their scale and power over the public sphere.

Role of social media sock puppets in the Russia-Ukraine war

Social networking sites have adopted the liberal ethos to enhance their business models that opened a way for people to

exercise their freedom of expression without any constraints; however, their main objective was to make profits from the flood of free content and gripping advertisement revenue. This ideological paradigm has been used for years by social networking sites - an idea effectually edged as the marketplace of ideas. This argument was ostensibly braced by historical events such as the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, which saw widespread anti-government protests such as Euromaidan in Ukraine.

During the Russia-Ukraine war, social media has played a key role as the platform for strong conflict-related information updates, fervent arguments, and deliberations. At the opening of the conflict, palpable strategic communication in action was seen - over such networking sites as Twitter and YouTube, shadowy sock puppets released an intercepted phone conversation between two top brass of the US. This incident has given rise to both a methodological exploit of an information system and a psychological attack on the West employing social media for inadvertent purposes.

During the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the plot of Russia has been closely scripted and disseminated - both on traditional media and on the Internet through social media networks. On social media, pro-Russian deliberations have thoroughly cultured fear, anxiety, and hate among the masses. The sock puppets have fabricated and circulated images of alleged mayhems by the Ukrainian army, including mass graves of tortured people, recruiting child soldiers, noncombatants used for organ trafficking, burning crops to create a dearth, the use of heavy weapons against civilians, and acts of cannibalism.

Such an act of disinformation spread by sock puppets through social media whether offered with some proof or merely in the form of rumours, often grids the entire world in minutes and achieve its very purpose - influencing the discernments and behaviours of the target population.

According to Peter Suci, who writes for Forbes, a disinformation monitoring platform Cyabra has announced that it had tracked more than 1,15,000 Twitter and Facebook accounts after the invasion of Russia on Ukraine. Notedly all these accounts were spreading

Russian propaganda. Also, according to the Cyabra's report, on February 14, 2022, negative content against Ukraine on Twitter was increased by over 11,000% as compared to the previous times. Besides, the statement also reveals the very fact that much of that content was generated by inauthentic profiles - the palpable social media sock puppets (Peter Suci, 2022:1).

Additionally, the agency has skimmed through 53,000 fragments of information about Ukraine from as many as 36,000 profiles - found approximately 17,000 fragments of information were negative. The most significant fact among Cyabra's revelations has it that they had found a notable Twitter trend with the hashtag #standwithRussia from 4,000 profiles - 13.7% of these profiles were inauthentic, and the remaining profiles were created in the recent past, soon after Russia tossed its invasion. As far as findings on Facebook are taken into account, 15.4% of the profiles were inauthentic. Across both platforms, according to Cyabra researchers, 56% of the Ukraine-related content created in the two weeks after the invasion of Russia on Ukraine was originated from inauthentic profiles that fit into bots or sock puppet accounts. Almost all those profiles displayed parallel behaviour (Ibid).

The aforementioned statistics from the Cyabra research agency has emphasized how the volume of disinformation spread in conjunction with the participation of the substantial number of inauthentic accounts in the discussion; have spiked in the days before the conflict had started and remained high throughout the conflict.

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has seen a parallel war recounting on the global platform through social media - with a high level of disinformation being disseminated and shared on social networking sites. There has been a change in the Modus Operandi of social media usage in the case of the Russia-Ukraine war. In this digital age of warfare, social media has been extensively used for spreading disinformation with memes, misinformation campaigns, and scams. The eventual result is - the growing maelstrom of information that not only confused and contorted but also clouded the happenings in the eastern European region.

Russia's ban on social media won't exclude social narratives online, for disinformation survives beyond such social networking sites as Facebook and Twitter with inauthentic accounts proliferating propaganda across all social media platforms. Given this, and the role that social media sock puppets play in the spreading of information, the social media platforms need to have authentic gatekeepers of information.

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