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# Crisis Communication and Challenges of Disinformation in an Era of Information Warfare: The Ukraine War

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# Dossier





*ESSACHESS – Journal for Communication Studies*

# **Communication Lessons from the Ukraine War: The Strategies, Narratives, and Implications of the Information Warfare**

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**Abstract:** In the context of the war in Ukraine, various forms and means of communication have been utilized by actors involved in and impacted by the conflict, with differing target publics and degrees of effectiveness, yet with an overall sense that an information warfare is taking place. This special issue seeks to make a contribution to the understanding of the strategic communication practices related to armed conflict, and in particular of the premises, patterns, and outcomes of the information warfare pertaining to the war in Ukraine. Specifically, the articles in this special issue make sense of aspects of the information warfare by focusing on: a) communication lessons from the Ukraine war in regard to the effectiveness of

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strategies and narratives employed in situations of armed conflict and particularly in the information warfare component of conflict, and b) ethical implications of communication campaigns and propaganda in times of war, specifically related to how we identify and address the alarming issues related to the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

**Keywords:** crisis communication, information warfare, communication strategies and narratives, propaganda, fake news and disinformation

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**Résumé :** Dans le contexte de la guerre en Ukraine, diverses formes et moyens de communication ont été utilisés par les acteurs impliqués et impactés par le conflit, avec des publics cibles et des degrés d'efficacité différents, mais avec un sentiment général qu'une guerre de l'information est en cours. Ce numéro spécial vise à apporter une contribution à la compréhension des pratiques de communication stratégique liées aux conflits armés, et en particulier des prémisses, des schémas et des résultats de la guerre de l'information relative à la guerre en Ukraine. Plus précisément, les contributions donnent un sens aux aspects de la guerre de l'information en se concentrant sur : a) les leçons de communication de la guerre d'Ukraine en ce qui concerne l'efficacité des stratégies et des récits employés dans les situations de conflit armé et en particulier dans la composante de la guerre de l'information de conflit, et b) les implications éthiques des campagnes de communication et de la propagande en temps de guerre, spécifiquement liées à la façon dont nous identifions et traitons les problèmes alarmants liés à la propagation de la mésinformation et de la désinformation.

**Mots-clés :** communication de crise, guerre de l'information, communication strategies and narratifs, propagande, infox et désinformation

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## **Introduction**

In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it has become more important and more pressing than ever to examine the communication strategies and narratives employed in the information warfare which accompanies an armed conflict (Henkhaus, 2022).

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded its neighbor, Ukraine, which was also a state in the Soviet Union from 1922 to 1991. Russia had already occupied portions of Ukraine since 2014, such as Crimea as well as parts of Donetsk and Luhansk, claiming the territory was Russian. In November 2021, the United States of America reported an extraordinary build-up of Russian troops near the Ukrainian border. U.S. President Joe Biden warned the international community about the situation. Russia's President Vladimir Putin countered by providing an array of geopolitical and legal reasons why



Ukraine should be denied membership into The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and demanding guarantees that NATO would not agree to expand its influence in the region by admitting Ukraine as a member. Ukraine rejected Russia's demand as did NATO. By January 2022, international news media reports revealed that Russian troops had amassed in the neighboring country of Belarus, an ally of Russia. Russia claimed its army involving thousands of troops and tens of jets was in Belarus near the border with Ukraine for mere military exercise. Up until Russian troops entered Ukraine, various pundits speculated that Russia would not invade, even as the United States had warned that an invasion was imminent based on the available intelligence. As the invasion turned into an all-out war, Russia and Ukraine used various narrative and rhetorical devices and harnessed traditional and new media channels to communicate about the war to their national as well as the international audiences. When the United Nations General Assembly sought to pass resolutions to demand protection for civilians in Ukraine, affirm Ukraine's territorial integrity, and condemn Russia for the humanitarian crisis it had created, only a handful of countries voted against, yet a number of countries including China and India abstained (Haddad, 2023). Meanwhile, the consequences of the conflict have been tragic, with thousands of deaths including many civilians, the displacement of tens of millions of persons, and massive damage to infrastructure (Pavlik, 2022). The war has included military as well as information activities with humanitarian as well as social implications, thus analyses from communication perspectives can provide valuable insights into the specific type of crisis communication situation constituted by the information warfare.

### **1. The Information Warfare**

According to the European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), information warfare refers to the battlespace use and management of communication content and technology while seeking to gain a competitive advantage over an opposing side. Closely connected to psychological warfare, information warfare often involves assurances that one's own information is valid and that the opposing side's information is invalid as well as "the spreading of propaganda or disinformation to demoralize or manipulate the enemy and the public" (ECPS, 2022). Information warfare implies an inherently dichotomic view of competitors as both opponents and irreconcilable enemies. As Daniel Ventre specifies in his seminal book on the topic (2016), information warfare constitutes a relatively new facet of war pursuits that is not limited to the military sphere, but instead expands into social and cultural aspects of conflict and security while also making use of technological developments and capabilities, and thus has transformed the ways in which situations of war are carried out. "A small group of antagonists can launch an information warfare offensive remotely, while comfortably seated in front of a computer and completely anonymous" (Ventre, 2016, 3). State as well as nonstate actors engage individually or in groups and in identifiable forms or anonymously in the information warfare through old and newer forms of media.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, various forms and means of communication have been utilized by actors involved in and impacted by the conflict, with differing target publics and degrees of effectiveness, yet with an overall sense that an information warfare is taking place. For months prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Biden-Harris administration in the United States of America provided to the media coordinated disclosures of previously classified information, in an effort to disrupt Russian planning, reduce the effectiveness of “false flag” operations, and deter military action. Many media venues were willing to convey such disclosures to global audiences, but some journalists challenged the validity of data with undisclosed sources (Lillis, Bertrand, & Atwood, 2022). Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky has rallied the population of his country and much of the Western world through speeches focusing on Ukrainians’ determination to oppose the invasion and their spirit of sacrifice, disseminated through an array of media venues and on social media platforms. For example, in a public post addressed to Russia in September 2022 and propagated through both traditional and new media, Zelensky wrote: “Read my lips: Without gas or without you? Without you. Without light or without you? Without you. Without water or without you? Without you. Without food or without you? Without you” (Haq, Nechyporenko, & Chernova, 2022). Russia’s President Vladimir Putin has sought to appeal to the population of his own country, and in particular to the elderly demographic, by promoting official justifications of the military operations through state-owned media while limiting news from international sources. Putin’s claims that the war is necessary to protect Russians in Ukrainian territories, to uphold the brotherhood between Russians and Ukrainians, as well as to curtail rising Nazism in Ukraine are potentially effective to sway some members of the Russian public, but have been highly contested internationally (Roche, 2022). Putin’s assertion of fighting Nazis, featured prominently in his rhetoric, seems particularly surprising when considering that it has been made “about a country whose president, Volodymyr Zelensky, is Jewish and who last fall signed a law combating anti-Semitism,” yet it shows how the Kremlin has been counting “on lingering Russian pride in the victory over Nazi Germany to carry over into support” for the attack of Ukraine (Troianovski, 2022). Putin has also made outreach efforts to other nations, especially non-Western leaders and publics that might be eager to benefit economically from collaborating with Russia while also being fairly suspicious of Euro-American colonial tendencies (*The Economist*, 2022). To counter Russia in Africa, U.S. President Joe Biden has again utilized his preferred strategy of sharing intelligence, in this case seeking to dissuade African nations from supporting Russia by providing warnings about the dangers posed to people in Africa by a presence on the continent of Russian paramilitary troops (Banco & Carrier, 2023).

Technology plays an essential role in information warfare and has been a critical aspect of communication from and on the Ukraine war. Technology has allowed for the viral spread of pictures and videos of Ukrainians standing up to the invading Russian forces, trying to flee the war zones, seeking refuge in other countries, being killed in Russian bombardments, or suffering the dire consequences of the war-related destruction of a dam. Technology has also facilitated global access to information

from Russia, with reports that a majority of the population supports the war or at least is unwilling to confront the country's leadership in regards to the war, yet also with images of some street protests, men fleeing the country when asked to join the army, or the recent Wagner Group rebellion (the Russian paramilitary group, funded by the Russian government and led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, that had fought alongside the regular Russian army until it staged a failed rebellion in June 2023). Such developments have resulted in concerns in regards to how diverging narratives emerge and spread as well as how disinformation may continue to shape this conflict and future conflicts. Disinformation may consist of posts and interactions from social media bots, manipulated photos and videos placed on fake websites, or even staged fake protests. For example, the publication *Le Monde*, in partnership with the organization Dossier Center, has identified approximately a dozen fake demonstrations with the message "Stop sending weapons to Ukraine! Zelensky is bombing Donetsk and Luhansk!" in several European cities. It has been documented that such demonstrations were organized by the Russian intelligence services and that fake demonstrators were recruited and paid to protest against Ukraine and NATO (Eydoux, Farran, & McCausland, 2023).

This special issue of *Essachess – Journal for Communication Studies* titled "Crisis Communication and Challenges of Disinformation in an Era of Information Warfare: The Ukraine War" seeks to make a contribution to the understanding of the strategic communication practices related to armed conflict, and in particular of the premises, patterns, and outcomes of the information warfare pertaining to the war in Ukraine. Specifically, the articles in this special issue make sense of aspects of the information warfare by focusing on:

- communication lessons from the Ukraine war in regard to the effectiveness of strategies and narratives employed in situations of armed conflict and particularly in the information warfare component of conflict
- ethical implications of communication campaigns and propaganda in times of war, specifically related to how we identify and address the alarming issues related to the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

## **2. Strategies, Narratives, and Implications**

From examinations of communication practices in this war that is set to have profound economic, social, political, and geostrategic implications for our planet during this decade and beyond, this special issue provides insight into both the specific area of crisis communication that is information warfare and the major role played by communication in the manifestation of power (George & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017; Ventre, 2016). The articles, in English and French, and grounded in theoretical considerations and empirical research, assess aspects related to the war in Ukraine including those regarding the functions of communication in the conflict, the various state and nonstate actors involved, the strategic communication techniques and

narratives utilized, the types of traditional media and new media employed, and the impact of communication on audiences.

Crisis situations often present opportunities for political leaders to shape their public perception, demonstrate leadership, and rally support for their causes, and information warfare contexts are no exception. The war between Russia and Ukraine has had significant impact in regards to the image building and reputation management of key political players, in their efforts to attract the interest and favorability of broad audiences. However, information warfare which frequently results in escalation differs from other forms of crisis communication in which the main aim is typically de-escalation. The article “Preparing for War: Strategic Narratives and Disinformation in Leadership Rhetoric” published in this special issue, discusses the rhetorical battle between strategic narratives of several Western leaders (the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, the Chancellor of Germany Olaf Scholtz, and the President of France Emmanuel Macron) and of Vladimir Putin. Such narratives were aimed at legitimizing particular purposes and guiding the public toward specific ideological positions while delegitimizing the opposing side’s purposes and ideological positions. According to this study, for Western leaders, strategic narratives highlighted in their speeches include that Putin’s war is a war on European principles, that Putin wants to change the status quo, and that NATO is not a threat or a danger to Russia but will ensure peace and security in Europe. In contrast, Putin focused on three competing strategic narratives, including the already mentioned (de-)Nazification of Ukraine and the terrorist threat posed within Russian borders, the “Empire of Lies” and the West’s empty promise, and the historical rehabilitation of the errors of the Soviet Union with Ukraine. These key strategic narratives were used as means to construct a collective meaning that was favorable to a specific side involved in the conflict, to immunize the public to the opposing side’s propaganda, and, at least to some extent, to provoke information disorder in the opposing side’s home front. Of particular concern is the use of disinformation and distortion of information which can alter and worsen the crisis, such as repeating a 2014 fake news story that the Ukrainian army would have crucified a Russian boy, or by misrepresenting historical events like the questioning of the history of Ukraine by Putin.

The article “Communication et rhétorique dans la construction de la réputation d’un leader : le cas de Zelensky,” also included in this special issue, reflects on the strategic narratives used by another key player in the conflict, namely Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky. According to the research based on the analysis of recordings of discourses held by Zelensky in European settings in the early months of the war, his focus was on building a reputation that would permit him to mobilize the international community in favor of the Ukrainian cause. The article examines Zelensky’s positioning, which subsequently became a media representation, as an archetypal warrior hero who is also an unlikely but authentic 21<sup>st</sup> century hero. The archetypal warrior hero is a larger than life figure preoccupied by fighting for grand causes and confronting enemies in the name of lofty ideals. This type of hero is

marked by a journey which includes a call to adventure, a refusal of the call, various forms of proof in support of the call, a series of alliances as well as enemies, a reward, the pathway back from the adventure, and the return home with the reward, which are all elements of the construction of Zelensky's image. While previous research has focused on heroic figures in audio-visual environments, this study is unique in its focus on the hero archetype in the context of an armed conflict. Strategies utilized by Zelensky, such as his positioning as "the servant of the people" (in a life imitates art instance in which he adopts as a political figure, the very title phrase of the comedy series which propelled him to fame and subsequently to winning the presidential race in Ukraine approximately three years prior to the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict), or the consistent use of the slogan "Glory to Ukraine," became part of a mediatized "rhetoric of seduction" which helped him become an iconic and quintessential representative for the suffering of the Ukrainian people in the eyes of Western leaders and audiences. According to the study, Zelensky's appeal to emotion by employing the trope of freedom makes him a world hero of the modern times whose compelling narrative has raised international enthusiasm for his cause in the conflict, but mostly because this is associated with the perception that his attitude is genuine. Interestingly, Vladimir Putin has also attempted to position himself in some of his speeches as a hero, in particular as a hero protector of his nation, but it remains unclear how much this stance connects to audiences especially in international settings.

Zelensky's appeal to international audiences particularly in the Western world was doubled by the success of the public diplomacy practiced by the Ukrainian people, both opening doors for strategic support for Ukraine through funding, weapons, outpouring of resources for refugees from Ukraine, and sanctions against Russia. As discussed in the article "Looking Back to Look Forward: Ukraine's Evolving Use of Digital Space for Resistance and Public Diplomacy, 2014-2022," the Ukrainian response to the Russian invasion of Crimea and of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions eight years prior had prepared Ukraine for effectively challenging Russia's disinformation tactics through quickly evolving public diplomacy in the aftermath of Russia's invasion that began in February 2022. The study based on data from a survey and interviews with Ukrainian citizens in 2015 documented a civil society with a high level of information literacy as well as a willingness to play an active role in finding credible information and also with a high level of self-reliance and a culture of volunteering for the common good. While in recent years Russia has engaged in disinformation campaigns which have taken a "4D approach: dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay" (Snegovaya, 2015), Ukrainians have met the Russian aggression in the information space by aptly countering politically motivated disinformation. Through citizen networks as well as user generated contributions online, Ukrainians have succeeded in the past decade to manifest the distrust in both successive national governments and the government of Russia and to create a place identity as well as mobilize protesters when needed. Thus, the Ukrainian society has become able to engage not only state actors such as President Zelensky and his government, but also nonstate actors such as informal organizations and ordinary citizens in digital information initiatives to respond to the 2022 invasion. For example, Ukrainians have

shared digital videos of encouragement for Ukrainians who fight in the war, have used social media to contact relatives of Russian Prisoners of War (PoWs), or have been requesting donations for the war effort online. According to the study, Ukraine's strength of grassroots movements developed within a decade of resistance to injustice internally and from Russia is connected with the nation's capacity to leverage a network of international allies. In contrast, in Russia the population has little access to means of comparing sources of information and nearly no capability for resistance; thus it would be more difficult for citizens to either engage in public diplomacy or to provide rapid response in regards to the conflict in online environments.

Since the information warfare involves not only political leaders but also regular people and communication conveyed through not only traditional media venues but also social media platforms, it is important for comprehending the information warfare as a form of crisis communication to examine both how images and narratives are constructed and disseminated and how audiences respond to them. Two articles included in this special issue explore and evaluate user perception of the information warfare and user ability to discern disinformation on social media about the war. The article "Information and Disinformation about the Ukraine War on Social Media" offers a network analysis of Twitter, which is one of the most utilized social media platforms worldwide, and has remained one of the few platforms still available to use in Russia, while other platforms which decided not to filter posts directly attacking Vladimir Putin have been banned since the start of the conflict. According to this study, although social media users have choices in regards to their sources, they often rely on information from sources matching their existing ideologies, which can be explained with the help of homophily and selective exposure theories. Upon comparing Twitter activity in the early months of the conflict and in later months of 2022, the study found that sharing facts as well as disinformation was prevalent on Twitter early in the conflict, whereas sharing opinions became more frequent subsequently. This means that as time passed people sought fewer sources from either side of the conflict, and were more likely to follow their own trends of thought once they had formed an opinion. From a crisis communication perspective, it is critical to comprehend that while people might pay less attention to accurate information when the information warfare is no longer new, they also pay less attention to disinformation with the passage of time, so the initial influx of information (or disinformation) shapes perceptions the most but also the sway of disinformation diminishes over time. Furthermore, political figures and ordinary citizens living in pro-Ukraine countries shared significantly more opinions about the war on Twitter as compared to those from pro-Russia countries, which is testimony to the effectiveness of the pro-Ukraine messaging since the start of the conflict. The article "The Casual Observer: Low-Activity Twitter Users as Arbiters of (Mis)information in the War in Ukraine" also shows how misinformation might be mitigated on social media platforms, thus likely having less impact than some people believe. The study posits that, in the face of an information warfare, "a web of actors," and not just the key political players, help shape public discourse on social media platforms. The study focused on the majority of Twitter users, who remain "casual" observers with limited

active engagement in crises, and based on their Twitter activity the study inferred that such low-activity users act as a stabilizing force in public discourse, as they tend to be less likely to disseminate misinformation from untrustworthy sources than high-activity users. This is good news in regards to the information ecosystem during an armed conflict, when social media platforms offer real-time data from combat zones as well as access to the discourses of the actors involved, but such platforms are also in danger of being marred with misinformation and propaganda.

There are also some not-so-good news in regards to the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation during an armed conflict accompanied by information warfare. In the article “Understanding Russia’s Disinformation Narratives about Ukraine: A Ratio-Oriented Approach to Strategic Crisis Narratives,” a content analysis of reports from the EUvsDisinfo website established by a task force of the European External Action Services shows that Russia’s disinformation narratives strategically define ratios in such a way as to easily exchange one adverse motive for another at multiple levels, thus having flexibility and efficiency in regards to propagandistic messaging and outreach. Using a framework developed by Edmund Burke (1996), the study highlights how Ukraine war narratives propagated by Russia communicate motivations and direction by implying dependencies between an agent (NATO, the E.U., or the West), an act (to provoke, discredit, or violate), an agency (for example sanctions or biological weapons), a scene (such as global Russophobia, Liberal World Order, or genocide), and a purpose (exploitation, provocation, or Nazification). Research findings suggest that at the system level agent-act ratios dominate Russia’s disinformation narratives, portraying the West as a puppeteer that manipulates and exploits Ukraine for its own economic and geopolitical interests, and Russia as a victim of Western aggression. At the identity level, agent-act ratios are also prevalent, Russia being represented as a liberator, while Ukraine is depicted as an aggressor against its own people. Finally, at the policy level, act-act ratios and scene-act ratios dominate Russia’s disinformation narratives, Russian military deployment being portrayed as an act of self-defense in the context of anti-Russian sentiment, while Ukraine is defined as a crisis ridden country that demands Russian military deployment because of such aspects as alleged genocide against Russians and even its own people. This study argues that, while it is easier to rhetorically legitimize strategic narratives within Russia’s state-controlled media system compared to democratic media systems, it is also important for democratic political crisis actors to publicly legitimize foreign policy decisions by convincingly communicating motivations to counteract undemocratic narratives.

Both Russia and Ukraine have framed their strategic narratives for domestic audiences as well as the international community, as success in the military warfare may be contingent on the ability to sway additional nation states, international organizations, and ordinary citizens that can provide support. Two articles included in this special issue address the increasing impact of the Ukraine war on the global information ecosystem. The article “The Russian - Ukrainian War as a Launchpad and Organizing Logic for Dis/Misinformation in Africa: Contemporary War Propaganda

Outside the Theatre of Conflict” is particularly important as it provides a rare and much needed analysis of how communication practices in the Euro-American context resonate with non-Western nations. Using as a framework the theory of war propaganda as an instance of manufacturing consent and possibly contributing to counterfeiting reality (Lippmann 1922), this study examines how propaganda from the Russia-Ukraine conflict has created narratives that are “particularistic” to the ideological positioning of public information in specific African states. According to this research, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Kremlin frequently disseminates propaganda targeting African governments, while African states in turn are using the conflict to spread disinformation primarily targeting their own citizens. An example is the message disseminated by Russia that Ukraine’s fighting against Russia has contributed to food shortages internationally and a food insecurity situation globally, with particularly dire consequences on nations in Africa. Due to Ukraine fighting back Russian forces, the whole world and in particular nations in Africa are experiencing food shortages and insecurity. The article notes that both blaming Ukraine for a global food crisis and overstating the impact of the war on the food situation in Africa are alarmist exaggerations, but such messages increase the popularity of African leaders among their populations and of Russia across Africa. As the study shows, both Putin and Zelensky have attempted to address African leaders at international events, but while Russia continues to have a large sphere of influence on the African continent, Ukraine (with just 10 embassies in Africa) is typically snubbed in Africa. In a complementary manner, the article “Digital Disinformation Campaign Around the War in Ukraine: Case of Alternative Media in Switzerland” offers a case study on Russian propaganda and its impact through a digital disinformation campaign in Switzerland during the first months of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Much like Russian propaganda aimed at Russian and Ukrainian citizens and at the leaders and citizens of African countries, Russian propaganda further disseminated by a number of alternative media sources in Switzerland positioned Russia as militarily and economically strong as well as savvy in its politics and communication, as opposed to the failed and weak West. Furthermore, evaluative adjectives and personifications were used, for example Biden being characterized as demented, Zelensky as a criminal, and various European leaders in similar ways.

The articles included in this special issue outline a set of implications of information warfare in the Russia-Ukraine conflict following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In times of war, leaders seek to appeal to their target audiences by giving speeches, holding news conferences, and engaging through social media to shape public opinion and perception. Putin, Zelensky, as well as additional key players in the conflict including E.U. and U.S. leaders, have done all of that, in person and virtually. Moreover, leaders who can prove effective crisis communication by conveying clear and coherent messages about the conflict, its causes, and their plans to resolve it, can build trust among their specific key stakeholders. Putin, Zelenky, and additional leaders claiming a stake in the warfare situation have put forth narratives to help legitimize the causes they support. In the context of the Ukraine war, Putin has overall sought to play a blame game, while the Kremlin has been vested



in offering official justifications for the war and limiting the exposure to Western media for domestic audiences as well as in creating disinformation campaigns and seeking collaborations with some of Russia's traditional international partners outside Europe. In turn, Zelensky has sought to craft the positive image of a leader who is actively addressing the challenges of his country and its residents during the war, has empathy and compassion for those in need and suffering, but is also firmly set on not allowing Ukraine to be overtaken by Russia. Zelensky has successfully leveraged global media and social media to gain superstar and icon status and recognition. Interestingly, Zelensky's poll numbers were as low as 25 percent among the citizens of his country before Russia invaded Ukraine, yet his popularity in Ukraine rose spectacularly especially after he made the decision to remain in Kyiv as Russian troops bombarded the capital city, with the now famous and defiant message: "We are all here. Our soldiers are here. The citizens are here. We defend our independence." With that decision and statement, he was transformed overnight into a war president and defender of his nation for both domestic and Western audiences (Langfitt, 2023). However, as case studies in this special issue show, Zelensky has been far less successful in appealing to non-Western audiences, particularly in spaces where Russia still has an economic stronghold and Russian propaganda appears believable, for example across nations on the African continent. Additionally, the Kremlin has had some impact with its disinformation machine among specific groups, including alternative media venues even in Western Europe. As another critical aspect, in today's information landscape, the spread of disinformation is a significant challenge during crises such as armed conflict. The Ukraine war includes numerous examples of the intentional dissemination of false narratives and the manipulation of information from the Russian government and Russia-sponsored actors in the conflict. Proactively preparing for and countering disinformation campaigns through fact-checking, providing accurate information, and engaging with credible sources is essential for debunking falsehoods. During the Ukraine war, there have also been some instances in which portions of the affected populations have reported to have felt unheard or ignored. Yet the Ukraine war has demonstrated both the effectiveness of citizen involvement in public diplomacy as part of the information warfare and the need for garnering international alliances and support to project an image of strength and strategic thinking.

### **3. Communication Lessons from the Ukraine War**

This special issue is innovative in that it allows for reflections on communication in crisis situations related to an ongoing war and it is important because it offers a series of critical analyses of an instance of information warfare with global reach. The issue constitutes a space in which communication experts discuss the framing of the war and its long-term implications.

Strategies adopted in the war have contributed to our understanding of crisis communication and in particular of the specific form of crisis communication that is information warfare in many ways, including in reference to:

1. *Hybrid warfare*: The conflict in Ukraine has been characterized by the use of hybrid warfare tactics, which blend not only conventional military operations with an information warfare, but also information, persuasive appeals, and propaganda, frequently with the addition of fake news, cyberattacks, and psychological operations. Too often the aim of hybrid warfare is to undermine an enemy's messages and communication infrastructure and to influence public perception from local to global levels to take a side in the conflict, but an important point remains that crisis management should focus on de-escalation rather than escalation. The Ukraine war has highlighted the importance of understanding and responding to hybrid warfare strategies through effective and ethically-minded crisis communication measures.

2. *Complex strategies*: Crisis situations constituted by hybrid warfare instances with information warfare components compel political players to engage in image building and reputation management practices to attract the attention and approval of audiences. Narratives seeking to legitimize specific ideological positions and to cast particular actors involved in the conflict as heroic may ensure public sympathy, but so do the perceptions of genuineness and authenticity in action. However, propaganda and disinformation continue to mar information warfare situations, as sometimes state or nonstate actors seek to distort facts and manipulate narratives. Citizen networks, fact-checking mechanisms, and information literacy can help counter disinformation during armed conflict crises.

3. *Mixed media*: The Ukraine war has attracted significant international media attention, with journalists from various countries and regions of the world reporting from the frontlines and documenting the conflict. The coverage of the Ukraine war has shed light on the roles of media venue in shaping international narratives and public perceptions during severe crises such as armed conflict. Yet the Ukraine war has also witnessed extensive use of social media platforms by both official sources seeking to reach out to various stakeholders and ordinary people engaged in citizen journalism. Social media has become a key tool for disseminating and receiving real-time textual and visual information, documenting events, and mobilizing sympathizers and support. However, it has also been a breeding ground for propaganda and disinformation. The Ukraine war has emphasized the need to understand the dynamics of traditional media and social media in crisis communication and develop strategies to counter misinformation and fake news effectively across communication channels in cases of armed conflict. Coordinated cross-media and cross-platform utilization is a best practice for increasing communication outreach and impact in armed conflict situations.

In summary, examining the Ukraine war has contributed significantly to our understanding of crisis communication, particularly in the context of hybrid warfare, complex strategies, and mixed media. In any crisis and particularly in situations of armed conflict, providing timely and accurate information is essential to address rumors and confusion. Information can also help save lives. It is essential to leverage multiple channels, including traditional media, social media platforms, and direct communication methods, to ensure that warfare messages reach a broad segment of the population. Yet conflicting narratives and strategies emerge about the war, leading to public distrust and speculation as well as the potential for further animosity, misunderstandings, and ensuing tragedies.

Lessons learned from the Ukraine war can serve as valuable guidelines for crisis communication in various contexts. The impact of the Ukraine war on the images and reputations of various actors involved in the conflict varies depending on the specific actions, messages, and perceptions associated with each political player. The ways in which leaders handle the crisis, communicate their actions, and demonstrate their abilities during challenging times can shape their perception and credibility in the domestic and international arenas. The war has underscored how by adopting proactive, empathetic, and transparent communication strategies, authorities can effectively navigate crises, minimize the impact on affected populations, and maintain public trust. Yet the war has also showed disturbing trends in regards to the scope, spread, and effectiveness of coordinated propaganda and disinformation campaigns on audiences in national and international settings. This trend needs to be further addressed, at both country specific levels and in global dialogue, through such means as education, regulations, legislative pursuits, and information ecology initiatives. Finally, in the current context of increased use of digital devices and communication globally, ordinary citizens can also become and frequently do become savvy public communicators who can help provide information, monitor the quality of information, and contribute to conflict resolution.

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