

Building the Consensus Narrative

*Ukrainian English-Language Social Media Information Operations in the
First Year of Full-Scale War*

Construire le narratif consensuel

*Opérations informatiques Ukrainienne en langue anglaise sur les
médias sociaux pendant la première année de la guerre à grande
échelle*

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by**

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DEDICATION

For Chris.

Not for the process, the reading, the late nights, the white boards, or the writing.

But for the quiet encouragement, for believing in me, and nudging me toward the courage to take the first step.

Part of this surely belongs to you. Hope you like it.

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ABSTRACT & RESUME

This dissertation examines the approaches and appeals Ukraine used in official English-language information operations through social media (X / Twitter) to shape opinions, attitudes and perceptions of Western publics on Ukraine's fight against Russia in the first year after the full-scale invasion of February 2022. This dissertation is novel in its examination of non-adversary information operations in the digital era. This dissertation examines the role of emotion, identity, and counter-narrative in shaping the perceptions of Western audiences for support for Ukraine. There is examination of how information operations fit within the broader context of international relations, statecraft and war, and how the tenets of information operations and propaganda theory apply to contemporary digital spaces. Using 16 months of data collection, this work identifies the key messages, emotional and identity appeals, and sub-population targeting as part of a master narrative targeting Western, English-speaking populations. This work finds that the target of information operations—human perceptions, attitudes and feelings—is constant in the digital era, and that though information operations are distinct from conventional sources of national power (military, economic, etc.) they nonetheless have the potential to be powerful tools for shaping consensus on major issues in international politics and thus influence policy choices.

ABSTRAIT ET RESUME

Cette thèse examine les approches and appels l'Ukraine a utilisé des opérations informatiques officielles en langue anglaise via les médias sociaux (X / Twitter) pour façonner les opinions, les attitudes et les perceptions des publics occidentaux pendant la première année suivant l'invasion à grande échelle par la Russie en 2022. Cette thèse est novatrice parce qu'elle examine les opérations d'informatique par un état non hostiles à l'ère numérique. Elle analyse le rôle des émotions, de l'identité et des contre-discours dans la formation des perceptions des publics occidentaux quant au soutien à l'Ukraine. Cette étude examine comment les opérations d'informatiques s'inscrivent dans le contexte plus large des relations internationales, de la politique étrangère et de la guerre, et comment les principes des opérations informatiques et de la théorie de la propagande s'appliquent aux espaces numériques contemporains. À partir de seize mois de données, ce travail identifie les messages clés, les appels émotionnels et identitaires, ainsi que le ciblage de sous-populations, dans le cadre d'un récit dominant visant les populations occidentales anglophones. Ce travail conclut que la cible des opérations informatiques — les perceptions, les attitudes et les sentiments humains — est constante à l'ère numérique, et que, bien que les opérations informatiques soient distinctes des sources conventionnelles de puissance nationale (militaire, économique, etc.), elles retiennent néanmoins le potentiel d'être de puissants outils pour façonner un consensus sur les grandes questions de la politique internationale et, par conséquent, influencer les choix politiques.

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'For us, it's reality, but for millions of people around the world, it's still a reality show. Not in terms of fun, but it's something that you see through the screen.

You have to follow certain rules if you want someone on the other side of the screen to keep watching you, and remain sympathetic to you. These are the same rules that work everywhere, in marketing strategies and military strategies. You have to be winning, because people love winners. From time to time, you have to impress them with something big and unexpected, because no one follows routine.

[Third], you need a clear character associated with the story to be visible all the time, and that's President Zelensky(y) in our case. And you need a good story to tell. It's the story of a smaller nation kicking the ass of a larger nation that invaded it. It's bad guys attacking good guys, and good guys winning. That's what people love.' ¹

-- **Dmytro Kuleba. Foreign Minister, Ukraine (2020-2024).**

1 Introduction

This work will study how the Government of Ukraine used its official English-language Twitter/X accounts to engage with voting publics in America and NATO countries to build and sustain political support and deliveries of military materiel to Ukraine during the first year of war after the full-scale invasion in February 2022. This work focuses on how Ukraine targeted friendly nations with digital messaging and content to secure military, financial and political support for its war against Russia. This study differs from most contemporary studies on information operations and propaganda because it focuses on narratives targeting friendly nations, not adversaries. There a rich literature of adversarial targeting in studies focusing on Russian hybrid warfare targeting the United States or former Soviet and Warsaw pact states, or information operations from the Taliban, Al-Qaeda or ISIS seeking to demonize the West and sustain recruitment.

This study explores: 1) how Ukraine developed and used its English-language information operations to leverage emotions of Western audiences through a narrative of shared identity and purpose with Ukraine; 2) how Ukraine regularly showed evidence of donated Western military equipment being used in combat; 3) how Ukraine timed its messaging to coincide with major geopolitical events – especially forums for decision-making about supporting Ukraine; and 4) how Ukraine deployed counter-narratives to undermine Russian messaging targeted at Western, English-speaking audiences.

For reasons of scope and focus, no other Ukrainian information operations will be part of this study. Other official Ukrainian channels like *United24*, official press releases from Government of Ukraine sources, or other official means will not be evaluated unless that material is included in X/Twitter messaging. This means there is no study of messaging targeting domestic Ukrainian audiences, Russian audiences, or any English-language Twitter account that is not an official Government of Ukraine account (even if they are clearly pro-Ukraine accounts) included in this work.

1.1 The Problem

The core problem for understanding the English-language information operations being used by Ukraine is that the existing literature does not provide much in the way of guidance for understanding how allies use information operations in the digital age. Existing theory tends to focus on the weaponization of information in the context of armed conflict or focuses on how groups target individuals for recruitment as part of revolutionary agenda or struggle. There is very little work on how allies target one another *at scale* in a conflict where only one side is fighting, and the most prominent propaganda-focused work about allies is a study about the First World War.²

It is also noteworthy because there has been considerable study on how Russia uses information operations, and how they were used against Ukraine in the annexation period from 2014 to 2022,³ and how they were used by Russia after the full-scale invasion of 2022.⁴ However, there has been very little study about how Ukraine has mobilized its own information operations, least of all how they have been used to target English-speaking audiences.

Generally speaking, there is limited literature on the approaches and appeals that allies use to target one another in the context of full-scale war. More specifically, there is very little work on how Ukraine has used information operations and persuasion in the context of its (at time of writing: ongoing) war against Russia, and the appeals and approaches it has mobilized to achieve that goal.

1.1.1 Existing Theory in Context

Existing academic literature does not provide adequate guidance on understanding how allies target each other with information operations. Ukraine—a friend and ally of the West—is using information operations to build and sustain public opinion in favour of continuing to deliver weapons, ammunition, financial assistance and political support. Ukraine is at war with Russia; though it requires support from Western governments and therefore requires the approval—or at very least, absence of objection—from the public in Western countries. This presents a challenge for academic understanding because the existing literature only addresses some components of Ukraine’s current challenge. Additionally, the existing theory on information operations in the context of war does not give information operations a prominent role in international politics, preferring to focus on military power or economic power as the primary tools of statecraft.

1.1.1.1 Information Operations Not Adequately Addressed by Existing IR Theory

International relations theories provide frameworks through which to understand how states engage in international politics. All theories address notions of power and competition in international politics, whether realism, liberalism, Marxism, or game theory for example. Some provide a basis for understanding cooperation and conflict, like liberalism, the English School, and complex interdependency. Some theories focus on the role of perception of an adversary’s preferences and intentions as a means of understanding international politics, including game theory and the work of Robert Jervis on psychology in international politics.⁵

The notable exceptions are Joseph Nye's *Soft Power* and Nicolas Gull's work on public diplomacy. *Soft power* discusses *belief* about a nation's intentions and their credibility of doing what they say they are going to do, and the attractive nature of states based on less tangible elements like culture and perceived prestige. Soft power, however, is typically used to describe how great powers leverage their culture for political effect globally through cultural attraction and the potential for benefits, not how middle powers like Ukraine use it to influence great powers. Nye also clearly states that soft power is not a replacement for the hard power of military or economic capability, but rather is a complement to hard power where hard power effectively underwrites the credibility of soft power.⁶ The literature on public diplomacy puts more emphasis on the mechanisms discussed in *soft power*, including the role of listening to better understand the preferences and bias of the target of public diplomacy, sending messages through advocacy and public broadcasting (information operations-type work), and cultural and diplomatic exchanges to build personal relationships and familiarity between nations. Ukraine lacked the hard power to underwrite its use of soft power in 2022, though appears to be attempting the use the power of attraction through the defiant, determined image of Zelenskyy. Ukraine has been engaged in advocacy and public broadcasting, through during wartime (from Ukraine's perspective) cultural and diplomatic exchanges are unlikely to deliver the needed effects quickly enough.

The challenge for Ukraine is using information operations, while also seeking to maximize the effectiveness of their military and economic resources. Information operations cannot compel action from an adversary on their own; they cannot be used for the purposes of deterrence or coercion without the military power to back them up; and they cannot practically be used to limit the range of options available to a determined adversary. And yet information operations are increasingly part of international relations and great power competition. The US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence published a five-volume series on Russia's interference in the 2016 election.⁷ The National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians in Canada recently released a similar report on foreign interference into Canada's democratic processes and institutions.⁸ Clearly, despite the gap in theory, information operations are part of international politics. Where theory does consider perception and information, theory tends to focus on how adversaries use information operations for the purposes of competition and conflict, not on how friendly nations target one another.

1.1.1.2 Limited Propaganda and Information Operations Work on Targeting Allies

Information operations and propaganda literature dealing with both state and non-state actors also tends to focus on how information is weaponized against a target in the context of armed conflict. Much of the contemporary literature written prior to 2022 focuses on how information operations are being used by hostile states either in combination with military power or as a means to undermine the credibility and trust in national institutions.⁹ That is, its conceptual roots are adversarial. Islamic State videos feature grotesque, graphic violence, and Russian video content showing the treatment of prisoners of war all focus on dehumanizing their target to make the victims look weak and defenseless, while making the perpetrators of violence look strong. Even in the context of non-violent *competition below the threshold of armed conflict* the focus is adversarial. Russian interference in the 2016 American election and in the 2016 Brexit referendum, and alleged interference in Canadian political institutions revealed in 2024 were all hostile acts of states but done outside the context of armed conflict. While Ukraine is clearly in a full-scale conventional war with

Russia, Ukraine is not in conflict with its allies. Quite the contrary: it relies on them for weapons, and financial and political support.

There is very little work (pre-2022) on how propaganda and persuasion theory apply to friendly relations, with a partner or ally seeking to persuade another, and the most notable work predates the era of popular commercial radio and television broadcast. Lasswell's *Propaganda Technique in the World War* was written in 1927 is probably the most significant work on how friendly nations target each other with information operations.¹⁰ Lasswell's work shows a clear understanding of the importance of convincing friendly nations to support their friends in the context of a war, and convincing neutral nations either to support a friendly coalition or to at least not support the opposing coalition. Lasswell's work addresses how the United Kingdom sought to galvanize its allies during the First World War, persuade neutrals to support the allies – or at least not support the German-Austro-Hungarian alliance – and attempts to persuade the United States to enter the war. This work focused primarily on the use of newspapers as the key vector of persuasion. The structural observations (help friends, harm enemies, persuade or neutralize neutrals) apply to any conflict with alliances today as in the early 21st century.

The notable exception is the use of information operations by both Israel and Palestinian groups to build a persuasive case in favour of their cause.¹ During the combat operations in Gaza in 2014, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and Palestinian activists were competing in the information domain; specifically, for the attention and support of international audiences outside of the Middle East. A teenager named Farah tweeted about the costs of war for Palestinian civilians (bombings, children killed, communities destroyed) that are not part of Hamas or fighting on their behalf, while IDF presented messages about the threat to civilians from Hamas rockets and from tunnels carrying fighters and weapons, and Hamas's use of human shields to either limit the IDF's willingness to use force, or accept the use of force and show images of collateral damage.¹¹ Israel's efforts were generally less effective than those of Palestinian activists in shaping international public opinion. In 2017, Israel updated its information doctrine based on these lessons, recognizing that information operations that seek to undermine Israel's public image need to be taken seriously.¹² Building on those lessons, Israel prioritized the information domain in 2021 during Operation Guardian of the Walls. The IDF sought to manage perception of the legitimacy of Israel's combat operation in the minds of international audiences. During the 2021 campaign, Israel sought connect all combat operations with media operations to limit the harm of international diplomatic relations and global perception of Israel's legitimacy more broadly.¹³

Like Ukraine, Israel is a state as is seeking the support of its partners and allies—most notably, the United States—to provide them political and military support. There are a few differences between the case of Ukraine and Israel/Palestine.

¹ This research work began in mid-2023, before the attacks on Israel on October 7th, 2023 or the subsequent combat and intelligence operations against Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. As a result, at time of literature review and research, these events had not yet taken place. Any scholarly literature written after the most recent conflict began was therefore not part of the literature review because it did not yet exist. The discussion on Israeli and Palestinian information operations for this work, therefore, pre-date the most recent conflict.

First, Israel's wars since the end of the Cold War have not been existential. While Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran have inflicted significant casualties on the IDF and Israeli civilians, they do not pose an existential threat to Israel the way the Russian invasion of 2022 posed an existential threat to Ukraine's democratic government and institutions. Russia had a far larger military than Ukraine, and based on wargames was expected to conquer more Ukrainian territory than it actually did in the first week of combat, and expected to destroy much more of Ukraine's military hardware.¹⁴ A after-action analysis showed that a combination of Russian underperformance and non-adherence to their own doctrine and Ukraine's deep willingness to fight and adapt their tactics led to Russia's failure to achieve their objectives. It was generally assumed that the superior force on paper would be superior in the field, making Ukraine's pre-war situation appear far more dire than it ended up being.¹⁵

The consequences for Ukraine of not receiving support for abroad would be far deeper than for Israel. If we look to complex interdependence theory, we can see that Ukraine was far more *vulnerable* to not receiving foreign support,¹⁶ compared to Israel being *sensitive* to not receiving support. Israel's air force is largely made up of American-purchased aircraft (fighter jets, helicopters, etc.) though its land forces tend to operate Israeli-designed and produced equipment. Israel's defence industrial base was far more robust in 2022 than Ukraine's, with many domestic manufacturers of weapons systems with many export customers. The consequences for Ukraine not receiving weapons and ammunition shipments, financial support, and political support from Western partners and international organizations would be far more dire than for Israel given Ukraine's *vulnerability* compared to Israel's *sensitivity*.

Second, both Palestinian activists and the state of Israel have established supporters and sympathetic groups in the West. For Palestinian groups, this includes diaspora populations living in the West, sympathetic social justice-focused activist groups whose main focus is not Palestine, and non-governmental organizations with similar global perspectives, and for Israel, this includes diaspora and Jewish populations globally, and non-governmental organizations.¹⁷ As we will see, a network of pro-Ukrainian non-governmental organizations and supportive social media accounts was established; though, notably, this network expanded significantly *after* the February 2022 invasion. The same level of support—support accounts on X/Twitter, the NAFO 'Fellas', etc.—did not exist in the 2014-2022 annexation period.

Third, Palestinian statehood is not currently established as Ukraine and Russia's status as states. Palestine is recognized as a non-member Permanent Observer State, which enables its participation in all of the Organization's proceedings, except for voting on resolutions and decisions of the main bodies and organs.¹⁸ Its status as something other than a state does not fundamentally change the nature of information operations, but it does mean that the notable examples of information campaigns are by individuals that live in Gaza, not as official policy positions of a government or formalized authority. For this study, we are focusing on Ukraine's official information operations, as Ukraine is communicating with the world as a state. There are unofficial communications (NAFO 'Fellas'), but they are not the same as official, state messaging. There are certainly structural similarities to Israel/Palestine and Ukraine. In both cases, each party has a clear desire to maintain the moral high ground as a means of generating international goodwill, and hopefully international support from states and international organizations. In both cases, each party has used digital

media to target English-speaking audiences that are not physically threatened by the conflict. In both cases, information operations are not intended to threaten their target audiences. As discussed above, Israeli and Palestinian information operations each seek to present their position as more sympathetic and compelling than the other party's in the court of global public opinion.

The examination of Ukraine's information operations is one of few examples of states targeting friends and partners with information operations in the digital age. For the reasons discussed, Ukraine's case shares some similarities with Israel and Palestine, though also many differences related to consequences and existing information support networks in Western nations.

1.1.1.3 Assumption of Hostile Intention in the Existing Literature

Much of the existing literature about propaganda and information operations is focused on conflict and weaponizing information for the purposes of intimidation or securing an advantage. Propaganda and persuasion theory gives us firm grounding in how information is used to evoke emotion, to mobilize feelings of group membership and identity, give purpose to events in the world around us, and how symbols and images are used as short-hand to evoke complex meaning with simple images, logos, talismans, and how a person can become a symbol for an entire political movement.¹⁹ These works are useful for understanding how Ukraine has mobilized Zelenskyy as a symbol of Ukrainian resistance, and how images of destroyed civilian buildings and dead civilians generate a clear narrative about who is the aggressor and who is the defender. However, much of the work on the mechanisms of targeting groups focuses on radicalization for the purposes of violence.

Case studies on radicalized youth—either by Islamists since 9/11 or by white supremacist groups—tend to focus on how young, alienated (mostly) males are targeted for recruitment by presenting a narrative that justifies violent action and symbols that allow a member to communicate their membership in a group or affinity for it.²⁰ These works focus on the mechanisms and instruments by which the grievances of a single target sub-population are mobilized through narratives and appeals to identity, and how images and symbols become synonymous with identity. These works are not a useful guideline for understanding how Ukraine is using information operations because they are not seeking to radicalize Americans and Western audiences toward violence against individual Russians living in the West. As we will see, Ukraine is seeking to tie their struggle to American and Western identity tropes and idioms wherever possible.

The works on targeting discourse and consensus more broadly are also focused on conflict. A recent work by Andres Krieg addresses how discourse and assumptions about the world can be slowly and systematically targeted through subversion, with the intent of making some assumptions about the world permanent.²¹ This work captures how allies target each other with subversive information operations to attempt to shape perception and create a consensus that is favourable to the party engaged in subversion.²² Another work that discusses subversion focuses on the essentially clandestine nature of subversion. Subversion is predicated on the idea that the party engaged in subversion is never discovered because if the subversion became known the actions may lose their effectiveness because the target will likely impose costs on the subversive party.²³ This literature captures much about how adversaries and nations that are ambiguously or selectively friendly to the West use information operations, and about the need for secrecy to avoid the imposition of costs.

There is general consensus on the tactics and mechanisms of targeting information operations. These works are also not an ideal guide for our purposes, because they focus on deniable or semi-deniable operations. Ukraine is seeking to shape consensus about providing sustained military support, but they are doing so openly and with clear attribution (i.e.: clearly not subversion).

1.1.1.4 Limited Study on Official Ukrainian English-Language Information Operations.

Lastly, there is very little study on how friendly nations target each other with information operations, and in the war in Ukraine there is very little writing about official English-language information operations. The most detailed research as of this writing has focused on grassroots online activists calling themselves the “Fellas” as part of “NAFO” (North Atlantic Fellas Organization).²⁴ This work focuses on how disparate individuals are collaborating online to harass Russian diplomats, share positive content about Ukraine and the rules-based order, and otherwise engage in trolling of accounts disseminating pro-Russian content. Their purpose appears to be undermining Russian narratives wherever possible while presenting pro-Ukrainian narratives. The Fellas/NAFO movement is, however, not an official Government of Ukraine information operation. This further emphasizes the need to study official Ukrainian information operations, as this is a much-understudied area.

1.2 Context

The ongoing war in Ukraine has deep roots in Russia’s political evolution immediately after the Cold War, Putin’s shaping of domestic politics, national identity, and presumption of great power status; in Ukraine’s political evolution after the collapse of the Soviet Union, its desire to re-orient itself westward to Central Europe, and the growth of a distinct Ukrainian identity, and; America and Russia’s politics, conflicts and disagreements, and the overall relationship between the winner and loser of the Cold War in the post-Cold War period. The historical context of Russian, Ukrainian, and American relations—and the long-term interests, ambitions, resentments, and self-images of each—informs the narratives about this war that each side communicates domestically and to the rest of the world, and how they view the actions of others.

Russia’s predicates and explanations for invading Ukraine are deeply rooted in Russian narratives about their imperial power and entitlements to parts of Ukraine, and Ukraine’s subordinate role in Russia’s concept of its empire. Russia under Putin is seeking to rebuild its immediate sphere of influence, which includes Belarus and Ukraine. This is about rebuilding Russia’s self-image as a great power with an empire, as it had during the days of the Soviet Union. Since Putin’s rise to power, Russia has sought to nurture a narrative that emphasizes past military glories, especially its victimization at the hands of Nazi Germany after 1941 and its eventual victory in the Eastern Front. The threat of an allegedly Nazi Ukraine figured prominently in Russia’s justification for invading a Nazi-run neighbour. The Russian invasion of Ukraine builds on series of relatively low-cost wars that Putin initiated in Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine since the late 1990s, and is part of a more confident, bellicose Russian tone and approach to international politics, illustrated by more war and interference in the politics of their neighbours.

The Russian narrative also includes a strain of victimization at the hands of a treacherous and duplicitous west, led by the United States. As the last great power standing at the end of the Cold War, America sought to expand liberal democracy and market capitalism to former Soviet block countries, and the former Soviet

republics that achieved independence. Russia has little leverage to prevent this from happening at the Soviet Union dissolved, and Putin has sought to weaponize this fact when pointing out the alleged hostility and treachery of the West. The term “Russophobia” is often used as a catch-all that seeks to blame any western resistance, retaliation or push-back against Russia geopolitical actions (sanctions of individuals, trade sanctions, limitation on global Russian oil markets, etc.) as western fear and irrationality toward Russia and Russians more generally. Putin will often point to the economic integration and military integration of former Warsaw Pact countries and Soviet republics through the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as evidence of Americans predation against Russia and interference in Russia’s traditional sphere of influence.

Ukraine, for its part, sought its own pathway after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Free of its status as a social republic in a Russian-led Soviet Union, Ukrainian identity grew as something distinct from Russian or Soviet identity in the post-Cold War period. This included reviving the use of Ukrainian language, seeking closer association with the West and Central Europe, and seeking to reduce economic and political dependence on Russia. Russia has opposed the idea of an independent Ukraine and has sought to place and sustain Russian-friendly political candidates and leaders in Ukrainian politics to prevent Ukraine’s alignment westward. The idea that Ukraine is its own, distinct political entity is anathema to Russia’s self-image a renewed great power with entitlements to reject the political autonomy of its neighbours. The incompatibility of Ukraine’s ambitions for its own future with Russia’s claims on its neighbours’ choices explain the 2014 Orange Revolution that saw Russia’s preferred Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, exiled after prolonged demonstration, and was the justification for the annexation of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in the weeks afterward.

The historical and political context of Ukraine, Russia and the United State since the end of the Cold War merits examination to better understand the self-images and identity narratives of the three main powers implicated in this war. Self-images and narratives are essential inputs to the discussion on the propaganda and information operations theory and literature in section 2.2, and the comparison of the findings to the theory and literature in section 6.3.

1.2.1 Russia and the Post-Cold War Period

1.2.1.1 *Immediately After the Cold War*

The end of the Soviet Union was one the great geopolitical events of the 20th Century. Vladimir Putin called it the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th Century.”²⁵ The actions and decisions of American and Russian leaders in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War influenced the discourse, rhetoric, and narratives of the Russian federation for decades to come. Then-Secretary of State James Baker was alleged to have promised that NATO and the United States would advance “not one inch forward” of the line of demarcation between East and West Germany, seeking to manage Russian anxiety about losing global prestige and influence over the countries formerly part of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.

The “not one inch forward” statement was allegedly made in a private meeting without consultation with the American President, West Germany, or other members of NATO. It is often recalled historically as a

hypothetical condition if Russia was to relinquish claim over the former Soviet sphere in Central and Eastern Europe.²⁶ German unification appeared inevitable, and Chancellor Kohl made clear that Germans alone would decide their political future—including how a unified Germany would fit in NATO.²⁷ The objection to NATO expansion eastward – and with it, eastward expansion of American power and influence – was largely rhetorical from the Russian perspective. Despite repeated objections about NATO’s territorial expansion, Russia was in no position to influence events²⁸ and NATO members were not willing to extend a veto to Russia over NATO’s future. Despite Russian complaints, it no longer had the power or credibility to act as it had in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, or Poland in 1981. In effect, Russia was threatened by the expansion of NATO and American power eastward but were powerless to meaningfully resist or drive an alternate outcome.

Despite Russia’s initial displeasure at NATO expansion, the narrative surrounding “not one inch forward” has been presented ambivalently by Russia since the early 1990s to suit the expediencies of the political moment, and its perceived power to influence and drive events in that period. There are good reasons to doubt Russia’s claim that “not one inch forward” was a broken promise about NATO’s role vis-à-vis Russia in the post Cold War period. First, during the George HW Bush administration the same Secretary of State – James Baker – repeatedly mentioned that Russia would be eligible to join NATO alongside any other state, so long as they met the same political and institutional reforms that NATO was demanding from the other former Warsaw Pact states as a condition of membership.²⁹ Second, Putin on many separate occasions mused about Russia joining NATO. In public statements in 2000 he asserted Russia’s European culture and willingness to engage with the rest of Europe through NATO.³⁰ When it came to discussing the actual process for NATO membership, Putin became somewhat annoyed according to one account that Russia’s membership in NATO was contingent on applying and meeting conditions like any other member.³¹ These accounts significantly undermine the narrative that NATO was an expansion-bound organization that actively sought to exclude Russia. Russia was not prevented from joining NATO; however, they would have been obliged to follow the same process as any other member and ultimately chose not to. These facts significantly undermine narrative of hostile, zero-sum NATO expansion, though Russia continues to perpetrate this narrative.

1.2.1.2 Building a New Russian Narrative

The role of an allegedly hostile NATO undermining Russian prestige was not the only narrative Russia was concerned with managing in the post Cold War period. Russia as an independent state faced major challenges in the 1990s. Despite hopes for continuation of Gorbachev’s liberalization and modernization from some corners in Russia, the reality was far more chaotic. The new leader of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, cobbled together a coalition of former Gorbachev supporters with divergent interests that were seeking to retain their own power, while seeking dialogue with the West and possibly their rhetorical support Yeltsin’s leadership during the transition phase.³² During this period Soviet-style state control was relaxed, but without the surge in prosperity that capitalism promised. Experiences of economic chaos, violence on the street, people forced in precarious labour, massive inflation for basic goods, and the perception of lawlessness were commonplace among ordinary Russians.³³ The transition to capitalism without the controls of socialism was blamed for the chaos and uncertainty in people’s daily lives. The sell-off of Russian assets to oligarchs and the erosion of official power, the transfer of wealth to foreign bank accounts, and the fracturing of official power left many in Russia anxious about the future.³⁴ Many Russians resented the power and wealth

that organized criminal figures accumulated in this time, the economic burdens this forced on the population, and the generally chaotic nature of Russian life during this period.³⁵ The moment was ripe for a strongman to take charge of society.

Vladimir Putin began his political life at the municipal level in St. Petersburg, and under Yeltsin first became head of the FSB, then Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, and was finally appointed as Prime Minister in 1999 using leverage and threat of criminal investigation over Swiss bank accounts to push Yeltsin out.³⁶ Putin was elected President in 2000, and quickly sought to implement a new vision for Russia that rhetorically addressed the concerns of citizens. Among Putin's first acts was limiting the freedom of the press to limit opposing narratives and seeking to limit the power of Russian oligarchs that had built their power and wealth during the divestment of government power and resources to private hands during the 1990s.³⁷ Putin sought to convert the oligarchs into vassals of his power, while allowing to retain their wealth as a trade-off. He sought to assert himself as leader by integrating the disparate elements of Russian society into one system.

Putin revived narratives of Russian power, strength, and prestige, recalling history and national identity. Putin's vision for the future is deeply rooted in the past, presenting a whitewashed narrative of military power and victories as evidence of Russian cultural superiority.³⁸ Totems easily understood by the public – Soviet victory during 'the Great Patriotic War', St-George's ribbon as a symbol of that victory – are transported into the present as symbols of either Russian glory or proof of threat from the West.³⁹ The narrative simultaneously speaks the past glory of Russia, and how every setback in international politics is proof of conspiracy targeting Russia. Sanctions against Russia, alleged Nazis in Ukraine, the expansion of NATO, the EU, democracy around the world – especially in former Soviet republics and Warsaw pact states – are all symbols of an expansionist West that is seeking to limit and undermine Russia.⁴⁰ In this framing, the West 'cheated' to win the Cold War and has been using the opportunity recast the power structures of international politics, while seeking to exclude Russia – a state that should be rightfully recognized as a global power.⁴¹ This is a narrative about a reckoning for Russia in the global order.

This narrative is an important one for Putin, because it frames anything that is pro-democracy or pro-Western as being the harbinger of the return to the poverty, economic weakness, uncertainty, and loss of national pride Russians experienced throughout the 1990s. The narrative seeks to connect fears of a return to recent memories of deprivation and humiliation with the idea of expanded freedom and democratic principles. Connecting the idea of democracy with danger allows any democratic movement – whether protests in Russia, or popular movements in Ukraine or Georgia – to be leveraged by the Russian state as a reminder of threat and instability. Domestic Russian narratives also identify clear out-groups, demonizing the LGBTQ+ community with allegations of grooming and sexual assault of children, as posing threat to traditional gender roles and therefore to societal order.⁴² By re-establishing a singular national narrative—and preventing a free press from either challenging it or presenting a competing narrative—Putin seeks to connect the 'good guys' to ideas of order and stability, and the 'bad guys' to chaos and moral decay. This is a resonant message for many audiences because it relies on familiar Russian identity narratives and conjures recent and traumatic memories of the 1990s as a fear-based reminder of what attempts at liberalization looked like in Russia at that time.⁴³ This narrative is an updated and modernized version of the classic Soviet narrative that portrayed any news item as one of two things: proof of socialism's superiority, proof of

capitalism's degeneracy, or ideally both.⁴⁴ Building a Russian narrative that extols historical military victories and imperial grandeur allows anyone who disagrees to be framed as a challenge to that history, and therefore a challenge to Russia's present and future.

1.2.1.3 *Russia and Wars in Its Near-Abroad*

Crisis and violence were rife across the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact after the Cold War, with the new Russia largely reacting to events. In November of 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, allowing people from East Germany to cross into West. In December 1989 Romania had a revolution that resulted in the summary trial and execution of long-running dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife. Azerbaijan and Tajikistan both had civil wars, adding to the chaos. The first war in Chechnya was a humiliating defeat for Yeltsin – taking Grozny, then losing it again. Russia was unable to dissuade NATO airstrikes against the Serbs in the Former Yugoslavia, nor could they do much once the Kosovo air campaign began. In the peace that followed, Russia was not given a sector of its own and seized Pristina airport in response, giving Russian citizens watching a rare piece of good news for their national pride.⁴⁵ In an era when Russia pride and sense of national identity was flagging, a military victory buoyed those feelings.

In 1999, the second Chechen war was initiated by a likely false-flag bombing operation made to appear as the work of Chechen jihadists to bolster Putin's image as being a strong counter-terrorist. Putin's willingness to allegedly kill his own people for the sake of a pretext for war presents a sharp contrast to Yeltsin's defeats or only-partial-victories. In 2008, Georgia appeared to be on the pathway to NATO membership after a summit in Bucharest. Georgian President Michael Saakashvili was prone to hyperbole and allowed himself to be provoked into attacking Russian forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, setting off a war in which neither Georgia nor Russia performed well.⁴⁶ Ultimately, Russia emerged the clear victor and recognized the independence of the breakaway 'republics.' Russia destroyed much of Georgia's military equipment, integrated cyber-attacks into its operations, and stationed military and security forces in the conquered territory to freeze military gains in Europe.⁴⁷ Despite challenges with combat performance, Russia showed some degree of integration of combat elements and asserted itself against the perceived threat of NATO.

Russia's wars in its near-abroad after the Cold War show two trends. First, a general inability to drive events as a great power throughout most of the 1990s. Russia was unable to prevent wars or win them decisively in the 1990s. Second, with Putin's elevation to power, Russia was more willing to use conventional military power—notably, against a would-be NATO member. This was a significant choice, because it underlined the need for NATO to reconsider the Article 5 implications for protecting countries with no interior lines to Europe, or in the case of Georgia, only one line to another NATO member (Turkey). Russia asserted its own narrative of being capable of preventing NATO expansion and its role as a power that could prevent actions it perceived as threats to itself and its notion of empire.

1.2.2 *Ukraine-Russian Relations*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine sought to slowly assert its independence without provoking backlash from Russia. This was about political independence, and more importantly about establishing Ukraine as an independent nation with its own identity that would choose its own future. This was fundamentally about asserting "Ukrainianness" as something distinct from either its Russia neighbour or its

Soviet past. As time carried on, Ukrainian politicians struggled with aligning itself more with Central and Western Europe while also grappling with its economic and political ties to Russia. Russia sought to exercise its influence in Ukrainian affairs in 2004 and failed (overall) and then accelerated those efforts in 2013 and 2014. When those efforts failed, Putin moved shifted to military power to prevent Ukraine from drifting further into European political and economic alignment, invading Crimea and the Donbas with semi-deniable forces. Unable to reverse Russian territorial gains, Ukraine effectively held the line for another eight years until Russia launched a full-scale invasion in 2022. Ukraine's narrative since 2014 has focused on its independence from Russia – politically, economically, and spiritually – as a distinct entity that is not simply a part of Russia's reborn empire. These tensions are fundamental to the narratives presented by Russia and Ukraine. For Russia, the narratives justifying the invasion are largely predicated on conspiracy theories about Nazis and alleged biological weapons laboratories, while at the heart of the matter it is really a grievance about Ukraine seeking a break from Russia's influence and domination; while for Ukraine the narrative is about being—yet again—prevented by force from making their own choices about their future by a revanchist imperial Russia.⁴⁸

1.2.2.1 Ukraine Looks West

As the Soviet Union was collapsing and former republics were seeking their own pathways forward, Ukraine managed a delicate journey, balancing its own desires for sovereignty without provoking reactionary forces in Moscow trying to rebuild some version of the Soviet Union going forward. Leonid Kravchuk, the first post-Soviet Ukrainian President, co-opted the existing communist party's political structure and expanded its domestic nationalist emphasis, while maintaining open dialogue with Moscow and committing to de-nuclearization.⁴⁹ Kravchuk's priorities for an independent Ukraine were as follows: first, building a state with its own independent government separate from Russia and the Soviet legacy; second, establishing Ukrainian national identity as something separate from the Russian national identity; third, building a sovereign economy, and; lastly, establishing democratic structures and principles for Ukraine.⁵⁰ This all had to be accomplished slowly enough to avoid prompting reactionary elements in Moscow. The overall vision was to put Ukraine on the pathway to territorial, economic and political independence; but not too quickly as to reduce the risk of backlash or resistance from Russia.

Kravchuk's priorities for an independent Ukraine were as follows: building a state with its own independent government separate from Russia and the Soviet legacy; establishing Ukrainian national identity as something separate from the Russian national identity; building a sovereign economy; and establishing democratic structures and principles for Ukraine.⁵¹ To manage this, Kravchuk was balancing three basic political camps: Ukrainian nationalists that favoured a rapid break from Russia; softer nationalists that favoured greater economic independence, but at a slower pace to limit the shocks to Ukraine's economy; and a group that saw trade with Russia as beneficial.⁵² Kravchuk's challenge was balancing moves toward greater sovereignty and autonomy with domestic political considerations while managing the pro-Russian camp internally and avoiding provoking Russian response.

Kravchuk was replaced by Kuchma in the 1994 election, and Kuchma sought to deepen cooperation with the West. Ukraine ratified the non-proliferation treaty (NPT) in 1994, joined the partnership for peace (PfP) putting it on the path to NATO membership, received IMF loans, received assurance from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), committed a small military contingent to the NATO

deployment to Bosnia in 1995, and signed a partnership and cooperation agreement with Russia (CPA) with the European Union (EU).⁵³ These measures were all important for a country leaning West, but Ukraine still faced major challenges. With – often correct – Western perceptions of corruption throughout the Ukrainian government, and Ukraine’s continued reliance on Russia for energy, transitioning to Western structures was going to take time.⁵⁴ As Ukraine moved forward, it was clear that Russia would continue to oppose Ukraine’s progress toward the West. The arrival of Vladimir Putin as President of the Russia accelerated Russia’s actions to assert its own imperial ambitions, and that necessarily meant arresting Ukraine’s progress toward an independent vision of itself.

1.2.2.2 Russian Involvement in Ukrainian Electoral Politics

The internal balancing act between Ukrainian nationalists seeking greater independence and pro-Russian factions inside Ukraine faced a major test in the 2004 election. By 2004, Putin had been President for four years and was committed to Russian influence over Ukrainian politics. Putin was determined to use influence, promise of personal gain, disinformation campaigns, and whatever else possible to ensure a pliable and pro-Russian Ukrainian leader was elected. A pro-Russian leader was vital to allowing Putin to make progress toward re-integrating Ukraine into Russia’s sphere of influence.

Russian influence in the 2004 Ukrainian election echoed later themes, with allegations of Ukrainian Nazis, allegations of Ukrainian fascism targeting Russia, the poisoning of the leading nationalist candidate (Viktor Yushchenko), and widespread allegations of Russian interference with voter rolls and even stuffing ballot boxes.⁵⁵ Yanukovych – Russia’s preferred candidate – was declared the winner, however the voting irregularities were so widespread that roughly half a million people took to the streets in protest, and the election result was cancelled by the Supreme Court with Yushchenko winning the next round.⁵⁶ This was taken by Russia as a major blow, because their preferred candidate lost, losing the most reliable pathway to influencing Ukrainian politics with him. Russia still had other policy tools at their disposal, even without their preferred candidate in office.

1.2.2.3 The Energy Weapon

To prevent Ukraine from leaning too far to the west, Russia continued to balance the threat of increased prices for natural gas with the promise of discounted gas rates and debt forgiveness to attempt to entice Ukraine to lean to the East. In 2005, in response to President Yushchenko visiting NATO headquarters in pursuit of a membership action plan (MAP), Russia announced it would be raising the prices of natural gas to Ukraine, planned to take effect during winter.⁵⁷ Denying gas deliveries or raising prices is a well-worn Russian tactic, with dozens of documented cases since the end of the Cold War, including in response to doing something Russia opposes is a well-worn tactic. Russia cut supplies to Lithuania in the late 1990s when Lithuania sought American investment in a domestic refinery; cut supplies to Czechia in 2009 when it supported US missile defence; and pursued new routes for gas pipelines to deny Ukraine, Poland, and Belarus gas transit royalties to exacerbate the impact of price and supply manipulation.⁵⁸ The use of the energy weapon is a major challenge for Ukraine. With pipelines connecting Russia and Ukraine and the rest of Europe, Ukraine is a pathway for Russian energy exports and has significant domestic consumption needs with harsh winters. Manipulating both the bulk sales prices to Ukraine and the transport fees paid to Ukraine gave Russia major leverage over Ukrainian decision-making about its economic choices, allowing Russia to easily impose costs

for non-compliance. The message from Russia was clear: Ukraine will pay a significant price for aligning itself further with the West.

1.2.2.4 *EuroMaidan*

Viktor Yanukovych was elected in 2010 after losing the election in 2004 and being widely suspected of receiving Russian help. The need to balance Ukraine between cooperation with Russia and greater integration with European Union remained, with potentially polarizing choices ahead for Yanukovych. Russia proposed a customs union in 2011 that would require total commitment from Ukraine in exchange for the promises of improved access to Russian markets, the promise of better terms of negotiation on gas, and allegedly better terms than the EU was offering.⁵⁹ Putin and other Russian opinion leaders emphasized additional cultural benefits, invoking the legacy of Kyivan Rus and orthodox Slavic values and religion as part of the deal, and almost making clear that Ukraine could not be part of both the Russian customs union and the EU.⁶⁰ The idea of Russia dictating Ukraine's focus was unacceptable to many Ukrainians, putting Yanukovych in an unenviable position: choose the Russian customs union and face an angry electorate at home, or choose the EU and face punishment from Russia across whatever issues Russia saw fit.⁶¹

In late 2013 Yanukovych decided to side with Russia, rejecting the EU deal in favour of the Russian customs union. Organized protest began almost immediately, with people protesting on the Maidan Square in Kyiv giving the movement its colloquial name (EuroMaidan). Russia often positions any organized protest as an anti-Russian conspiracy organized by the United States and the West, and EuroMaidan was no different. Russian information operations accused America of fomenting protest, of targeting Russia specifically, framing EuroMaidan a Nazi or fascist threat to Russia like Nazi Germany, and branding Ukrainian as Banderites (reviving the memory of Ukrainian nationalist that collaborated with fascists during the Second World War).⁶² These narratives were largely rejected in Ukraine and did nothing to stem the protest.

In mid-February the government sought to crack down further on protests. Security forces opened fire on protestors and used semi-deniable proxies to intimidate protestors. On the night of 18 February 108 protestors were killed in the streets, and by 20 February a diplomatic delegation with members from Germany, Poland, France, and Russia worked with Yanukovych to find a peaceful settlement and end the violence.⁶³ Even without Russia signing, the agreement ended the violence in the short-term. However, Yanukovych's political future was now deeply imperiled and even faced threats to his life. Two days later he fled to Russia. The Ukrainian protestors believed they had won. The violence ended, Yanukovych was gone, and the new government committed to signing an agreement with the EU.⁶⁴

Ukraine aligning itself with the EU – and not with Russia – was intolerable to Russia. The success of the EuroMaidan protests in reversing Yanukovych's policy direction, forcing him from office and replacing him with a western-focused government was the final triggering event for Putin. Two days later, Russia deployed semi-deniable forces to Crimea and Donbas to annex the territory, take political control as it did in Georgian 'republics', and set the stage for the full-scale invasion eight years later. Putin was ready to translate threats and coercive negotiation with military power. The immediate price to pay for Russia was not a massive military response from NATO or NATO members, but being kicked out of the G8, a motion all parties regarded as mostly symbolic.⁶⁵

1.2.3 America's Post Cold-War Unipolar Status & The Challengers

The United States won the Cold War and used that power to enable former Warsaw Pact countries to assert themselves in the absence of Soviet coercion. This included supporting the unification of Germany, adding former Warsaw Pact members to NATO, and economic and political integration efforts. There was some hope for closer US-Russian ties, sharing the mutual adversary of fundamentalism Islam in the post-9/11 period. However, this was short-lived as American signaled desire for further NATO expansion with Georgia and Ukraine. The military intervention in Libya was another point of tension. Russia saw these efforts as Western imperialism and contributed to Russia's more hostile actions. In the 2010s, Putin accelerated much of his rhetoric around alleged American imperialism and abuse of Russia, culminating in direct interference in the 2016 US Presidential election. Putin's narrative of victimization at the hands of the West and the perception of America illegitimately stepping beyond the boundaries of its influence and into Russia's sphere of influence is central to US-Russia relations in the post 9/11 period.

1.2.3.1 *America, Its Allies, and the Rules-Based Order*

Francis Fukuyama famously declared the 'end of history' at the end of the Cold War. The 'end of history' is a reference to history being characterized by conflict and competition between opposing power and their alliances. With liberal democracy winning, history had therefore ended in the figurative sense because the alternatives for domestic political structure had been proven less durable than the modern democratic state.⁶⁶ The 'end of history' was the belief that Western liberal concepts of how governments and economies should be organized had triumphed, and that other countries would naturally seek to replicate those structures absent the influence and coercion of a rival communist power. This theory had currency for many. As the Soviet Union collapsed, almost all of those in the former Soviet sphere of influence chose the path toward 'the end of history'. East Germans fled west when the Berlin wall came down, not the other way around. Romanians revolted and deposed Ceausescu. Czechoslovakia elected Vaclav Havel in 1989, a long-standing dissident against communism during the Soviet era. In Russia, Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika to expand economic and political liberalization continued under Yeltsin.

America availed itself of the tools of power at its disposal. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) approved military action in Somalia under the justification of humanitarian intervention for the first time in the history of the UN. The US also sought intervention in the Former Yugoslavia, with UNSC resolutions for major peacekeeping operations in Croatia and Bosnia. Images of concentration camps and ethnic cleansing paralleled images of the Holocaust, putting pressure on the United States and NATO to act. Air strikes in Bosnia specifically targeted Serbian forces either too close to cities or too close to protected areas. A major air campaign in Kosovo followed, justified as preventing ethnic cleansing and genocide. The United States also sought—and received—UNSC approval for no-fly zones in southern and northern zones over Iraq after the Gulf War to prevent Saddam from targeting civilians. America was behaving like the only superpower and generally exercised power with the support of international organizations like the UN and NATO.

The end of history was not spreading to all corners of the world, however. There were over 20 major armed conflicts every year from 1990 to 1995, with slight decrease in 1997, with an increase back to 20 plus major armed conflicts from 1998 until 2003.⁶⁷ Democratic backsliding was taking place, with manipulation of

elections and weaponization of the law and courts can all concentrate greater power in the hands of elites, while maintaining the veneer of democracy as the system of government.⁶⁸ Despite democratization in some spaces, there was an actual rise in authoritarian tendencies across the world in the 1990s.⁶⁹ The narrative of liberal democratic triumph was clearly not being embraced globally.

1.2.3.2 *America-Russia Relations Since Putin's Arrival in the Presidency*

The appointment of Putin as Prime Minister by Yeltsin was widely interpreted as a signal that Yeltsin was endorsing Putin for the Presidency and created major concerns in Washington.⁷⁰ These concerns were overlooked by the George W Bush administration after 9/11, seeing Putin as a counter-terrorism ally.⁷¹ Bush notably claimed to have gained a 'sense of his soul' early in the relationship with Putin, seemingly based on counter-terrorism cooperation and vague discussions about a more cooperative future.⁷² Those good will feelings of collaboration faded rapidly in 2003. America's invasion of Iraq in 2003 without UNSC approval was perceived by Putin as naked *realpolitik* as part of America's global strategy to expand its influence under the veil of the high-minded rhetoric of democracy and liberalization.⁷³ The United States also cancelled the anti-ballistic missile treaty (ABM) in 2003, removing one of the guardrails for theatre and strategic weapons proliferation. Most worrisome for Putin, the fusion of unfettered American military power projection and a democratization narrative was perceived as coded language for the expansion of democracy by force *everywhere*. Putin perceived dual American threats from NATO expansion eastward and from colour revolutions in Georgia in 2003 (Rose) and Ukraine in 2004 (Orange).⁷⁴

The Obama team sought a "re-set" with Russia, and there was *some* common ground. Then-President Medvedev agreed with Obama's plan to re-engage with Iran on the nuclear question and agreed in principle on re-opening strategic weapons limitations talks. However, Russia found no common ground with America on Georgia and pressured Kyrgyzstan to shut a US air base in exchange for billions in investment in the Kyrgyz government.⁷⁵ The Russian message seemed clear: Russia was willing to re-engage with the United States on global issues like Iran and strategic weapons discussions, but was not ready to yield on any issue in what it perceived as its regional sphere of political influence.

The Arab Spring in 2011 was another crisis that tested Russian-American cooperation. America rebuked Egyptian president Mubarak for the violent crackdowns on protestors and emphasized the need for a peaceful path forward, while also seeking a UNSC motion to use force against Qaddafi in Libya. American needed Russia's support – or at least non-opposition – to move forward with such a mission.⁷⁶ The UNSC resolution passed, though Russia's future intentions were not clear. Putin (then Prime Minister, not President) made statements contradicting Medvedev's choices. Putin claimed the UNSC resolution was a mistake, that America was supporting popular revolutions in Egypt and Libya (which he saw as being American led and organized). Putin re-affirmed Russian support for Assad in Syria on the grounds that attempts to remove him would generate yet more violence and chaos,⁷⁷ which would also forestall movements toward democratization. These positions were significant because they signaled that Putin's ambitions had widened beyond the former Soviet sphere.

The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Donbas put Russian-American relations at an all-time low in the post Cold-War period, prior to the 2022 full-scale invasion.⁷⁸ Putin's rhetorical flourishes were consistent with

the Russian narrative since the early 2000s. The themes include: the history of Ukraine and Russia and Kyivan Rus as evidence of cultural unity; the ‘historic error’ of Crimea being re-allocated from Russia to Ukraine under the Soviet Union; allegations of an American-Nazi EuroMaidan plot as proof of anti-Russian machinations in the West; and the direct threat posed to Ukrainian people – Russian-speakers, especially – by the government in Kyiv.⁷⁹ This narrative emphasizes the cultural sameness of Russia and Ukraine (with Ukraine as a subset of Russia), and that any attempt to deny this fact could only be explained by a grand conspiracy led by the United States to interfere with Russia’s interests. The Russian narrative of entitlement to Ukrainian territory and decision-making over its future remains a central theme in Russia’s justification for continued war.

1.2.3.3 2016 Interference in the US Presidential Election

Russia’s post Cold War information operations targeting Western political institutions and processes began in 2014, targeting western conservative politicians in the US, Germany, France, and the UK by emphasizing traditional values, the spiritual and moral value of religious practice, and encouraging hostility toward those who disagreed.⁸⁰ The relative impunity with which Russia conducted these operations likely encouraged an expansion of scope.

Election interference in the 2016 US Presidential election has been well documented and was the subject of a major investigation by the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. The Committee study could not conclude the exact extent of cyber operations or attempts to access voter role information; but it was unequivocal in its findings that the purpose was to sow division among voters, undermine confidence in institutions, and therefore cast doubts on electoral process and the outcomes of the election.⁸¹ This theory is further supported by the findings of the Committee, which found that there was inflammatory content being published about both major party candidates, targeting their traditional voter bases and appealing to their respective identities about religion, diversity, and social order generally.⁸² These operations followed the traditional approach of many Soviet active measures during the Cold War that focused on exacerbating social tensions that were otherwise accepted and managed in democratic society.⁸³

What was clear to American policymakers in 2016 is that domestic interference was a continuation of a broader global pattern from Russia. That is: Russia’s ambitions would not be limited to seeking control over Ukraine’s future. Ukraine was but one pillar in Russia’s overall strategic objective of building its own imperial power by confronting and agitating the United States wherever and however possible, short of directly confronting the United States with military power. Russia granted Edward Snowden asylum; in 2015 Russian forces propped up the Assad regime with massive human rights abuses; and in 2016 Russian security forces assaulted American diplomats in Moscow.⁸⁴ It was later determined that so-called “Havana Syndrome” was possibly a Russian directed energy weapon targeting US diplomats starting in 2016 ranging from Cuba to Germany to China, and even in Washington.⁸⁵ Where America was still trying to establish a relationship with Russian leaders to pursue the “re-set” to find common ground on de-escalating in Syria and Ukraine, Russia was doing the opposite. Russia was engaged in a comprehensive and global campaign—including military campaigns, information operations campaigns and cyber attacks—targeting both the foreign policy of NATO members and interfering in their domestic politics.⁸⁶ From this vantage, any discussion of ‘reset’ appears hopelessly naïve in retrospect.

1.2.4 Russian War in Ukraine

Russia's narrative on Ukraine has been one of historical grievance and wrong since the arrival of Putin. The idea of a *Novorossiya* constituted of Crimea and Donbas and beyond is cited as rightfully with Russia's empire. However, a predicate that was so nakedly based on imperial expansion was softened with largely invented allegations of Russians being killed and persecuted in the Eastern regions of Ukraine. A Russian narrative that emphasized imperial necessities would not be palatable in the court of international opinion, and therefore a defensive narrative was created about the need to protect allegedly persecuted minorities from Ukrainian Nazis. Ukrainians sought to undermine this narrative in the Western media, often referring to their President's Jewish heritage as clear evidence the Ukrainian government was not dominated by Nazis. Ukraine deliberately delivered counter-narratives to Western audience to prevent the Russian version of events from standing as the consensus understanding of the conflict in the West.

1.2.4.1 *Annexation of Donbas and Crimea (2014 – 2021)*

Yushchenko's flight from Ukraine in response to sustained protest was the last straw for Putin. Crimea was important to Russia for historical and symbolic reasons mentioned earlier; because many Ukrainians in Crimea were native Russian-speakers and had greater affinity for Russia than Ukrainians living further east; and because the port of Sevastopol enabled the Russian navy to operate in the Black Sea. Unsurprisingly, the Ukrainian defence was no match for well-prepared Russian forces controlling local forces to consolidate territory they captured. The information campaigns in Crimea favoured wedge politics, encouraging Russian-speaking Ukrainians to embrace the narrative that Crimea is rightfully Russian, that Ukrainians are essentially Russian, and that the revolution was just the latest in an ongoing campaign of anti-Russian obsession from America and the West. This basic narrative repeated to Russians at home, to Ukrainians and Crimea, and even to President Obama underlining that Russia was engaged in an operation to 'safeguard' Russian-speakers in Ukraine and would reserve the right for future military action.⁸⁷ A single Russian narrative was being used to signal Russia's perspective and desired outcomes to all audiences. This is noteworthy, because it shows that Russia has a master narrative around which events are wrapped, sustaining the overall integrity of the narrative no matter what political developments unfold.

In the Donbas, things were not as easy for Russia. Crimea is a territorially defined peninsula that can be occupied and controlled easier than a large swathe of the eastern edge of Ukraine. Ukrainian forces were largely outmatched by Russian forces, and the population in Donbas did feel some alienation from the national government in Kyiv, making them more vulnerable to Russia persuasion than in other regions.⁸⁸ Similar to Crimea, Russia focused their international narratives on undermining Kyiv's narratives about being invaded, claiming Crimea was really Russian based on history, and pointing to alleged Western hypocrisy in supporting independence movements in Kosovo when it suited NATO but not supporting independence for Donbas.⁸⁹ The narrative presented internationally was consistent with the narratives being presented on the ground in Crimean and Eastern Ukraine, giving the entire messaging campaign some coherence.

NATO, for its part, was not clear on how to respond. This was the largest real-life case of so-called *hybrid warfare* the West had seen. The combination of information operations, military activity, recruiting local militias, co-opting local elites, using covert action and semi-deniable forces, and making clear, repeated

denials about deploying conventional military power had not been seen on this scale before. Russia was therefore moving quickly and relying on ambiguities to limit the risk of retaliation.⁹⁰ By 2015 much of the discussion focused on tactics, the application of military and non-military needs, and the limited returns that NATO conventional deployments were likely to deliver in the face of the ‘new’ challenge.⁹¹

The problem with attempting to parse the military and non-military components of Russia’s annexation is that it ignores that both are simply tools used selectively in pursuit of the same goal. Some observers rightly pointed out that the mixing of military and non-military is not about different goals, but about different contexts and tolerances for action.⁹² Russia is seeking to minimize the costs and risks of further escalation for its aggressive international political actions by mixing a range of tools to achieve the desired outcomes it is pursuing.

1.2.4.2 The Invasion of Ukraine (2022)

The deployment of 80,000 Russian forces near the Ukrainian border in late 2021 was a repeat of previous large-scale deployments near Ukraine’s border since February 2012.⁹³ The difference by spring of 2021 is that instead of going home the ‘exercise’ force expanded to 140,000 troops with more enablers, combat service support units, equipment deploying to the border regions, and naval blockades of Mariupol and Berdiansk denying Ukraine freedom of movement in the Sea of Azov.⁹⁴ Russia was clearly signalling either its intent to invade Ukraine, or at very least pre-positioning the capabilities close enough to retain the option.

By October of 2021 the American intelligence community had made its assessment that war was coming. General Milley – Chairman of the Joint Chiefs – presented an assessment to the President that Russia intended to attack in the winter of 2022 on multiple axes and that the objective was the removal of President Zelenskyy.⁹⁵ When confronted with this information by CIA Director, William Burns, in November of 2021, Putin denied nothing and chose instead to air grievances about the expansion of NATO.⁹⁶ This narrative was familiar by 2021. Selected historical evidence was presented, connecting Ukraine and Russia through common religion and history, denying any real difference between both peoples while attempting to blame crimes in history against Ukraine as the interference of Poles.⁹⁷ Any resistance to Russian domination over Ukraine was attributed to the meddling and interference of NATO and the West, driven by their alleged delusions and “Russophobic” preoccupations.⁹⁸

In November, Americans re-iterated to Ukrainian President Zelenskyy that Russia was planning an invasion, with 75-80% certainty and that it would take place in two months (January of 2022).⁹⁹ To make the point more forcefully to the Ukrainian leadership, US national security and diplomatic officials began sharing raw intelligence of intercepted phone calls along the border talking about the invasion and satellite imagery showing the build up of the logistical tail – field hospitals, supply depots, even refrigerated blood – to emphasize that this was not an exercise.¹⁰⁰ The Ukrainian government was concerned that making overt preparations would stoke fear, panic and a sense of inevitable victory in those areas in Ukraine already under Russian control.¹⁰¹ Ukraine was very concerned about the appearance of weakness in the face of Russian threats, while also preparing as best it could. This was a seemingly impossible narrative to manage: presenting an image of strength and calm on one hand, while also making large-scale preparations for resisting invasion as secretively as possible.

Russian diplomats categorically denied an invasion was being planned or even contemplated, including in meetings at the UNSC. During a press conference that was televised, Russia's head of foreign intelligence was seemingly out of the loop on the invasion.¹⁰² The United States was apparently not convinced by the denials, and President Biden began declassifying intelligence to both build global consensus in support of Ukraine and against Russia and to prepare global audiences for the misinformation they were likely to hear in coming weeks. Declassified evidence was presented on 18 February 2022 – four days before the invasion – showing 150,000 Russian troops on Ukraine's borders, all while outlining Russia's intent to deliver misinformation accusing the Ukrainians of genocide against ethnic Russians in Donbas.¹⁰³ We observe two significant components in these declassifications. First, it is a rare occurrence that the United States shares previously secret information contemporaneously for the purposes of its foreign policy. The only recent and comparable example was the United States presenting its case to the United Nations General Assembly on the alleged existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, as presented by then-Secretary of State, Colin Powell.

Second, telling people that Russia was likely to engage in misinformation about a specific topic is the practical application of *inoculation theory* or *pre-bunking* in international politics. Inoculation theory is the idea that if an audience is told that someone is about to attempt to trick them with a concept or message, the audience will be more resistant to that message if they have been forewarned. The vaccination analogy applies for two reasons: first, people do not like to feel tricked or duped, so pointing out that someone is trying to do so makes the more resistant to attempt; second, people tend to want to argue against things they disagree with as an expression of their own freedom of thought and expression.¹⁰⁴ Pre-bunking is similar to inoculation, and focuses on the idea that if people are given advanced warning about what *will be said* to them, they are more likely to start constructing the arguments for each position in their own minds and will be less susceptible to the false message.¹⁰⁵ Six days later – two days after the invasion started – the Associated Press reported that Russia was spreading fake content online, explained why it was fake, and directly discredited Russia's more outrageous claims like allegations of Ukraine was going to use chemical weapons against its own people.¹⁰⁶ The stories quickly disappeared, presumably because they were so unbelievable. It is difficult to directly attribute inoculation or pre-bunking directly, though it is reasonable to conclude that Biden's warnings of disinformation to come played a role in Russian narrative collapsing.

Ukraine had wasted valuable preparation time by doubting the veracity of the threats of Russian invasion in the fall of 2021 and were responding to the invasion as best they could. Once the invasion began, the Ukrainian government presented messages showing resolve in the face of Russian invasion. A story surfaced that when President Zelenskyy was offered an opportunity to leave Ukraine to save himself and his family his alleged response was "the fight is here: I need ammunition, not a ride." This line communicates clear resolve to stay in Ukraine and lead the fight against the Russians; however, the only source for this line was a US official.¹⁰⁷ Zelenskyy did not leave, even though some Western powers were urging him to leave.

The line "I need ammunition, not a ride" shines through as a simple line that captures his defiance in the face of an existential threat to Ukraine. Whether or not Zelenskyy said those words exactly is immaterial. What matters is that they sound plausible, and that Zelenskyy was photographed in the days surrounding this statement in the streets and in subway stations. Media reports showed Ukrainians matching words and

actions. Did Zelenskyy actually say that? It certainly served his interests and those of Ukraine for everyone to believe that he did. Stating only the need for ammunition to sustain the fight but signalling his own defiance to evacuate communicates the two key messages: Ukraine is facing a clear and urgent threat; and it needs American and NATO support to survive.

1.2.5 The Acceleration of Information Operations

1.2.5.1 *Digital Media and the Reach of Information*

The rise of digital media has had massive impact on international politics. Information cannot be easily controlled in an era of smartphones, social media, and nearly ubiquitous persistent connectivity. *Operation Neptune Spear* – the US military raid into Abbottabad, Pakistan – was a top-secret and highly complex mission that involved flying helicopters into Pakistan under cover of darkness to kill Osama bin Laden in a compound located a short distance from the Pakistani Military Academy. This mission was effectively live-tweeted by an IT consultant in Abbottabad who tweeted “Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event) ...Go away helicopter – before I take out my giant swatter,” unaware that he was covering the US military raid in real time.¹⁰⁸

The breakdown of traditional media monopolies and the gatekeeping function that legacy television, print and radio played are being replaced – or at very least heavily supplemented with – digital media where there is no practical dividing line between producers and audiences. Crowd-sourcing knowledge accelerated in the 2000s with things like *Wikipedia*, where contributors edited mostly long-form online content on virtually any subject.¹⁰⁹ By the early 2010s platforms like Facebook and Twitter had simultaneously centralized much of information consumption on the internet by having its users collate it all by linking to blogs, videos, and other content, all while keeping content relatively short and digestible.¹¹⁰ Without the ‘gatekeepers’ of traditional media editorial boards making decisions about what articles to write, what letters to the editor to publish, which callers can access radio or television shows, and even the overall narrative a media outlet will present, interest-based sharing of information began.

The leaderless nature of internet content created an environment where users can access information on virtually any topic and are likely to connect with others that share similar interests no matter where they are in the world. In this environment everyone from hostile states like Russia and China to armed non-state groups like ISIS can access a literally global audience with their content to either shape opinions and political preferences or harden existing preferences and even recruit the most enthusiastic supporters to either regularly amplify content or even join a movement for the purposes of violence.¹¹¹

Arquilla and Rosenfeldt described the modern information environment with their term *Noopolitik* to describe the flow of information across international borders using technology, and the acceleration of issues and interest-based groups that exist across international borders. *Noopolitik* is a reference to politics in the *noosphere*, and concept that originated in the notion of one-ness and interconnectedness of beings in the natural world that was extended to mean the connectedness of all entities in cyberspace and virtual spaces. *Noosphere* is a space that notionally seeks equilibrium and balance of things – a reference to the notion of balance in the natural world – however, there has been greater tendency in digital spaces for tribal

“memetic” conflict over the supremacy of each group’s cultural values.¹¹² Equilibrium and harmony is certainly not the norm on any large-scale social media platform (X/Twitter, Facebook, etc.).

Noopolitik acknowledges the disruptive capability of transitional and multinational actors working for common cause to build and sustain social movements with the intention of impacting domestic and foreign policies, and even the role of international organizations and governance.¹¹³ In this context, states can work with civil society and non-state groups on specific issues. The concept is that the will of broadly-based multinational groups may be beneficial to states who are seeking greater consensus and international reach on large issues. *Noopolitik* emphasizes at the sub-state level between groups with common interest, while leveraging the power of states through appeals to collective good. Where *realpolitik* emphasizes classical concepts of states, the primacy of hard power, a zero-sum approach to politics, and the drive for power and advantage in international politics, *noopolitik* sees a global arena of nodes on different issues, soft power as real, the potential for cooperation toward shared interests, and balancing responsibilities toward those goals.¹¹⁴ The notion of *noopolitik* stands in opposition to *realpolitik* at an ontological level, with *noopolitik* echoing elements of liberalism, critical theory and soft power and *realpolitik* aligning with classical realism and neorealism.

1.2.5.2 Information Operations and Competition Below the Threshold of Armed Conflict

The contemporary information domain does not separate civil society and interest-based collaboration or culture wars of *noopolitik* on the one side, and the expression of military power and zero-sum calculations about the pursuit of interests by states on the other side. States are increasingly using the tools of *noopolitik* for *realpolitik* ends. Where Arquilla and Rosenfeldt acknowledged the culture wars and competition of culture was in the *noosphere*, America’s adversaries appreciated the potential to use digital communications as a weapon in the information domain. A clear benefit of using information operations is the ability to generate strategic political effect without the risk of competition based on military power, and at a fraction of the cost of any other available means.¹¹⁵ Non-kinetic means for the purposes of great power competition has been described as ‘liminal warfare’ by David Kilcullen. This refers to clandestine or semi-deniable activity taken by a state that is intentionally designed to reduce the potential for a violent response, and thus limit the costs of escalation and retaliation.¹¹⁶ This can include a range of activities that are not intended to be attributed – information operations, special operations using force, operations using semi-deniable proxies – that need to be detected and then attributed in a timely fashion in order to sustain public pressure and international public opinion to allow for a retaliatory response to be defined and delivered.¹¹⁷

The question of proportionality on information operations is far from settled. In 2019 the US Congress authorized the US Secretary of Defense to authorize US Cyber Command to take “appropriate and proportional action in foreign cyberspace to disrupt, defeat, and deter (cyber) attacks” against foreign powers.¹¹⁸ In a concept document focused on security trends projected to 2040, the Director of National Intelligence identified three basic categories across the spectrum of conflict. The lowest end of the spectrum is ‘non-kinetic’ and includes information operations, cyber attacks against non-critical infrastructure, economic coercion, military test and exercises, intelligence and blackmail of officials; the next tier is hybrid or intermediate threats, consisting of cyber attacks against critical infrastructure, use of irregular forces and proxies, sabotage operation, EM spectrum interference, and assassination; and finally the highest end of the

spectrum is conventional and strategic attack, including catastrophic cyber attacks targeted at C2 and financial systems, conventional military activity, attributable weapons use, and nuclear weapons or other WMD.¹¹⁹ The language used by US Congress is sufficiently vague to give wide discretion to the secretary of defense, and the spectrum of conflict shows information operations at the lowest end, with different types of cyber attacks spanning all three layers.

With little in the way of meaningful guidance on proportionality on cyber attacks, there is even less clarity on what constitutes proportionality for information operations. If cyber attacks are to be met with proportional and appropriate cyber attacks, does this mean that information operations should be met with proportional information operations? Even if this was the case, it is not clear what proportionality means for information operations. The highest profile case of someone being targeted by the United States for information operations activities is Anwar Al-Awlaki, an American-born cleric that was a senior figure with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In addition to being a charismatic Salafi preacher advocating violence, he was also in contact with US Army Major Nidal Hasan who killed over a dozen of his fellow soldiers at Ford Hood, and was responsible for recruiting other AQAP leaders and inciting them to attacks in the United States and in Britain.¹²⁰ While Awlaki was involved in information operations, he was also involved in operational issues making his targeting not solely a response to information operations. It is clear that information operations are an activity below the threshold of armed conflict, but it is very unclear what proportionality means.

1.3 Contribution to the Literature

1.3.1 Analysis of Ukraine's Official Information Operations

This research will attempt to provide explanations on how Ukraine is using English-language information operations through official Twitter/X accounts to influence American and NATO publics. This research will provide a detailed analysis of 16 months of Twitter/X traffic published by two of Ukraine's official government accounts. The data will be coded to provide an empirical dataset that shows the emotional themes and tools that Ukraine used to engage with Western publics. The dataset will be an empirical contribution to what official Ukrainian accounts said and did, and what they were likely trying to accomplish.

1.3.2 Explore Application of Non-Adversarial Use of Information Operations

Ukraine entered its fifth year of war in February 2026. As discussed above, there is a paucity of literature on how friendly nations target each other with information operations and propaganda. The ongoing war provides an ideal test case to observe how Ukraine has used information operations targeting friendly nations in the period leading up to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and for the first year of fighting. With very little existing literature, Ukraine provides an ideal test case for study of this under-examined topic area and provides a contemporaneous test case.

1.3.3 Explore the Implications on Theory of Ukraine's Use of Information Operations

The use of digital information operations is not new; however, as we have discussed previously there has not been a detailed study of how any ally or partner has targeted western audiences with digital information

operations in the context of an armed conflict. The existing literature tends to focus on the weaponized use of information using digital means in an adversarial manner or context, with little contemporary literature on how allies target one another. There is also very little literature on how information operations are used as a tool of international politics. This work will explore what implications can be drawn from the Ukrainian case study on how allies use information operations as a tool of international politics in the digital age.

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¹⁰ Harold D. Laswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War*. Martino Publishing, 2013 (first published: Peter Smith, 1927).

¹¹ David Patrikarakos, *War in 140 Characters: How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*. Basic Books. 2017. 26-37, 68-69.

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2 Situating the Problem in the Literature

2.1 Fields of the Study Connected to the Problem

This study connects information operation and propaganda theory and concepts and how they are used to influence perception, foster a sense of group identity, and influence behaviour with broader defence and international political concepts like strategy and military doctrine and international relations theory.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the necessary breadth of discussion on the existing literature on information operations and propaganda, and how that literature connects (or doesn't) with theory and ideas about and contemporary war and competition, and international relations. This chapter provides an overview of information operations and propaganda theory to provide a detailed summary of different perspectives, a discussion on the mechanisms and approaches that theory identifies as the most important for developing and delivering effective information operations, and discussion about where there is general consensus on information operations and where debates remain.

This chapter will also provide broader discussion about how information operations are reflected (or not) in theories of war and competition, and how they are reflected (or not) in theories of international relations. This discussion is important for connecting the objectives and methods of propaganda and information operations to how they are used in international politics—including in war and competition. Most international relations theories do not connect easily with information warfare as a tool, though there is space to explore about how information operations as an indirect (i.e.: non-kinetic) tool of statecraft supports national interests in international politics, and its relationship to concepts like soft power.

2.2 Broad Consensus in the Literature

Propaganda and information operations are fundamentally about persuading an audience that a perspective, worldview, or narrative is the 'correct' one, and that other perspectives and narratives are not. There is a long and varied compendium of theory on propaganda, persuasion, and information operations. Works of theory cover a wide range of topics including how it is intended to shape beliefs to prompt action from its target audience; the role of cultural norms, historical context, emotion; and the appeal to a sense of identity as the key mechanisms through which propaganda and persuasion work. Theory also covers the importance of context and connecting propaganda to daily events to give the message a sense of immediacy and relevance. The role of the source of information is also covered at length, with specific focus on attempting to either leverage credible individuals to give messaging greater credibility, or to obscure the source of information to prevent messaging from being dismissed because of who is delivering them. Theories about communications and the role of the internet discuss the ways in which electronic and digital communications provide unprecedented access to audiences with global reach, the ability to target specific populations through social media campaigns, and the feedback loops that connect digital media with legacy media.

As we will see below, there is general agreement in propaganda, persuasion, and information operations theory that successful persuasion relies on provoking an emotional response in the audience, often through

appeals to identity group values, norms, and aspirations. Symbols and images are important totems for distilling complex ideas about identity into easily identifiable visual short-hand. Shaping attitudes is vital to prompting action in a target audience – whether in support of something, opposition to something, or to prompt inaction and apathy to something.

The most notable debate in the existing literature on information operations and propaganda is disagreement on whether the ultimate goal of persuasion via propaganda is to generate societal or population-level consensus for ideas and perspectives, or if the ultimate goal is to prompt organized politically-motivated action from those who have been persuaded. This debate is fundamentally about the difference between generating acceptance for ideas as a consensus position and taking action to change the consensus by action (including the possibility of coercion, violence, or threats thereof).

2.2.1 The Importance of Emotion and Identity in Persuasion

There is much theory about how people are persuaded to embrace beliefs. There is general consensus is that emotions play an important role in by-passing logical faculties, stoking a sense of identity and belonging, or both.

2.2.1.1 *The Power of Emotion in Shaping Perceived Truth*

Emotion is often cited as the most durable and potent element in propaganda and information operations. The discussion on elaboration likelihood model (ELM) below shows that emotionally provocative arguments tend to undermine thoughtful consideration of arguments. Jacques Ellul points out that the best propaganda should be based in truth; but that truth on its own should not limit the propagandist. Facts and arguments are important in persuading people, but the emotional impression on the audience is far more impactful and more durable than facts and figures.¹ Exaggerated claims, emotional hyperbole, and facts chosen to present a specific perspective are generally more effective than lies because there is a lower risk of being proven false. If a propagandist indulges in lies, they should be very difficult to disprove and should have emotional resonance with the target audience. If the claim cannot be directly refuted, but is emotionally powerful and connects with identity messages the audience wants to hear, the message is likely to be embraced because of its emotional quality.² Conversely, if false claims are repeatedly made that can be proven false, this will undercut the quality of the propaganda because the audience wants to connect emotional truths with factual truths.³

The power of lies that are difficult to demonstrably disprove is that disproving them typically requires research, time, effort and presenting a complex explanation to a lay audience that was already satisfied with a truth that was more emotional than factual.⁴ An audience not open to being persuaded otherwise will reject facts in favour of emotional preference. The notion of ‘emotional truth’, then, is really about something that sounds and feels true within an existing set of values and perceptions, that cannot be easily disproven. Gustav LeBon agrees with the basic point and extends the idea to convincing a crowd they have been lied to by others, and that promising the ‘real’ truth delivers excitement. For LeBon, the emotional truth is in fact a *hidden truth* that has been denied to the audience previously. This creates a position of prestige—being allowed to know the hidden truth—and simultaneously generates emotional angst over having been duped or deliberately misled in the past. This process creates a false dichotomy between the “lies” of

conventional wisdom or prevailing opinion and the real, recently revealed “truth” shared with a select audience.⁵

2.2.1.2 *Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)*

The means and ways by which people are persuaded are not consistent or uniform. Broadly speaking, some people are persuaded by careful, detached consideration of evidence and arguments to make up their minds, while others can be more influenced by the attractiveness of the source, the perception of the social correctness of being associated with certain perspectives, or simplistic arguments that do not require deep reflection.⁶ Elaboration can be thought of as a continuum, where at one extreme a person gives almost no consideration of an issue, while at the other end of the continuum a person gives great consideration to an issue. The degree to which someone is willing to engage in issue-relevant contemplation, consider facts, compare the merits of an argument, and engage with a different perspective from their own is referred to as *elaboration*, and is the core or the *elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion*.

The ELM model states that while people can carefully consider facts before deciding whether they are persuaded by an argument, there are also many competing variables that are also powerful in persuading outside of a detached consideration of facts and evidence only. The competing variables tend to be emotional, identity-based, and often highly personal. The *central* route to persuasion seeks to convince people directly through presentation of facts and argument that make the argument directly, and the *peripheral* route to persuasion adds emotional or identity-based appeals to enhance the persuasive value of an argument.⁷ People with high elaboration also tend to have a higher desire for cognition, in that they enjoy thinking about complex subjects to make sense of them with less reliance on emotional persuasion.⁸

The role of context, emotion and sense of self are significant, and are vital to the *peripheral* route of persuasion. For example, if a person has a direct stake in an issue being debated – that is, they will be directly impacted by a policy choice – either by impacting their sense of ego and self, or by imposing restrictions on them, the person is more likely to either accept an argument that favourably impacts them or seek to undermine and reject an argument that will harm them.⁹ This is consistent with other research that points to most people preferring positive emotional states over negative ones, and will therefore be more open to arguments leverage positive emotions.¹⁰ There is also a general desire to avoid negative emotions, like sadness or embarrassment. If a person is expected to be held accountable for their opinion – as part of professional duties, being on a jury, etc. – they are more likely to consider issues more carefully, in part because they know getting it wrong may come with a social cost.¹¹ Embracing positive emotions and avoiding negative ones influences elaboration, either by enabling more peripheral arguments in the case of embracing emotion or mitigating peripheral arguments by incentivizing higher elaboration to avoid negative emotions.

This does not mean that negative emotions are not important to persuasion. Negative emotions like anger are shown to reduce the willingness to think through concepts carefully. Anger is positively associated with confidence. That is, when people are angry, they are more likely to be certain about something because anger feels empowering. This means that arguments that motivate an anger response make a person more confident, and thus far less open to any competing argument.¹² This is instructive because it shows that anger is an effective way to shut down persuasion of a new or competing idea. The link between anger and

confidence is more likely to generate certainty in the existing idea, and greater confidence that the idea is correct.

Membership in an identity group also plays an important role in persuasion. Arguments made by a person with perceived social expertise will be given greater weight than those from somebody without that social expertise – even if the argument is relatively weak; and arguments made by more attractive sources of information are more likely to be accepted than those from less attractive sources.¹³ This is fundamentally an emotional stimulus overpowering the cognitive consideration of an argument. There is also a greater likelihood for arguments that communicate a majority opinion to be accepted, and that arguments in support of an opinion that is perceived to be the ‘correct’ opinion that one wants to be associated with is more likely to be accepted than other less-correct opinions.¹⁴ This is a clear appeal to identity. The psychosocial pressures of the perceived expertise of individuals with social capital on an issue, the perceived value of an attractive source, and the desire to be part of a correct majority all speak to a desire for participation in community.

Elaboration is highly contextual. The higher elaboration a person exhibits the more likely they are to carefully consider persuasive arguments, and the lower the elaboration the more likely a person is to assign value to emotional or identity-driven arguments.¹⁵ However, people with high elaboration can still be persuaded by emotional arguments through appeals to membership and identity, or through anger. The right contextual factor can undermine the rationality of people with high elaboration, so long as their peripheral pathways are activated. For persuaders, the ability to understand elaboration is fundamental to crafting arguments. Arguments that are fundamentally strong and persuasive will not need an attractive source or a socially valuable source to deliver the message *if elaboration of the target audience is high*. The same argument, however, may need an attractive or socially valuable source to persuade audiences that do not have high elaboration. Understanding the nature of the target audience is therefore essential to crafting messages that align with the audience’s presumed elaboration value, and to supplement emotional or identity-driven messages where required.

2.2.1.3 Group Identity

Cultural norms and history become the bedrock for group identity. Group identity is defined by the kind of values, aspirations, and norms ‘our side’ holds. Values and beliefs are fundamentally judgements about what is important and what is less important to an identity group. Moreover, values cannot conclusively be proven but must be consistently defended to announce to others where we stand on certain issues, which entails showing support for the values, beliefs, and standards of a particular community.¹⁶ Embracing opinions or doing things that show affinity toward an identity group are ultimately about projecting an image of oneself as part of that group. Projecting the image becomes an act of membership in the identity group. The most common identity elements are those that are either highly visible – making parsing the in-group from the out-group easier – or things that are highly unlikely to change, thereby solidifying a person’s place in a group, according to in-group/out-group definitions. Race and ethnicity, religion, nationality or country of origin, or gender can be used as visible markers for eligibility for an identity group, or less visible are more transient markers like political beliefs, job, or socio-economic markers.¹⁷

Large populations – whether national or sub-national – inevitably have overlapping identities with which they identify, with varying degrees of pliability associated with each sub-identity. People may identify with a particular identity – sports team fan, town of origin, job type – more or less, depending on who they are surrounded by in a context. While at a sports game, people may emphasize their own sense of identity in that context, while virtually ignoring that same sports team fan identity in a professional context, or when travelling in a different region. This speaks to a human survival tendency to show greater affinity with an in-group when we can derive specific benefits in that context and avoid harms that come with being associated with the out-group. The markers of the identity group tend toward an archetype or prototype of what things defines *idealized* in-group member, based on habits, language, colloquialisms, idioms, tropes, etc.¹⁸ Even conditional or circumstantial identities come with markers (sports team logos, catch-phrases, etc.).

Signalling group membership requires greater personnel emphasis on the values of the group than on dispassionate consideration of evidence. The impact of values and identity on personal beliefs provides a major opportunity for propaganda and information operations. The degree to which people rely on more on preconceived notions, theories and beliefs has been correlated with the propensity to believe misinformation, so long as that misinformation confirms pre-existing beliefs.¹⁹ The idea that “people like me” believe certain things is an appeal to accept beliefs because they are perceived to align with the values of the group, and in so doing giving the group a narrative that emphasizes control over a situation because we understand it.²⁰ Embracing the ideas of “people like me” signals support for a group’s values, beliefs, and therefore a desire to be associated with the identity group.

Any subset of society is vulnerable to appeals to identity and group membership. A study on the research of life scientists found with members of a group leading research that challenged established norms more likely to believe those findings, while scientists not involved in the research were more likely to reject the findings.²¹ This is a significant finding because it shows that even those we would expect to have higher elaboration values in the ELM due to their focus on science and dispassionate consideration of findings are susceptible to support the findings of their own group, or resist the findings of another group. *Identity biases affect us all and* present an opportunity for propaganda and information operations if shaped to exploit weaknesses in the beliefs and values of an identity group.

2.2.2 Competition and Mobilizing the More Compelling Perspective

Presenting an emotionally compelling perspective is vital; but not sufficient. The perspective must be presented as *more compelling and more meaningful* than the competing alternative. In effect, there is competition in the information operations and narrative space, and the winning narrative is the one that is more compelling with the target audience than another narrative. This is achieved by presenting a narrative from which meaning flows. Images, symbols and memes become the short-hand that visually summarizes the narrative, and leaders, heroes and myths become the living embodiment of the meaning and the narrative.

2.2.2.1 Narrative as Meaning

Narrative provides a broader story that resonates with a collection of qualities, values, and assumptions that constitute a group identity. Narrative is about presenting information in such a way that an identity group understands the meaning and importance of the information as pertains to the identity group. Narratives

can connect meaning with different identity groups simultaneously, giving propagandists the ability to connect with many sub-segments of society with one overall narrative. Narratives are all about meaning and creating something emotionally resonant for audiences. Ajit Maan talks about narrative as something other than competition about facts of a situation: it is a competition about the meaning of the facts.²² This is significant because it emphasizes that what actually occurred is not the central component to narrative: it is about animating the story with emotions to give it identity meaning for the audience. Narratives also have a time component to that is important both for the present and the future. Narratives revolve around a causally linked sequence of events that emphasize the role of people and things as they navigate conflict and challenge, connected with events and incidents that the target audience understand and agrees upon.²³ These descriptions combine two very important elements: the idea that meaning is more important than objective facts, and the idea that agency and crisis are important to animating a narrative.

Classical propaganda theory aligns with this perspective. LeBon points out that crowds seek simple, persuasive arguments that present a good binary: something to loudly support or something to loudly oppose.²⁴ This means that presenting broad, sweeping statements that emphasize the righteousness of one side, and the perfidy and treacherousness of the other side is exactly what a crowd wants. The competition must be framed as one righteous choice contrasted with one treacherous choice. Each crowd wants its own narrative to support, while demonizing the narrative of the other side. Narratives are fundamentally about providing an organizing principle for what a movement stands for, and just as importantly what it stands against, which partly explains why authoritarians use narrative as a tool for their messages, but also to signal which messages are not acceptable and counter to the core values of the government.²⁵ A binary is an effective construct for a narrative. Identity narratives cross into extremism when it is not sufficient for the in-group to benefit, only: the opposing out-group must be harmed.²⁶ Narratives that promote not only the value of the in-group but advocate harm to an opposing out-group are therefore extremist narratives, otherwise relying on the same non-extremist structure and approach of appeals to identity.

In international politics, a 'master narrative' is about building an architecture about a war, conflict or crisis. This is more than a 'strategic narrative' that presents a vision of a state's aspirations of what it stands for and what it plans to achieve in the world.²⁷ A master narrative is embedded with clear archetypes about each party to a conflict—with deeply embedded assumptions about the character and motivations of each party—as a means of presenting a simple story that nonetheless has significant complexity inherent to it.²⁸ The master narrative seeks to establish clear parties to a conflict, with deep assumptions about the rightness and wrongness about each party, as a means of making the use of armed force appear logical.

Binary narratives were often used to illustrate contrast between the sides in the Cold War. During the Cold War the Soviet Union published two basic stories, regardless of what was happening in the world: the day's events serving as either proof that the Soviet system was superior to capitalism, or proof that capitalism is corrupt, indulgent and inferior to socialism (or perhaps, both).²⁹ This is an example of how narrative interacts with real-world events, with events being wrapped around the pre-determined meaning, no matter what the events are. The meaning was assumed, and constant. Connecting a narrative to the day's events is not just about giving newspaper headlines and television news stories meaning. By invoking the past, historical references and myths about the identity group, propaganda and information operations connect the past to

the present in way that makes today feel more relevant and urgent.³⁰ Propagandists create the impression of a linear story of an imagined past that is connecting with the present in a way that implies today is a significant because of its role in that story. It is about conjuring the alleged greatness of a bygone era, transplanted to the present, and on the cusp of being reborn.³¹ The narrative connects people with events in the real world (sense of connection to ‘history’), and gives the audience a sense of momentum and hope for the future (the movement is going somewhere).³²

2.2.2.2 *Narrative, Framing and Messages*

Narratives are not the same as messages. Messages are the individual communications (social media post, newspaper article, television broadcast, etc.) that make up an overall narrative. Messages are the constituent pieces that make up a broader whole narrative is the “big idea” that is being communicated, messages—taken together—are the evidence to substantiate the big idea. Messages are basically the dynamic element of sending the narrative to the audience. The difference is important, because there is some evidence to suggest that countering individual messages is less effective than challenging the broader narrative. The messages that make up a narrative are not necessarily fixed, based on what is happening in the world, but the parameters of the narrative should generally stay consistent to illustrate the “big idea.”³³

For narratives to sustain their credibility, the messages need to align to the narrative. For states, this means coherence between the rhetoric of a narrative and the actual behaviour and actions delivered in messages—either by the state or its rivals. In the post-Cold War period, some American scholars pointed to the risk of a “say-do-gap” of individual actions of states undermining the normative aspirations of a narrative.³⁴ Some scholarship shows that attacking individual messages is not always effective at undermining the narrative. There are often simply too many messages to take the time and effort to attempt to de-bunk them all, and some doubt about whether or not undermining individual messages will undermine the overall emotional impact the narrative has on its intended target audience.³⁵

However, there are also examples of messages that sharply illustrate the “say-do-gap,” and undermine a narrative. For example, the images of Iraqis held at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba in orange jumpsuits contributed to the Islamic State dressing their victims in the same orange jumpsuits, presumably to illustrate the “say-do-gap” between the rhetoric of freedom and liberty and mistreatment of detainees.³⁶ During the Cold War the United States faces major challenges in promoting a narrative of freedom and democracy, when lynchings were still happening in the United States and the perpetrators were not found guilty in court proceedings.³⁷

Between narratives and messages is a concept called ‘framing’ or ‘frames.’ Frames are not an entire narrative and they are not individual messages, but are a meso-level mechanism of “slant, structure, emphasis, selection, word choice, context (that) bundle key concepts, stock phrases and iconic images to refined certain ways of interpreting developments.”³⁸ Framing is about curating the most useful elements of the truth in a way that is more likely to resonate with emotions and identity biases of the target audience. Frames are not stagnant, but rather can be shifted to meet the needs of the sender based on an evolving set of circumstances;³⁹ and it does so within the context of the existing master narrative.

Any event or crisis can be framed differently, based on the needs of the sender and what they want to communicate to an audience. A statistical analysis of hundred of media stories about the Euromaidan protests in Kyiv in 2014 were framed by Western media as a human rights crackdown violating democratic principles, while the Russian media framed the protest as Western meddling in Russia's sphere of influence with potentially catastrophic economic consequences.⁴⁰ This shows how events can be framed in very different ways, depending on the intent of the sender and the master narrative they intent to share. The messages are the individual media stories; the framing is what they emphasize; and the master narrative is the "big idea" that is being shared. In this case, there are competing master narratives about values and aspirations. Russia's framing about foreign interference and dire economic consequences belies a master narrative of regional power interests, and the threat of high costs for obstructing those interests, while the Western framing is about undemocratic crackdown on citizens exercising their rights. The messages and frames work together to serve a narrative.

2.2.2.3 *Inoculation and Counter-Narratives*

There is some research that examines how populations can be protected from propaganda and misinformation through a process of 'inoculation' or 'pre-bunking'. This is the idea that an audience can be protected against misinformation and propaganda from an opposing faction if they are warned ahead of time. By playing appealing to people's preferences for individual thought and making their own decisions, false or misleading information can be 'pre-bunked,' and has shown to be effectively in controlled studies.⁴¹ Just like vaccines for diseases prepare the body by prompting anti-bodies to fight the disease, 'inoculation' is intended to do the same thing. If warning a target population that an actor is attempting to trick them or mislead them, a government or civil society group can 'inoculate' a target population by warning them of the approach an adversary may use to persuade them. This is not the same as counter-narrative, where a competing—with the intent of being more compelling—alternative narrative is presented to undermine a rival.

The risk with engaging with any false narrative – even through counter-narrative – is that the counter-narrative may not have the same persuasive power as the original false narrative. Worse, the counter-narrative may be so ineffective as to strengthen the original narrative in the eyes of the intended target audience. The US State Department attempted to counter online ISIS propaganda through their *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign. The State Department attempted to counter ISIS narratives through this campaign, and ended up being the object of mockery online because the campaign was exceptionally tone deaf, appeared amateur, and did not effectively tackle the themes that ISIS was presenting.⁴² The State Department campaign ultimately failed because it did not tackle the structure and emotional appeals ISIS was presenting; it focused on the punitive components of American law and the potential for death—things the ISIS narrative emphasized as selling points or points of opposition. The poorly crafted nature of the counter-narrative emphasizes the notion of competition in the information space and the need to understand the opposition's narrative in order to effectively counter it.

2.2.2.4 *Images, Symbols and Memes*

Images and symbols are powerful in narrative and messaging because they communicate complex ideas about identity, social order, values and 'our team' in short, simple, easy-to-understand formats. LeBon

identified the importance of connecting the appropriate image, symbols and myths with the shared values and beliefs of specific subsets of a national population. Images and symbols are a *reflection* of a created identity, serving as a totem and becoming the embodiment of 'the cause'.⁴³ The Nazi Swastika and ubiquitous colour aesthetic of red, black and white communicated power and consistency of a worldview in all public places, symbolizing not only clarity and coherence of the Nazi brand, but to also communicating the power and omnipotence of the state by existing everywhere in German life during the Nazi period.⁴⁴ In a public setting where the government is controlling the message in public spaces, these symbols and images become, in effect, a sort of *propaganda by the deed* where the continued control of that space communicates a message about the power the state exercises on its citizens.

Meme culture today is a digital version of the same basic concept, with a highly dynamic and constantly changing contextual component and the signature of the author embedded in the content. The term was coined in 1967 by Dawkins referring to how cultural totems tend to self-replicate, and mutate and adapt based on external events and shifting culture.⁴⁵ Memes can be used as statements or as comments on the statements of the others, and the choice of symbols and images – and the media or social context which they invoke – communicate something about the author's social context and preferences.⁴⁶ The meme is simultaneously a referential or ideational tool, while also providing a statement about ideology or worldview, and have increasingly been used as a tool for online political expression. The use of 'Pepe the Frog' or 'Wojak' as symbols in far-right discourse allow the creators the same versatility as any meme – contextual, ideological, and contextual reference – while speaking to an in-group that understand the etymology of the meme and the undertones of the message if they overtones are not explicitly spelled out in text.⁴⁷ The meaning of any individual meme is therefore not fixed, though serve as a powerful identity marker. Memes take on the meaning of the context in which they are deployed, which can be for humour and banter online, and can also be used to stoke hatred as incite violence as has been the case on private message boards and websites like 4Chan or 8Kun.⁴⁸

2.2.2.5 *Leaders, Heros and Myth*

Individuals can also become the symbol of the movement. The leader becomes the embodiment of the movement, and any explanation from the leader becomes the solution to the threat or uncertainty, giving the leader power over the crowd as a saviour figure.⁴⁹ Leaders connect with the emotions of the crowd by affirming the key values and appeals the audience wants to hear, and repeats those themes with the goal of turning this messages into widely held assumptions that go unquestioned.⁵⁰ This particularly prevalent in totalitarian societies, where the leader wields absolute power.

The pathway of the leader can be presented as part of a story or myth about the creation of the hero. The hardship that a leader faced on their pathway to being a seemingly omnipotent cultural symbol contributes to developing a myth about the movement and its purpose. Joseph Campbell has written extensively about the power of myths in giving every human civilization from the beginning of recorded history a sense of purposes. The pathway from childhood to adulthood requires a growing from a past condition to a future condition; in effect, the death of childhood must happen for the adult to be born. This basic transition – death of past, making room for the future – is the 'hero's journey' that features in all cultures' stories about how their heroes overcame great odds, conquered danger and peril, only to finally achieve the objective of a

great journey or quest.⁵¹ The nature of this myth is essentially about overcoming an obstacle. It is about the triumph of 'our' hero over 'their' hero or cause, who is depicted as an unworthy obstacle to the in-group's success.

There is a common story of the hero going into exile where they must balance the preference of their past self with the requirements of a new self to overcome the challenges, perils, and temptations of the moment. Ho Chi Minh's journey from obscurity to taking on foreign oppressors, and nearly dying in the process, elevated him in Vietnamese propaganda as a symbol of resistance to foreign occupation, and therefore to the French and later the Americans.⁵² Mao Tse Tung's *Guerilla Warfare* presents similar stories about Mao's role in organizing and leading a long armed struggle on the pathway to victory.⁵³ Whether it is an image of Prometheus, Jesus, Hitler, Stalin or Pol Pot – or Obi Wan Kenobi or Luke Skywalker – the myth of the hero's journey makes the hero a symbol for the identity group subject to their power.⁵⁴

2.2.2.6 Framing and the Implied Question

Humans evolved to quickly identify patterns – especially threat warnings – as a cognitive 'short-cut' to taking in information and to inform decision making.⁵⁵ Social psychologists have identified that for political messaging, cognitive short-cuts can be used by leveraging emotions and existing beliefs about the world to deliver more persuasive messaging. This involves framing arguments in an emotionally resonant theme that tap into pre-conceived notions about fairness, rightness, social order, and who is eligible to have legitimate access to government or organizational power.⁵⁶

Lakoff emphasizes the importance of framing because it either emphasizes or delegitimizes the moral subtext of an issue by appealing to preconceptions in a way that is not explicit, but nonetheless powerful.⁵⁷ An example that Lakoff points to is how healthcare is framed in political debates in the United States. Framing health care as a question of *insurance* has a very different connotation than framing healthcare as *protection*. In the case of *insurance*, there is a heavily implied sense of personal responsibility for each person to pay their premiums as they would for car insurance or home insurance, while in the case of *protection* there is a connotation of something that is provided to everyone as a question of a government's responsibility to its citizens.⁵⁸ The issue at hand – how best to provide for the health of the population? – is the same under both frames, though one perspective emphasizes health as an individual financial issue, while the other presents it as a shared, societal responsibility.

Framing is an important mechanism because it can massively shift which implied question is being posed to the audience. If health is framed as a personal responsibility that is fulfilled through market instruments (private insurance and for-profit healthcare providers), discussion about the role of government is effectively outside of this frame beyond safety and regulatory issues. If health is framed as a governmental obligation, the discussion is about what government should do to improve the health of its citizens, not market solutions. The purpose of implied messaging is to tap into deeply held and emotionally rooted beliefs about social order when discussing any issue. ELM shows us that this is an intentional tactic to move the audience away from careful consideration of facts, and drive the audience into emotional considerations, thereby making weaker arguments more persuasive to the audience. Framing an issue in a certain way gives an emphasis that makes the message more familiar and attractive to the target audience.

2.3 The Debates in the Literature

We explored the areas of general consensus about propaganda and information operations above. Emotion is clearly the most important element in conducting effective information operations. Emotion bypasses logical filters and critical thinking abilities of the target audience, making the task of persuasion simpler when emotion is successfully leveraged.

There are disagreements and debates about information operations and propaganda. Firstly, there is consensus about the ultimate purpose of propaganda, specifically about whether it is for changing perceptions and attitudes, or explicitly for the purpose of prompting action from the target audience. Second, the literature does not come to consensus about whether information operations and propaganda are only about targeting adversaries or about targeting all audiences. Lastly, there is some disagreement about whether information operations and propaganda are a weapon to be used in armed conflict or in broader statecraft and international politics.

2.3.1 Propaganda in Support of Action or Discourse

Propaganda can be defined in many ways. Most definitions have slightly different emphases, but they all talk about shaping the belief, opinions, and attitudes of the public. However, there is disagreement about whether propaganda is just about shaping attitudes, or also about prompting action. It can clearly be both, depending on the context and the intention of the propagandist. For example, shaping consensus is not enough to topple a government, meaning revolutionaries will see consensus building as necessary for their followers and recruits, but not sufficient to provoke a revolution. Those that seek only favourable political discourse in order to affect political change through existing means will likely see violence as counter-productive to their political objectives. This is a significant differentiation, because action implies forcing change outside the boundaries of an existing political system while consensus implies manipulating perception in order to create space for an existing political system to deliver a desired outcome.

2.3.1.1 *Shaping Discourse*

Edward Bernays defined propaganda as a consistent and repeated effort to shape the opinions about a group, enterprise or idea.⁵⁹ Noam Chomsky quotes Bernays directly in his work *Media Control* when presenting the example of the American government using selective facts to build justifying narratives to build public support for military action in Vietnam and Iraq.⁶⁰ Moving public attitudes toward something desirable is as important as moving attitudes away from a competing idea. If done effectively, propaganda effectively shapes a belief system or set of assumptions toward something and away from something else.⁶¹

Stanley's definition of propaganda focuses on influencing discourse by limiting the range of topics a discourse will allow.⁶² Stanley's view is that propaganda is fundamentally about reducing the scope of acceptable discourse such that the narrative the propagandist prefers is the most compelling one within a narrowed frame of acceptable ideas. This is the idea of the Overton window (an imagined window within which all acceptable discussion on public policy must fit in order for the public to accept it⁶³) that shrinks or shifts through propaganda, where the public perceives fewer available options or previously too radical options become available. For authoritarian states without voters, this means propaganda as the vehicle that

promotes the official party line, while vitally limiting competing voices and narratives to allow the momentum of the official narrative to continue uninhibited.⁶⁴

Krieg's discussion is similar, and focuses on the process of shaping attitudes and notions of the public slowly over time, such that ideas and assumptions favourable to the propagandist become consensus political positions, and then rarely questions or re-opened for debate.⁶⁵ Laswell also focuses on discourse, and defines propaganda as speaking with greater certainty and clarity using all means available, while provide less accuracy – all without changing anything about the environment of discussions.⁶⁶ That definition focuses on shaping opinions through clear, confident messages, without having to shape the environment or demand any action from the audience. Shaping beliefs is about making clear what is desirable and what is not desirable and limiting the space for ambiguity or disagreement between competing concepts.

Chomsky, Laswell, Krieg and Stanley all focus on shaping discourse and attitudes for the purposes of framing the choices of decision-makers as logical, if not inevitable, once discourse is appropriately shaped by the propagandist. There is clear merit to this definition, in part because Krieg and Laswell provide such rich empirical evidence to support their claims for shifting consensus toward desired political outcomes.

2.3.1.2 Prompting Action

Some of the classical theory takes a slightly different approach to the purpose of propaganda and information operations. Both LeBon and Ellul agree that propaganda is intended to shape perceptions and attitudes; but that shaping is a precursor to the ultimate objective of prompting people to action. LeBon argued that action is the central point for all propaganda, and identified the psychological manipulation of a group of people as the start point to eventually prompt them to action.⁶⁷ LeBon called building a constituency around a set of perspectives as *remote activities* to grow a movement, and called the final prompts for action as *immediate activities*.⁶⁸ LeBon believed crowds to be particularly prone to 'contagion' of ideas because people will rally behind big ideas *if* they believe them to be popular with others in the crowd, and that 'contagion' was essential to convincing large groups to take action where individuals may not be similarly persuaded.⁶⁹ For LeBon, the process from thoughts and beliefs to actions is accelerated by group dynamics, and that the group is capable of pushing individual to do things they would not otherwise. For LeBon, the Crowd is the vehicle that accelerates people from thought to action, even surpassing the limits of their thoughts under the circumstances.

Ellul agreed with LeBon's basic premise, separating discourse-shaping actions that require no action of followers (yet) as *sub-propaganda*, and the messages that prompt action as *propaganda*.⁷⁰ Lenin had a similar concept of opinion-making as separate – but related to – agitation. In Lenin's view, a broad cross-section of the population needed to be inculcated into the 'correct' consciousness prior to being agitated into street action in pursuit of class-based revolution.⁷¹ For Ellul and Lenin, the process of shaping opinions takes time and requires manipulating and shaping attitudes in a certain direction before making the conscious choice to agitate and pressure toward action. Some contemporary theory aligns with the classical concepts. Both LeBon and Lenin wrote of revolution, and the need to convert as large a group of followers as possible and then prompt them toward violent street action, which informs their bias toward propaganda as a tool for eventual action.

Some contemporary theory aligns with the idea of propaganda as being for the purposes of action. Reasoned action theory connects the notions of thoughts and beliefs with the intention to engage in certain behaviour that are consistent with those beliefs. The idea is that beliefs about society, culture, norms, approval of certain behaviours by peers, family, and other identity groups that a person belongs to all important in shaping perceptions about good behaviours and bad behaviours: the only part missing in a person's individual willingness to turn thoughts into actions by willfully engaging in certain behaviours.⁷² This is where Ellul and Lenin's ideas about messages finally prompting action can serve as the trigger point in reasoned action theory to turn commitment to idea to actions.

2.3.1.3 Summary

All the literature acknowledges the importance of shifting perceptions and preference through propaganda, but they do not all acknowledge that this is only done for the purposes of eventually prompting action. Ellul, LeBon and Lenin emphasize that shaping perceptions is only the first stage in making eventual action acceptable and connected to beliefs. Reasoned action theory claims the same, connected ideas to action. Those who believe that discourse is the real purpose do not preclude action, but frame action generally as a population-level lack-of-acceptance of competing ideas once consensus is shaped. For this theory, the action is often a non-action once a consensus position has been reached, and a preference for sustaining the status quo. The fundamental difference is in the ultimate purpose: accessing the power of existing structures by shaping consensus or toppling existing structures through violent action.

2.3.2 Targeting Nations or Targeting Sub-Populations

There is another debate in the literature about the use of information operations and propaganda for the purpose of convincing national populations of perspectives or targeting sub-populations within a nation.

Some of the literature talks about targeting "nations" as part of information operations, with the purpose of influencing a national-level policy decision during wartime. This perspective emphasizes the need to manage domestic and coalition politics during a conventional state-on-state conflict. This presents two challenges. First, in an era of "competition below the threshold of armed conflict", "grey zone" or "hybrid warfare" the boundaries between war and peace are increasingly hard to define because the character of warfare cannot be assumed as combat and manoeuvre only. Second, in the case of Ukraine, Ukraine is most definitely in a full-scale war, though its allies—and the target populations for its information operations—are definitely not at war.

Conversely, much of the classical theory talks about different populations within a nation, and the need to tailor messaging to those sub-populations specifically. None of this precludes transnational populations with shared ideas and interest, though classical theory implies sub-populations within a single nation.

2.3.2.1 Target National Populations

Laswell's study focuses on targeting states, in the aggregate, during wartime. He does not ignore the idea that states are made up of different sub-groups and sub-population, but argues that during a time of war a broader view of propaganda of targeting the state that focuses on governments, targeting both their own populations to sustain the war effort and domestic morale; targeting enemies to demoralize them; targeting

allies to sustain the alliance; and targeting neutrals to prevent them joining the other side or ideally becoming an ally.⁷³ This approach assumes that during wartime the nuances of society are flattened, such that targeting becomes about the state as a singular entity, and that the importance of sub-populations and demographics matter less. Laswell makes many references to a singular national character, and that writing for each nation should be a clear consistent message that relies on presumed elements of that national character.⁷⁴ Laswell does acknowledge the notion of sub-populations in peacetime, but emphasizes that during wartime messaging must be centralized and flattened to deliver, clear, coherent messages to all national audience to ensure repetition of a single message.⁷⁵

The limitation of this approach—especially in the digital age—is that sub-populations exist for virtually any self-proclaimed identity marker. Identity groups exist online for video games, bands, films, food preferences, and virtually any other human activity one can imagine. What remains unresolved is whether these sub-populations retain their separation during a large conventional war—and what that means for nations not directly involved in combat operations. Most Western countries have not been involved a full-scale war since the Second World War. There is no test group against which to compare Laswell’s assertion that large conventional war flattens sub-populations into a single national target.

2.3.2.2 Targeting Sub-Populations

Much of the classical theory focuses on targeting as many sub-audiences as possible, and tailoring language in a way that speaks to the worldviews, attitudes and identity markers of those sub-audiences. These theories do not, unlike Laswell, make any differentiation for peacetime of wartime.

There is broad agreement in classical propaganda theory with the value of accessing stereotypes, tropes, and other identifying features of an identity sub-group to better connect with groups and sub-groups on an emotional level. LeBon characterizes sub-groups as largely homogenous (internally) based on formal political or religious affiliation (‘sects’), occupation-based groups like the military, occupational groups, or clergy (‘castes’), and socio-economic class. Each sect, caste, or class tends to share a deep collection of common values based on their similarities, which enables communication with each sub-group based on those commonalities.⁷⁶ Ellul views segmentation similarly, focusing on converting as many people in society as possible through propaganda, while also being mindful of individual identifiers like socio-economic class, where they live (urban vs. rural), and the kind of media they consume to get their information (radio, television, print, etc.).⁷⁷ The difference between Ellul and Laswell is that Ellul sees each of these sub-populations as requiring their own messaging, where Laswell sees them as a cohesive national whole during wartime. For Ellul, each of these groups is equally susceptible to propaganda if the propagandist understands how to appeal to their beliefs, histories, perspectives, etc.

Lippman makes similar observations when he identifies “stereotypes” as both the predilections and attitudes of sub-groups looking inward at other people like themselves (trades, socio-economic class, etc.), and sub-groups looking outward at other groups and making assumptions about their predilections and attitudes. He says that people tend to interpret behaviour in others they don’t immediately understand through assumptions driven by stereotypes, and that different types of people (class, occupation, etc.) will tend to hold different stereotypes about other groups.⁷⁸ The stereotypes about groups other than your own tends to

flatten understanding, assuming an opaque singularity about ‘what those people are like’, and is typically taught – even if not directly – by other groups. LeBon, Ellul and Lippman all see internal, domestic sub-segmentation of the population because the characterization is about daily interactions—something unlikely to be international in character, except border towns that side astride an international border.

In an era of partisan divide and digital communications, this means connecting messages to as many sub-groups as possible that comprise a winning coalition on an issue. This means tailoring oratory to each sub-group to connect with their preferences; connecting all the different sub-group oratories into one overall policy platform; and making sure to demonize the opponent using emotional language to develop the broadest contrast possible.⁷⁹ An overarching message must be developed that can be parsed and dissected to appeal to each sub-group’s identity markers, while also undermining the opposition at each level. The best-crafted propaganda or information operations contain words and phrases that have slightly different meanings to different audiences, while retaining cohesion across groups. This kind of content allows the sender to deliver one overall narrative, confident that many slightly different messages will be understood by different audience segments.⁸⁰ To do this successfully requires message discipline and organization, and a keen understanding of how to target individual groups with messages that all align with one overall narrative.⁸¹

2.3.2.3 Summary

Like the observations about discourse and action discussed in the previous section, targeting national populations as an aggregate versus targeting sub-populations is a question of intended purpose and context. Laswell maintains that during time of war much of the peacetime discourse is flattened because of the seriousness of the circumstance: war. Absent a war, much of the theory points the need to specifically target sub-populations and to appeal to their (presumed) identity-based idiosyncrasies in order to cobble together a coalition of different sub-populations around one idea. The limitation for Laswell in the contemporary era is that digital media enable highly precise targeting of users based on their preferences—especially those who are higher-intensity users and thus generate a far richer profile of their preferences.⁸² This would have been unthinkable in the era of Laswell, raising some doubt about whether national level targeting is still relevant, or even possible, in a era of digital media.

2.3.3 Information as a Tool of Warfare or Statecraft

Many of the contemporary concepts about strategy and warfare include references to information operations. Some theories like 4GW and the so-called Gerasimov doctrine fuse information operations to a specific context and application, and do not treat them as independent activities absent from armed conflict. Grey zone concepts acknowledge the importance of information operations in competition below the threshold of armed conflict; however, do not fully acknowledge their role in higher-intensity conflict or other contexts.

On the other hand, the concepts in *Unrestricted Warfare* treat information operations as a tool of statecraft and competition, and war (even if *Unrestricted Warfare* sees less utility in the conceptual separation of war and peace). Many military doctrinal concepts acknowledge the role of information operations but view them both too broadly – including cyber operations, electronic warfare, etc. under a single umbrella concept – and

generally view them only in the context of the military instrument. This makes some sense, as militaries in democratic nations are generally not empowered to engage in politics, but the doctrinal concepts are limiting, nonetheless, to broader concepts of statecraft.

The fundamental disagreement between whether or not information operations are a tool of war or tools of statecraft rests on the bigger concepts of war of the authors of these concepts. *Unrestricted Warfare* sees limited utility in differentiating between war and peace, preferring a “tools for the job” approach to all global competition, based on context and utility of the tools and the fungibility of the power they exert. Russian concepts of hybrid warfare focus on information as a cost-and-risk-reducing and impact-maximizing approach to using military power. Western democratic concepts tend to focus on clear limitations of information operations for military applications, and not political, though there are exceptions to that rule with military information operations being used to counter hostile states targeting domestic populations.

2.3.3.1 *As a Tool of Warfare*

The concept of ‘fourth-generation warfare’ (4GW) was first developed in the 1980s, envisioning a future where states were losing legitimacy in the eyes of many global populations, and armed non-state groups would play an outsized role in conflict, possibly eclipsing the significance of states in terms of war. The focus of the 4GW is contrasted with ideas of second-generation warfare (2GW) that focused on the establishment of hierarchically organized and structured armies fighting for heads of state, and third-generation warfare (3GW) that focused on mechanized armies relying on speed and maneuver from multiple arms (infantry, armour, artillery, and airpower) to break through stationary lines (*blitzkrieg* concept).⁸³ 4GW envisioned states with significant conventional military power fighting non-state adversaries with less combat power than states, but with a more robust connection to the non-state fighters and the population, tribe, or identity group they claimed to be fighting for.⁸⁴ The 4GW concept implies the importance of information operations of some kind, because there must be a mechanism by which identity markers and tropes are communicated to the target audience to attempt to secure their support. Thomas Hammes in his *The Sling and the Stone* cites Palestinian information operations during the *intifada* of the 1990s undermining Israeli narratives about self-defence and raising awareness of settlers pushing Palestinians off their lands.⁸⁵ He also cites a similar attempt by Osama bin Laden to create global awareness of al-Qaeda’s objectives and its cause.⁸⁶

The central limitation of 4GW is that it presents a false dichotomy between maneuver warfare between states and the advantages of non-state groups in agility and leveraging of information. Questions of managing perception, building support for a conflict or one party to the conflict, and undermining political will of an opponent is also part of conventional conflicts.⁸⁷ We know that states use information operations as a tool of statecraft, not only insurgents. Information operations are not only a tool for warfare as 4GW implies.⁸⁸ It certainly can be, as we are seeing in the ongoing war in Ukraine, but we also know that information operations were being used by Russia prior to major conventional combat operations from 2014 to 2022. Identifying the importance of a group identity to mobilize recruits and supporters is an important concept, but 4GW limits that to non-state adversaries only, and does not include states—even friendly ones.

The so-called ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ was a term coined by Mark Galeotti to reflect concepts about the combination of information operations and military power as discussed by General Valery Gerasimov at a

keynote address. The idea is that psychological, political, subversive and military operations could all be used simultaneously in the context of peace, conflict below the threshold of conventional war in away that would allow Russia to further its strategic aim.⁸⁹ The purpose of the Gerasimov Doctrine was assumed as furthering strategic goals without risking a conventional war and limiting the risk of escalation and retaliation associated with military action where possible by keeping kinetic activity to a minimum and relying more on non-kinetic activities. While initial meant to describe Russian thinking, Gerasimov was in fact illustrating how United States generated consensus for its military operation using media and information operations to expand its power in the post-Cold War period and to justify wars of the post-9/11 period.⁹⁰

Galeotti's self-admitted error in characterizing Gerasimov's address as a doctrine did, however, have significant appeal because it provided Western observers with a framework for re-examining Russia's past actions and fitting them into the 'doctrine' concept. It provided a new model to attempt to explain the 2008 war in Georgia, the initial annexation of Ukrainian territory in 2014, Russia's cyber attacks and electoral interference operations in the United States in 2016 or anything else that Russia did for which the West did not have a ready-made response could be analyzed through this lens.⁹¹ The Gerasimov concept suffers from a similar limitation to 4GW: it views information operations as an inseparable complement to the use of military power, not a tool unto itself. While information operations are regularly combined with military action, they don't have to be. The 2016 US election interference example is a notable example of using information operations without preparing for military action.

The term 'grey zone' has been used in many policy documents, including Canada's *Strong, Secure, Engaged* to refer to activities that falls outside the traditional concepts of war and peace, and definitely below the threshold of armed conflict. The concept of greyness revolves around the idea that without clear boundaries, rules, and expectations about non-kinetic or deniable activities the proportionality and reasonability of military response is unclear and potentially risky. Grey zone activities give the advantage to the attacker, who calculates that provocative action below the threshold of armed conflict will likely go unanswered and can therefore be used with little risk of retaliation or escalation.

United States Special Operations Command (US SOCOM) published a short paper in 2015 that outlined the challenges that America faces in the so-called 'grey zone'. Grey zone security challenges are fundamentally about "competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality."⁹² The key difference in the US SOCOM definition of 'grey zone' compared to the works of its adversaries, is that it defines a white zone – in which there is no aggression, or weaponized use of non-kinetic tools – and a grey zone where the tools and tactics are used more aggressively specifically for the purposes of securing an advantage outside of conflict or competition.⁹³ *Unrestricted warfare* clearly says the difference between war and peace doesn't matter, and Russian doctrine takes an ambiguous approach to the concept and focuses more on the combination of tools based on context and objectives.

US SOCOM rightly identifies that where the line is drawn between white and grey is largely contextual and depends on the perspective of the observer or target, and their biases and expectations. The ambiguity is amplified when actions that don't fit with existing doctrinal models and concepts about war.⁹⁴ Democratic states tend to either view international political challenges through the lens of potential military or

deterrence operations, or as something that is non-kinetic and thus not eligible for retaliation.⁹⁵ The ambiguity and pliability of perception means that adversaries can calibrate their actions in a way that does not align with target expectations or capabilities to retaliate in a proportionate and non-escalatory manner.

The grey zone concepts have a few limitations. Firstly, they strongly imply that states using grey zone tactics are using them as a precursor to armed conflict or as a substitute for armed conflict. While both may be true, by assuming that non-kinetic tactics must necessarily be adjacent to armed conflict, it limits the range of applications; namely when being used intentionally as a tool of statecraft with no intention to ever escalate into armed conflict or as a substitute for it. Second, grey zone has little room for the role of allies; specifically allies targeting their allies with non-kinetic activities. This is significant because one could classify Ukraine's English-language operations as "grey zone" activities, if they were being conducted against an adversary. Ukraine is a Western partner seeking to access the military industry power of their friends, not an adversary. Not surprisingly, the grey zone literature is focused on the adversary because it presupposes grey zone warfare as a cheaper, lower-risk substitute for armed action, not an alternative to collaboration and cooperation with friends and allies. Grey zone is inherently adversarial in its perspective.

David Kilcullen's *The Dragons & Snakes* discusses how armed non-state groups (the snakes) have begun operating more like states (the dragons) in some ways, and that states have embraced the non-kinetic tools of competition below the threshold of armed conflict when engaging in competition with the United States. States, however, are still very cognizant that deterrence and threat of confrontation exist, incentivizing non-kinetic means on the basis of being lower cost and lower risk.⁹⁶ The result for states competing with the United States is focusing more on '*horizontal escalation*' and avoiding '*vertical escalation*.' Horizontal escalation refers to escalating tensions in a different theatre of operations, making changes to targeting (types of targets and location of targets), attacking enemy sanctuary spaces, and violating the boundaries of neutral states, as opposed to vertical escalation of coercive action in one theatre.⁹⁷ Horizontal escalation is an approach that is intended to keep pressure on an adversary by forcing them to address multiple new challenges to create new dilemmas, force resource and effort expenditure, all while (hopefully) avoiding vertical escalation on the pathway to major war or even nuclear confrontation.⁹⁸

This definition suffers from similar limitations as the grey zone. First, this concept does not explicitly recognize non-kinetic measures as a vector of horizontal escalation, only kinetic ones. The concept recognizes that psychological warfare, lawfare, financial and economic manipulation and cyber attacks are much more likely than military escalation because of the lower risk of escalation,⁹⁹ but does not see them as potentially escalatory. That is a significant limitation because it assumes that state-based adversaries can only use kinetic action—or the threat of it—to escalate and can therefore use non-kinetic means in a basically risk-free manner if escalation is not possible. The threat of violence is definitely escalatory, but we have many recent examples of non-violent escalation (election interference, state-sponsored cyber attacks, etc.) that raised tensions between states (2016 election interference, for example). The concept would benefit from including non-kinetic activities as potentially escalatory because they can notionally raise tensions in state-state relationships if there is ongoing tension. Second, by not acknowledging the potential for non-kinetic escalation, this concept precludes losing control of escalation management due to non-kinetic activities.

2.3.3.2 As a Tool of Statecraft

Unrestricted Warfare articulates a concept for how China should use all tools of state power to compete in international politics. Most notably, *Unrestricted Warfare* says that the difference between using military power in conflict or other tools like economic, legal, or informational power is irrelevant, and that the boundary between war and peace is meaningless if we accept that competition is enduring, and that war and peace are simply concepts about what tools are being used and the costs associated with each.¹⁰⁰ War and peace differ only in the types of tools that states are willing to use, and in calculations about escalation and retaliation. Economic competition over market access and maintaining a competitive military advantage over rival states are not fundamentally different in the concept of *Unrestricted Warfare*. In both cases, states are seeking to secure or impose advantage over a rival.

Crucially for the purposes of information operations and persuasion, *Unrestricted Warfare* separates the notions of war and peace from the toolset. Armed conflict carries a higher risk of escalation than non-kinetic methods, but the fundamental purpose of securing an advantage, however possible, is not contingent on concepts of war and peace. The tools have specific characteristics and are used however required to gain advantage in the most suitable context. Software engineers, stock speculator and media moguls – none of whom require any military training or even understanding – are equally capable of being weaponized for modern power competition between states.¹⁰¹ This approach allows greater versatility because the imagined context for competition is broader, which allow for a broader view of the applicable tools. *Unrestricted Warfare* views military and civilian tools as simply different instruments under the general umbrella of international politics.

Continuing from the Chinese concepts in *Unrestricted Warfare* are the *Three Warfares* of non-kinetic competition. These include: first, media or public opinion warfare to shape public opinion; second, influencing decision-makers internationally as a means of creating pressure or incentives for decisions favourable to China, and; third, weaponizing legal regimes to create legal defence in the international realm for China's behaviour.¹⁰² The first warfare is intended to generate positive feeling about China around the world to create a favourable impression of China and its global ambitions. The second warfare is intended to shape the decision-making environment to either expand the range of the CCP's policy options or increase the likelihood the CCP can achieve its policy objectives (or ideally: both). Lastly, weaponizing legal structures is intended to have a legal arbiter provide justification for the CCP's actions to give them legal justification, which can then be translated into a narrative conflating legality and legitimacy of actions. These concepts speak directly to statecraft, and the desire to shape any decision to China's favour: not only those about kinetic action.

The CCP concept is not limited to digitally based communications alone. It is much broader than that. It combines global listening (i.e.: understanding what is being said about China and the CCP), advocacy campaigns, cultural diplomacy and exchange diplomacy that relies much more on developing and sustaining personal relationships and having the means of international broadcasting to connect messages with audiences.¹⁰³ Digital means are part of this, but not the only part. *Three warfares* provides a definitely non-military component within the *Unrestricted Warfare* concept. Taken together, these concepts allow us to

view information operations in a comprehensive way; either as something to complement military operations in the right context, or as a stand-alone non-kinetic tool for use in competition more broadly.

Sean McFate's *The New Rules of War* embraces the simultaneous complexity and ambiguity of the 'grey zone' and provides observations on how the blurring of boundaries is incentivizing new tools and tactics by states and non-state groups alike. McFate declares that conventional conflict as a path to victory is effectively a dead concept because the distinction between conventional, asymmetric and irregular war matters less when adversaries are using all the tools at their disposal, while generally avoiding military confrontation as a stand-alone activity.¹⁰⁴ Non-kinetic operations are more important because the user has a high degree of confidence that proportional retaliation is effectively impossible, and there is no military solution to preventing the use of non-military tools that target domestic politics.¹⁰⁵ This certainly applies to information operations. Manipulating perception, targeting social fissures, and accelerating potential social tension can be achieved through some combination of discrediting enemies and undermining their perceived prestige, and counterattack every narrative they present.¹⁰⁶

Though the implied focus is on adversary nations and groups, this concept can be applied to friends and partners. Friends and partners, by definition, will not use military power against one another. The concept of conventional military victory is not dead among friends; it was never born at all. This leaves only non-kinetic means. As McFate notes, there is no practical means of retaliation or deterrence against non-kinetic means, and they can be used to target civilians because nobody will be harmed.

2.3.3.3 Summary

There is consensus that information operations are part of modern warfare and can be used in conjunction with military means to achieve objectives. There is also generally agreement on the benefits of using information operations from the perspective of limiting the risk of escalation in other domains. Information operations campaigns are not likely to lead to military action, on their own. The US SOCOM concept points to the challenges with deterrence in information operations. Military alliances rely heavily on the notion of deterrence. NATO's Article 5 characterizes an attack on one is an attack on all, influencing the calculations of any state that would attack. For information operations the notion of deterrence is elusive. Information operations cannot practically be met with military power because of the risk of escalation. Proportionality is also difficult to assign, in part because effect is difficult to measure making an equal response very difficult to index. Moreover, it is not clear how to respond to information operations. With more information operations? With cyber operations? These questions are not settled.

There is also little consensus on how to use information operations as a non-kinetic—or even non-military—tool of statecraft and competition. 4GW presents a view of asymmetry that includes information operations and controlling and manipulating narratives as part of the political struggle for insurgents, including to sustain the legitimacy of the military struggle. *Unrestricted Warfare* ignores any distinction between war and peace and focuses on selecting the right tools in pursuit of strategic objectives, including information operations. Russian concepts – whether Western misinterpretations or Russian doctrinal concepts – both focus on the value of narrative in pursuit of strategic and national security objectives, generally in combination with military action as part of a specific military campaign.

A fair assessment of information operations is that they can be used in either context, based on empirical evidence. Information operations are not an either/or choice for war or politics. Laswell, for example, showed a war-focused analysis that aligns more closely with 4GW concepts. Ellul and LeBon, conversely, speak more broadly about the value of persuasion and shaping ideas that align more closely with the so-called Gerasimov doctrine or *Unrestricted Warfare*. Information operations can be used for either war or statecraft, and there are concepts that provide guides depending on which application is being studied.

2.4 International Relations Theory

The existing literature on information operations and persuasion does not align neatly with international relations theories; nor was it specifically intended to. Information operations and persuasion can be used as tools of international politics to communicate clearly with potential consequences of different courses of action to adversaries, signal willingness to defend allies and partners, and to signal unwillingness to be implicated in crises, for example. One author points out that propaganda is not a moment in international relations, but is rather an element within the structure of international relations.¹⁰⁷ This author points the mix of persuasion, threats, deception, shows of force, and intimidating battlefield regalia all serving the purpose of maximizing the likelihood of maintaining and advantage.

With information operations and propaganda considered an element within international relations theory, there is therefore, no specific theory on the application of information operations in international politics. International relations theories were never intended to explain information operations, though they were intended to explain how international politics works. International relations discussions about perception, power, conflict, cooperation, and other key areas have some application for information operations because information operations are often used as a tool of international politics.

The intangible nature of information and persuasion tools means they are not generally treated as something as important as traditional measures of power like military, industrial and economic power. Power is often conceived as national tools that allow states to impose certain outcomes or avoid certain outcomes from being imposed. Military power enables states to expand the range of policy options available to them and to block and adversary's ability to impose their will by force.¹⁰⁸ Information operations does not work that way. Kinetic force can be delivered against the means of information production – television stations, radio towers, data farms, the key people and personalities that deliver information operations – but the concepts and messages cannot be destroyed simply by destroying the means of production.

Even acknowledging these differences there is value in differentiating between how international relations theory can help us understand the context of a political moment as distinct from seeing some themes contained in international relations appearing in information operations. For our purposes, this is the difference between understanding and explaining the broader nature of the challenge facing Ukraine and identifying components of different international relations theories in the messaging that Ukraine uses. The closest alignment between any international relations theory and information operations are Joseph Nye's *Soft Power* and the literature on Public Diplomacy. These theories address the role of persuasion and

developing an emotional affinity toward nations and ideas; concepts that are admittedly much more abstract and nebulous than conventional attempts to quantify power and qualify its application in international politics.

2.4.1 Ukraine's Context in International Relations Theory

There are many international relations theories we can reference to understand Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Realism provides a simple lens through which to explain the invasion. In international relations, there is nothing to prevent a more powerful state from attacking a less powerful one because anarchy reigns. The invasion of Ukraine happened because there was nothing preventing it; ¹⁰⁹ especially not firm action or threats of action from NATO partners. Waltz could point us to the superior military, economic and natural resource power and the ability to marshal that power¹¹⁰ which gave Russia an advantage over Ukraine. That the war happened at all could be seen as a failure of concept of balancing power. Balancing is the idea that major powers all have roughly the same level of power, and thus little incentive to fight one another. ¹¹¹ In the context of Russia and Ukraine, the direct confrontation was not between Russia and NATO powers, though clearly the United States expended time and effort through the then-CIA director to warn Russia against invasion (as discussed previously). The United States saw the possibility of a Russian conventional invasion of a partner (though not at titular NATO ally) as an unacceptable outcome and threat to global security. If we focus only on the balancing of power component, the United States and NATO clearly did not succeed in convincing Russia that they were willing to use military power in pursuit of balancing.

From the perspective of the United States and NATO the Russian invasion represented a violation of the rules-based international order, with rules and norms against invading neighbours without provocation. The basic tenets of liberal institutionalism—state should seek to promote freedom and individual rights, not just security from threats; the right not to be subject to arbitrary authority, and freedom of peaceful pursuit of objectives¹¹²—are the general expectation that democratic states have of one another. Critics could point out that expecting the same behaviour from other states as we would treat others rests on one's own pre-existing beliefs about the behaviours of others. ¹¹³ A more nuanced position is acceptance that friends and allies tend to see each other's actions through a more benign set of assumptions and expectations than we view adversaries' actions, which we are more likely to perceive as hostile. ¹¹⁴ Whatever the starting assumptions, it eventually became so clear to American policy makers that Russia was going to invade that previously classified information was declassified in order to make the case to the world that Russia was going to violate their neighbour's sovereignty through invasion. ¹¹⁵

From Ukraine's perspective, we can appreciate their relative industrial weakness compared to Russia through the complex interdependence. Complex interdependence theory treats a nation's reaction to global challenges differently based on how *sensitive* they are to changing conditions in international politics, and how *vulnerable* they are to changing conditions. The nature of global finance, trade flows, national industrial capability, national natural resource endowments, and supply chain vulnerabilities means that every nation will be challenged differently by changing global conditions.¹¹⁶ A state with significant oil reserves, for example, will be *sensitive* to changes in global oil prices because they are subject to the laws of economics, pricing and consumption behaviour, however they will not be as *vulnerable* as states without oil reserves. Ukraine's was *vulnerable* to war with Russia in 2022 because of its comparatively small defence industrial

base, economy, and population size. Complex interdependence explains why Ukraine sought the help of the United States and NATO: to provide sufficient weapons, ammunition, funding and political support to render Ukraine's *vulnerability* into a *sensitivity*. With a greater volume of military materiel from multiple donor nations, Ukraine could narrow the power differential between itself and Russia in the tangible measures of power.

Hedley Bull's English School of international relations provides some understanding on Ukraine's long standing post-Soviet objectives of aligning themselves Westward to NATO members to the greatest extent possible while trying to minimize Eastward dependence on Russia. The English School posits that that while there is one global international arena of international politics where states make calculations about their actions with other states, there is a subset of 'international societies' of states that have existing relationships. Bull claims that international societies are comprised of like-minded states that understand a common set of rules of principles, for whom war is a last resort and will be carried out proportionally and inside the bounds of rules pertaining to warfare.¹¹⁷ An international society in the English School is, in effect, a rules-based systems where membership in the society is predicated on some shared understanding of what they rules are, and playing within them. The assumption is that shared civilizational norms are what connects the individual states within an international society.¹¹⁸ Ukraine's long-term strategic goal has been integration into international organizations like the European Union and NATO, not the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

2.4.2 Critiques of Information Operations in IR Theory

The simplest critique of information operations that international relations theory can provide is the realist assertion that only the tangible components of national power matter. Information cannot compel action from an adversary that doesn't want to accept or absorb it. Information power is social power and rests below the level of coercive power like military or economic power, where it influences perceptions, assumptions, and knowledge systems.¹¹⁹ Perception and knowledge systems cannot—on their own—repel an armed attack, and thus are not generally considered on par with other elements of power.

Morgenthau acknowledges the importance of national character and national morale as factors that influence state behaviour.¹²⁰ This is about the value of a collective sense of statehood and national confidence, or broad contours of *national identity*. As we discussed earlier, identity is a fundamental lever in persuasion, propaganda, and information operations. However, national character or identity is not a weapon to be mobilized against an adversary: it is presented as a benefit that enables better use of all the other tools. This observation is about characterizing something as a multiplier or enhancer to the other elements of power, not as a tool in its own right.

EH Carr stands alone in classical realist thought in accepting the importance of propaganda and information operations to prompt the state into action, as the central actor in international politics. He claims that "international slogans only become real and concrete when they are translated into terms of national power...power over opinion cannot be dissociated from military and economic power."¹²¹ Information operations are not used to conquer territory or apply pressure on an adversary: they are used as tools to generate pressure on governments to then use the levers of state power for a particular purpose. EH Carr's

remarks accept classical realist thought in asserting that propaganda—while not a direct-action tool—can be used to leverage other tools of power.

2.4.3 IR Theories that Address Information Directly

The two international relations theories that most closely align to information operations are Joseph Nye's *Soft Power* and the literature of Public Diplomacy. Each will be addressed below.

2.4.3.1 *Soft Power*

Soft power theory provides us with most applicable frameworks to help us understand the value and importance of information operations and propaganda in international politics. Soft power is about having attractive, persuasive value that induces other to *want* to adopt certain policies and pursue certain outcomes rather than relying on coercion alone to get compliance from others. For soft power to function effectively in international politics it must leverage an attractive culture, a set of values that are promoted and lived up to both domestically and internationally, and then manifest as foreign policies that are perceived as both legitimate and having moral authority.¹²² Soft power is not a replacement or substitute for hard military power or economy power, but is intended to be used to shape discourse and set the agenda for discussing policy options to attempting to build coalitions over unilateral action.¹²³ This is similar to EH Carr's observation on propaganda, in that the information is used a leverage to access other, more conventional sources of power.

Soft power does not reject the nature of competition in international politics or the possibility of war or military conflict. Soft power assumes that hard power is also required to give soft power credibility. Soft power recognizes the importance of culture and communicating it effectively and consistently to make policy options leveraged through soft power tools appear attractive and credible, thereby limiting the need for coercive tools to reach consensus. If *realpolitik* is about the application of military power alone to win wars in pursuit of interests, the *noopolitik* of communicating an attractive narrative to the world through soft power is fundamentally about a story winning to provide credibility for pursuing interests.¹²⁴

Soft power theory also discusses the mechanisms by which it is wielded: daily communications through press conferences, media releases and news stories; strategic communications over the medium term that focuses on communicating broad themes that communicate the sender's value assertions and their aspirations; and lastly through public diplomacy and cultural exchanges that include scholarship exchanges, global media access in multiple languages, conferences and summits and anything else that promotes cultural familiarity between states and civil society groups.¹²⁵ This is a significant theoretical contribution to connecting information operations and international relations theory because it is the only theoretical perspective that includes a discussion about mechanisms, and different means of exercising influence through information.

Differentiating networks and their purposes is important for conceptualizing information operations in international politics. Persuasion in international politics can either be direct by seeking to influence government elites directly to make decisions favourable to the persuader, or they can indirect by seeking to influence voters, civil society and the public at large to attempt to sway public opinion in a way that is favourable to the persuader.¹²⁶ This is an important differentiation because it acknowledges the possibility of

influencing decision-makers and elites directly by targeting them with information operations, and the possibility of generating domestic political pressure in favour of certain international policy choices. Soft power, networks, and direct and indirect persuasion provide a wider range of concepts for delivering different messages through different channels and networks *while maintaining a consistent narrative* across all messaging. This approach is about communicating clear messages to target audiences, persuading the audience to embrace an attitude or perspective on issues, and then seeking to connect that attitude and perspective with support for certain policy options.¹²⁷ This is an important aspect of soft power because it connects the idea of persuasion with action. It is not enough to generate favourable feelings and sentiments about a particular policy choice; soft power and information operations are concerned with connecting feelings and sentiments with outcomes. In the current case of Ukrainian information operations, for example, the intent is to translate positive feelings toward Ukraine the importance of its fight into increased material support in the shape of ammunition, weapons systems, intelligence support, training, and financial assistance.

Soft power theory also acknowledges that the information domain is a competitive domain. Daily messages and strategic communication do not exist in a void. Communications in a digital era is a highly competitive, crowded and decentralized global space where billions of pieces of content are all competing for the attention of audiences. This ‘paradox of plenty’ means that all sources of information (digital, television, radio, print and in-person channels) are all competing with each other to deliver credible messages that the target audience cares about and continues to engage with.¹²⁸ This is an important aspect of soft power theory because it acknowledges the overall marketplace of ideas, and does not limit any source – including coordinated disinformation campaigns – from the marketplace. This means that values-based material the United States has presented to the world about the rules-based order, the value of international organizations and collaboration with partners and allies must compete with counter-narratives about Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay that can be relatively easily weaponized to show the disparity between American values and actions. Events that contradict values-based rhetoric have been called “non-biodegradable” in that they do not fade away and can be repeatedly weaponized without diminished impact over time.¹²⁹

Soft power is a newer contribution (2004) to international relations theory than many of the classical works that were developed in the 1950s and 1960s. By this time, global digital technologies existed and social media was in its infancy, giving states and non-state groups global reach with messaging. The context in which soft power theory was developed is instructive because it acknowledges the role of digital communications and networks in influencing global consensus on issues—particularly when the messaging is done by states with cultural attractiveness.

2.4.3.2 *Public Diplomacy*

Public diplomacy is another area of international relations theory that connects information and persuasion with international politics.

There are many different ways of defining and explaining what is meant by public diplomacy. A series of competing definitions have explained it as when diplomats negotiate in public; when states explain their

actions to a global audience, as an umbrella term for creating and managing a state's reputation, or the act of seeking to influence public opinion through deliberately crafted messages and content—whether from the state or from sympathetic proxies.¹³⁰ Muddying the waters somewhat is the notion of “government public relations,” which is similar to the deliberate process of seeking to influence public opinion, but targeting only domestic citizens (that is: the voters to whom the government is responsible), not a global audience.¹³¹ The definitions that articulate a clear and deliberate intention are the most convincing because the other concepts imply that public diplomacy is simply a side-effect of engaging with the world, as though public diplomacy simply happens when statecraft goes public. This approach is lacking because it denies any rhyme or reason to public diplomacy. Some scholars make clear that public diplomacy must be connected to policy; must be credible in that words reflect intentions and actions; and that it must put the audience at its centre.¹³²

It is—generally speaking—as much broader concept than soft power because it encompasses many different ways of engaging with the world through information. One framework lists five different components to public diplomacy: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting.¹³³ Listening means gauging public opinion and mood about what target societies are saying about you—even if not information that is necessarily volunteered immediately. This is about collecting information about the target. Cultural diplomacy and exchange diplomacy are about two-way communication with another society through things like university student and professor exchanges, military officer exchanges, youth student exchanges and learning-abroad programs, the export of culture through things like opera or symphony groups, and other non-threatening communication and sharing of culture. For our purposes, we will be excluding listening, cultural diplomacy and exchange diplomacy. The “public diplomacy pyramid”, used by Foreign Affairs Canada in the 2005, shows a clear difference between shorter-term strategies—like advocacy—and the longer-term strategies like cultural exchanges.¹³⁴ The scope of this work is on the first year after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Cultural and exchange diplomacy take longer than advocacy, based on the pyramid.

Listening will also be excluded from our analysis. Listening refers to paying attention to what the target audience thinks and feels about messages. This is a challenging prospect during peacetime because counting digital engagements is not the same as measuring the emotional impact of a message, and the process of interpreting the data can be biased by the perceptions and preferences of the audience doing the listening.¹³⁵ We can reasonably assume that Ukraine was “listening” the impacts of their online information operations based on metrics like impressions, number of likes, re-tweets / shares, and other surface level metrics—but we do not know what was done with the data, and if it influenced decisions about content and narrative creation or adjustment. We can also reasonably assume that some diplomatic back-channels were accessed to give a rough estimate of how Ukrainian material was being received by national audiences, though we also cannot know for sure what that process was and how it informed decisions. In short: listening is an important element of public diplomacy; however, questions about the role of listening cannot reasonably be answered with open source data alone, and a problem of this complexity exceeds the scope of this work.

That leaves advocacy and international broadcasting. Advocacy and international broadcasting are uni-directional activities where a message is sent to an audience in the attempt to persuade them to embrace a

certain position, or more subtly, to accept a certain framing of an issue or the choices about a certain issue.¹³⁶ The boundaries and meaning of advocacy and international broadcasting are hotly debated. Some have referred to it as the act of creating opinion, or when combined with polling data on existing moods, seeking to route existing mental models and frames toward views and attitudes favourable to the advocate or broadcaster.¹³⁷ Others have suggested that—depending on the context—advocacy and international broadcasting are akin to propaganda because they are simply state-sponsored messages intended to generate an informational effect for a political purpose.¹³⁸ The truth requires some nuance.

First, when we are discussing public diplomacy, the means of advocacy and broadcasting are presumably owned by the state sending the information. This is an important point. Some critics of public diplomacy will point to the presence of media outlets who are just as capable of disseminating information as states. While that may be true, it also misses an important point. Government communications are only a small outlet in an otherwise commercially-dominated media landscape. In that space, commercial outlets present what they want based on perceived profitability of their content and delivery model—not on the policy preferences of the state where the media company resides.¹³⁹ Commercial media is in the business of selling advertisements and subscriptions for their content, based on the content’s entertainment and engagement value; not on the (often) intangible value of presenting the rationale and benefits of a particular policy position. For that reason, there is general consensus that for advocacy and broadcasting the means of dissemination should be owned or managed by the state.

In the twentieth century, democratic states have been capable of some major public diplomacy and information operations using their own means. During the Second World War the British relied on a mix of “white” broadcasting from the BBC and “black” broadcasting from the Political Warfare Executive (PWE). Both were state-owned information campaigns, but the difference lay in the sender taking credit for their messages. There was considerable tension between the BBC and PWE inside Britain during the war. The BBC regarded its work as the vital effort of engaging with civilians living in authoritarian states to show them that freedom and democracy were alive and well, even during wartime, while the PWE’s purpose was to undermine Nazi morale by exploiting cleavages between the party leadership and the military. Dedicated operations were conducted by both the BBC and PWE in different theatres, countering Axis operations in occupied Europe and the Middle East.¹⁴⁰ However, all those means were owned by the state, and therefore the content was tightly controlled by the state.

The central difference between the “white” and “black” propaganda is acknowledging the sender as who they really are. During the Cold War, the Voice of America and BBC were run by the US and British governments respectively, and some evidence shows that people living on the communist side of the Iron Curtain appreciated hearing information that was truthful because they knew that state media would not provide them the truth.¹⁴¹ Both “white” and “black” information could be considered international broadcasting, because they leverage the power of technology to reach global audiences; albeit for different purposes. No matter how we choose to define the boundaries of advocacy vs. propaganda in the context of public diplomacy, it is important to note that states—even democracies—have mixed attributable and unattributable means as part of a political program during war time. Setting aside the issue of whether or not the information constitutes propaganda, communicating with global audiences is a tool of public diplomacy.

Irrespective of the type of content, there are limitations to public diplomacy—and indeed, for any kind of information operation. Conceptually, targeting a specific population is possible. Though practically speaking, there are some assumptions embedded in the idea that one type of broadcast means (television, social media, etc.) reaches only one type of audience, or that the reach of information is limited only to those who use a medium directly.¹⁴² When we talk about broadcasting being targeted at specific audiences, there are assumptions made about the boundaries of targeting. Clearly, a sender can intend to target specific audiences; but there is no mechanism to limit the message to those audiences alone. Notwithstanding the limits on target, broadcasting and advocacy can be effective in reaching audiences—even if not the specific audiences that were targeted. Social media has been used effectively for grassroots politics to mobilize coalitions of voters in national elections, or activist movements seeking major policy change on the environment, civil rights, or other causes.¹⁴³ Even if targeting is perhaps imprecise, there is clearly potential for tangible outcomes—rallies, demonstrations, etc.—though public diplomacy via advocacy and broadcasting around specific issues.

There are some competing concepts about what public diplomacy entails and how to define it. For our purposes the focus will be on advocacy and public broadcasting, as part of a deliberate campaign separate from the more conventional business of elected leaders and diplomats engaging in the (largely) private affairs of international politics. Public diplomacy is carried out in public, and the target is a foreign population. In the case of Ukraine, this is about Ukraine targeting the voting publics in the United States and NATO nations as a complementary activity to their official diplomacy, and doing so using advocacy and public broadcasting.

2.5 The Vector of Communications

2.5.1 Pre-Internet Concepts

Canadian Marshall McLuhan coined the famous phrase ‘the medium is the message’ in his 1967 work about the impact of television and computing on how people consume and connect with media. McLuhan’s argument was that the widespread adoption of electronic means of media consumption was going to fundamentally impact the human nervous system in ways that people could not anticipate or understand.¹⁴⁴ The introduction of print media allowed people to engage with media stories individually, while electronic media created *the mass* by allowing people to consume the same media collectively and simultaneously and allowed them unprecedented access to content that was otherwise locked away in libraries.¹⁴⁵

For propagandists, any medium that delivers a collective experience provides a powerful tool. The early days of movies and television provided a collective, social experience through which people became part of the narratives through their attendance (and therefore participating), and more obviously by providing messaging about the medium itself being emblematic of the movement. Participating in television and film became an act of endorsement to the overall vision. Like the military parade, where the civilian audience becomes part of the parade by the act of watching it – thereby confirming the status of the audience as willing participant and consenting agent of the state¹⁴⁶ – so too does watching propaganda television and film make the audience part of it. That is, using the medium becomes an act of participation and therefore has power as an identity symbol. The Nazis leveraged technology to saturate viewers with the ‘appropriate’

messages using film and television, and in so doing also cultivated a narrative of modernity and technological superiority. Television also became emblematic about something larger: futurism and modernity. Television was one device in addition to jet airplanes, high-speed submarines, V1 and V2 rockets, the Autobahn, and others that became emblems of the technological sophistication and thus the proof of the superiority of the regime and its people compared to other nations.¹⁴⁷ The Soviet Union also relied on similar approaches to spread messages to a mass audience. While consolidating their revolution in the late 1910's and early 1920s the Bolsheviks saw film as an excellent tool of propaganda by reinforcing their key narratives, key historical icons and myths, and their overarching narrative in way that – in addition to being entertaining – communicated modernity, even in remote parts a vast country.¹⁴⁸

Collective experience has not disappeared; however, digital media has undermined 20th century assumptions about media being consumed simultaneously by *the mass*.

2.5.2 The Internet and the Challenge to Traditional Media's Role

The most significant changes the internet brought about in media and communications is: 1) the elimination of media owners as gatekeepers over what content people saw; 2) the collapse of the cost and technical barriers to entry, and with it; 3) enabled the explosion of platforms and channels that are user driven down the level of the individual user with a smartphone.

Large media companies –television broadcasters, cable and satellite television providers, newspaper and magazine companies, radio stations – were the gatekeepers that decided what content their subscribers, viewers and readers could access through their editorial processes. These technologies effectively allow ordinary people, activists, and professional communicators alike to compete in the media space on more-or-less equal footing, flattening the previous hierarchies of messaging in media.¹⁴⁹ Without gatekeepers, individuals are free to organize and disseminate content however they like using message boards, social media and video sites, or form groups and closed subsets using those platforms.

The cost barriers to entry have largely disappeared with the introduction of the smartphone. Developing television broadcasts or movies requires massive costs for cameras, sets, control rooms, graphics, and then the means of long-range dissemination, either through the airwaves or previously through physical media like DVDs or other formats.¹⁵⁰ The smartphone and the social media website did not replace the television production studio, radio station or newspaper office, but it rapidly ended the monopoly and gave anybody with the will to start communicating globally. User-driven content allows anyone to present stories the traditional hierarchies of messaging allowed people to produce their own media content with stories that the legacy media was not covering. Farah, a teenager in Gaza, tweeted about her life during the 2014 Operation Protective Edge, often directly challenging narratives about all Palestinians being pro Hamas, or that bombs were only being dropped on Hamas targets.¹⁵¹ Moreover, by sending messages in English and using Twitter – a global platform – her messages reached a global audience, and challenged prevailing global narratives about the conflict. These messages were being shared and re-shared around the world, generating near-real time global reach for messaging.

In this environment, those whose position is being undermined by user-driven content – states especially – are basically compelled to compete with user-generated content to prevent user-driven content from dominating the information space. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) took notice of user-driven content from Farah and other Palestinian voices in 2014 and took their own action on social media – rather than only on traditional media – to provide competing narratives. There were three purposes: firstly, to challenge any narrative hostile to Israel in the global press (often perceived as hostile to Israel); second, to shorten the time where a Palestinian narrative could stand alone without a competing one; and lastly, to establish the IDF as a player in the digital information space.¹⁵² None of the above was possible in an era where legacy media were gatekeepers on what stories were told. This is especially true in warzones, where not all reporters are willing to venture.

The fundamental principle of presenting the most compelling and emotionally resonant narrative as possible, while undermining competing narratives in the minds of your target audience, has not changed. However, the rise of digital media has eliminated the monopoly of “gatekeepers”, effectively eliminated the barriers to access, and has massively reduced the timeframe for presenting narratives and counter-narratives in response.

2.5.3 Traditional and Digital Media Mutual Reinforcement

Accessing traditional media has long been the objective of many states and groups engaging in information operations. Many Soviet active measures campaigns relied on laundering planted stories in fringe media outlets, and then encouraging slightly more credible outlets to cover the story, until finally the story was repeated enough times that it could appear in American newspapers with national readership.¹⁵³ The concept was to work stories from a place of obscurity to a place of credibility, to allow a broader audience to read stories that would otherwise not have been publishable had they been submitted directly to reputable newspapers.

Even with the elimination of the monopoly of “gatekeepers”, a similar model exists with digital media content seeking legitimation by becoming part of mainstream media stories. The findings of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence into the 2016 US Election found was seeking to accelerate stories from fringe media outlets on social media, where traditional media would then cover the frenzy online and, in so doing, give it unearned credibility. This relied on amplifying YouTube videos and other social media content, publishing ‘findings’ on Russian state media (RT, or Russia Today), and then hoping that so-called ‘useful idiots’ or others agents seeking provocative content online will amplify the messaging enough that traditional media outlets cover the controversy, if not lend credibility to the story itself.¹⁵⁴ The relationship between social media and traditional media today is two-way. During times of conflict, information that is captured on battlefields makes its way to social media, and then to television news very quickly. This symbiotic relationship means that stories that originate on one medium will almost certainly generate discussion on the other. For the purposes of this research, this means that focusing on Government of Ukraine Twitter/X accounts is a focus on the originator’s intent, not a focus on the entire discourse on Ukraine because of the relationship between digital and traditional media. Likewise, material generated by Ukraine’s official Twitter/X accounts will likely reflect the day’s events, as reported on other traditional media.

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3 Method and Approach

To better understand how Ukraine is using its English-language information operations to build and sustain the political support of the United States and NATO partners, this study will examine 16 months of X/Twitter postings from two official Government of Ukraine accounts: @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUa. The period of study covers the four months preceding the full-scale February 2022 invasion, and a one-year period after the invasion. This data will be manually coded using an improved version¹ of the ‘Seven Propaganda Devices’ codebook originally developed by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis.²

This study codes 16 months of X/Twitter data to better understand *how* Ukraine mobilizes emotional appeals and symbols to create a sense of shared purpose with English-speaking Western audiences; how Ukraine frames receiving and using military aid; the timing of messaging on Twitter/X to coincide with possible decision points like bilateral visits and NATO summits; and how Ukraine delivers counter-narratives to Russian narratives targeting English-speaking audiences. Throughout the term Twitter/X will be used to denote the change in name of the platform during the period of study.

The data set is analyzed as a complete dataset and will be analyzed across four sub-segments to reflect different periods of the war, including the run-up period in late 2021 and early 2022. This study will be a single case study that will study how Ukraine uses information operations to target friendly countries and potential partners they rely on for political and military support in their war against Russia.

3.1 Assumptions & Limitations

The following assumptions are being made to manage the scope of the work, ensure focus on the research question and the dataset being studied, and about the nature of information operations targeting allies. As with any information operation campaign, some things are unknowable. Attributing political impact to a single information operation campaign – basically, performance measurement – is very difficult in consistent and granular way because we cannot isolate an information operation campaign from all other media coverage and from the complexity of human perception and attitudes.³

3.1.1 Completeness of Data

The internet is effectively endless. The total size and data volume expands every second of every day with new social media posts, raw footage uploaded to social media sites, and cycle of twenty-four-hour news coverage. The dataset being presented focuses only on two official Ukrainian Government X/Twitter accounts – @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA – for a period of 16 months. These accounts enable clear scoping of data.

3.1.1.1 Social Media X/Twitter Account Data is the Most Complete and Verifiable Dataset Available in English

As above, the internet is unfathomably vast and finding a complete dataset ‘in the wild’ would present many challenges. Media outlets collate and present their data differently online, based on topics and key subjects; not all television and radio broadcasts are made available for later use; and not all information captured contemporaneously is included in a readily available archive for later use.

Social media accounts show a chronological flow of everything a specific account has posted. This means that examining two official X/Twitter accounts will give us very high certainty of a complete and verifiable dataset in English of official information that Ukraine has published. Additionally, this data is accessible in a relatively user-friendly way, making verifiability of the dataset presented in this study simple and straight-forward. It does not represent everything Ukraine has said, but it is the most readily available and complete dataset.

3.1.1.2 Official English-Language X/Twitter Feeds do not represent all of Ukraine's Information Operations

The two X/Twitter accounts being studied here are not the whole picture of information operations being conducted by Ukraine, or with its tacit approval. Information operations targeting the Russian population, the Russian military, the domestic Ukrainian population, or Russian and Ukrainian diasporas abroad are not reflected in this study. This is an important differentiation because – based on the discussion in sections 2.2.2.1 and 2.3.2 **Error! Reference source not found.** about the importance of framing narratives at a target audience – the messaging targeting Ukrainians and Russians will focus on their history, beliefs, and identity markers, not on Western identity. This assumption is important because we need to be clear that Ukraine's English-language information operations will rely on Ukrainian assumptions about Western identity themes and markers that are more likely to resonate with Western audiences, not Ukrainian ones.

3.1.1.3 Deniable, Semi-Deniable or Unofficial Messaging Cannot Reasonably be Captured

Many information operations are not intended to be attributed to the sender, out of concern that if the actual sender's identity was known the believability of the message would be impacted. It is possible that Ukraine is conducting deniable or semi-deniable information operations targeting western publics. However, we cannot prove this or be certain and will therefore not be examined in this work.

3.1.1.4 No interviews conducted with official Ukrainian government sources

Information operations are often the preserve of intelligence agencies, both in conceptualization and in execution. During the Second World War, the British Government relied on a mix of the BBC for its attributable information operations and the Political Warfare Executive (PWE) for the unattributable content.⁴ The Soviet Union relied on the state-controlled outlets like TASS and Pravda for their attributable content and the KGB for the unattributable content.⁵ In both cases, there was clear political management of the attributable content and unattributable to keep the narrative coherent. This study is only about the attributable Ukrainian content; though it is safe to assume there could be other unattributable content. In any case, documentation or explanations about the intentions of an information operations campaign are likely to be sensitive. For that reason, the author opted not to seek any interviews or source material from Ukrainian officials.

3.1.2 Ukraine's Intentions for their Information Operations Campaign

Trying to discern the *real* intentions of an adversary was an area of significant inquiry during the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁶ The rational actor model was used to attempt to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of an adversary's decision making about major foreign policy decisions. However, any attempt to specifically conclude what an adversary was trying to do was significantly fraught with bias on behalf of the analyst evaluating the situation.⁷ Attempting to discern the motivations of President Zelenskyy and other

Government of Ukraine officials is impossible beyond self-evident motivations like building support for more military, financial and political support. Understanding the intentions over narrower things – the emotions the information operations are meant to stimulate, for our purposes – is basically unknowable. However, we know that organizations make decisions about resource allocation to either benefit the organization or harm its rivals in a competitive marketplace.⁸ If the true intentions are basically unknowable, we can only observe the outputs of the organization; in this case, the English-language X/Twitter feeds. We can deduce from the content of the messaging, the symbols used and the emotional tone of the messages what Ukraine is *likely* trying to achieve even if we can't conclude Ukraine's intentions for certain. This study will focus on the information operations that are delivered as an indicator of what Ukraine is likely trying to stimulate in the target audience.

3.1.3 Quantifying the Impact of English-Language Information Operations

Determining the specific impact between information operations and public opinion is difficult to discern with certainty. Electoral campaigns provide a good analogy for assessing the impact of persuasion, because the outcome can be quantified in votes cast as some indicator of successful persuasion. Some studies have shown that during elections door-to-door visits increasing the likelihood of voting for a specific candidate in some regions, while showing only a small increase in the likelihood of voting in other regions, pointing to a lack of control group to explain the ambiguity in the dataset.⁹ Others point to the level of information and political sophistication voters have before an election as the key indicator, with less informed voters more likely to be persuaded by campaign messaging than more informed voters with a better understanding of the issues and impacts.¹⁰ Political campaigns do not exist in a vacuum, with other macro indicators like economic performance influencing attitudes, and events-of-the-day like a military or political crisis, crime wave, or impacts of natural disaster also dominating the informational and political landscape. Discerning causation and correlation from and outcome in any information-based environment remains a challenge, and there is no consensus on what clearly connects messages to electoral outcomes.

Thomas Rid points out that information operations are no different from elections in the sense that those responsible for information operations makes statements about the effectiveness of their operations because the overall objective was at least partially achieved.¹¹ The information operation may be persuasive, but there is no consensus on exactly *how* effective a specific information operation is or a specific media channel is because there is no control group from which to separate an information operation from all other information consumed.¹² We must therefore assume that assigning causality between an information operation and the mood of the target audience is difficult to discern. For that reason, this study will focus on the approaches and appeals as part of information operations used to persuade, and will not attempt to measure specific, quantifiable impacts for the reasons articulated above.

3.2 Research Question

The main research question is: *what approaches and appeals is Ukraine using its official English-language X/Twitter accounts to build support among members of the public and political leaders in the United States and NATO partners, and to limit the appeal of competing Russian narratives?*

In English-speaking Western democracies, elected leaders are sensitive to the preferences and dislikes of their voters because their voters have the ability to remove them if they do not deliver on their policy preferences. The research question is about the approaches and appeals Ukraine is using to persuade Western political leaders to support them, and to persuade voters that supporting Ukraine should be *their* policy preference because that will pressure elected leaders to deliver on voters' preferences.

The sub-questions are:

- How is Ukraine mobilizing emotional and identity appeals to build and sustain the political support of the American and NATO publics?
- Are symbols being used as part of the identity appeal, and if so, are sub-populations being targeted with specific appeals?
- How is Ukraine talking about the need for military support from the United States and NATO allies?
- How is Ukraine attempting to counter and undermine Russian narratives in the eyes of Western publics?
- Is Ukraine connecting its messaging with other events in the world going on concurrently?

This study is fundamentally about understanding the approaches and appeals Ukraine is using its English-language X/Twitter, specifically: (1) whether Ukraine is targeting broad national populations with identity appeals, or sub-populations, or some mix of both; (2) whether Ukraine is appealing to war-based narratives or to international political narratives, or some mix of both; (3) the degree to which Ukraine is competing in the information domain by undermine Russian narratives about the war with counter-narratives of their own; and (4) the degree to which Ukraine is aligning their messaging to events in the world, to give their narrative a resonance with global affairs.

The debates introduced in Section 2.3 focus on the disagreements about national level targeting vs. sub-population targeting; about whether information operations are more about being used as a tool of warfare or statecraft; and about whether or not the real purpose is action or creating a consensus or accepted discourse around specific ideas. This study will provide observations on how those debates apply (or not) to a real-time contemporary case that is unfolding contemporaneously. There is general agreement on information being a competitive domain, and this study seeks to better understand if and how Ukraine is countering Russian narratives targeting Western audiences.

3.3 Hypothesis

3.3.1 Main Hypothesis

The main hypothesis is: *If Ukraine has realized that it needs military and political support from the United States and from NATO partners to effectively fight the war against Russia, then Ukraine's English-language official X/Twitter accounts are being used to develop and sustain the support of publics in partner nations.*

3.3.2 Sub-Hypotheses

The sub-hypotheses are aligned in four basic categories:

Emotional Appeals

- H1: To build support with Western publics, Ukraine will target voters with emotionally-based identity messages and narratives with themes familiar to Western audiences to establish a sense of shared identity around values like freedom, democracy, community, and the right to self-defence in the face of attacks.
- H2: To focus its targeting on population sub-segments in Western countries (and transnationally across Western countries), Ukraine will use symbols, memes, and slogans that are specifically targeted to those sub-populations to generate easily recognizable images that reinforce emotionally-based identity messages.

Showing Western Equipment

- H3: To emphasize that military aid is being used for the stated purpose, Ukraine will showcase the use of donated Western military equipment – including some battlefield losses – to show Western voters that the equipment being sent is being used in combat (i.e.: the military aid is being used for the purposes for which it was donated, and not abandoned, diverted, or sold).

Timing

- H4: To coordinate messaging with major political decision points, Ukraine will emphasize some specific narratives to coincide with major events that involve decisions from its allies (Summits, Presidential visits, etc.) to appeal to broader themes of statecraft.

Counter-Narrative

- H5: To prevent Russian messages from undermining Ukraine's esteem with Western publics, Ukraine will actively present counter-narratives to Russian messages targeting English-speaking audiences.

3.3.3 Variables

For this study, Ukraine's war aim (victory or possibly negotiated peace) is the independent variable. This is the objective Ukraine is pursuing. The dependent variable is Ukraine's information operations using X/Twitter. The information operations campaign is in service of achieving the war aim.

3.3.3.1 Independent

The independent variable in this study is Ukraine's desire to win the war and reassert their sovereignty as a unitary political entity. The specific objectives that either Ukraine and Russia are willing to accept to end the war have likely changed as time goes on, with the impact of the losses and the ability and willingness to sustain further losses for potential gains. Ukraine's strategic political objectives are securing its long-term interests against Russian ambitions of regional hegemony – including permanently integrating Ukraine under its coercive influence – means political and military integration with the rest of Europe, not Russia.¹³ Any hope of achieving the long-term objectives requires achieving the near-term objectives first.

3.3.3.2 Dependent

The dependent variable for this study is the information operations campaign and approach being used by Ukraine through official English-language X/Twitter accounts. The content that is posted to these accounts is,

therefore, the dependent variable. Its purpose is resumed to be building and sustaining the political support of western partners Ukraine can fight on.

3.3.4 Null Hypothesis

The null hypothesis is that the independent variable and the dependent variable are not correlated. That is, Ukraine's English-language X/Twitter content is not being developed in a way that is systematic or deliberate; targeting is not mobilizing any emotional themes; and does not appear linked to Ukraine's military and political objectives in a meaningful way. For the null hypothesis to be true, Ukraine's English-language X/Twitter content must be found to be ephemeral, mixing themes and identity messages in a haphazard way, not connected to its political or military objectives, and unchanging in the face of major world events (intervening variable). Additionally, in the null hypothesis, counter-narrative messaging will be simply anti-Russian, with no attempt to undermine the structure of Russian arguments and will be disconnected from the timing of Russian arguments.

3.4 Case Study Approach

This research will use an embedded single-case study approach to examine multiple embedded units of analysis about a single case.¹⁴ For this study, Ukraine is the case study and the multiple embedded units are the mobilization of emotion and symbols to generate affinity toward Ukraine and its cause; proof of Ukraine's armed forces putting military aid to good use on the battlefield; and countering Russian narratives targeting English-speaking populations to prevent them from undermining Ukrainian narratives.

The embedded case study approach is commonly used for exploring critical, unusual, uncommon, revelatory, or longitudinal cases, and is commonly used to examine different elements or aspects of a single case.¹⁵ Information operations in the war in Ukraine satisfies these conditions. The case of Ukraine is critical because of the topical nature of studying a case unfolding in real-time, and the gaps in the existing knowledge that it seeks to fill, as described above. Ukraine's information operations are being used on American and NATO member policy decisions to continue supporting Ukraine, – and presumably having impacts, because Ukraine continues to use them – and there has been little written on the subject thus far.

The case is unusual for the same reason it is uncommon. As we have seen in the literature, very little is written about using information operations targeting friendly nations and their publics. With that absence of study on the subject, the case could also be revelatory for a few reasons. First, there is very little written about how states target information operations at friendly nations in the context of conventional conflict. Lasswell's work is the only major work on the subject. Second, very little has been written about how internet-based communications are used to deliver information operations targeting friendly nations. There is no shortage of work on how either America's adversaries target America with digital media,¹⁶ or how armed non-state groups have targeted Western publics with digital media campaigns.¹⁷ However, there is no major work on how friendly states use information operations targeting each other in the digital age.

The case study method is also suitable for longitudinal studies. This case will be longitudinal because it will cover approximately 16 months of X/Twitter traffic, allowing for change over time and across phases of the

war to be observed and identified. There is significant potential to observe change over time in Ukrainian information operations because there are first-hand accounts not only did Zelenskyy not take the early warning of Russia's invasion from the United States as seriously as he probably should have in retrospect, but that the military also struggled to communicate the urgency to the President.¹⁸ The lack of preparation is likely to show less coherent and cohesive information operations in the early stages of the war than in the latter. Additionally, as the volume of military aid increased over time and the military conflict has gone through periods of stalemate, the data may show changes in how Ukraine is positioning its requests and the narratives that Russia is using to attempt to undermine Ukraine.

The inclusion of different accounts meets the criteria for an embedded research design because it researches different elements as part of the same case. @DefenceU is very much focused on the military component of the war, and @ZelenskyyUa focuses on President Zelenskyy as the political leader of the country, a (now) an easily recognizable international figure, and a symbol in his own right.

3.4.1 Reasons For Approach & Method

The most significant reason for taking the case study approach and collecting data from English-language Twitter/X accounts is that the current case is not something for which recent comparators exist. The case study approach and the collection of recent data published to X/Twitter also allows us to examine primary data very close to the context in which it took place. Case studies, as an approach, are valuable for examining recent (and contemporaneous) behaviours while they are still ongoing, avoiding the need to rely on secondary or historic sources, and avoiding the limitations of re-characterization of events after they have passed.¹⁹ The story about Ukraine is still very much unfolding at time of writing and final edits, and the case study method is well suited to capturing longitudinal data while the area of study is still evolving.

The approach being used for this case study looks at two different data streams – the accounts of @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU – which allows us to view two data points that have slightly different characteristics and focus, allowing us to treat each account as a separate data stream that exist within the same context, and therefore allow us to examine each in a common environment to identify commonalities and differences between each data stream.

3.4.2 Reason for Not Using Comparative Case Study Approach

Using a comparative case study is not an appropriate method for this study. The most recent example of information operations being targeted at the United States by friendly nations or allies during a conventional conflict to which the United States was not a directly participant is the pre-1917 period of World War One. This was an era where news was transmitted by newspapers, primarily. The lack of television or digital media means comparing these time periods is not suitable. There is no suitable comparison case in recent history to examine how America's allies and partners target its voting public with information operation. The recent examples are all adversarial: Russia's election interference in 2016, Osama bin Laden declaring war on America and escalating attacks after 1996, Anwar al-Awlaki making threats to America, and the range of Islamic State videos and regional Islamic State and al-Qaeda franchise videos threatening to attack American and Western targets are not suitable comparators.

3.4.3 Official Accounts Only

This study will use official Government of Ukraine English-language X/Twitter accounts only.

3.4.3.1 *Why using official accounts only*

The purpose of using official accounts only is to clearly connect the intentions and actions of the Ukrainian government – not any other actor – to the information operations. The research is focused only on connecting Ukraine’s official narrative with Western audiences. Other pro-Ukraine social media accounts are clearly doing this also, but the focus of this study is on the official Ukrainian position only.

3.4.3.2 *Why using selected official accounts*

The two accounts – @ZelenskyyUa and @DefenceU – are being used for two reasons. Firstly, for scope. Ukraine has official accounts for its foreign affairs, for its air force, and for many of the leadership including generals. Collecting 16 months of data for all these accounts would far exceed the scope of this study. Second, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been the most prominent symbol of Ukrainian resistance to the English-speaking world and therefore represents a rapid visual association to Ukraine for Western audiences. Zelenskyy speaks to the major themes of Ukraine’s information operations, so using this account will show the most important themes that Ukraine is presenting to the world. The @DefenceU account was selected because presenting a strong military image is important for Ukraine’s requests for military support, and also regularly shares military-adjacent content that appeals to a broader audience.

3.4.3.3 *Why not using other official accounts*

Other official accounts – Ukraine’s official foreign affairs, the accounts of then-Minister Reznikov, or then-Commander of the Ukrainian armed forces, General Zaluzhny – are all publishing content, however due to scope constraints these accounts were not suitable. The @MFA_Ukraine for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs account provides material that summarizes all diplomatic content. A cursory examination of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@MFA_Ukraine) account in the first months of the war clearly shows more formal communications (press releases, formal language likely targeting diplomats) than @DefenceU or @ZelenskyyUA. @DefenceU is therefore the more logical choice for the purpose of this study (targeting of domestic populations; not elites in Western countries). Many of the major events – NATO summits, Zelenskyy visiting foreign capitals – are also captured by @ZelenskyyUA posting. The military leaders are also generally publishing content that is either captured by @ZelenskyyUA or by the @DefenceU account. @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU provide a better summary of the themes that Ukraine is communicating, while ensuring continuity of message through the Presidential and Defence accounts.

3.4.3.4 *Why not using similar, but unofficial accounts*

There are many accounts that are not controlled by the Government of Ukraine but nonetheless rely on source footage and imagery that could only come from the Government of Ukraine. Accounts like Ukraine Weapons Tracker (@UWeapons), Jay in Kyiv (@JayinKyiv), Hunter UA (@UaCoins), MAKS 24 (@Maks_NAFO_FELLA), ((Tendar)) (@Tendar), Special Kherson Cat (@bayraktar_1love), Ukraine Battle Map (@ukraine_map), and any account associated with the NAFO (North Atlantic Fellas Organization) or Fellas movement all rely on combat footage from Ukrainian drones, aircraft, vehicles, and dismounted infantry wearing *Go-Pro* or similar cameras. The Government of Ukraine is clearly allowing this information to be used

by supportive accounts; but they likely do not control the narrative. The sheer number of accounts and the low – or non-existent – barriers to entry for a X/Twitter user to declare themselves part of the *Fella* movement means that the volume is not practical for a study of this scope, nor can the authenticity of the account be verified. A framework for deciding which accounts to use and which to exclude would also be cumbersome and imprecise.

3.4.4 Why X/Twitter as the Platform?

The biggest reason for relying on Twitter for this study and not a comparably popular platform like Facebook is the way in which users interact with the platform. Facebook users tend to use the platform in a much more guarded way – that is, limiting who can see their information – compared to X/Twitter. Facebook users tend to connect with people they know in-real-life and guard that personal information more closely on Facebook than they do on X/Twitter. In one study, 87% of users of both platforms were found to keep their information private on Facebook, and 52% of users of Facebook only (i.e.: don't use Twitter) have private accounts.²⁰ The same study confirmed hypotheses from previous work that indicated that Facebook users are more social people that almost certainly know their Facebook friends in real-life, while X/Twitter users have 'friends' that tend to be based on entertainment, celebrity news, and sports news; that is, interest-based 'friends' that are news, culture and entertainment entities, not people they know.²¹

Facebook users, therefore, are much more likely to have real relationships with people they connect with online, and at least half of Facebook users keep their accounts private. X/Twitter users, by contrast, are more likely to follow accounts for news and entertainment. In the context of the war in Ukraine, X/Twitter is therefore the more logical choice because X/Twitter users are more likely – at a platform level – to consume news-based content than Facebook users. Moreover, Facebook users are more likely to share information with people they actually know, introducing some level of social group identity bias into friend-based sharing. For our purposes, Twitter/X therefore provides a shorter connection between Ukraine and its viewers on X/Twitter, giving Ukraine a less complicated estimation of how users are connecting with their content without the same social pressures and layers that Facebook introduces (at a platform level).

Based on the assumption that Ukraine is doing data analytics of their information operations on X/Twitter, collecting data about uptake from people who are there for news purposes is more accurate way to measure increases or decreases in online engagement than people who are sharing information with a friend group because they have a shared interest in the first place. X/Twitter, in effect, is a more honest measure of interests because its users are consuming information because they get some kind of *personal* enjoyment out of it, not because they have a *social* pressure to consume it. Adding credibility to that claim is the orders of magnitude lower advertising revenue that Twitter/X generates compared to Facebook. In 2021 Meta (Facebook's parent company) generated \$114.93 billion in advertising revenue compared to \$4.5 billion that X/Twitter generated.²² X/Twitter users are clearly not seen as consumers or buyers in the same way as to the same degree Facebook users. X/Twitter users are there for the content and the individual experience, making the content the most central part of the X/Twitter experience, and thus the platform chosen for this study.

3.5 Data Collection, Coding & Time Segmentation

3.5.1 Data Collection

Data collection for this study is a combination of collecting text-based data and metadata from a commercial seller to capture declarative data from key fields and then viewing each X/Tweet (including images and video content not included in the text-based data) and coding it based on the code book developed.

3.5.1.1 *Collecting Metadata for Both Twitter/X Accounts*

Metadata was purchased from “trackmyhashtag.com,” an online service that aggregates data from social media accounts, including Twitter. The data purchased was for both @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU included raw data covering the period from 21 November 2021 to 24 February 2022. The purpose of purchasing this data was to save the time and effort of manually copying-and-pasting this declarative data for thousands of Tweets/X. This data served as the baseline dataset for all the manual human coding, including the following fields:

- URL of X/Tweet
- Account name
- Date
- Language
- Text of X/Tweet

3.5.1.2 *Adding Descriptive Data for Each Tweet*

The purchased dataset above was the baseline text-based data and metadata from both accounts for this study. The author then manually coded each tweet—describing the images and video—based on the parameters of the codebook to complete the dataset. This includes descriptive data from viewing each X/Tweet

- Video - brief description of content
- Image - brief description of image
- Meme / GIF – brief descript of image

Some of the early data (2021) was written in Ukrainian using Cyrillic script. This was only prominent in the earliest data, indicating that the team managing Ukrainian social media quickly understood that connecting with English-speaking in Roman-letter script on social media audiences was important to spreading their message. These X/Tweets were removed from the English-language data set for this study.

3.5.2 Data Coding

The data coding section is the most valuable part of the coding, where each Tweet/X is coded based on the updated version²³ of the ‘Seven Propaganda Devices’ framework.²⁴

3.5.2.1 Code Book

A code book was developed to code each tweet. The codebook contains three components.

- **Baseline Data / Metadata:** this was the data that was purchased and includes declarative data for each tweet.
- **Descriptive data:** this is the manual coding identifying video, image, or meme/gif
- **Coding for sub-hypotheses**

The baseline and descriptive data will be organized as follows.

| Baseline & Descriptive Data | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|------|---------|---------|-------------|---------|
| Account | Date | Video | Image | Meme or GIF | Text |
| Name | Date | Of what | Of what | Of what | In Full |

3.5.2.2 Coding for Emotional an Identity Appeal

Each category in the codebook was aligned with each sub-hypothesis.

- **H1 – Emotional appeal:** this is manually coded data identifies the presence of any of the ten propaganda devices outlined in Phadke et al.’s²⁵ expansion of the original ‘Seven Propaganda Devices’ framework.²⁶ Each tweet was coded based on whether or not a ‘device’ was used in the tweet. Multiple devices can appear in a single tweet. The ten devices are:
 - A. **Name-calling:** the use of negative or pejorative language about a target.
 - B. **Instilling fear:** presenting something as an emerging or extant threat.
 - C. **Glittering generalities:** speaking very broadly, exaggerating, without much substantive detail.
 - D. **Transfer:** appeals to the perceived authority or prestige of a person or organization.
 - E. **Snob appeal:** presenting appeals to elitism, identity, or in-group lore.
 - F. **Plain folk:** appeals to conventional wisdom, common tropes, and the perception that “people like me” understand and agree with.
 - G. **Bandwagon:** presenting the desired outcome as inevitable or forgone, and appealing to people to be part of the “winning team”.
 - H. **Logical fallacies:** leaps of logic that are intended to connect cause and effect of disparate things that are not likely causally linked.
 - I. **Testimonial:** presenting a personal story that connect with pre-existing beliefs and attitudes, and presenting that single story as a broad, consistent fact.
 - J. **Card-stacking:** the use of hyperbole, over-emphasis, or under-emphasis to exaggerate difference, contrast, or significance or impact of the information presented.

| H1 – Emotional Appeal | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Name-Calling | Instilling Fear | Glittering Generalities | Transfer | Snob Appeal | Plain Folk | Bandwagon | Logical Fallacies | Testimonial | Card-Stacking |
| Negative Labels | Future / emerging Threat | Virtue / Positive | Authority or Prestige | In-Group Lore | "People like Me" | "Winning Team" | Leap of Logic | Personal Story | Under/Over Emphasis / Hyperbole |
| Y/N | Y/N | Y/N | Y/N | Y/N | Y/N | Y/N | Y/N | Y/N | Y/N |

- **H1 – Identity-based Messaging:** this data was manually coded using a binary for the presence of any explicit appeals to identity (yes/no coding). A free-text box was used to describe the identity-based appeal if there was any such appeal.

| H1 - Identity | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Identity-Based Messaging | |
| Presence | Description |
| Y/N | Free Text – what appeal to identity? |

3.5.2.3 *Coding by Symbols & Images, Western Equipment, Timing and Counter-Narrative*

Symbols and images, western equipment, timing and counter-narrative were coded according to the following approach:

- **H2 – Symbols / Images:** this data was manually coded using a binary for the presence of any symbols or images (yes / no coding). A free-text box was used to describe any symbols or images.
- **H3 – Showing Western equipment:** this data was manually coded using a binary for the presence of any Western equipment or appeals to send more Western equipment (yes / no coding). A free-text box was used to identify the equipment being used or being asked for.
- **H4 – Timing:** this data was manually coded using a binary for any mention of an upcoming event, including a foreign visit (Zelenskyy leaving Ukraine, or foreign leader visiting Ukraine), NATO event (including summits), United Nations event, European Union event, or any other event where it is reasonable to believe Ukraine would use the opportunity to build support among Western nations.
- **H5 – Counter-Narrative:** this data was manually coded using a binary for the presence of any counter-narrative (yes/no coding). The binary coding requires a mention to either Russia specifically or reference to the common themes Russia has included in their narratives about Ukraine. If a counter-narrative was present, the Russian narrative that was being countered was described in a free text box. Lastly, another free text box was used to describe how the Russian narrative was countered or undermined.

3.5.2.4 *Additional Coder Validation*

To validate the human coding of the dataset performed by the author, an additional coder(s) was used to code a sub-set of data, based on the codebook provided above. The additional coder received a sub-set of 25 X/Tweets, and a 60-minute tutorial on the codebook with questions and answers, and a short demonstration on why 5 X/Tweets were coded the way they were. The 5 were not part of the 25 sample.

This study is largely about the inherently subjective nature of language, culture, and identity, making additional human coding a value-added benefit to the validity and integrity of the coded data set. While perfect agreement among coders is very rare in any field that deals with interpretation of language, there is a generally observed threshold of 80% agreement between different coders across a meta-analysis of human coding on computer language.²⁷ The manual human coding approach for some social media studies on identifying if a tweet did or did not belong within a specific theme produced 73.2% accuracy based on a sample of 220 tweets, and was deemed as statistically viable given the imprecision associated with feelings and sentiments online.²⁸

The additional coder delivered a total congruence of 69% on 25 tweets. This total figure is somewhat lower than the standard of 73% above. The highest level of disagreement between the author's coding and the additional coder's data was on the "logical fallacies" and the "over-or-under emphasis / hyperbole" categories with 15 and 14 points of disagreement out of a possible 25, respectively. While this figure is high—over 50% disagreement—those categories ask the coder to identify logical fallacies and assess hyperbole and exaggeration: inherently subject to the perceptions of each individual. The difference in these two categories serve to underline the impact of individual perception and subjectivity in information operations.

If we remove the two variables with the highest level of disagreement, the agreement between the author's coding and the additional coder increases to 72% of all data points. This figure is closer to the 73% reference point. Overall, the consistency is sufficient to report on the data findings with reasonable confidence for our purposes, accepting that coding social media traffic—and indeed: coding information operations, generally—has a high degree of subjectivity due to human perception.

3.5.3 Time Segmentation

3.5.3.1 *Four Time Segments*

This data timeline will be segmented into four time segments to represent different phases of the war (with specific reference to the 2022 invasion, not the 2014 invasion and the intervening period).

1. **The lead-up:** this is the period 4 months before the February 2022 invasion, covering the period 24 October 2021 to 23 February 2022.
2. **The initial invasion:** this is the period of the initial Russian offensive into Ukraine. This covers the period from 24 February to 15 April 2022. The selection of the 15th is somewhat arbitrary and was chosen as a division between when the Russian offensive stalled and Ukraine began a counter-offensive.
3. **The Ukrainian counter-offensive:** this is the period where Ukraine's armed forces began pushing back against the Russian lines and covers the period 16 April 2022 to 15 November 2022. Like the period above, the choice of the 15th of is to divide the month of November in half.
4. **The first stalemate:** this period covers the first winter of the war, when Ukraine was conducting mostly small-scale and shaping operations against Russian positions. This covers the period of 16 November 2022 to 24 February 2023.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data analysis for this work will focus on the prevalence of messages that appear in official Government of Ukraine Twitter/X accounts, broken down by time segment and across the entire data set. The prevalence of messages that touch on the sub-hypotheses will be counted to determine the most prevalent message types that appear, the overall narrative used in each time segment, any messages that were abandoned during a time segment, and any new themes that were introduced. The purpose is to identify what messages were most prevalent across time periods and across the entire data set.

The nature of the variables coded in the code-book means that each value is a binary: either a theme was present, or it was not. For that reason, any regression or statistical method that provides fractional outputs (i.e.: anything other than whole numbers that indicate a binary – either 0 or 1, -1 or 1, 1 or 2, or any other coding framework to assign presence/absence of an observation) will not be part of this work.

3.6.1 Prevalence of Message by Time Segment

For each of time segment, data will be analyzed to identify the prevalence of individual messages (align with the structure of the sub-hypotheses) and the overall message in that time segment.

Prevalence of individual messaging:

- Prevalence of messages, based on the Seven Propaganda Devices framework:
- Prevalence of messages showing Western equipment.
- Prevalence of messages presenting counter-narratives to Russian narratives.
- Prevalence of any key themes in the run-up to major international events, including NATO or EU summits, meetings at the UN

The overall message:

- A breakdown of the prevalence of all the themes communicated during the time segment.
- The overall narrative presented in the time segment: this is the overall message that is being presented. This is the sum of the parts, in terms of presenting an emotionally resonant message to the target audience and giving meaning to the facts for the audience.

3.6.2 Changes in Messaging During a Time Segment

For each time segment, the data analysis will identify any changes in the overall messaging. This will include the abandonment of specific themes during the time segment, and the introduction of new themes. The abandonment of some themes could be either because they were not resonating with target audiences (and the assumption that Ukraine is tracking digital engagement data for its Twitter/X accounts) or were overtaken by events because Ukraine achieved the policy outcome they were pursuing with some messages (delivery of HIMARS systems or tanks, for example). Any new themes introduced during the time segment will also be identified, with an explanation for how this theme is being used and any Ukrainian policy objective the theme supports.

3.6.3 The Full Time Period

Lastly, data analysis will be provided for the entire 16 months covered during the period of study. The analysis will seek to identify any consistent messages and narratives that Ukraine communicated. The significance of consistency is that some themes may connect to the overall strategic outcomes and structural context Ukraine is facing that may be effectively unchanged by tactical events.

Likewise, for the full 16 months period, any messages that are abandoned or any narratives that shift will also be noted. The significance of changing messages or narratives is either that they were not connecting with target audiences, or that a change in context was such that the messages no longer connected audiences to events.

¹ Phadke et al, 'Framing Hate with Hate Frames: Designing the Codebook,' Conference Paper: Companion of the 2018 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing. November 2018

² Clyde Miller, 'Seven Propaganda Devices,' Institute for Propaganda Analysis. 1939

³ Thomas Rid, 'Thomas Rid on 'Active Measures,' Part 2,' *Arbiters of Truth*. Lawfare. 3 February 2022.

⁴ Peter Pomarantsev, *How to Win an Information War: the Propagandist who Outwitted Hitler*. Hachette Book Group. 2024.

⁵ Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2020;

⁶ Errol Morris, *Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*. Sony Pictures Classics. 2003.

⁷ Graham Allison, Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Longman 1999. 16-26.

⁸ Gary Shiffman, *The Economics of Violence: How Behavioural Science Can Transform Our View of Crime, Insurgency, and Terrorism*. Cambridge University Press. 2020. 34-36.

⁹ Vincent Pons, "Will a Five-Minute Discussion Change Your Mind? A Countrywide Experiment on Voter Choice in France." *American Economic Review*. Volume 108, Number 6. June 2018. 1357-1359.

¹⁰ Kevin Arceneaux, 'Do Campaigns Help Voters Learn? A Cross-National Analysis,' *British Journal of Political Science*. Volume 36. 2005. 172.

¹¹ Rid, 3 February 2022.

¹² Benkler, et al. 2018. 337-339.

¹³ D'Anieri, 2023.

¹⁴ Robert Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Designs and Methods (6th Edition)*. Sage. 2018. 48.

¹⁵ Ibid. 49.

¹⁶ Daniel Bagge, *Unmasking Maskirovka: Russia's Cyber Influence Operations*. Defense Press. 2019; Christopher Andew, Viktor Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West*. Penguin. 1999; Ebom, 1987; Peter Pomarantsev, *This is not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*. Public Affairs. 2019; Mark Galeotti, 2022b; Clive Hamilton, Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping the World*. OneWorld. 2021; Krieg, 2023.

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¹⁹ Yin, 12.

²⁰ Francesco Buccafurri, Gianluca Lax, Serena Nicolazzo, Antonino Nocera, 'Comparing Twitter and Facebook user behaviour: Privacy and other aspects,' *Computers in Human Behaviour*. Volume 52. 2015. 92

²¹ Ibid. 93

²² Statista, 'Selected online companies ranked by total digital advertising revenue from 2012 to 2023 (in billion U.S. dollars),' <https://www.statista.com/statistics/205352/digital-advertising-revenue-of-leading-online-companies/>

²³ Phadke et al.

²⁴ Miller. 1939.

²⁵ Phadke et al.

²⁶ Miller, 1939.

²⁷ Petra Sakia Bayerl, Karsten Ingmar Paul, 'What Determines Inter-Coder Agreement in Manual Annotations? A Meta-Analytic Investigation,' *Computational Linguistics*. Volume 37, Number 4. April 2011. 700

²⁸ Matthew Andreotta, Robertus Nugroho, Mark J. Hurlstone, Fabio Boschetti, Simon Farrell, Iain Walker, Cecile Paris. 'Analyzing social media data: A mixed-methods framework combining computational and qualitative text analysis,' *Behavioural Research Methods*. 2019. Volume 51. 1775

4 Findings

4.1 General Findings

The Ukrainian use of English-language X/Twitter evolved considerably over the period of study. The @ZelenskyyUA account delivered content at a far slower pace than @DefenceU, producing only about one third of the volume of @DefenceU. The @ZelenskyyUA account was little-used before the invasion of February 2022, and the @DefenceU account published almost no original content in English prior to February 2022 and was generally used as a vehicle for re-tweeting content shared by the then-Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov and content from other Defence Ministers supportive of Ukraine. The invasion itself clearly served as the impetus for accelerating an information operations campaign using X/Twitter, and for making Zelenskyy personally a symbol of Ukraine’s defence.

TABLE 1: TOTAL CONTENT AND AVERAGE CONTENT PUBLISHING

| | Start | End | Days | @ZelenskyyUA | | @DefenceU | |
|------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------|--------------|---------|-------------|---------|
| | | | | Tweets | Avg/Day | Tweets | Avg/Day |
| The Lead-Up | 24-Oct-21 | 23-Feb-22 | 122 | 135 | 1.11 | 2 | 0.02 |
| The Initial Invasion | 24-Feb-22 | 15-Apr-22 | 50 | 172 | 3.44 | 274 | 5.48 |
| Ukr Counter Offensive | 16-Apr-22 | 15-Nov-22 | 213 | 268 | 1.26 | 1160 | 5.45 |
| The First Stalemate | 16-Nov-22 | 24-Feb-23 | 100 | 162 | 1.62 | 765 | 7.65 |
| | | | | 737 | | 2201 | |

The @ZelenskyyUA relied on far less multimedia visual content – videos, images, infographics – than @DefenceU used. @ZelenskyyUA only published images in 115 of their posts out of 737 over the period of study, or only in about 15% of the content. By contrast, @DefenceU published videos, images or infographics in 1726 posts out of a total of 2201 posts, or in about 78% of their posts. This means that @DefenceU was publishing about 15 times the absolute volume of multimedia content, and about 5 times the relative volume of multimedia content. @DefenceU was clearly the leading account for delivering multimedia content, with the breakdown skewing heavily in favour of still images, followed by video content, “kill cards” (an infographic template that showed a regular rolling tally of the number of Russian combat losses including soldiers, tanks, armoured fighting vehicle, aircraft, etc.), and finally all other types of infographics.

FIGURE 1: MULTIMEDIA USE (@DEFENCEU)

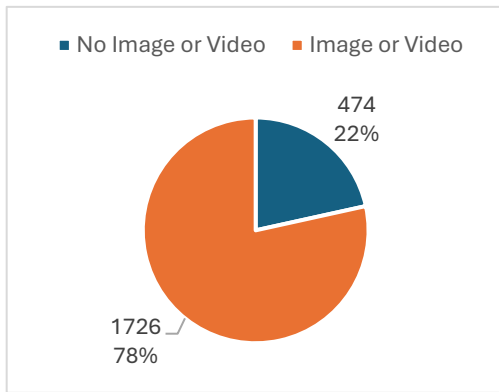
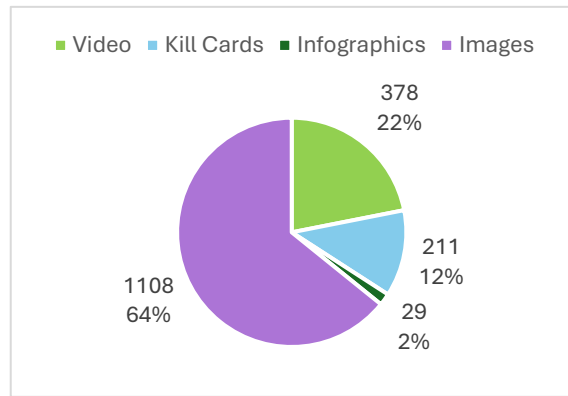
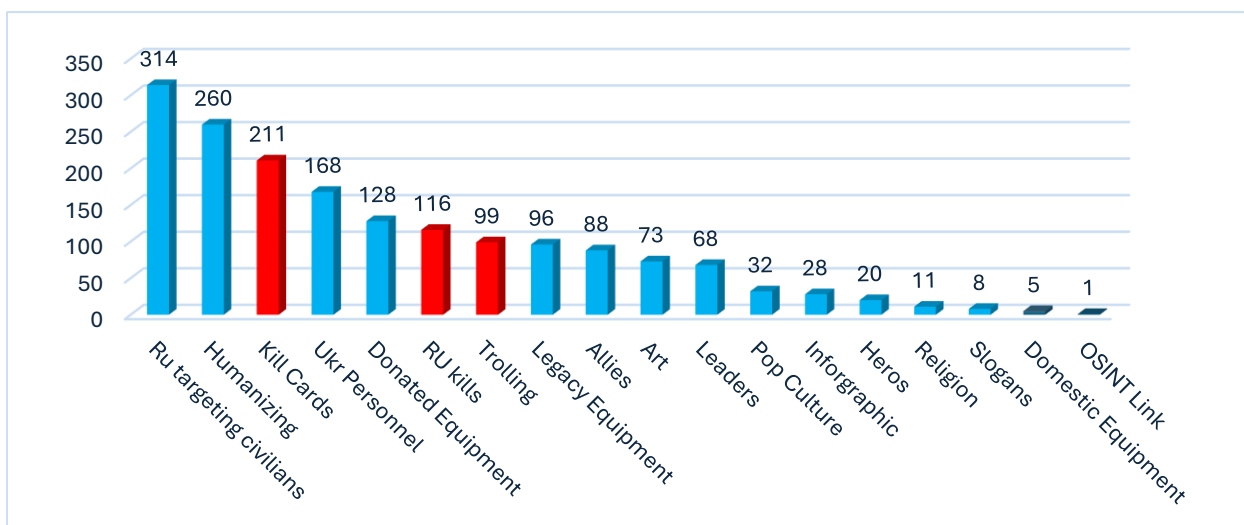


FIGURE 2: MULTIMEDIA BREAKDOWN (@DEFENCEU)



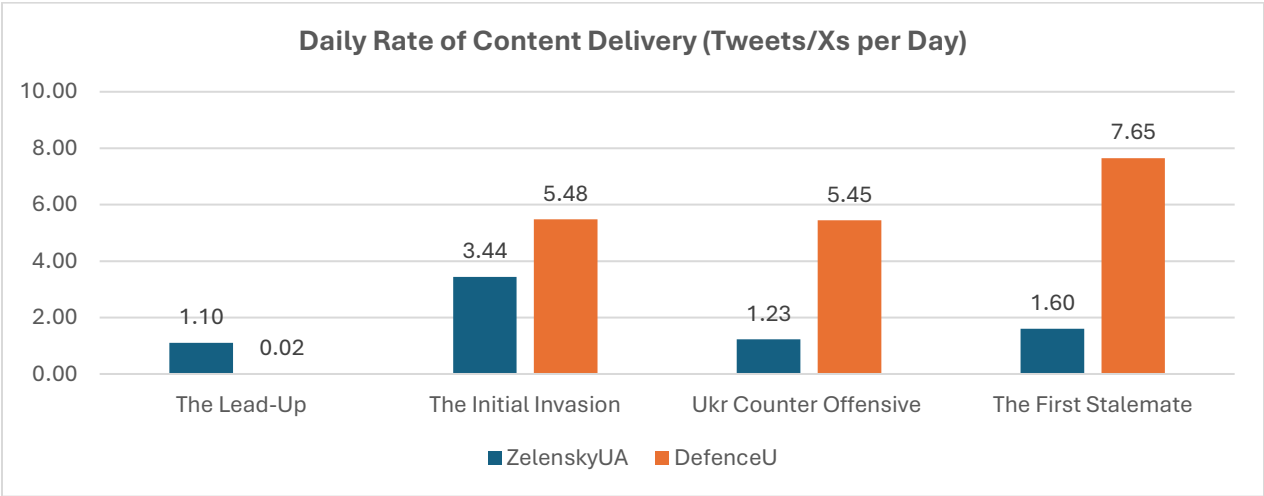
The message types in the multimedia content are also illustrative. Of the 1,726 @DefenceU messages that included multimedia, roughly 1300 were messages (or about 75% of the multimedia volume) that focused on Ukraine, not Russia. These messages focused on the resilience, determination, commitment to victory, the humanity of the Ukrainian people, and the toughness of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. While Russia was clearly the reason for the war, these 1300 messages focused on how Ukraine responded to these challenges. The themes in these messages had considerable variation, including showing Russia targeting of civilian targets, the humanity of Ukrainians, showing military equipment (NATO standard equipment donated by allies, legacy Warsaw Pact equipment, and domestically produced equipment), the embrace of allies, presenting pop culture references, showing strong Ukrainian leaders, and making appeals to Christian values. This variety of positive messages about Ukraine allowed @DefenceU to provide a wide variety of different messaging to prevent the @DefenceU account from becoming predictable or only talking about a few things. The variety allowed Ukraine to sustain engagement through variety in content. Only 426 messages (or 25% of the multimedia volume) focused on Russia, though “kill cards” updating the world on Russian losses, showing video of Russian forces being destroyed in combat, or negative messaging targeting Russia that we could call trolling (provocation, hyperbolic comparisons, inflammatory language, etc.).

FIGURE 3: TYPES OF MESSAGES IN @DEFENCEU MULTIMEDIA



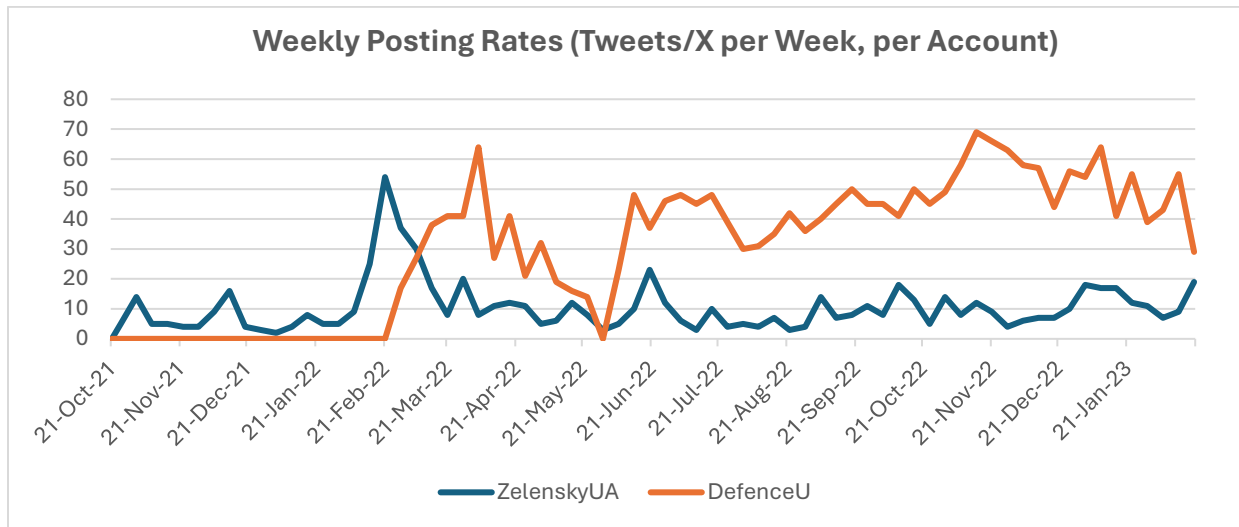
The weekly pace of content was heavily biased in favour of @DefenceU over @ZelenskyyUA over the entire period of study. While @DefenceU published almost no original, English-language content in the period before the invasion, after the invasion the pace accelerated significantly. In the period of the initial invasion @DefenceU’s original, English-language output grew by 274 times, and was slightly greater than 1.5 times the output of @ZelenskyyUA. The pace of @DefenceU basically sustained until November of 2022 and accelerated further still in the final time segment. During the Ukrainian 2022 counter-offensive and the first stalemate, output from @ZelenskyyUA held roughly the same (i.e.: a fraction of the content that @DefenceU was publishing).

FIGURE 4: AVERAGE DAILY POSTING RATE



The biggest observable anomaly in this overall trend was sharp reduction in output from @DefenceU in late May 2022. During the last three weeks of May 2022, the output from @DefenceU dropped from 30 to 40 Tweets/X per week – as had been the trend since the invasion of February 2022 – to below 20 for two weeks in a row, followed by no original English-language output at all the final week of May 2022. A plausible explanation is that Volodymyr Zelenskyy was personally engaged in significant talks and discussion with Western partners during this period, and little material was published in order to allow a large announcement at the end. Of note, at the end of this lull, the delivery of HIMARS long-range precision rocket systems was announced; Elon Musk was praised for sustaining Starlink service to Ukraine (at that time); and there were deliberate appeals to Western allies from Zelenskyy and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin to support Ukraine on the basis of preserving the rule-based global order. It is plausible that Ukraine published less content on @DefenceU in order to achieve surprise with a number of large announcements – including the announcement about HIMARS.

FIGURE 5: AVERAGE WEEKLY POSTING FROM @ZELENSKYUA AND @DEFENCEU



In the first year of war, Ukraine transformed their use of the English-language X/Twitter accounts that are part of this study from rather tepid vehicles for sharing and amplifying the content of others into vehicles for promoting key themes and presenting their perspective on events. In effect, they transformed their English-language X/Twitter accounts from peacetime vehicles for general messaging to wartime information operations outlets presenting a generally coherent narrative. By early May 2022, Ukraine’s narrative was effectively established – Ukraine is good and deserving of aid to defend itself and the rules-based order, and Russia is bad and engaged in a barbarous invasion – and its content generally coalesced around this basic narrative.

Both Ukrainian accounts delivered clear messages delivered a narrative that showed Ukraine’s strength and determination; messages that attempted to link Ukraine’s fight for its existence to a fight on behalf of European and Western values; messages that tried to humanize Ukrainian soldiers and people and brave and deserving of help; messages that showed images of Russia’s war crimes and human rights violations; and generally presented an image of combat effectiveness and an inevitability of eventual Ukrainian victory over Russia.

In this time, Ukraine moved from re-sharing point-in-time messaging to presenting a sustained narrative of an underdog valiantly defending not only itself but the whole rules-based order against unprovoked aggression from Russia and showing that its ongoing determination in the face of violence means that it deserves the support and contributions of Western powers. Other commentators viewing the total information ecosystem in the first six months of the war—that is, content beyond only X/Twitter accounts included in the scope of this work—agree generally that these are the key messages that comprise the overall Ukrainian narrative more broadly on all social media channels and accounts.¹

4.1.1 Across Entire Data Set

Generally speaking, @ZelenskyyUA provided a steady flow of diplomatic updates on conversations with foreign leaders, commitments of military and financial aid, political commitments, and announcements of support from international organizations like the United Nations, the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, NATO, and others. @ZelenskyyUA content focused on the value Ukraine delivers to the world both by fighting Russia and by growing a large proportion of the world's grain supply. It relied on much less video than @DefenceU and spoke in generally optimistic tones, looking to a better future.

@DefenceU evolved over the period of study from a mixed English-and-Ukrainian language account to an English-language account that provided a mix of positive and negative messages, relying on evocative imagery and portraying a strong narrative of Ukrainian determination and tenacity. Positive messages included videos and images intended to humanize Ukrainian soldiers and people by showing them with animals, playing music, sharing family moments and otherwise persevering under difficult circumstances; videos and images of Ukrainian military personnel liberating Ukrainian soil from the Russian military; videos showing Ukrainian forces fighting and winning against Russian forces; and a specific emphasis on showing Ukrainian forces using the equipment donated by NATO and Western powers. Negative messages show the evidence of Russian war crimes against Ukrainians, including destroyed apartment blocks, schools and churches; the more gruesome evidence of torture and rape, including alleged torture chambers, images of dead civilians; and mass graves being exhumed after towns and villages were liberated from Russians control.

Though Ukraine did establish a coherent narrative, this took time. In the period leading up to the 2022 invasion, Ukraine was not publishing information in English, and there was little in the way of coherent narrative. This strongly implies that there was no planned information operations campaign prior to the full-scale invasion. The X/Twitter content in late 2021 and early 2022 and the roughly six-week period following the February 2022 invasion focused on factual point-in-time information and images that showed Ukrainian forces fighting back, evidence of Russia targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, and showing evidence that Zelenskyy and his government were still alive and in Kyiv.

The Ukrainian narrative started gaining more coherence in March 2022 as evidence of Russian war crimes at Bucha was being uncovered and became a focal point for Ukrainian X/Twitter content. This will be discussed in greater detail later. By May 2022, the overall narrative and feeling of Ukraine's English-language information operations was effectively solidified. Ukraine launched *United24* during the week of 2 May 2022, a YouTube-based media outlet that Ukraine uses as a base for fundraising and to share its own short videos on a range of topics – Ukraine's history, Ukraine's resistance to Russia, the prowess of different Ukrainian military organizations, etc. Many of these videos are shared using @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU. On X/Twitter, Ukraine started issuing videos that showed Ukrainian military units fighting Russians with electronic dance music (EDM), synth music, and rock music from bands like AC/DC to give their videos an appealing aesthetic quality for different target demographics.

On X/Twitter Ukraine was taking great care to present content that appealed to voters of both major American political parties, without explicitly taking a stance to endorse either, while avoiding key domestic

identity issues associated with one political party. Both accounts emphasized gratitude to President Biden, Secretary Blinken (State) and Secretary Austin (Defense), while also recognizing Republican Senator Lindsey Graham and others supportive of Ukraine. @DefenceU presented a significant amount of humanizing content that showed with animals and being kind to each other, while also presenting content that appealed to “family values” typically associated with Republican campaigns. Content showing heterosexual couples – specifically with serving military males returning to their wives at home – features regularly, alongside imagery of destroyed churches and the slogan #FreedomIsOurReligion as clear appeals to American evangelicals and the so-called “Freedom Caucus” followers in the United States. Images of women distinguishing themselves in Ukrainian military service were also published, showing a clear intent to appeal to as many sub-populations as possible.

To show a steady increase in the volume of Russian casualties and number of destroyed pieces of equipment, Ukraine started publishing “kill cards” during the week of 25 July 2022. Kill cards presented a rolling tally of how many Russian personnel have been killed and wounded, and a rolling tally of the number of different types of armoured vehicles that have been destroyed (tanks, armoured personnel carriers, artillery guns, self-propelled air defence systems, etc.). They also include the increase compared with the posting of the most recent “kill card.”

The figures on these kill cards continue to increase – personnel and vehicles cannot be un-killed – showing an ever-rising kill count that is regularly updated. The kill cards are always accompanied with a quote that is clearly targeting a specific audience. For example, a quote from Winston Churchill is clearly targeting a British audience; a quote from an anime character is targeting a younger audience that spends time in online communities; a quote from a Polish poet is clearly targeting Polish English-speaking users.

FIGURE 6: SAMPLE "KILL CARD" FROM @DEFENCEU (MARKING 1-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THE WAR'S START)



4.2 By Time Segment

4.2.1 Segment 1

Time Segment 1 covers the four-month period prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (24 October 2021 to 23 February 2022). There is very little data for either @ZelenskyyUA or @DefenceU in this time segment. In fact, for @DefenceU there are only two original, English-language X/Tweets covering this period. There were 133 original English-language X/Tweets from @ZelenskyyUA during this time segment.

4.2.1.1 Messages

The messages presented by @DefenceU were very limited. There was less content shared during this period, and much of it was delivered in Ukrainian and thus outside the scope of this work. The other notable English re-tweets published during this time period were from the account of the General Staff of Ukraine (@GeneralStaffUA) focusing on military preparations being made in the face of Russia threats,² or re-tweets from then-Defence Minister Oleksi Reznikov talking about the total weight of military assistance arriving in Kyiv,³ or rolling counts of how many aircraft full of ammunition had arrived.⁴

The content shared from @ZelenskyyUA during this period focused on showcasing military equipment from the United States, from European powers like the United Kingdom, Germany and France, and from Western international organizations like the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and NATO.

@ZelenskyyUA used images far more often during this time segment than during any other. Of the 135 X/Tweets shared during this period by @ZelenskyyUA, 54 of them contained images or videos of President Zelenskyy with world leaders, or video from Western leaders expressing support for Ukraine. There were nine images or videos of Zelenskyy with American officials like President Biden, Vice-President Harris, or Secretary of State Blinken; three with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson; five with President Macron of France; three with German Chancellor Merkel; two with the OSCE, one with the EU and one with Stoltenberg of NATO. The images and videos were of visits to European capitals and other cities, Washington and Kyiv. Of note, in all of these pictures, President Zelenskyy is clean-shaven and is wearing formal business attire (sometimes without a tie). This is a stark contrast to the eventual image of Zelenskyy wearing a short beard and military inspired clothing (green or khaki top with cargo trousers, or something close to that).

By 21 February it became clear that Russian invasion was imminent. Putin released a video message on 21 February 2022 announcing a 'special military operation' to allegedly protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine that have been the target of genocide. Russia had the stated objectives of the de-militarization and 'de-Nazification' of Ukraine, and the recognition of the 'republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk.⁵ On 21 February @ZelenskyyUA responds to the hour-long video released by Russia of Putin addressing the Security Council of the Russian Federation to ask for help from France and Germany, and convened the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council.⁶ Similar appeals were made to the United States and the United Kingdom.⁷ This was also the beginning of the #StandWithUkraine hashtag that was first used in an appeal to friendly global business leaders with the support of Sir Richard Branson on 22 February 2022. This hashtag was still

being used in late 2025 and is generally being used by accounts of individuals that support the cause of Ukraine.

4.2.1.2 *Emotions*

The emotional content in @DefenceU is not worth considering in the time segment because there were only two messages, and they were months apart.

For @ZelenskyyUA, the emotional content was overwhelmingly positive. 131 of 134 X/Tweets were positive, speaking about the possibility of cooperation and collaboration with many nations, and expressing positive sentiments about the aspirations for the future. This was consistent with the finding that 126 of the 134 X/Tweets contained a leap of logic: typically, vague exaggerations about friendship and cooperation with allies. The focus on the positive and on the future makes sense in a context where Ukraine was seeking the support of its allies as deterrence against a much more militarily powerful enemy. Accordingly, all messages but one showed 'card-stacking' or hyperbolic emphasis. Much of this was of a positive nature, emphasizing the friendship and strong bonds between Ukraine and the world.

Almost half of the total messaging content – 71 of 134 messages – included worry of a future threat to instill fear. Again, this follows logically because Ukraine was seeking to show that Russia was an imminent threat to Ukraine's existence and that support from allies was required to prevent the destruction of the Ukrainian state as it existed. The language remained diplomatic, with terms like 'de-escalate' or 'localize threats' or 'aggravation on the frontline' to emphasize that there was action along the existing front lines and expressing legitimate concern for more. The messages that warned of a threat often contained positive content also. Many messages expressed concern for the future, and hope that Ukraine's allies would support it with political, diplomatic, economic and (in some content) in fulfilling requests for military aid.

There was only one negative message directed at another NATO member, and it came on 10 December 2021, asking "If more than 100,000 troops were on the border with Croatia, President Milanović would call the Ukrainian Prime Minister's visit to Zagreb not "charlatanism" but a manifestation of solidarity and friendship,"⁸ in an apparent sarcastic rebuke of the Croatian President who disagreed with his own Prime Minister over Zelenskyy visiting Zagreb. The challenge for this kind of message is that the reference is not immediately clear. The author had to research to understand the reference: without additional knowledge, this X/Tweet did not make sense.

4.2.1.3 *Narratives*

First-hand accounts indicate that not only were senior Ukrainian politicians – including President Zelenskyy himself – split on the idea of whether or not Russia would invade, but that non-American leaders were telling Zelenskyy that American warnings about Russian invasion were overblown.⁹ Within that frame, it should not be so surprising that there appeared little preparation on an information campaign if there was not even consensus at the highest levels that a military campaign would be necessary. Arguably, there was no coherent narrative at this stage: only messages based on the images that would cast Ukraine in the most positive light as an underdog defending itself against invasion by its bigger, stronger neighbour.

4.2.1.4 Timing

The focus on avoiding war meant there was very little in the way of specific timing other than trying to avoid conflict. In October and November 2021 @ZelenskyyUA focused on broad national security issues like energy security, the support of NATO members, and plans to attend a planned NATO summit in July 2022. The collaboration and discussions that @ZelenskyyUA referred to include the United States, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Turkey and smaller powers like Angola, Argentina and Moldova (also enduring Russian annexation of some of its territory).

By mid-December the rhetoric was more focused on the prospect of invasion at some point in the future. On 16 December @ZelenskyyUA thanked NATO Secretary General Jans Stoltenberg for NATO's commitment to Ukraine,¹⁰ and on 17 December thanked NATO for their role in demanding an immediate de-escalation from Russia.¹¹ In early January @ZelenskyyUA made an oblique appeal to the impact on the rules-based order if smaller nations are allowed to have their borders violated by other powers, saying ""We want to remind the great powers that there are no minor incursions and small nations. Just as there are no minor casualties and little grief from the loss of loved ones. I say this as the President of a great power (*Ukraine*)."¹² This appeal appears to be making the argument that any violation of any nation is a threat to global peace and order.

By February 2022, @ZelenskyyUA was putting out messages showing global support from partners. Emmanuel Macron visited Kyiv; Zelenskyy himself met with Boris Johnson and Olaf Scholz in Munich; conversations with President Biden and Vice-President Harris were held; and discussions with international organizations like the World Bank and the European Council were mentioned. On 21 February 2022, messages were released from @ZelenskyyUA effectively predicting that war was imminent. The last message published from @ZelenskyyUA before the invasion was about discussions with Macron thanking him for demining equipment and for urging the European Council to expand macro-economic aid.¹³

For its part, @DefenceU was not publishing any new English-language content during this period. Most of its English content was re-tweets from Minister Reznikov showing weapons shipments arriving in Kyiv, evidently making final attempts at deterring Russia by showing that the Armed Forces of Ukraine will be equipped shortly with new western-pattern weapons – Javelin anti-tank guided weapons especially. Like @ZelenskyyUA, there was tacit acknowledgement that invasion was imminent in their 22 February 2022 message about a central location for foreign media correspondents to receive more information.¹⁴

4.2.1.5 Counter-Narratives

Ukraine did not present a significant volume of counter-narrative content during the pre-invasion period from either @ZelenskyyUA or @DefenceU.

For @ZelenskyyUA, only 16 X/Tweets of the total 134 during this time segment contained a counter-narrative – or about 12% of the content. The content from @ZelenskyyUA attempted to address the basic Russian pretext and predicate for war, and the Russian allegations that the military build-up was all for military exercises. @DefenceU had only one original X/Tweet other than the media advisory of 22 February, coming on 5 January 2022. It was a factual assertion of the disposition of Russian forces in the occupied Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine: "The Russian Armed Forces Command continues keeping task group units of the Russian occupational forces in the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions in state of

readiness to be used."¹⁵ This kind of statement does not rise to the level of counter-narrative, where something is being said explicitly to undermine a Russian narrative.

4.2.2 Time Segment 2

The first week of the war – 24 February 2022 to 3 March 2022 – was a time of massive confusion for Ukraine and its allies. The United States offered to evacuate President Zelenskyy, believing he would be captured or killed by Russian special forces teams sent to ensure the most prominent symbol of Ukrainian identity and its government since the Maidan would not survive the invasion. Upon being offered safe passage out of Ukraine he was reputed to have said “the fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride.”¹⁶ This was a powerful statement to communicate, with little in the way of confirmation if he ever actually said those words or if they were a convenient explanation. Regardless, the fact that he remained in Ukraine – that is, he turned down the ride – makes the statement believable. More importantly, Zelenskyy’s defiance established a narrative of survival and defending the homeland despite expectations of rapid Russian victory.

The roles of both X/Twitter accounts included in this study were also solidified in this time segment. @ZelenskyyUA presented an optimistic tone in his engagement with allies, partners and international organization. He did not, however, shy away from criticizing the West for its perceived inaction – or underaction – in supporting Ukraine. The tone of @ZelenskyyUA in this time segment was generally optimistic and diplomatic. @DefenceU presented a more, direct and sometimes visceral tone. The combat footage and war crimes evidence, for example, appear on @DefenceU and not @ZelenskyyUA. @DefenceU tended toward more images and more plain speech. The @DefenceU account was likely intended to have a broader-based appeal than @ZelenskyyUA, whose tone is that of a leader of country, communicating clearly yet diplomatically.

4.2.2.1 Messages

@DefenceU was focused on communicating with the Ukrainian public in Ukrainian at the start of the war. The video of President Zelenskyy on the darkened streets of Kyiv showed the world he was staying in Ukraine to fight. The video was published using @DefenceU, though in Ukrainian Cyrillic text with his speech in Ukrainian.¹⁷ A similar video was posted through @ZelenskyyUA the following day during daylight hours, with Ukrainian script and spoken language.¹⁸ The prominent video of President Zelenskyy walking around Kyiv was shared through @DefenceU, not through Zelenskyy’s own account. There were only two images from @ZelenskyyUA during the first week: one thanking Estonians for their public demonstrations in support of Ukraine¹⁹ and an infographic showing the support Ukraine received in the United Nations General Assembly demanding Russia end its unjustified war.²⁰ Of note, in both images he had adopted the uniform theme that he continues to wear: dark military-inspired button-down shirts or t-shirts – the opposite of the suit and bright white button-down shirt of the pre-invasion period. This video content was picked up and broadcast by Western media outlets like CNN, BBC and others.

During this first week @ZelenskyyUA presented some content rebuking the West for their inaction. On 1 March 2022, he X/Tweeted “To the world: what is the point of saying «never again» for 80 years, if the world stays silent when a bomb drops on the same site of Babyn Yar? At least 5 killed. History repeating...”²¹ This was in response to Russia striking a Holocaust memorial on the site of where the Nazis and the

Einsatzgruppen murdered 33,000 Jews in 1941.²² The following day, @ZelenskyyUA continued with that theme with a less rebuking tone while making clear statement about war crimes saying “Proved the facts of Russian systematic crimes against the civilian population,”²³ with a reference to a conversation with the Dutch Prime Minister.

After surviving the first week—against many assessments about the likelihood of resisting Russian invasion—Ukraine began showcasing their own military victories. From the start of the second week of the war (4 March 2022) until the end of time segment 2 (15 April 2022) Ukrainian X/Twitter messaging shifted, taking on a more assertive tone on its own victories; showing the probable war crimes of Russia; and the responsibility of Western partners to help Ukraine. This was the case for both @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA.

On 6 March 2022, @ZelenskyyUA released a video requesting a no-fly zone on humanitarian grounds.²⁴ The US Ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, made clear during a CNN interview that the United States would not contribute its own troops directly for the purposes of a no-fly zone and was exploring options to enable Ukraine to defend their airspace themselves against Russian attack.²⁵ While there was precedence for the United States to implement no-fly zones—Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992,²⁶ and over Libya in 2011²⁷—these were against enemies who had no meaningful way to deny American-led forces air superiority.²⁸ Neither side had air superiority during the 2022 invasion, and the imposition of a no-fly zone risked escalation if American or NATO aircraft were engaged by Russian air defences or by Russian fighter aircraft, with even greater risk if NATO aircraft fired upon Russian aircraft operating in Ukrainian airspace.

On 9 March 2022, @DefenceU published a video that showed solidarity marches in European capitals, media references to a no-fly zone, and a Reuters-published opinion poll that showed 74% of Americans supported the idea of a no-fly zone.²⁹ Ukraine likely shared this to present the notion of a no-fly zone as a the majority opinion to encourage American citizens to view a no-fly zone as the “common-sense” consensus opinion that people should hold. On 12 March 2022, @DefenceU published a highly provocative AI-generated video that shows a woman sightseeing in Paris, posing with Eiffel tower in the mid-ground. Suddenly, explosions start going off, Russian warplanes are swooping low over Paris, with more explosion and aid raid sirens and the eventual text ‘Just think if this were to happen in another European capital,’ followed by ‘We will fight till the end. Give us the chance to live,’ with a choice presented to Western leaders ‘close the sky over Ukraine or give us the air fighters. If we fall, you fall.’³⁰ This video almost immediately crossed into traditional media, with Newsweek,³¹ DW,³² and Forbes,³³ though curiously they all focused on alleged misinformation. The video was clearly meant to be an illustration of a worst-case future, based on the slogans.

Video of the suffering of civilians in besieged Mariupol – without water or electricity and could not leave due to fear of the Russian army – was presented on @DefenceU on 13 March 2022.³⁴ The script in the video makes clear that people in Mariupol wanted to leave, but the Russians were stealing the humanitarian aid from convoys destined for Mariupol and were shooting at civilians. The script claims 2,100 civilians had already been killed, and video shows surgeons trying to operate on patients by flashlight because the power is out. This message appeals to the world to help. A similar message from Zelenskyy on @DefenceU the following week read “If Russia is not stopped now, if Russia is not punished now, other aggressors in the world will start other wars. In different regions of the world. On different continents. Wherever a state

dreams of conquering its neighbors.”³⁵ A video was also shared that makes clear parallels made between the Nazi invasion of Ukraine in 1941 and the Russian invasion of 2022, with simulated battle footage of the Nazi invasion spliced with simulated battle footage illustrating the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk with the words ‘We are fighting for our homeland.’³⁶

Ukraine sought exposure in the traditional American media space during this period. On 20 March 2022, Zelenskyy appeared on *GPS*, a CNN news program hosted by Fareed Zakaria.³⁷ The interview was 36 minutes long (without commercials) and included a wide-ranging conversation about what Russian activities in Ukraine, what Ukraine needs from its Western allies (including weapons, and an appeal for NATO membership), and how Ukraine will fight on for its identity, its nation, and its land. Zelenskyy spoke in Ukrainian, with real-time translation dubbed over in English for American and western audiences. This interview was significant because it provided Zelenskyy the platform to communicate Ukraine’s needs at-length in an uninterrupted forum that millions of Americans watch. Two days later a Ukrainian fighter pilot identifying himself only as ‘Juice’, appeared on Anderson Cooper 360 – also on CNN – to talk about how Ukraine’s fighter aircraft have been fighting back against Russian fighter aircraft to prevent them from gaining air superiority over Ukraine.³⁸ The footage of ‘Juice’ is a pilot wearing a flight helmet with the dark visor pulled down, and a boom microphone capturing the audio.

Ukraine also engaged in satire during this time segment. On 28 March, @DefenceU released a series of seven videos as part of the ‘Ukraine Oscars 2022’ series. These videos were meant to be link discourse on the war to an awards show for the Hollywood movie industry. @DefenceU used each of these seven messages to reinforce the overall narrative about Ukrainian strength and perseverance in the face of Russian aggression. The first video for “best supporting actor” was awarded to Ukrainian civilians capturing Russian armoured vehicles and self-propelled air defence systems using their farm tractors.³⁹ “Best International Feature Film” was awarded to the Bayraktar TB-2 drone, with footage of Ukraine using TB-2s to strike Russian vehicles and positions and children in Ukrainian hospitals set to a folk-song that is subtitled in English.⁴⁰ These videos were seeking to connect their war to a prominent media event.

By early April 2022, the tone shifted as evidence of Russian war crimes surfaced. On 3 April 2022, @DefenceU showed four images of dead civilians; some killed on bicycles in the street, some apparently murdered on curbs, and one shallow mass grave with the visible remains of at least four people – one with their hands bound behind their back.⁴¹ Another video was posted the same day showing dead bodies in a dark basement with their hands bound behind their backs, on their knees and shot in the back of the head.⁴² Images were also posted of a child standing beside his mother’s grave,⁴³ and allegations that the Russians were bringing crematoria closer to the front lines elsewhere to burn the bodies of the civilians they killed.⁴⁴ To solidify the impression of deliberate war crimes, @DefenceU sought to pre-bunk Russian narratives. On 7 April 2022, @DefenceU posted that the German intelligence service, BND, has radio intercepts that include Russian soldiers talking about the massacres of civilians they committed in Bucha.⁴⁵ This is an example of the Ukrainians pre-bunking any future Russian denials of their involvement, or more likely undermining future Russian attempts to downplay the official role of the state and blaming it on local decision-making. The impression the world was meant to take away was that committed gross indignities and war crimes against civilians was not the result of rogue elements; it is who Russia is.

As for @ZelenskyyUA, the period from the second week of invasion to the end of time segment 2, there was generally a lower volume of content compared to @DefenceU, less visual content, and a narrower focus on decision-makers. There were the typical text-only messages thanking the IMF for considering future support for Ukraine,⁴⁶ thanking the World Bank's President for his support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression,⁴⁷ and appealing to the President of the European Council for assistance in resolving the issue of Russian conducting combat operations near a nuclear facility.⁴⁸ These messages were familiar in theme to many others thanking world leaders from the UK, UAE, the United States, etc. for their support. The messages are consistent with previous @ZelenskyyUA content in that they are relatively vague diplomatic-sounding messages that point to progress and future conversations.

@ZelenskyyUA also published messages focusing on the business sector, with emphasis on the tech sector. One notable message was a personal thanks to Elon Musk for providing Starlink systems to allow Ukraine connectivity, with the door open for potential future space projects.⁴⁹ @ZelenskyyUA also presents its thanks to Meta (parent company of Facebook, Instagram, Threads (rival to X/Twitter), and WhatsApp (secure messaging platform) for taking an "active position" in support of Ukraine.⁵⁰ This support included Meta allowing its users calling for violence against Russians and Russian soldiers using their services (something usually prohibited in the terms and conditions of use) in the wake of Russia's invasion,⁵¹ and Meta donated \$15M for humanitarian aid for Ukraine channeled through UNICEF and the International Medical Corps.⁵²

There were also negative messages for American tech sector. @ZelenskyyUA called out Microsoft, Oracle and SAP by name for their business in Russia, stating "Now can be no 'half' decisions or 'halftones'! There is only black and white, good or evil! You are either for peace or support the bloody Russian aggressor to kill Ukrainian children and women."⁵³ The messaging may have been successful. On 4 March 2022, Microsoft announced they were suspending new sales to Russia, making a \$35 million dollar donation to Ukraine for humanitarian purposes, and supporting Ukrainian cybersecurity.⁵⁴ SAP and Oracle announced on 2 March that they were taking measures, with Oracle suspending all its operations in Russia and SAP suspending all sales into Russia in accordance with the sanctions⁵⁵ though did not comment on service to existing products. It would be speculative to assume that a single X/Tweet from @ZelenskyyUA was the cause of large technology companies to abandon or significantly curtail their operations in Russia. However, the platform that @ZelenskyyUA has likely factored into the decision-making.

There were many references to the possibility of negotiations with Russia from late March 2022 onward. Some messages were relatively anodyne, including messages emphasizing dialogue with Olaf Scholz⁵⁶ and Justin Trudeau⁵⁷ separately on the question of negotiations. There was another referenced a conversation with Joe Biden, mixing references to more military and financial aid with references to negotiation.⁵⁸ The discussion about negotiation seems to be more a recognition of keeping options open, than a rush to peace at all costs.

4.2.2.2 *Emotions*

The negative labels applied by @DefenceU accelerated significantly in the first week after the invasion. This is unsurprising, as Ukraine was invaded by its neighbour without provocation. The mixing of negative appeals to emotion ("Russia is a brute") and positive appeals to emotion were an even 50:50. 17 of 34 messages in the

first week after the invasion were negative messages. Underlining this point was a meme of soldiers marching in a May-day style parade with either nesting dolls or dogs with fur hats for faces, calling for Nuremberg-style trials for Russia.⁵⁹ The messages were clearly intended to show that the situation is going to get worse for Russia, not better, the longer the fighting continued.

During the first week of posting from @ZelenskyyUA, the positive emotions were about 75% of the content and only 25% negative. Messages talked about positive outcomes for Ukraine after being invaded, including combat updates about Ukrainian battlefield victories of all kinds – shooting down cruise missiles, summaries of Russian combat losses, and appeals to Ukrainians and foreigners alike to fight. These were couched in positive emotions, even if representing the ‘glittering generalities’ of wishful thinking, the ‘leap of logic’ of logical fallacies, and the ‘card-stacking’ of over or under emphasis of the significance of those events.

After the first week, the emotional tone of the messages shifted considerably. After the first week, the emotions in the messages skewed much more negative than positive. For @ZelenskyyUA, the proportion of negative and positive emotions flipped, with about 75% of the messages had a negative emotional connotation and only 25% positive. For @DefenceUA the change was far less, with about 55% of the message carrying a negative emotional connotation with 45% featuring a positive one.

Overall, during this period @ZelenskyyUA’s messages focused on mixing positives messages with high-impact negative messages. Some positive messages were clearly diplomatic in nature, and closer to official statements than evocative messages for mass appeal. Positive emotional messages focused on Ukraine’s will to fight on, and its request for more weapons to defend itself. For negative emotions, @ZelenskyyUA was attempting to connect Ukraine’s fight to a bigger struggle between Russia and Europe and the rules-based order and showing that Russia commits war crimes against civilians. These negative messages appear intended to buoy public sympathy for Ukraine, in recognition of the suffering Russia was inflicting on the population.

4.2.2.3 *Narratives*

There were two basic narratives in this time segment: first, the bravery and courage of Ukraine for surviving the Russian invasion, and second, the resilience of Ukraine to continue fighting back (not just in the immediate term) in a context of massive violence targeting civilians. The first was presented in the first week after the invasion when the survival of the Ukrainian government was not assured, and the second was during the period after the first week where the Russian offensive was clearly breaking down, with clear evidence of Russia deliberately targeting civilians with missile strikes and evidence of deliberate war crimes against civilians began surfacing.

During the first week @ZelenskyyUA spoke about an anti-Putin coalition, with regular statements about being in touch with leaders from countries and international institutions like the UN, and about the possibility of sanctions against Russia. @ZelenskyyUA was painting the invasion of Ukraine as an assault on the rules-based order, and democratic principles in general. @ZelenskyyUA did direct some shame to allies and partners by claiming the West is failing at “never again” buy refusing to institute a no-fly zone over Ukrainian cities to prevent missile strikes on civilian spaces. The overall narrative was positive and emphasized shared

values but did include some elements of shame about the West's perceived inaction on defending grand principles.

The @DefenceU narrative focused more on combat action, mixing Ukrainian resilience with an image of Russian weakness and cruelty. @DefenceU provided regular updates on how many hours had passed since the invasion, and estimated tallies on the numbers of Russians killed and vehicles and aircraft destroyed. The narrative being presented was one of Ukrainian defiance in the face of a Russian onslaught. Ukraine is being portrayed as the underdog, less powerful by objective measures but superior in bravery and tenacity. Russia, for its part, is portrayed as being on the path to losing a war of its own making, adding a humiliation factor. One video even showed Russian paratroopers engaging a monument – and armoured vehicle on a stand in a park – to show that the Russian soldier cannot differentiate between a monument and a threat.⁶⁰ In this week, Ukraine was clearly establishing the dyad of Ukraine-brave-and-tough and Russia-weak-and-incapable.

After the first week, the basic structure of the narratives did not change, but some features did. It became clear that Russia was not going to achieve the objectives of a three-day “special military operation” after the first week. Ukraine began shifting the narrative toward a longer war. Also, as evidence of war crimes began emerging the narrative about Russia shifted from battlefield inadequacy to Russia's cruelty and awfulness.

The @ZelenskyyUA narrative after the first week maintained an overall hopeful tone but did not shy away from engaging in negative messages directed at big technology companies' status of continued Russian business and appeals to the West to impose a no-fly zone. The negative narrative was effectively calling on the West to take action to limit Russia's freedom of action – either by limiting their access to western technology or deny their missiles' ability to hit their targets. Even the positive and hopeful messages about engagement with Western countries and international organizations carried negative tones about Russia.

@DefenceU's narrative after the first week remained split on two basic categories: the resilience of Ukraine in the face of a war that is about the rules-based order, and the awfulness of Russia. Ukraine's record of combat victories continued to be shared, showing land battle victories and air defence victories against Russian aircraft. The dogged resistance at the Azovstal steel factory in Mariupol became a prominent symbol of resistance, capturing the spirit of resisting against an enemy who is bigger and better resourced. There were some “kill videos” that show air defence missiles shooting down Russian aircraft, and another showing an anti-tank guided missile team destroying a hovering helicopter.⁶¹ In all these combat videos the language spoken is Ukrainian, though that does not present a barrier to the audience what is happening based on the English-language text in the message.

@DefenceU also sought to make the positive Ukrainian narrative appear more familiar to Western audiences by linking appearance on American television news programs. President Zelenskyy's appearance on CNN to speak with Fareed Zakaria and the fighter pilot “Juice” appearing on Anderson Cooper's show were both appeals to similarity. Showing symbols of Ukrainian resistance on popular television programming makes the broader Ukrainian narrative more accessible and more appealing because differences can be somewhat flattened by the familiarity of known TV hosts on well established news networks beaming into American homes.

There was a notable difference in the evidence used in @ZelenskyyUA's narrative compared to @DefenceU's narrative. @DefenceU tended to show the more jarring images of the dead, evidence of the torture, and general evidence of Russian cruelty. To present a narrative of Russian cruelty, evidence on the ground provided ample content. Evidence of missile strikes on civilian buildings, dead women and children in the streets, Russian looting of shops and banks was shown.⁶² There was also a clear comparison being drawn between the killing in Bucha to Srebrenica⁶³ where roughly 8,000 Bosnian men and boys were murdered and put in mass graves.

4.2.2.4 *Timing*

Consistent with time segment 1, @ZelenskyyUA almost always referred to a future event. During the first week after the invasion, @ZelenskyyUA emphasized the war's imminence, Ukraine's defiance in continuing to fight, and appeals for financial assistance,⁶⁴ and Turkey's help closing shipping channels to Russian traffic.⁶⁵ Other messages focus on future support from international organizations like the UN and seeking multilateral sanctions regime. @DefenceU was similarly focused on the future. There were multiple messages that referred to the Russian overtures at peace talks to be held in Belarus. @DefenceU also called for Nuremburg-style trials for Russia two days after the invasion,⁶⁶ and a press release that linked to President Zelenskyy's office website officially calling for international courts to investigate a missile strike on the main square in Kharkiv.⁶⁷ Using @DefenceU, a separate press release from Minister of Defence Reznikov was included that linked to his Facebook page calling on ordinary Ukrainians to begin an insurgency against Russian occupiers no matter where they are on Ukrainian soil.⁶⁸ @DefenceU was open to discussions, but would not stop fighting as a condition of any discussions.

After the first week, @ZelenskyyUA included a reference to the future in all messages but one. Future hope-based messages included requests for a no-fly zone over Ukraine⁶⁹ and for additional military support to allow Ukraine to turn the tide of war.⁷⁰ The content from @DefenceU was highly evocative in nature. On 5 March 2022, three videos were posted asking for a no-fly zone. One video was narrated in Ukrainian with English subtitles showing global solidarity marches for Ukraine, demanding a no-fly zone;⁷¹ the second was narrated in English, had ominous music, showed images of bombs striking civilian space, and images of children who are alive today who may not be tomorrow;⁷² and a final one was a link to Minister Reznikov's Facebook page where he delivers a speech in English imploring NATO partners to close the skies over Ukraine to prevent woman and children, hospitals, and kindergartens from being hit by Russian missiles.⁷³ On 23 March a post urged the G7, EU and NATO to support Ukraine.⁷⁴ On 27 March, a message was posted warning about the ongoing genocide in Mariupol that was about to accelerate with the arrival of a Chechen commander from the Russian army to that city.⁷⁵ In early April another ask for weapons came from Minister Reznikov.⁷⁶

4.2.2.5 *Counter-Narratives*

Ukrainian X/Twitter content presented counter-narratives to the Nazi allegation almost immediately. @DefenceU showed a cartoon of Russian soldiers as nested dogs or barking dogs with the caption "Nuremburg trials for Russia" and "Death to Russian-Fascist Occupants" only two days after the invasion.⁷⁷ A video was posted by @DefenceU showing a dramatized version of the Nazi invasion of Ukraine in 1941

juxtaposed on the 2014 Russian annexation of Ukraine.⁷⁸ They compared Russian behaviour in real-time to the crimes of the Nazis. @ZelenskyyUA only makes one similar reference on the morning of 24 February 2022 while the attack was still underway, stating: "Russia treacherously attacked our state in the morning, as Nazi Germany did in #2WW years (sic). As of today, our countries are on different sides of world history. RU has embarked on a path of evil, but UA is defending itself & won't give up its freedom no matter what Moscow thinks."⁷⁹ @ZelenskyyUA does not revisit counter-narratives with comparisons to Nazis again throughout time segment 2. Ukraine is keen to point out that the Nazis invaded Ukraine just as Russia is in 2022, attempting to undermine Russia's frequent references to the invasion of 1941. This comparison attempts to steal Russia's claim as the only victim of Nazi aggression. Drawing those parallels leave Russian no other argument, because in 2022 there was no case to be made that Ukraine invaded Russia.

To make that case even more emphatically, @DefenceU posted an image of a 96-year-old man that survived the Holocaust in the Buchenwald concentration camp, only to be killed in Russian shelling in Kharkiv. The caption says: "Putin managed to 'accomplish' what even Hitler couldn't."⁸⁰ Days later, @DefenceU showed images of Russian shell damage to a Holocaust memorial with the caption "The Nazis have returned. Exactly 80 years later."⁸¹ The invocation of a Holocaust survivor that was killed by Russia, and Russia targeting a Holocaust memorial is a clear attempt to reverse the claim of Ukrainian Nazis. These posts cast Russia as the equivalent of the Nazis, and simply a new version of the same foe. A similar post on 31 March 2022 from @DefenceU shows juxtaposes an image of Ukrainians piling sandbags in the street for protection during the Second World War with an image of current stacking of sandbags around a Ukrainian monument with the caption "russia (sic) is at war with the historic memory. The occupiers shelled several memorials to the victims and heroes of World War II. The Nazis of the 21st century call themselves denazifiers."⁸² There is a text-only post from @DefenceU that makes the claims that RIA Novosti (Russian state media) published a (sic) article that detailed how to address the "Ukraine question",⁸³ mirroring language used by Hitler with reference to Jews. The use of crematoria near the front to hide the evidence of murdered and tortured Ukrainian civilians near Mariupol is compared directly to the crematoria of the Nazi concentration camps.⁸⁴

@DefenceU also showed ample evidence of Russian war crimes in Ukraine. On 16 March, @DefenceU published a video in English that shows Russian missiles destroying cultural sites – including churches, monasteries and museums – with explosions and buildings collapsing, while quoting death tolls of over 2,500 civilians since the war started. The video shows a mother seated in a hospital ward crying with a bandaged child in her lap.⁸⁵ Another post shows an apartment building on fire, firefighters putting out the blaze, a smashed living room, and a child holding her father in a basement with a bare lightbulb.⁸⁶ There are many more with similar images of building on fire or destroyed. To reinforce that these acts are part of a deliberate Russian plan, images were posted showing a destroyed building in Grozny, Chechnya in 2000 and Mykolaiv, Ukraine at present that show similar damage with a caption making this comparison, following by "If evil goes unpunished once, it returns 100 times worse."⁸⁷ To emphasize this point, a text-only message announces a Chechen commander that was allegedly responsible for murdering Russian journalist Boris Nemtsov is now in charge of the Mariupol front.⁸⁸ These messages appear intended to crystalize the idea that not only does Russia target civilians, but it does so intentionally as a question of standing policy. Russia did so in Chechnya and are doing so again today.

4.2.3 Time Segment 3

Time segment 3 is by far the longest of the four segments and has the most content. This time segment covers seventh months from 16 April 2022 to 15 November 2022. During time segment 3 @DefenceU published over four times as much content as @ZelenskyyUA. Much of the @ZelenskyyUA content was focused on diplomatic messaging talking about other heads of state and international institutions. @DefenceU tended to post more short, sharp, easy-to-understand content.

Throughout time segment 3, we see the same basic narrative Ukraine arrived at the latter part of time segment 2: Ukraine is brave and defiant, fighting against an unprovoked and unjust invasion by a brute that targets and murders civilians, including women and children. The biggest changes are not to the narrative itself, but in the variety and number of ‘proof points’ that @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA present to reinforce the narrative, and the alignment of those proof points to a growing range of demographics and sub-segments of national target audiences.

To provide more depth and variety to the overall narrative, pictures deliberately humanizing Ukrainian service members and civilians were shared regularly. These images appeal to the idea that outside of the roles people play in society – soldier, paramedic, firefighter, volunteer coordinator, doctor, parent, teacher, etc. – there is still humanity at the core of every person. These images show people in the clothes or uniforms and scenarios of their ‘roles’, but with a clear appeal to their humanity. Things like a smile, a dance, a song, a tear, an embrace, etc., are all meant to make the people living through Russian invasion relatable because of their humanity.

We see the introduction of ‘kill cards’ as a templated format that is repeated every few days in time segment 3. The ‘kill card’ is a templated graphic that provides a rolling count of the number of personnel, vehicles, aircraft and equipment that Russia is assessed to have lost. The cards are reposted every few days with higher numbers, giving the audience a rolling scoreboard of sorts on Russia’s losses. The ‘kill cards’ are only possible because Ukraine enjoyed many combat victories during time segment 3 and began pushing the Russian back from territory conquered during the initial invasion. Ukraine’s combat victories and momentum generate the sense of the “winning team” narrative. The kill cards’ contribution to the narrative it to show Ukraine is winning and continuing to win, and a small piece of identity included in the quote. Each post has a quote included. These quotes range from leaders like past US Presidents, British Prime Ministers, authors, playwrights, actors, poets, sports figures, etc. The quotes are generally aligned with a message of either hope and strength, or defiance. The invocation of national heroes or cultural icons from one country or another is possibly intended to appeal specifically to nationals with an emotional affinity toward those heroes or icons.

4.2.3.1 Messages

Time segment 3 begins on 16 April 2022 and the messages presented by both @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU continue with the themes from March and April. The evidence of war crimes was used by both accounts to raise global awareness and to ask for greater materiel support from the West. @DefenceU published images of apartment buildings in Irpin with all the walls blown off, and nothing but empty apartments looking like empty honeycomb cells, comparing the situation to Aleppo,⁸⁹ a city destroyed by

Syria and Russia. Similar scenes were published the following day, showing Izyum, Mariupol and other cities,⁹⁰ indicating a trend. To further emphasize the fact that war crimes are being intentionally committed by Russia, a subsequent message shows the 64th Motor Rifle Brigade – the unit accused of committing the war crimes in Bucha – was bestowed the honorific title ‘Guards’ as a result of their service.⁹¹ In May there was follow-on content alleging the rape of children in captured areas,⁹² and another linking to video of prisoners of war captured by the Russians with the executed bodies of the same men behind a building.⁹³

In late April @ZelenskyyUA was appealing for greater sanctions on Russian shipping in the Black Sea and was attempting to start a viral campaign with the hashtag #ArmUkraineNow. As of December 2024, this hashtag was still generating multiple grassroots postings from accounts supportive of Ukraine, so this was not an ephemeral sentiment.

In early May 2022, the overall production quality of Ukrainian content improved significantly. Much of the previous video content was either presentation of raw footage with subtitles, or imagery shot of President Zelenskyy by his entourage – either the few images on the streets, or in non-descript locations (i.e.: nothing defining in the background). Part of this is explained by the announcement of the launch of *United24* on May – announced both by @ZelenskyyUA⁹⁴ and @DefenceU⁹⁵ – as a deliberate media event. *United24* is a Ukrainian-owned global crowdfunding and news website platform that allows anyone to donate to the Ukrainian cause.⁹⁶ *United24* also has a YouTube channel that published over 2,000 videos from May 2022 to March 2025.⁹⁷ The launch of a video-heavy production channel indicates that Ukraine prioritized video content and assembled the people to improve quality. It is possible the same people producing video content for *United24* were also developing the content for Ukraine’s X/Twitter channels, explaining the improved production quality. Ukraine was professionalizing the function across all channels.

In mid-May both @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU were campaigning for major asks from their Western partners; membership in the EU, and for NATO-standard multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) respectively. @ZelenskyyUA announced positive conversations with Slovakia,⁹⁸ France,⁹⁹ and the Netherlands¹⁰⁰ about securing their support for Ukraine’s membership in the EU. Interestingly, as Ukraine was making one of its most significant political asks – acceding to the EU – the traffic from @ZelenskyyUA dropped to very low levels, with only 3 X/Tweets in the week of 30 May 2022, and 5 the week of 6 June. On 17 June 2022, Ukraine announced that the European Commission had granted it candidate status in the EU.¹⁰¹ An additional twenty-three messages followed on the topic, with @ZelenskyyUA thanking a long list of European leaders that supported Ukraine’s bid to join the EU.

@DefenceU was making its asks for MLRS by connecting the ideas of Russian targeting of civilians and the Ukrainian army as the reason. The argument was simple: Ukraine is being targeted and needs more than just tube artillery to fight back. A video shows a barrage from a Russia TOS-1A (incendiary / thermobaric rockets) on Ukrainian position, with an ask for NATO-standard MLRS to better fight back.¹⁰² A photo montage of an American M777 and British FH70 howitzer are shown firing as a ‘duo annihilating Russian occupiers’ with an appeal that ‘to reach crescendo in this “musical repertoire” we need the famous soloist of our time – MLRS.’¹⁰³ On 8 June 2022, @DefenceU re-shared a post from the US Embassy in Kyiv (@USEmbassyKyiv) that posted a message in Ukrainian script (itself a re-share of an English US Department of Defence post

(@DeptofDefence)) confirming that the United States will donate HIMARS systems and ammunition to Ukraine as part of a security assistance package. The @DefenceU post reads: “Our uninvited guests will feel the real heat of a Ukrainian summer. #HIMARS will make it even hotter!”¹⁰⁴

Ukraine’s requests for weapons and international efforts sustained through June, with a NATO Summit (‘Ramstein-3’). The messages featured Defence Minister Reznikov appealing for fighter aircraft (F-15, F-16, Gripen or F-35) and pilot training to defend Ukrainian skies.¹⁰⁵ This was a clear attempt to secure air assets by leveraging previous US statements toward that purpose. @DefenceU reminded audiences just ahead of Ramstein-3 of a previous remark from the US Secretary of Defence: “The U.S. is willing to provide everything and to help Ukraine be successful.”¹⁰⁶ Ukraine was also clearly pushing for some kind of arrangement with NATO – ideally, membership or at very least the military protection guarantees that come with membership. Minister Reznikov was quoted by @DefenceU saying “Ukraine is now looking for a clear signal from NATO regarding our future role in European security. During the past four months, UA have demonstrated conclusively that we can serve as Europe’s eastern shield.”¹⁰⁷

By July of 2022, both @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU began making much more explicit appeals to American voters of all political stripes, appealing to American patriotism, revulsion at the idea of terrorism, and traditional assumptions about gender roles and religion. Taking advantage of Independence Day, Ukraine expressed its gratitude to the United States for air defence systems and more ammunition for artillery and HIMARS systems on the 4th of July.¹⁰⁸ @DefenceU expressed its thanks to the United States, including news footage about Ukraine presented by CNN, MSNBC and included explicit condolences for the death of a Fox News cameraman that was killed in the war zone.¹⁰⁹ Two days later, Ukraine made a similar appeal, adding religion with an image saying simply “Freedom is our Religion.”¹¹⁰ @DefenceU also published a video of Senators Lindsey Graham (senior Republican Senator) and Richard Blumenthal (senior Democratic Senator) in Kyiv at an exhibition showing destroyed Russian military hardware. In the video, Senator Graham advocates adding Russia to the list of state sponsors of terrorism, putting Russia in the same category as North Korea, Syria and Iran.¹¹¹ This is significant because it provides messages from conservative politicians in a bipartisan context. This messaging could equally be targeting voters generally, and also targeting elected officials to show that bipartisanship on the issue of Ukraine is possible. Whatever the intent, Ukraine shared content that was clearly bipartisan in nature.

@DefenceU continued with the war-as-sport theme by beginning the posting of ‘kill count’ cards that provide a summary of total Russian losses, including personnel and different equipment types (tanks, artillery systems, air defence systems, drones, etc.). The first ‘kill card’ in English was posted on 30 July, and includes the visual graphic, and a quote from English poet and William Blake: “The arrows of Almighty God are drawn!”¹¹² This card maintains the war-as-sport feeling by implying an ever-higher scoreboard of killed Russians and destroyed equipment, though the quote in this case is more likely to appeal to British voters. The kill cards became a fixture, with cards continuing to be posted weekly on @DefenceU as of December 2024. These cards follow the same formula: a visual graphic showing the total losses, and a quote from a notable person of differing nationalities, indicating a desire for the broadest possible appeal to different national audiences. The kill cards, as a genre, do not target one nationality only. There are many different national appeals, with quotes from Churchill, Shakespeare, American movie heroes, American Presidents and

authors, French literary giants, Japanese anime characters, former Warsaw pact country poets and playwrights and human rights advocates, and more.

In July 2022, @ZelenskyyUA began sharing *United24* videos, amplifying the reach of Ukrainian-owned content. The video shared was an almost-6-minute video that outlines the military advantage that Russia has over Ukraine.¹¹³ This video makes clear that Russia has a 6:1 shell advantage, and an even bigger advantage in armoured vehicles, artillery and other systems. This message established the well-worn message in the narrative that Ukraine is the determined underdog.

August 2022 brought renewed appeals to American audiences specifically, and to global audiences generally with references to the targeted killing of Ukrainian civilians. @DefenceU reminded its audiences that Russia has spend 60 times more strikes on civilian targets as on military targets (17,300 on civilian targets vs. 300 on military targets).¹¹⁴ The figures @DefenceU presents are likely a reference to precision munition strikes, though the contrast is still staggering in terms of Russia's prioritization of targeting: 60 times more civilian than military targets. To emphasize the point, a follow-on post showed partially blurred out images of crumpled and bloodied civilian bodies on a road-side showing evidence of Russian strikes.¹¹⁵ A video titled "Freedom is Our Religion" shows Russia blowing up civilian buildings and destroying cities, pivoting to Ukraine using western-donated equipment to fight Russia, spliced with CNN, Fox News, CNBC, an other mainstream news footage.¹¹⁶ The narrative of the underdog is effectively captured in these vignettes, and is the predicate for needing Western weapons to fight.

More evidence of war crimes was shared in September 2022, with @ZelenskyyUA showing exhumation of mass graves containing as many as 400 bodies of killed Ukrainians – with an image of a partially decomposed body dressed in civilian clothing.¹¹⁷ The clear inference is that Russia is not engaged in a uniquely military struggle; they will wantonly murder civilians in their path, and then do them the final indignity of throwing hundreds of bodies into unmarked mass graves to attempt to hide the evidence.

As the war moved into fall, Ukrainian messaging added a strong element of momentum. That is; they were showing that the scrappy underdog was beginning to 'win the war.' A video from @DefenceU on 12 September says "It is indescribably painful to be separated for a long time from the person you love, and will always love."¹¹⁸ The video shows Russian officials claiming they will be welcomed by the local population, and then shifts to Ukrainian HIMARS strikes, smiling soldiers on the back of armoured fighting vehicles all set to Vera Lynn's 'We'll meet again.' Two days later, @DefenceU posted a video with the script "World, prepare for the Victory of a nation that puts Freedom above all else! This love of freedom makes the enemy's blood freeze in their veins! Because #FreedomIsOurReligion."¹¹⁹ The video gives Russian service members two choices: run or die. The video shows Ukrainian soldiers firing machine guns, launching rockets, drone-aided artillery strikes, burning Russian equipment, maps showing Russian territory being lost, Ukrainian soldier liberating territory, donated APCs, HIMARS launches, and President Zelenskyy promising victory, all to soaring music befitting a Hollywood epic film. The message clearly plays to the idea of the inevitability of Ukrainian military victory, and that western-donated equipment will be a major part of that victory.

During October and November 2022 Ukraine escalated their presentation of war imagery – both negative images showing Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilians, and positive images showing Ukrainian combat victories and images humanizing Ukrainian military members. On 10 October, @ZelenskyyUA showed images of destroyed cars and damaged streetscape, showing its audience “the true face of the terrorist state that is killing our people.”¹²⁰ This image was followed by appeals to Canada,¹²¹ the United States,¹²² New Zealand,¹²³ and Italy¹²⁴ to help Ukraine address the “missile terror.” A week later, @ZelenskyyUA posted a video showing the results of a missile strikes on Mykolaiv on a civilian building, a flower market, and a park that killed a person.¹²⁵ A United24 video was shared, combining Russian leaders talking about targeting Ukrainian infrastructure with images of missile blowing up power stations, infrastructure and civilian buildings; all on the eve of Russia suggesting negotiations with Ukraine.¹²⁶ @DefenceU published similar content, showing the a destroyed lecture space at Taras Shevchenko National University¹²⁷ and another side-by-side photo showing before and after photos of a missile strike on buildings in downtown Kyiv.¹²⁸ More emotionally evocative images were shared of a man crying over a body bag containing a loved one killed in a Russian missile strike,¹²⁹ and an image of a children’s playground struck by a missile.¹³⁰

Toward the end of time segment 3, @DefenceU published much more humanizing content, connecting it to the remainder of the ‘missile terror’ content of the period. A video was posted of a Ukrainian soldier playing the violin in a bomb shelter full of families with their children.¹³¹ Another video shows a soldier playing the violin in a crater made by a bomb strike in a roadway beside a burned out car in the crater, as other cars drive around the crater.¹³² A final video shows a soldier playing violin for his comrades in a bombed out school gym, with a hole in the roof.¹³³ Other humanizing content at the end of this time segment includes things like a soldier smiling with a German Sheppard puppy in a playful pose,¹³⁴ a soldier in the driver’s hatch of a BMP-2 with his dog sitting on the hull,¹³⁵ soldiers tossing fallen leaves into the air in slow-motion video and waving to the camera,¹³⁶ and wedding photos of soldiers and wives.¹³⁷ These images show no violence, but instead show the humanity and resilience of Ukrainian people and soldiers. Amidst the violence, people go to bomb shelters to stay safe; people above ground still need to drive places; and soldiers are still in the field. Like the music videos referenced above, these videos juxtapose the seriousness of soldiers in uniforms with a human gentleness. Soldiers are with their pets, showing the bonds of affection between them. Soldiers that go to the front lines also have loved ones at home. And soldiers throwing leaves have not become so hardened by their experiences as to lose their humanity.

4.2.3.2 Emotions

The emotions mobilized during this time segment were a relatively even mix of positive and negative and positive emotions. @DefenceU published 595 negative messages and 565 positive ones for a 51/49 breakdown, and @ZelenskyyUA published 120 negative messages and 148 positive ones for a 45/55 breakdown.

Positive emotions in time segment 3 were focused on showing shared values between Ukraine and the West; humanizing Ukrainian civilians and soldiers; and building a sense of excitement around Ukrainian momentum toward victory. Not surprisingly, the @DefenceU data shows that 71% of messages included bandwagon emotions – or an indication to support the ‘winning team’. This means that a proportion of messages included negative references to Russia with the audience being led to the conclusion that Ukraine will win in

order avenge their countrymen. This is consistent with Ukraine's narrative of being the underdog that is going to succeed against all odds. @ZelenskyyUA's data was even more heavily skewed, with 93% of messages containing bandwagon inferences. For @ZelenskyyUA, there is a clear logic in having the President – who is also probably the most easily recognizable symbol of Ukrainian resistance – talk about Ukraine's victory as an inevitability to convince Western publics that their support will eventually lead to a win.

The messaging from @DefenceU during this time segment included much over-emphasis and sweeping statements about both Russia's actions and about Ukraine's. 82% of the messaging in this time segment included leaps of logic, and 95% included hyperbole. This does not mean that Ukraine was publishing inaccurate or false information; only that the 'spin' on the information as part of their narrative often included grand statements or leaps of logic to make the point. When attempting to create a narrative of the savagery of the enemy and the virtue of the 'home team' this is an understandable approach to take. For @ZelenskyyUA, the trend is similar. 95% of the @ZelenskyyUA content contained a leap of logic and 98% contained hyperbole.

There were many references targeting specific national audience, such a reference to national poets, celebrities, and prominent people in each state. There was also explicit use of in-group lore. The purpose of in-group lore is to reduce the emotional distance between members of the in-group and to distinguish the in-group from the out-group. @DefenceU had 19% of its content in time segment 3 show some kind of in-group lore, and @ZelenskyyUA had in-group lore in 48% of the content. For @ZelenskyyUA, the in-group lore tended toward insider knowledge of international institutions and references to protocols and process. @ZelenskyyUA made references to declarations from the UNGA, the ICJ and others, which could easily be opaque to people not interested in international politics. However, @ZelenskyyUA's content was targeting international leaders in addition to voters. His use of in-group lore was focused on international political jargon for an audience that understands it or is employed in diplomacy or government.

4.2.3.3 Narratives

The basic narrative of Ukrainian rightness in defending itself against an unprovoked invasion did not change from time segment 2. In time segment 3 the narrative emphasized greater need for long-term assistance and partnership. By late April 2022, Russia's advance had bogged down, and Ukraine was engaged in a counter-offensive on many fronts. Ukraine understood that victory was not going to be quick or simple, and moved into deeper appeals to shared identity with the West and its values in time segment 3. The basic narrative of Ukraine being deserving of assistance to defend itself against an invasion did not change. The reasons *why* Ukraine should be supported *over the long term* became more central to the narrative.

During time segment 3 there was deliberate effort to connect Ukraine to western values, and to connect Ukraine's fight against Russian invasion as a fight for all democracies and for Western values. This narrative serves multiple purposes. By attempting to fuse the notion of Ukraine's war with a war for all Western values, Ukraine was seeking to make Ukraine's virtues 'Western' and make the war crime and atrocities explicitly 'Russian.' This included images and videos of destroyed civilian spaces, mass graves, dead civilians, and other jarring images. There was evidence of Russia targeting and killing civilians in time segment 2, however the scale was much greater in time segment 3 because there was more time in time segment 3 than

2; because Russia accelerated its campaign of missile strikes on civilians targets during time segment 3; and because some of the war crimes committed during time segment 2 were not discovered until time segment 3 as Ukraine's Armed Forces liberating more Russian-occupied territory.

4.2.3.4 *Timing*

A consistent theme from time segments 1 and 2, is @ZelenskyyUA's reference to speaking with world leaders and looking forward to speaking again, making progress, etc. These statements are expressed in the vague, optimistic language of diplomacy. There is still a reference to the future, but these references are not nearly as concrete or significant as the far fewer and more specific references made by @DefenceU.

@DefenceU made many timing references in time segment 3 including to multilateral conferences, receiving more weapons and training, to the risk of famine if Ukraine cannot export grain, and eventually to the inevitability of Ukrainian victory. There are references to the Rammstein-3 meeting of the Ukraine Contact Group in June of 2022 and the NATO Summit also in June of 2022. Ramstein-4 was also announced in July, following on from the previous iteration.¹³⁸ The other major multi-lateral reference made was @DefenceU indicating that the EU Commission recommends giving Ukraine observer status.¹³⁹ There is also a clear reference to Ukraine wanting eventual war crimes tribunals for Russia so those responsible for war crimes can be held to justice.¹⁴⁰ The summits are important multilateral meetings where Zelenskyy could make his appeals to Western leaders directly and in private. The meetings would obviously have media coverage, but the private meetings with multiple leaders provided the opportunity for Zelenskyy to persuade in person.

The requests for weapons deliveries of new weapons systems and expanded training were constant in time segment 3. In June 2022 Ukraine was asking for F-16 fighters,¹⁴¹ a request that was not fulfilled until August 2024 when Ukraine received their first F-16 deliveries.¹⁴² For land operations, Ukraine made clear asks for Leopard tanks and Abrams tanks, pointing out that they will be more effective than existing Soviet-legacy stocks of tanks.¹⁴³ There were many less flashy messages on the future of weapons deliveries, like thanking the British and American governments for an announcement of additional ammunition and weapons that will be delivered in the future. With these specific asks, Ukraine takes the same approach as above with multilateral institutions: they announce clear and demonstrable things that will happen (new ammo shipments) with aspirations (new weapons systems and aircraft).

By July, the references to inevitable victory began (in retrospect, quite prematurely). President Zelenskyy is quoted as saying "We will become not a new legend of heroic resistance, but a state of winners... The multimillion-strong nation-hero which is worthy of living, worthy of winning and which will teach others in the world how to defend themselves and how to win" on 28 July.¹⁴⁴ There is also reference made to liberating Crimea in August 2022,¹⁴⁵ showing considerable ambition from Ukraine. As of December 2025, Crimea was still held by Russia, and no ground operations taken place to attempt to recapture it. Momentum on the ground did keep up with the overall narrative of winning. By September, Kharkiv was being liberated,¹⁴⁶ presenting a ground truth that shows Ukraine delivering on the overall message of "winning."

@ZelenskyyUA was very deliberate in connecting content about weapons shipments to victory. In late September a message read: "Today us @DeptofDefense announced a new \$1.1 billion security support

package for UA. We'll get 18 more HIMARS, other critical equipment that'll bring UA victory closer. A very timely decision showing that Russian blackmail does not work."¹⁴⁷ On 10 November, a similar message connected weapons shipments to victory: "Thank you @POTUS & friendly us people for showing solidarity once again - an aid package including Avenger air defense systems; missiles for Hawk air defense systems. Together we're building an air shield to protect UA civilians. We're bringing victory over the aggressor closer!"¹⁴⁸ These messages are important because they connect the sense of inevitability of victory that Ukraine is presenting to continued weapons shipments.

4.2.3.5 Counter-Narratives

The counter-narrative in time segment 3 was thematically the same as time segment 2: addressing the allegation of Ukrainian Nazis and showing evidence of war crimes to undermine Russia's credibility when it comes to any other topic. The additional layers in time segment 3 was engaging in more direct trolling of perceived Russian inadequacies and failures, and addressing baseless allegations that weapons donated to Ukraine were being diverted into black market supply chains for profit, and pre-bunking against claims of US Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and Leopard tanks being in Ukrainian possession (they were not yet at that time).

The "Ukrainian Nazis" narrative was confronted directly. @DefenceU pointed out that Russian parliamentarians are suggesting forcibly extracting blood from Ukrainian prisoners of war for the treatment of Russian wounded noting: "The Nazi practice of forced donation and medical experiments on prisoners of war was condemned in 1946 in Nuremberg."¹⁴⁹ More significantly, @DefenceU pointed out how Russia abandoned the pretext of de-Nazifying Ukraine as the reason for invading: "They stopped hiding it. Today, the command of russian (sic) looters, rapists and murderers acknowledged that the goal of the "second phase" of the war is not victory over the mythical Nazis, but simply the occupation of eastern and southern Ukraine. Imperialism as it is."¹⁵⁰ The Russians seems to have abandoned the de-Nazification narrative themselves, presumably having identified that it was no longer effective. Ukraine however, continued to point out that Russia is just a latter-day Nazi. Historical parallels are presented in images of destroying civilian spaces, harming civilians and looting,¹⁵¹ and weaponizing hunger by destroying food stores prevent the needy from eating it.¹⁵²

The war crimes counter-narrative continued in this time segment. Ukraine tried a captured Russian soldier in one of their own courts, finding him guilty of war crimes and sentencing him to life in prison.¹⁵³ Additional evidence was presented of war crimes outside of a trial context. One image shows a plastic bin full of gold crowns – torn from the mouths of those the Russians tortured and presumably killed with the reference to a "mini Auschwitz."¹⁵⁴ Images of devices used to electrocute prisoners as part of torture were shared,¹⁵⁵ the massive weight loss and permanent injuries suffered by some Ukrainian POWs after released from Russian captivity,¹⁵⁶ and multiple images of mass graves being exhumed of Ukrainian bodies. All these images are meant to convey clearly and concisely that Russia is engaging in sadistic violence against Ukrainians and—crucially—that it is doing so deliberately.

During time segment 3, Ukraine struck Russian ammunition and fuel depots with long-range fires – presumably HIMARS in many cases. In one case in Crimea, Russia refused to acknowledge this, citing

“violation of fire safety violations” as the source of the explosions, not Ukrainian strikes.¹⁵⁷ This became something of a running joke for Ukraine. @DefenceU showed before and after photos – presumably from HIMARS strikes – showing destruction of a facility with the caption “Before and after. Quit smoking, guys!”¹⁵⁸ @DefenceU also made a threat about their investment in space systems to improve surveillance, claiming “Ukrainian people fundraised \$20 mln to watch russian (sic) occupiers smoking negligently over the illegal Kerch Bridge.”¹⁵⁹ This is a pointed threat, because there was a vehicle-borne IED attack against the Kerch bridge in October 2022, for which the Ukrainians denied involvement.¹⁶⁰ These counter-narratives are effectively trolling, intended to undercut the general Russian narrative of being the second most powerful military in the world.

Lastly, Ukraine sought to address false allegations being made (presumably from Russian or Russian-sympathetic sources): specifically, about Ukraine selling donated weapons into black arms markets. Citing both Minister Reznikov and including the BBC in the message, @DefenceU categorically denied that weapons were being diverted. They remind the audience that GPS trackers are on all deliveries; allies are monitoring how military aid is used; and NATO-style logistics management systems – with digital traceability – are being used to track shipments.¹⁶¹ Reznikov was emphatic: “We need to survive. We have no reason to smuggle arms out of Ukraine.”¹⁶² This is an important counter-narrative for Ukraine because it addresses the issue of Ukraine ‘deserving’ weapons and also seeks to prevent Ukraine from being perceived as similar to Afghanistan – which in July 2022 had not yet reached its 1-year anniversary of falling to the Taliban. If broad segments of Western voting publics believed that Ukraine was selling donated weapons, it would significantly undermine the Ukrainian narrative of being the strong, brave underdog that needs and *deserves* help.

The counter-narratives during this time segment mixed a continuation of undermining the Ukrainian Nazi narrative with attempting to redirect the Nazi allegation back toward Russia, and by continuing to show evidence of war crimes to show that Russian forces were committing intentional acts of cruelty and violence. These counter-narratives were intended to contrast the in-group (Ukraine and the West) with the out-group (Russia) as starkly as possible.

4.2.4 Time Segment 4

Time Segment 4 covers the period from 16 November 2022 through to 23 February 2023 (the one-year anniversary of the 2022 Russian invasion). Time segment 4 included most of the same themes from time segment 3, with more varied and diverse messages to reflect events on the ground in the war.

The basic narrative of Ukraine-as-underdog fighting for its existence and freedom against an unjustified and unprovoked invasion by a neighbour that commits war crimes did not fundamentally change; but the messages and ‘proof points’ used to illustrate that narrative changed based on evolving events and new discoveries. On the positive side, Ukraine continued to show military personnel using donated equipment to prove Western contributions were being put to good use; evidence of Ukrainian combat victories; civilians celebrating liberation from Russian occupation; and material humanizing Ukrainian civilians and soldiers. On the negative side, content drawing parallels between present-day Russia and the worse aspects of Stalin and Hitler continued, along with evidence of Russian war crimes and content portraying the Russian military as

weak, foolish, and backward. The basic dyad of Ukraine-good / Russia-bad continued, with new information shown to keep pace with events.

New negative messaging targeting Russia in time segment 4 was driven by events, primarily. Evidence of war crimes and targeting civilians continued to be shown. What was new was showing mercenaries fighting for private military company, Wagner. Previously, Wagner was recruiting mostly retired special operators from the Russian armed forces. By January 2023, Wagner was using many prisoners that were offered a chance to have their prison sentences commuted by fighting for Wagner. On the themes of cruelty and brutality, Ukraine made deliberate effort to appeal to the world to keep Russia from the upcoming Olympics on the grounds that their military is deliberately engaged in cruel, sadistic violence against civilians and that Russia therefore has no place at the Olympics; a place that aspires to the best of humanity, sport, and sportsmanship. A long-form video series talking with children and kindergarten teachers who had their school occupied by Russian military personnel was shared at the same time to provide detailed summaries of what Russia allegedly did.

The new content for this time segment included formal asks for main battle tanks. During time segment 4, Ukraine made explicit asks for Leopard, Abrams, Leclerc and Challenger tanks from its NATO allies. By the end of time segment 4, Ukraine announced that its tank crews were training on Leopard tanks, indicating their ask was successful.

Toward the end of the time segment, Ukraine accelerated its populist appeal to American values. President Zelenskyy attended the US National prayer breakfast remotely, endorsed US football, had celebrities endorse Ukraine at film festivals, and earned a Time magazine cover with coverage of Russian war crimes.

Lastly, this time segment sought to communicate a narrative of continued momentum (Ukraine will win), established partnerships with Western countries over the long term (and by extension, Ukraine's legitimate role among the 'civilized' nations of the world), and a continued narrative of Russian cruelty and sadism. To support the familiar messages of combat victories, humanizing content about Ukraine's military and people were shown, contrasted with examples of Russian war crimes. The biggest additions were asks for tanks, and efforts to convince the world to boycott Russia in the Olympics.

4.2.4.1 Messages

In late November 2022, Ukraine emphasized its resilience to Russian attacks, and its contribution to feeding the world. @ZelenskyyUA celebrated the extension of the grain deal whereby Russia agreed not to target grain exports from the port of Odesa. Zelenskyy thanked the Secretary General of the United Nations and the President of Turkey for their role in brokering the deal.¹⁶³ These messages were not intended to show a softening position toward Russia for agreeing not to sink merchant shipping; simply acknowledgement that famine would be averted so long as Russia refrained from attacking shipping. A few days later @Zelenskyy thanked the European parliament's decision to designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism¹⁶⁴ and congratulated some friendly nations for recognizing the Holodomor as a genocide¹⁶⁵ – clearly emphasizing the parallels between Stalin and Putin.

@DefenceU shared a wide variety of new themes in late November 2022, with greater emphasis on Zelenskyy as a symbol. An eight-minute video of Zelenskyy, showing a montage from 2021 to 2022 with his face looking older and wearier. The video starts with Zelenskyy speaking and then shifts to images of soldiers fighting, liberating occupied territory and a reminder that all that Ukraine is accomplishing, it is accomplishing with the blood, sweat, effort, courage and determination of the people.¹⁶⁶ The video presents a message of a unified Ukraine – from soldiers, to doctors, to energy workers, to farmers harvesting grain – all working toward a common objective. Zelenskyy speaks Ukrainian throughout the video, with English subtitles, switching back and forth from 2021 to 2023. The message is clear: Ukraine’s aspirations for itself have not changed, even though there is now a war to win. The message is of hope for the future, and determination to get there.

In December, @Defence accelerated the populist appeal. Videos of soldiers dancing¹⁶⁷ were shared and generated some traditional media coverage.¹⁶⁸ President Zelenskyy was named Time Magazine’s person of the year,¹⁶⁹ a Christmas tree was installed in a bomb shelter to prevent Russian missiles from destroying it;¹⁷⁰ a soldier playing piano in a bombed out church;¹⁷¹ and a Ukrainian singer delivering a concert in a theatre during a power outage, with cellphone lights to illuminate the space.¹⁷² These messages all appear intended to humanize Ukraine, from soldiers dancing to show morale is high to civilians going to concerts and observing Christmas to show determination.

As Christmas approached, both @ZelenskyyUA and @Defence presented high-impact content, with specific appeals to Americans and the juxtaposition of the calm and peace that many Western families enjoy at Christmas compared with Ukraine, a nation at war. Images were shared showing Zelenskyy visiting troops at Bakhmut to present medals for those defending a city that both Ukraine and Russia prioritized, leading to heavy fighting and casualties.¹⁷³ US Presidents have often visited American soldiers during wartime, from Lincoln to Biden,¹⁷⁴ indicating that Presidents putting themselves at personal risk is an accepted cultural practice. Zelenskyy doing the same appears calculated to borrow on that presumed credibility. Zelenskyy was also in Washington DC days later, with photos published of Zelenskyy in the Oval Office with President Biden¹⁷⁵ and Washington recognizing Zelenskyy’s arrivals by hanging Ukrainian flags on Pennsylvania Boulevard.¹⁷⁶ @ZelenskyyUA released a video with soaring music and high-quality imagery of Zelenskyy arriving at the White House in a motorcade with President Biden and the First Lady greeting him warmly.¹⁷⁷ The video then includes Zelenskyy briefing the Cabinet table, with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs listening intently and capturing notes. @POTUS shared a similar video days after, adding to the credibility of the exercise.¹⁷⁸

British PM Rishi Sunak released a video juxtaposing a calm happy Christmas in the UK with a Christmas under the spectre of war in Ukraine. To emphasize the packed schedule of Zelenskyy over the holiday period, a video was shared of him visiting troops on the front to meet with soldiers, juxtaposed with Putin standing alone in empty rooms, waiting for Erdogan at a meeting, with Johnny Cash’s ‘Song of the Coward’ playing. This collection of messages clearly plays to an image of Zelenskyy that aligns with American perceptions of what Presidents are supposed to do: visit the front at Christmas and put themselves in harm’s way to show strength and resilience.

On Christmas Day at 5:00am, @DefenceU released three ten-minute videos that were part of a documentary film made by a Ukrainian director. The film tells the story of a civilian Ukrainian woman that was caught between Ukrainian and Russian front lines, fired upon by the Russians, and the Ukrainian soldiers that fought the Russians to save the woman and her child.¹⁷⁹ The videos include drone footage of the area and interviews with the soldiers involved in the mission, and details how she was almost captured by Russians.¹⁸⁰ A final video detailed the wounds that Ukrainian soldiers endured saving the woman, and interviews with the medical personnel that treated the wounded. The video concludes with a soldier saying that saving the woman's life was the right thing to do, and in accordance with a soldier's code.¹⁸¹ The timing of this content appears intentional, to remind Western viewers of what Ukraine is enduring while many of them are enjoying peaceful time with family. The video emphasizes fear of harm, and the Ukrainian soldiers risking themselves for a higher principle – and that all ended well because of their courage. This appears to be an appeal to Western voters that Ukraine deserves help and wants nothing more than peace.

4.2.4.2 Emotions

Time segment 4 relied on positive feelings of hope and pride to promote Ukraine, and negative feelings of disgust and revulsion about war crimes committed by Russia. @ZelenskyyUA posted 162 times during time segment 4, and @DefenceU posted 764 times. Roughly 60% of @DefenceU's messaging included negative feelings about Russia, focusing on targeting civilian spaces and deliberate war crimes committed against civilians. @ZelenskyyUA on the other hand had only about 33% negative emotions in its content and 67% positive. This represents change for both accounts from time segment 3 compared to time segment 4. @DefenceU produced far more negative content – proportionally – in time segment 4 compared to time segment 3 where the split was roughly 50/50 for positive and negative content. @ZelenskyyUA produced far more positive messaging in time segment 4 than time segment 3.

The negative emotions were largely focused on Russia's acts of cruelty and deliberate harm. This includes ongoing threats to nuclear power generating stations, threats to prevent the shipment of Ukrainian grain to feed the world—especially exports to the Global South—and the risk of famine these actions pose, regular posts of Russian missile strikes on civilian areas, and emphasizing that Russia should not be allowed to participate in the Olympic games because of it.

The positive emotions in time segment 4 tend toward ebullient hope for the future; the success of Ukraine's military; Ukraine's contribution to the world, and the world's support for Ukraine; and attempting to create a sense of inevitability about future victory. 78% of @DefenceU's content evoked the bandwagon effect of Ukraine making progress toward victory that is presented as a given. 98% of @ZelenskyyUA's content presents content that included bandwagon language. Whether positive or negative, during time segment 4 both @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA presented content with broad generalization, using leaps of logic and hyperbole to make absolute statements. @DefenceU's content has leaps of logic 88% of the time in time segment 4 and hyperbole 94% of the time. @ZelenskyyUA had leaps of logic and hyperbole in 99% of the messages released during time segment 4.

@DefenceU had greater segmentation targeting different audiences with in-group lore in time segment 4 than time segment 3. In time segment 4 @DefenceU had some kind of in-group lore in 33% of their content

compared with only 19% in the previous time segment. Appeals to religion, to American cultural references, to science fiction films and media, reference to poets and authors, and to youth continued during this time segment. The appeals for new military equipment often included implicit assumptions about the capability that they provide without explicitly explaining that to the audience (why are new American tanks better than existing ones? Why are F-16s better than existing fighters), denoting that Ukraine assumes the target audience for that content already knows the answers. The in-group lore does not mean that Ukraine is appealing to one sub-segment of the total target audience. The evidence shows, rather, that @DefenceU is appealing to many different sub-segments by providing some content that aligns with their presumed cultural values, aesthetics and symbols.

@ZelenskyyUA, on the other hand, had very little in-group lore during time segment 4. Only 18% of the content shared by @ZelenskyyUA had in-group references. Like time segment 4, many of these references were to international political jargon, abbreviations of things like the UN General Assembly or the Zaporizhian Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) or references to military equipment (CV90, etc.) that lay people would not likely understand intuitively. This indicates that @ZelenskyyUA, in contrast to @DefenceU, was appealing less to specific sub-segments and making broader appeals that assumed no prior knowledge compared to time segment 3.

4.2.4.3 Narratives

The overall narrative of Ukraine's strength and resilience in the face of an unprovoked attack by a cruel enemy did not change in time segment 4. The theme of Ukraine as a tough, determined underdog was unchanged, as was evidence of Russia' indifference or outright cruelty to civilians. As discussed previously, a narrative is not about facts; it is about the *meaning of the facts*. In time segment 4, Ukraine has positive facts on its side. Most of the newly conquered terrain that Russia took in 2022 had been liberated; American and Western military equipment that was donated featured prominently in the messaging; and the world was largely supportive of Ukraine's ongoing fight from everything to weapons shipments, to securing the grain deal, to condemnations of Russia at the UN to preventing Russian athletes from fully participating in the 2024 Olympics.

The narrative, therefore, was broadened in time segment 4 to show that Ukraine is not *only the underdog* fighting against Russian aggression; it is also a state that deserves equitable treatment in international politics. The grain deal is a notable example, where @ZelenskyyUA made the appeals to the world that Ukraine is a key supplier of grain to the Global South. Without deliveries of Ukrainian grain, there is a risk of global famine. This component elevated Ukraine's narrative from being about its survival and the credibility of the rules-based international order to a narrative about *what Ukraine gives the world*. President Zelenskyy was also appearing in many more prominent global media spaces that before and not speaking only about war. His appearance at the Berlin Film Festival was about the importance of culture to national identity; the appearance at the Superbowl of Ukrainian (American) football players was about cultural similarity; talking about the death of Ukrainian athletes was about the Olympics and about the (ostensibly) non-political nature of sport. All these components of the narrative give it greater breadth. Ukraine is not only a nation at war. It is a nation that contributes to the world, contributes to global peace and security, and needs help from its allies.

4.2.4.4 *Timing*

The timing of content during time segment 4 focused on preventing Russia from delaying the shipments of grain by threatening Ukrainian shipping and preventing Russian athletes from participating in the 2024 Olympics. There was regularly content from @ZelenskyyUA about the grain deal, reminding the world that famine in the Global South is the cost of delaying a deal on grain. The grain deal was urgent, because winter waters make shipping more difficult, and the urgency associated with hunger generally. For the Olympics, there were regular appeals from @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU to convince the IOC not to allow Russian athletes participate in the upcoming games citing either athletes support for Russia's war or the evidence of Russian war crimes more generally.

Both @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA presented messaging in anticipation of Christmas. This included images of Christmas trees in subway stations to prevent the Russians from bombing them,¹⁸² serving as a reminder that Christmas is just a special to Ukraine as it is to Americans; but that celebrating Christmas during wartime is a very different experience. To emphasize that connection on Christmas Eve content was presented wishing soldiers in trenches and barracks and command posts a Merry Christmas, and to all who support Ukraine,¹⁸³ and images of seven Christmas shoppers who were killed and 35 injured when Russia struck a shopping mall¹⁸⁴ – clearly not a military target.

4.2.4.5 *Counter-Narratives*

The counter-narratives in time segment 4 followed some familiar themes. Showing evidence of targeting civilian centres continued with images shared by both @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA. These are consistent with previous time segments.

For the first time in the data set, @DefenceU showed combat losses. A video was shown of a Ukrainian APC-4 returning from battle where “the earth is on fire”, with all four tires shredded and smoking. Irrespective how this damage happened, Ukraine published photos of a vehicle that had clearly been in combat, was damaged, though was still driving.¹⁸⁵ This message serves two purposes: it shows that Ukraine does not shy away from battle and is using all its equipment for fighting, and that even when on fire, Ukraine perseveres.

There was also some messaging targeting Russians directly – though was subtitled in English and captioned in English, so clearly also meant for Western consumption. Speaking in Russian, Defence Minister Reznikov appealed to Russians liable for military service in a New Year's message that in 2023 that they have one important choice: surrender or die.¹⁸⁶ He outlines that the three-day 'special military operation' is almost year old, that 100,000 of their countrymen have already been killed; that those who reject military service are put in jail; and that those who fight are sent into meat-grinder assaults like the ones at Bakhmut. The message is targeting Russian listeners in its original language, and the subtitled version is also clearly intended as a summary of Ukrainian victory for Western audiences. The message criticizes Russian leaders as being uncaring, out of touch, and incompetent, and that it will be the mobilized (and likely coerced) audience that will pay the price for these failings. For Western ears this is still a stinging indictment and caricature of what Russia does, making Ukraine that much more Western (and therefore familiar) by contrast. A week later, @DefenceU published images circling dozens of Russian soldiers' bodies in a flat, pockmarked field with the caption “Never before has the russian (sic) diplomatic corps suffered such losses,”¹⁸⁷ to emphasize the

point. This counter-narrative is intended to show that Russia is losing and will continue to waste human lives on a failed endeavour, despite Russian rhetoric about the threat Ukraine allegedly poses.

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5 Analysis

5.1 By Time Segment

5.1.1 Segment 1

The English-language X/Twitter traffic during time segment 1 reflected the information operations priorities and structure of a Ukraine that was mostly at peace and was seeking to avoid an escalation of the annexation and occupation of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk into a more substantial war. @DefenceU produced no original English-language content during time segment 1 other than a Javelin training video,¹ and instructions for the international press on the eve of the invasion.² @ZelenskyyUA showcased engagements and meetings with foreign leaders and international organizations to build a picture of Ukraine having the strength of partners and the international community supporting them. These messages focused much more on positive content – emphasizing partnership and unity – than negative content targeting Russian intentions and actions.

5.1.1.1 Emotions

The emotions in this period were overwhelmingly positive, reflecting either a general lack of appreciation that war was likely, or a hope that American rhetoric and diplomatic warnings would be sufficient to deter Russia from a large-scale invasion. There were attempt to convey to the rest of the world the severity of what a full-scale invasion would mean both for Ukraine or for international politics, but the messages were not as emotionally gripping or impactful as they would later become (for example: image of war crimes and killed civilians). This is understandable, however, because without actual war imagery, the same emotional impact is difficult to generate.

5.1.1.2 Narratives & Target Audiences

The overall narrative appears intended to firstly—and most importantly—show Russia that even though Ukraine was not formally a member of the NATO alliance or the European Union, member states of both would continue to offer military, economic and moral support to Ukraine. Second, to build the notion of shared impact on Ukraine and western countries in the case of Russian attack and thus galvanize support for Ukraine. It is reasonable to view the messages in this narrative to be for the purposes of deterrence, by showing not only shipments of Western equipment to expand Ukraine’s defensive posture, and to signal to Russia that Western countries are committed to strengthening Ukraine. Determining the preferences and cost/benefit calculus of the leader of the Russian federation is unknowable, so we cannot conclude the success or failure of this narrative in changing Russian thinking. However, it is clear that this narrative was not sufficient (on its own) to create a feeling of deterrence for Russian leaders.

There were three main target audiences for messaging in time segment 1: Russia, to attempt to deter an invasion; Western leaders, to prompt weapons shipments and other political and economic support; and to a lesser extent Western publics, to sustain public mood and preference for supporting Ukraine. The nature of the language and the focus on @ZelenskyyUA indicates that diplomatic and official messaging was far more important to Ukraine during this time segment than more generally accessible messaging. This indicates that

Ukraine was delivering its messaging more for the purpose of engaging leaders, officials, and people working in foreign policy and government than engaging directly with the population.

Notably, Both @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU were presenting content in Roman script and Cyrillic script throughout this time segment, indicating that Ukraine had not yet created dedicated channels (i.e.: separate X/Twitter accounts) for domestic (and diaspora) and Western audiences. This is an indication of lack of focus in the overall approach, because the same accounts were presenting messaging to vastly different audiences; one that was forced to bear the direct burdens of war, and another that was only implicated at a safe distance.

Ukraine's narrative does not appear to have changed Russian calculation. In fact, nothing did. CIA Director Bill Burns travelled to Moscow in early November 2021 to express concern over the Russian military build-up along the Ukrainian border, including satellite imagery of the build-up.³ These concerns were met with blanket denials of Russia's intentions to invade, with seemingly contradictory statements that Russia's military posture is its own business. Burns also shared messages of concern with allies and with Ukraine about the Russian building. President Biden escalated the rhetoric of the warnings to Russia about invading in early February 2022, that the United States and its allies would "respond decisively and impose swift and severe costs on Russia."⁴

These narratives clearly did not have the intended effect on Russia and Putin's calculations. There has been a debate on whether this was a failure of deterrence. One commentator put it succinctly when saying "The White House has consistently broadcast what it won't do (i.e. use force against Russia), removing a crucial component of deterrence: the ability to amplify risk through ambiguity."⁵ There is clearly some merit to this argument. America's warnings alone did not prevent Russia from choosing military action. Others have pointed to the nuclear deterrent of the United States and the conventional power of NATO as a deterrent from Putin choosing a bigger, more significant military option.⁶ Russia opted for 3-day "special military operation" which required not additional domestic mobilization, and targeted Kyiv and most of Central and Eastern Ukraine, but notably not Western Ukraine toward Poland – which already shares a border with Russian Kaliningrad and Russian-dominated Belarus. The argument for partial success of deterrence assumes that Russia would have launched an invasion of central Europe if it believed this possible; that is, it assumes maximalist territorial ambition from Russia.

Whether deterrence failed or only partially failed, Ukraine's public narrative on deterrence was effectively tied to America's appetite for rhetoric, and not for a direct commitment of military forces to support deterrence. Ukraine's misperception or miscalculation on American willingness to turn rhetoric into military action in support Ukraine helps us understand why the narrative in time segment 1 focused on deterrence themes.

5.1.1.3 General Comments on Time Segment 1

The overall X/Twitter content in time segment 1 was heavily focused on deterrence and seemed to put faith and hope in the power of American and NATO military power to prevent a Russian invasion. An information

operations campaign from Ukraine was never going to prevent a military invasion, though Ukraine appears to have hoped American military power would prevent it. It clearly did not.

The information campaign in this time segment focused on diplomacy and the language of international politics and did not focus on explaining Ukraine's cause to general populations. This is somewhat understandable, as the invasion had not yet taken place. That said, there was little effort put toward a coherent narrative to ordinary voters as to why Ukraine needed more help from the West. This is partly attributable to Ukraine and non-US countries refusing to believe that an invasion was imminent and focusing their efforts on diplomatic and official-sounding messaging. Amid this confusion and lack of consensus on whether Russia would actually invade, there was no coherent narrative from Ukraine in this period explaining its position to the public or attempting to influence the overall discourse on supporting Ukraine.

5.1.2 Time Segment 2

During time segment 2 the invasion began. This was an important event in geopolitics in the 21st century and also shifted all information operations from warning about what *might* happen to focusing on what *is happening now*. Ukraine sought a narrative that focused on Ukrainian resilience and defiance in the face of Russian aggression and translating that perspective into requests for assistance: military, political, and American leadership through multinational organizations like NATO and the UN to take unified action against Russia.

This segment signaled the beginning on Ukrainian English-language messaging seeking to target voters, and not primarily government leaders and officials alone. This is a major shift, because once the war began Ukraine began trying to build a broader public discourse around Ukraine as the underdog resisting Russian invasion, and communicating that to ordinary people as much as to government leaders and decision-makers. This is reflected in Ukraine seeking mainstream media news and seeking to connect with the public by integrating their messaging into the Oscars motion picture award shows and doing so through satire (not simply factual reporting). Ukraine also sought to create a counter-narrative around Russia; specifically, by showing Russian brutality against Ukrainian cities and people, with heavy reliance on graphic imagery to make the emotional points to attempt to solidify a narrative suspicious of, or hostile to, Russia.

5.1.2.1 Emotions

The defiance of Ukraine and the fighting spirit of its military was central to messaging during the first week after the invasion. Sentences like *"Our army has already destroyed thousands of invaders. And so much enemy equipment that the troops of several states could be armed. The capabilities of our AFU are growing, and assistance is coming,"*⁷ and *"Our defenders are ready to meet the enemy. All fighters have a fighting spirit and a great desire to destroy the occupiers. Everything will be Ukraine!"*⁸ are generally illustrative of the attitude of defiance and aggression in defence that were included in the first week of content from @DefenceU. With success uncertain during this period, Ukraine was seeking to mobilize hope and defiance that the underdog would endure.

@ZelenskyyUA also focused on positive messaging in the first week, as he was the face international face of the resistance. His personal narrative needed to emphasize more hope than despair to foreign audiences.

Ukraine was not expected to be as effective at repelling the Russian offensive – either by Russia or the United States. Putin prepared for a 3 day ‘special military operation,’ seemingly expecting it to be a walk-over. The US Marine Corps University ran a wargame just two weeks prior to the actual invasion, in which the players correctly predicted Russia’s axes of advance and general tactical application, but did not anticipate either so much underperformance from Russia or such dogged determination to fight and resist from Ukraine.⁹ With that context, it should not be surprising that Ukraine was putting forth positive English-language messaging to attempt to convince the rest of the world that they would hold on.

@ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU messages pivoted to more negative messaging after the first week, apparently seeking to create a sense of urgency-through-shame from Western partners. Where @ZelenskyyUA used very little imagery, @DefenceU used frequent videos and images. Though Ukraine was highly dependent on the political, military and financial support of the West to both help Ukraine with materiel and harm Russia with sanctions or other political action, Ukraine did not shy away from some shaming of the west. A highly provocative video of Paris being bombed was intended to show Western publics that if they were in danger from Russia, there would be no hesitation. The silent question the video poses is “why, then are you hesitating when it’s Ukraine?” Another video showed mostly children in Mariupol hospitals. One child is on an operating table while a surgeon tries to save the child, another child’s apparently lifeless body is shocked with a defibrillator, and mothers are crying over their dead children with a reminder that Ukraine asked the West for help to defend Mariupol and it did nothing.¹⁰ The video is among the most visceral the @DefenceU posted. The negativity of this messaging was not intended to reflect a sense of Ukraine’s weakness, but testament to their resilience under such awful circumstances.

@DefenceU’s negative messages mixed Russian battlefield failures, Ukrainian battlefield victories, and showing the harm committed to Ukraine. With a steady pace of Russian missile attacks on cities, @DefenceU presented images of dead civilians, bombed out buildings, and destroyed shop fronts. Images like these appear intended to stoke anger at Russia for its deliberate targeting of non-combatants, especially with the images of dead women and children. Later images of dead civilians in Bucha – some with their hands bound behind their back – was a significant escalation of negative emotion. It shows that these civilians were not “collateral damage” that can be more easily explained as a reality of war: these were cold-blooded, intentional murders. Other images showed the destruction of Holocaust memorials, also intended to stoke anger and outrage.

Many of @DefenceU’s positive messages focused on combat action, engendering emotions of defiance and possibly even pride for Ukrainian forces in the eyes of western publics. In those videos, the emotional significance is Ukraine making the most of the equipment donated. Other combat footage emphasized two themes with varying emphasis: the use of Western donated equipment to good effect, or the destruction of Russian equipment by any means. For example, showing the destruction of a Russian tank with a Javelin or an NLAW missile is meant to show that Ukraine is making the most of the donated help. In other videos that show things like a Ka-52 or Mi-24 attack helicopters being shot down by shoulder-launched air defence missiles, or Ukrainian farmers towing away abandoned Russian tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and self-propelled air defence systems the emphasis is on the fighting spirit of Ukraine, not the weapons used. This is a subtle, but important difference, because the ‘star’ in some videos is the American-donated weapons

systems, while in others the 'star' is Ukraine's military. Major events like the sinking of the Russian Navy's *Moskva* destroyer in the Black Sea was immortalized with the slogan "Russian warship, go fuck yourself" and the release of a commemorative postage stamp.

This overall emotional story is important because it creates the sense of Ukrainian forces as *deserving* of the help they receive. That is: the Ukrainian Armed Forces as being noble and committed fighters that will use the equipment donated for the purposes intended. This is an especially important point for Western publics, given that about \$7bn of the total \$18.6bn of weapons and aid the United States gave to Afghanistan between 2005 and 2021 ended up falling into the hands of the Taliban.¹¹ Showing maximum use of donated American equipment was a clear attempt to emphasize that American voters were not being asked to support "another Afghanistan" by supporting Ukraine. Ukraine is attempting to generate an image of Ukraine's military fighting with bravery and courage and thus being deserving of American-donated equipment because they will use it to good effect. This is especially important when considering that President Biden tried to explain the Taliban victory in Afghanistan as largely a question of the Afghan National Army lacking the resolve to fight, and downplaying the political and military capability of the Taliban against a weak government that could not sustain itself without American support.¹² The implicit comparison is between an "undeserving" Afghan National Army that abandoned equipment donated by the United States, and a "deserving" Ukraine that is using weapons for their intended purposes.

During this time segment Ukraine was facing its greatest danger. Russia was on the offensive and had the most combat power it would have at any point in the war so far. Ukraine had received very few weapons, compared to what would be donated by the West in the coming years. Ukraine was still fighting a defensive battle, and though inflicting losses of the Russians, was not ready to stage or sustain a meaningful counter-offensive. It is therefore logical that Ukraine's emotional tone was negative because negative emotions were more reflective of the circumstance in the sense that demonizing Russia aligned better to reality. High hopes of a victory would likely ring hollow during a war where Russia had significantly expanded the amount of Ukrainian territory they controlled at that point in the war. Negative messages about how Russia was controlling that territory – seemingly organized rape, plunder, torture and murder of civilians – and evidence of systematic missile strikes on civilian targets make sense because they resonate with the context Ukraine was facing in the period immediately after the invasion.

5.1.2.2 Narratives & Target Audiences

During the initial days of the war, the X/Twitter accounts appeared to focus on the Ukrainian public, publishing content in Ukrainian. However, shortly after the invasion English-language content accelerated, showing a deliberate shift to target Western political leaders to ask for help, and to target Western audiences to build a shared sense of purpose. For messaging that was intended to connect with elected national leaders and government officials, Ukraine made their requests very clear. Both @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU present requests for help from NATO and Western partners for more military equipment, a no-fly zone, and seeking condemnation from the United Nations.

There was also deliberate counter-narrative content, focusing on undermining Russia's messages about Ukraine and shaping Western perceptions about Russia. All narratives for all audiences sought to create a

very simple dyad: Ukraine-good / Russia-bad. This dyad applies to all narratives for all audience. For Western publics, Ukraine should be supported because they are good, and because Russia is bad. When Russia presents narratives of their own, they should not be believed because Russia is bad; the Ukrainian narrative should be believed instead, because Ukraine is good. In this time segment, Ukraine accelerated their targeting of western publics; accelerated their efforts to target Russian narratives; and sought to solidify the dyad of Ukraine-good / Russia-bad.

As discussed in 4.2.2, and above in 5.1.2.1, Ukraine showed evidence of combat victories to show that they were actively resisting Russian invasion, and @ZelenskyyUA presented evidence that he was alive and well and continuing to defiantly lead the country through its defence. Ukraine provided much evidence of combat operations and alleged war crimes to reinforce that dyad. This is significant because it shows understanding of the need for a simpler argument for a broader appeal; not just appeals to a rules-based order of international politics. Connecting Ukrainian narrative with more general Western publics was likely helped by showing evidence of war crimes to solidify public perceptions of Russia. The idea of a dyad is important to creating clear contrast between Russia and Ukraine in the minds of Western voters. This is the essence of shifting the discourse over time. With enough evidence and a consistent narrative, Ukraine appears to be creating assumptions about Russia that will last and thus become part of a consensus in the minds of Western publics.

Ukraine also started producing its own satire content, distinct from any combat footage-based content. Ukraine released its own 'Oscars' content, timed to coincide with the motion picture award show. All seven videos were released on the same day with the same campaign identifier, "Ministry of Defence of Ukraine Oscars 2022" and hashtag #Oscars2022. The Oscar videos represent a clear attempt to mix pro-Ukraine content with other social media stories about the actual Oscars, using the same hashtag #Oscars2022. Interestingly, ISIS has used a similar approach in the past to connect their own social media propaganda to people looking for something else by inserting hashtags like #NapaQuake for the earthquake in the Napa Valley in California in 2014,¹³ or using #JustinBeiber to connect ISIS propaganda with Justin Bieber fans.¹⁴

These videos are significant for a few reasons. First, this content was not simply combat footage that was repurposed: it was developed on its own as part of a planned, deliberate campaign. This content represents the first shift for @DefenceU away from daily reportage on combat action and the day's events to proactively building a narrative and 'brand' on Ukraine's terms. These videos do not communicate anything about the daily activities in Ukraine; they communicate the *meaning of the activities so far*. This is the core of narrative building. Second, it signifies a deliberate attempt to broaden target audience. This content is clearly targeting Western viewers of motion picture awards, who may or may not be regular news consumers. The point is that these videos show Ukraine broadening its target audience base beyond simply the news cycle and is deliberately seeking to insert its messaging into the Oscars media ecosystem.

Ukraine sought counter-narrative efforts in time segment 2, and had two apparent objectives: first, to present evidence that clearly shows Russia is targeting civilians in Ukraine and engaged in war crimes (murder, looting, etc.); second, to present the idea of a unitary Russian will about harming Ukraine—that is, showing that Russian civilians support the war, and agree with what their government and military forces are

doing. This appears to be intended to show Russia a single entity, thus deserving of resistance, sanctions and economic hardship *because* the people and the government agree that harming Ukraine is good.

During time segment 2 the basic contours of the narrative are established for @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA. Russia is presented as predatory, cruel, violent and sadistic – and aware of it, because they seek to hide the evidence. Ukraine is presented as the underdog that is bravely fighting against an unjust invasion by a savage nation. This basic narrative allows Ukraine to plug new information – any subsequent evidence of war crimes, for example – into this narrative as time goes on and events unfold. The visceral nature of the imagery was accelerated as Ukrainian forces fought the Russian army back from places like Bucha – the site of many alleged war crimes. On 2 April a video was posted showing a Ukrainian Army patrol through a residential neighbourhood in Bucha with at least 15 identifiable bodies of civilians dead in the street, with bullet pockmarks on homes and fences. The caption reads “Local civilians were being executed arbitrarily, some with hands tied behind their backs, their bodies scattered in the streets of the city,” calling this the “New Srebrenica.”¹⁵ On 3 April, four images were posted to @DefenceU showing dead civilians – some shot down in the streets, crumpled under bicycles – including one image of four bodies that are half buried in what appears to be a mass grave, one of whom had their hands bound.¹⁶ The same day a video was posted showing basement where the Russians allegedly murdered civilians, all of whom had their hands bound with gunshot wounds to the head and some in the knees also.¹⁷ A final image shows a child’s bloody toy – presumably the child’s – after a Russian missile strike outside a train station in Kramatorsk that killed 59 people, including 7 children.¹⁸ These images among the most visceral and jarring of time segment 2. They show many dead people – on the streets and executed in basements – along with mass graves to conceal the evidence and proof of dead children. These images and videos are clearly intended to remove any doubt about who is the ‘bad guy’ in this conflict. Sharing images of this type of violence shows Western audiences that Russia is at the very least indifferent to human suffering, and at the worst use this kind of violence because they enjoy it.

Russian activities provided Ukraine with an asymmetric advantage in the narrative space. Russia’s narrative of Ukrainian Nazis and alleged genocide against Russian speakers in Ukraine were not factual or supported by any visual evidence. Presumably, if Russia had images and video of Ukraine committing genocide against Russian, they would share any compelling evidence. It would provide a more emotionally impactful narrative to show social media content consumers the images. Showing evidence in genocide allegations is common practice. Incarceration of Uyghurs in China is confirmable through satellite imagery;¹⁹ press coverage of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar has shown the world those images;²⁰ in the Balkans the war crimes and genocidal acts in Srebrenica, Medak and later in Kosovo were all well documented. Presumably if there was a genocide going on in Ukraine, Russia would have some evidence. Ukraine, by contrast, is showing the world that atrocities against civilians were committed because they have the evidence. This counter-narrative can be repeated because the evidence exists. As we will see in time segment 3, there was more evidence of war crimes to come, allowing the same counter-narrative to be sustained with no worry of evidence of comparable war crimes against Russian soldiers or Russian-speakers that were alleged being victimized.

Additional evidence was shown to attempt to show a *mens rea* –or guilty mind— that Russia knew what it was doing, and knew it was wrong. Images of mobile crematoria imply that Russia knew their actions would

be judged harshly and so sought to hide the evidence.²¹ This adds a layer to the narrative. It intends to highlight the cruelty and show that its perpetrators understand that it is cruelty and therefore trying to destroy the evidence to escape accountability. This negative narrative appears intended to show Russia in the worst possible light: a war criminal that knows it is a war criminal and wants to hide it. To maximize the impact of the @DefenceU narrative, images of basements where torture took place, images of dead people on the streets, and images of bodies being exhumed from hastily dug graves were also shown.

Lastly, Ukraine sought to create the notion of a unitary Russia– the government, its military, and its people – committing war crimes and atrocities. On 10 April 2022, @DefenceU posted on X/Twitter with the text “This is their war too. It is often said that ordinary Russians (sic) should not suffer from sanctions: after all, it’s putin (sic), not them, who started the war. In this video, residents of russia’s (sic) Kursk region happily see off russian (sic) soldiers to go rob, rape and kill Ukrainians.”²² The post accompanies a video of a Russian military column passing along a rural roadway with hundreds of people dressed in national colours – on with a CCCP-emblazoned tracksuit – cheering and applauding the column as it moves through an intersection. In May 2022, stories were published in the Daily Mail and Euromaidan press sharing audio of a phone call between an alleged tortured and his mother, with the soldier detailing the horrific details of his actions.²³ This type of content attempts to link Russian military activity with the will of the civilian population, or at least complicity. This narrative seeks to erase an emotional distinction between Russian soldier and Russia civilian and thus reinforce collective national culpability.

5.1.2.3 General Comments on Time Segment 2

As mentioned previously, Ukrainian elites were not fully convinced that Russia was going to invade and did not apparently have an information operations campaign planned. The first week of segment 2 shows highly reactive messaging, focusing largely on Ukrainian successes fighting back. Success was being communicated in hours as a rolling tally. The narrative in the first week of time segment 2 was therefore reactive and did not appear to be part of a planned campaign. If the risk of invasion was not fully understood, why prepare an information campaign?

During the remainder of time segment 2, Ukraine started developing a narrative, emphasizing Ukraine as the tenacious underdog fighting bravely against a bigger, stronger enemy that launched an unprovoked and brutal war against all Ukrainians and Western culture and the rules-based order. The logical conclusion is that Ukraine needs and deserves the help of the West to win. The bravery components are highlighted with combat footage and battlefield successes – especially where Western-donated weapons can be shown supporting Ukraine’s success. The impacts on all of Ukraine are illustrated with images of destroyed building and public spaces, and so is the evidence of Russian looting, war crimes and abuse of the civilian population. The bravery of Ukraine and the savagery of Russia in this narrative lead the viewer to the clear conclusion: Ukraine *deserves* our help to fight back against this injustice.

This video of Russian civilians visibly supporting the military is a clear attempt to condition Western citizens to see Russia as unitary, thus any harm that falls upon Russian society from fuel or food shortages, reduced access to the global economy, or reduced standards of living are perfectly justifiable because harm to civilians is the same as harm to Russian soldiers that raped, robbed, looted and murdered. If the state is a single entity

of one mind and intention, harming the Russian people through sanctions is a justifiable punishment because they either endorse the war crimes or are comfortable with them being committed.

The openness to negotiations is significant because it belies that Ukraine's military strength is not limitless. The narrative up this point has focused on Ukraine as an underdog that is overcoming the odds and defending its homeland against Russian invasion and war crimes. However, from late March 2022 there is a tacit admission that negotiations are an option for Ukraine.

5.1.3 Time Segment 3

In time segment 3, Ukraine shifted the style and delivery of much of its content, emphasizing more excitement and appeals to popular aesthetics that have less to do with international politics and global news. Appeals to higher ideals – content showing international organization members, appeals to the rule of law, rules-based order, etc. – remained, though Ukraine included far more general, population-level appeal for those that do not closely follow international politics (i.e.: probably most people in Western democracies). During this period Ukraine effectively built a broader narrative, focusing on the humanity of Ukrainians, the momentum of the underdog in the counter-offensive against Russian forces, and a sense of “the good guys” winning. This time segment saw a clear narrative based on the previous Ukraine-good/Russia-bad dyad, with a much broader general appeal, with clear application of aesthetics and cultural totems to appeal to sub-segments of Western populations. There was also greater emphasis on non-X/Twitter content through official and non-official sources. This signals that Ukraine was seeking to connect its X/Twitter content to a broader network of users already connected to other official Ukrainian outlets, and non-official (and highly sympathetic) outlets like “NAFO” and @Saint-Javelin.

We also see publication of more raw combat footage, including drone camera footage. Time segment 3 saw the Ukrainian counter-offensive begin as Russia lost control of most of the new territory they gained during the invasion. The counter-offensive was a sustained combat operation that sought to push Russia back, which generated a great deal of combat footage. Of interest, Ukraine began receiving more support from West during time segment 3, specifically heavier weapons. Ukraine was very focused on showing the public from donor nations that the equipment being donated was making its way to combat. As discussed previously, this was mostly likely to prevent any parallels being drawn between aid to Ukraine and the \$7 billion worth of equipment and weapons donated to Afghanistan that fell into the Taliban's hands because the Afghan Army could not or would not fight.

Music and combat video footage was added to many videos with target demographics ranging from Gen Xers and millennials (AC/DC and Metallica songs) to younger millennials and Gen Z with electronic dance music (EDM) and synth – including remixes. Some videos include music popular during the Vietnam War era, presumably targeting baby boomers. The choice to use certain types of music across different generations and decades to a deliberate sub-segmentation of audiences and presenting music that is more likely to resonate with specific demographics. Sub-segmentation of audiences started occurring in time segment 3. During time segment 3 we see a greater production value, entertainment value and appeals to visually and auditorily engaging style and aesthetic cues.

Another change in time segment 3 was the attempt by Ukraine to build a network of other official and unofficial information sources and using @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA to connect users to other nodes in that network.

During time segment 1 and 2, X/Twitter posts connected to a few sources: Minister Reznikov's Facebook page; Press Releases from the Office of the President; or a few CNN stories. The rest was stand-alone content. During time segment 3 Ukraine connected many of its X/Twitter posts to *United24*. *United24* is 'the initiative of the President of Ukraine.'²⁴ *United24* collects donations, sponsors project for things like demining robots and recovering stolen artwork and cultural artefacts and has celebrity ambassadors like Mark Hamil (of Luke Skywalker fame). *United24* also has a YouTube page, where they host 3,500+ videos organized into full length (2 to 15 minutes, generally), shorts, live feeds, categorization by type into playlists, and a community section to build awareness.²⁵ The YouTube page provides the same overall narrative as the X/Twitter account, but in a different format: all videos. Some videos take the feel of long-form or documentary journalism showing the impacts of war, and others appear more like marketing material for the equipment manufacturers, showing exiting sequences and using their weapons systems in combat. *United24* basically provides another official Government of Ukraine platform to share information, and after it launched in time segment 3, the X/Twitter content did link out to *United24*.

During time segment 3 there was also links from X/Twitter content to unofficial – though highly sympathetic – X/Twitter accounts and other websites. The Government of Ukraine formally endorsed NAFO – the North Atlantic Fellas Organization – and began linking some of its own content to @SaintJavelin. Saint Javelin is a charity that fundraises for the Ukrainian cause, and NAFO and began as a Twitter campaign to counter Russian narratives using common cyberbullying techniques and their Shiba Inu dog meme as the consistent aesthetic baseline. Its followers are called 'Fellas'. Anyone can join if they donate to a charity and become a 'Fella' in the process. Most notably, Mikhail Ulyanov – Russia's permanent representative to International Organizations in Vienna – made ridiculous claims about Ukraine starting the war, and NAFO members mocked him to the point where he responded with "You pronounced this nonsense. Not me."²⁶ Another organization based in Canada called Saint Javelin – after the anti-tank missile – then made t-shirts showing the Shiba Inu dog wearing a multi-cam pattern uniform, wearing a special operator's helmet and night vision goggles, carrying a suppressed carbine with the slogan "You pronounced this nonsense. Not me."²⁷ This indicates that Ukraine must trust the overall intentions of NAFO Fellas and Saint Javelin enough to not see public relations risk with being associated with content creators they do not control.

5.1.3.1 Emotions

For both @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA, there is a clear internal logic to communicating in sweeping, somewhat exaggerated language. Competition in the information space relies on creating a clear, simple-to-understand narrative for broad consumption. References to "pure evil", "terrorists and filthy liars," "all territories will be liberated," and grand exultations about soldiers and weapons systems convey clear, strong emotion. The frequency of the hyperbole indicates that this is an intentional tactic to speak in the broadest, most absolute terms possible to communicate the point dramatically. This approach connects the emotional nature of the images with the heated nature of the language, leaving an emotional impression with the audience. The inverse – presenting measured, nuance language, without emotional appeal – would be

counter to the theoretical discussion in the introduction, and thus less likely to succeed in eliciting an emotional response and building a sense of emotional connection from the audience.

The emotional proportions make some sense when considering Ukraine's strategic objectives during time segment 3. By this point, Ukraine has resisted the initial invasion and needed orders of magnitude more support in the shape of armoured vehicles, artillery systems, and air defence systems. The negative messages were important to sharing new information about Russian war crimes, targeting of civilians, destruction of infrastructure, occupying a nuclear power plant, and other actions. These messages were likely intended to elicit anger, disgust, and generally negative feelings toward Russia and its actions. However, positive messages were just as important for Western audiences to *want to keep supporting Ukraine*. Western publics were aware of the atrocities of Syria against its own population, but that did not translate into a groundswell of support from Western publics to intervene in a significant way. Likewise, simply making Western publics aware of Russian war crimes would not be sufficient to sustain Western interest and support over the long-term.

@DefenceU's audience targeting was broader, targeting a wider range of sub-segments of society. To connect content with emotions of different sub-segments of the population, a range of in-group lore was used. For example, one of the kill cards includes a quote from an anime character.²⁸ This message would not make any sense to a non-anime consumer. Others made references to poets or scientists from specific countries (i.e.: not 'household' names). There was significant variation. References to the Mandalorian, Shakespeare plays, bible verses, Rambo films, Bananarama lyrics, The Beatles Abbey Road or other cultural references connect better with audiences who instinctively understand what those things and their emotional significance. Referring to in-group lore is a way of showing the audience that there is common ground; that is, with a quick symbol, quote or reference, the sender and viewer both 'get the joke' because they share a common frame of reference. The notion of 'snob appeal' is about excluding those who don't 'get it' by allowing those who do 'get it' to immediately understand. Of note, @DefenceU did not use in-group lore as often as @ZelenskyyUA, though @DefenceU used a much broader range of in-group lore to appeal to a range of different audiences (i.e.: not just those interested in international politics like @ZelenskyyUA). @DefenceU used in-group lore in less than 20% of the content, possibly to avoid excluding or alienating would-be supporters by focusing too much on content they may not understand. This is an important balance, to prevent either @DefenceU or @ZelenskyyUA from being perceived as catering exclusively to sub-genres, while presenting content to show an understanding of, and appeal to, other demographics.

Overall, in time segment 3 Ukraine accelerated its use of hyperbole, leaps of logic, and the bandwagon effect to reflect its battlefield victories and creating a sense of inevitability that there will be sustained momentum. The negative messaging was focused on the same basic feelings of disgust toward Russia over war crimes. The volume of content in time segment 3 gave Ukraine the opportunity to provide greater variety in the content, while coalescing it all around the same general narrative. In time segment 3 the momentum of the war going well for Ukraine. By late October 2022, Russian advances had largely ground to a halt, and assessments indicated Russian forces were likely planning to withdraw across the Dnipro river to avoid being cut off by renewed Ukrainian offensives, were increasingly relying on Iran for materiel support, were exaggerating their claims of success near Bakhmut, and that infighting and blame between Russian regional

political leaders and the Russian Ministry of Defence continued.²⁹ In newly liberated spaces additional video was shown including soldiers waving Ukrainian flags,³⁰ Ukrainians pulling out their own flags they buried during Russian occupation,³¹ and video of civilians lining the streets to show their gratitude for their liberators.³² These images are somewhat reminiscent of photos and newsreels of Allied soldiers liberating villages in France and the Netherlands as the Wehrmacht was pushed out of occupied territories in the Second World War. The meaning of these images was clear: the liberation of occupied territory and the joy of the civilians being liberated by Ukrainian forces is meant to communicate a genuine sense of common identity. The Russian assumption that they would be “greeted as liberators” is proven hollow contrasted with images of Ukrainian civilians overjoyed when their countrymen arrive to replace Russian flags with Ukrainian ones.

5.1.3.2 Narratives & Target Audiences

Messages in time segment 3 shows a multi-pronged strategy to reach multiple audiences with a common narrative: support Ukraine because Ukraine is a winner, fighting back against the aggression of an enemy common to all Western countries—namely Russia. This basic message presented through a variety of message types, ranging from short, exciting musically driven video to content with links to long-form content in a Washington-based think-tank’s journal. This approach presents content to a broad audience that consumes short, fast content on X/Twitter, and also links to an “inside-the-beltway” audience through long-form content. Messaging also linked to international institutions (EU, NATO, UN), and to individual leaders of partner countries, showing a unified front of like-minded nations. The links to external content does not negate the audience that consumes short, fast content, but it does provide the option to audiences who also consume longer content through the same platform. This means that Ukraine is not choosing between the audiences: it is seeking to reach multiple audiences using a single channel by varying the content.

The sharing of videos and images of Ukrainian soldiers fighting or military equipment – especially equipment donated by Western allies – are too numerous to list here. The common thread is that this content appeals to war-as-sport audiences. The videos show fast-paced images, often have music dubbed over, and unfailingly imply victory for Ukraine. Ukraine was engaging in high-intensity combat operations during this period, blunting Russian offensives in places like Slovyansk and Bakhmut,³³ but also losing Severodonetsk, and engaged in ongoing and non-decisive positional battles around Kharkiv City.³⁴ To solidify the idea that Ukraine was continuing to fight and had shifted the momentum against Russia, combat footage with video dubbed over accelerated. This included videos of legacy Soviet equipment like Tochka short-range ballistic missile launches with synth music dubbed over,³⁵ and videos of a 2S3 artillery crew talking about a fire missions with metal music dubbed over.³⁶

Ukraine also accelerated its asks for more equipment in this time segment, including for fighter jets and longer-range systems like HIMARS and MLRS (which were delivered). To clearly illustrate that all donated equipment goes to good use, this time segment included more music and more exciting video of donated equipment being used. Videos of donated equipment also became more prominent, including videos of French-donated Caesar crews firing,³⁷ images of recently arrived German-donated PzH2000 howitzers ready to fire,³⁸ and MLRS firing with AC/DC playing over the video footage.³⁹ These videos show an exciting, defiant side of Ukraine’s war. They also show that Ukraine is using all the equipment donated to them for combat

purposes. This is, in part, to eliminate any notion that Ukraine's Army is like the Afghan Army, who was derided for not standing and fighting against the Taliban. These messages were as much about showing Ukrainian victory as they were pre-empting arguments from Ukraine's opponents that donated weapons are somehow not being used for their intended purposes. This is an important message for western publics – American ones especially – considering the then-recent victory of the Taliban over the Afghan government and Army the west had sustained with money, weapons, ammunition and training for almost twenty years.

A core narrative was the idea of Ukraine *deserving* help from the West. To show something is deserved is to show a commitment to working for a benefit. This is about showing some kind of intangible exchange of effort and labour to build confidence that help will be used for best purpose. For every weapons system donated – artillery, mortars, rocket artillery, armoured fighting vehicles and armoured personnel carriers, air defence systems, and even personal weapon – were all shown being used to best effect. Nations were thanked by name, with content shared of the weapon system being used in combat or in training missions. This appears to be a clear attempt to show the voters of the donor nation that the weapons are being used.

To reinforce the idea that Ukraine deserves help over the long term, the narrative was expanded to show the humanity of Ukrainian civilians and military service members. This appears to be an effort to make the Ukrainian cause more relatable, familiar, and to shorten the emotional distance between Western voting publics and Ukraine. To building this narrative @DefenceU (primarily) showed images and videos of families, soldiers – including women – doing simple human things like playing music, making trench art, dancing and goofing around, being re-united with family members, and showing first responders attending to missile strikes looking for survivors. All these activities would be very familiar to Western audiences.

The overall narrative that Ukraine mobilized in time segment 3 was not fundamentally different from that in time segment 2 in terms of the emotions and meaning it sought mobilize. The difference is that Ukraine had understood that having resisted the initial invasion, the future fight to liberate occupied territory was going to be very long. This means that Ukraine emphasized more cultural familiarity and similarities to solidify the notion of sustained support, not just the urgency in time segment 2 to fight back against an imminent collapse of the government. Time segment 3 was more about making the case for sustained support than responding to a one-time emergency. Battlefield successes were vital to showing audiences that Ukraine was winning, and that long-term success appeared inevitable. To develop this narrative Ukraine produced a much greater variety in content, all coalescing around the central narrative of deserving help over the long term.

Ukraine also began targeting American conservative-leaning voters specifically during time segment 3. Ukraine offered its specific condolences to a Fox News reporter. The appeal to the Fox News audience is significant because Fox News appeals to conservative values far more than to centrist or liberal voters,⁴⁰ and is regular proponent of Donald Trump (the subject of who's first impeachment was a phone call with Zelenskyy about weapons shipments). When combined with a bi-partisan visit of American Senators, this signals that Ukraine is making a deliberate attempt to build a bi-partisan or non-partisan coalition by explicitly appealing to conservative voters. Appeals to religiosity with slogans like "Freedom is our Religion," is a clear attempt to appeal to traditionally conservative values like evangelical Christianity and the use of "freedom" as a political slogan. In much more direct emotional appeal to commonality between American

patriotism and Ukrainian pride, @DefenceU published a video of a young Ukrainian girl singing the Star-Spangled Banner, with the statement “Shared values are what unite us.”⁴¹ This continues with the overall trend of Ukraine appealing to as many sub-segments of national populations by including images and slogans that are more likely to resonate with those sub-segments.

For counter-narratives, Ukraine continued to show evidence of war crimes to portray Russia as a brute, particularly the mass graves.⁴² By this period in the war, the evidence of war crimes was less ‘fresh’ than images of recently killed people in the streets of Bucha, as we saw in time segment 2. During time segment 3, more evidence was shown of war crimes that were hidden and now being discovered by Ukrainian forces as they liberated terrain previously occupied by Russian forces. The images of Ukrainian investigators and medical teams dressed in protective clothing, measuring and cordoning search areas and conducting a thorough and respectful exhumation and examination of the deceased, shows a massive gulf in the way each combatant values human life. Where the Russians murder civilians and throw their bodies away without markings, Ukrainians treat their dead with the care and human dignity befitting them. These images show a clear “Russia is a brute; Ukraine respects human life” contrast. @DefenceU posted effectively the same message a few days later, with the addition of exhausted forensics crews sleeping near the mass graves, having worked non-stop to exhume bodies. The clear effort Russia put toward hiding the massive graves plays off the previous themes of *mens rea*: that is, Russian soldiers knew what they were doing was wrong and sought to hide evidence of it.

As a continuation of time segment 2, Ukraine continued the narrative of fusing the idea of Russian nationality as a threat to the West, not simply the Russian military. Some messaging in time segment 3 showed Russian tourists being loud, rude, claiming Russia will destroy Prague and Budapest, and one soldier presumably drunk in a dumpster.⁴³ The video ends with an appeal to end travel visas for Russian nationals to Europe because they will behave badly as guests, and are allegedly predisposed to violence. The video is a bit tongue-in-cheek, because the real purpose appears to be to punish Russians who support the war from enjoying holidays in the nations of their supposed enemies. The content is intended to mock and denigrate and paint a generally poor impression of Russians; and more importantly for Ukraine’s narrative to paint Russians as non-European. The appeal is for European countries to end visas because Russians allegedly behave in socially unacceptable ways, and that Russian tourists are simply the civilian version of Russian soldiers. The subtle message in this counter-narrative is that Ukraine is European: Russia is not; Ukraine is civilized: Russians are not. This reinforces much of the content from @ZelenskyyUA about joining the EU as an observer and wanting to become a member of NATO due to shared values, bonds, etc., and seeks to undermine long-standing Russian claims to European-ness and being the defender of superior values.⁴⁴

5.1.3.3 General Comments on Time Segment 3

Time segment 3 represented Ukraine’s English-language information operations developing more complexity and taking a broader approach to deliberate targeting, all while reinforcing the same basic narrative that was crafted in time segment 2 after the first week of war. The messages posted during time segment 3 repeated key themes like Ukraine’s need for help from partners who share common values, Ukraine’s deservingness of help, the bravery of its soldiers, the humanity of its people; and the urgency to sustain support in the face of continued violence and war crimes in the face of an unprovoked attack. Content showing evidence of war

crimes and the targeting of civilians reinforced the overall narrative of the brutality of Russia, and the perseverance of all Ukrainians in the face targeting violence.

In time segment 3 Ukraine expanded its targeting to include many sub-segments of the population across age, social interests and preferences, and deliberate targeting of conservative-minded Americans. In this time segment Ukraine maintained an overall coherence in the master narrative and became more adept at sub-segmenting messaging targeting specific demographics. This approach combined a broad, general, values-based narrative that forms Ukraine's overall argument, with smaller, more specific messages meant to resonate with in-groups. This is significant because it shows a clear intent to appeal as many sub-groups as possible to build a more durable coalition. General messaging continued and is important to root the overall narrative in broad key themes. However, the deliberate effort to appeal to sub-segments is intended to connect with pre-existing affinity and identity groups with key messages.

Ukraine started amplifying content from *United24* – another Ukrainian-owned channel, largely focused on video content – and from unofficial accounts and channels associated with NAFO. Both are significant because it shows that Ukraine was engaged in multi-channel distribution, with X/Twitter channels serving as part of a broader network of information operations. NAFO accounts are reliably pro-Ukraine and anti-Russia, giving Ukraine predictability that even though NAFO accounts are not controlled by Ukraine, they can be counted on to boost the same general narrative. NAFO likely represented another sub-segment target audience for Ukraine's English-language information operations, whose members were in turn amplifying Ukraine's messages further. NAFO may lack the mass appeal of mainstream media accounts, but they have an in-group following that is dedicated to pro-Ukraine / anti-Russian messaging, giving NAFO channels much deeper focus.

5.1.4 Time Segment 4

The overall messaging in time segment 4 provides a sense of the momentum of Ukrainian success, and clear intent to link Ukraine to Western culture. The momentum part of the narrative is consistent from time segment 3 to time segment 4. Video and image content shows Ukraine using the donated equipment to maximum effect, with a range of video showing combat action with music dubbed over to provide a greater entertainment value.

Time segment 4 covered Christmas, and the sanctity of the holiday was emphasized. Images of Zelenskyy visiting soldiers at the front over Christmas are juxtaposed with the safety that Westerners are enjoying (ostensibly because of Ukraine), to create a sense of common identity. Zelenskyy himself was clearly featured as a symbol of Ukrainian resistance is emphasize more than in previous time segments. The time-lapse video shows a war-weary Zelenskyy, with the weight of war clearly visible in his physical appearance. This weariness is translated into hope and prestige when Zelenskyy is officially received in Washington by the President and First Lady. This signals Zelenskyy's prestige as a world leader by extension. This segment includes much more explicit targeting of American audiences with American-specific messaging.

The negative messaging targeting Russia mixed familiar elements with new elements in time segment 4. New stories of war crimes were also shared to emphasize the pattern of behaviour from Russian occupiers. Showing Wagner as a mercenary army that engages in wanton cruelty extends the previous narrative about

Russian army cruelty to new levels. This cruelty was used as the predicate to attempt to prevent Russian participation in the Olympic Games.

5.1.4.1 Emotions

During time segment 4, Ukraine was enjoying some battlefield successes, generating a sense of hope and momentum, mixed with continued anger directed at Russia. The images and videos of Ukrainian soldiers and people enduring were intended to show a 'happy warrior' culture. Soldiers and relief workers with dogs, in partially destroyed buildings show that despite Russian aggression their spirits are not broken. This approach mixes negative and positive emotions and creates a sense of persistent threat that Ukrainian strength overcomes.

Given the time of year, Christmas is used as a theme to make this point even more forcefully. On Christmas day, @DefenceU released three ten-minute videos about hardships in Ukraine, including civilians caught between the front lines⁴⁵ and how Ukrainian military personnel ultimately saved her.⁴⁶ These images evoke tension and fear of harm, with relief at a happy outcome. Images of Zelenskyy touring the front lines are juxtaposed with American and British Christmas celebrations, where those citizens enjoy relative comfort, quiet, and peace while Ukraine fights on for common values. These images appear intended to emphasize the common cultural identity of Ukraine and the West, and how Ukrainian soldiers continue to fight on amid it all. US Presidents have often visited American soldiers during wartime, from Lincoln to Biden,⁴⁷ indicating that Presidents putting themselves at personal risk is an accepted cultural practice. Zelenskyy doing the same appears calculated to show a moral obligation to soldiers fighting that he is meeting.

There is also clear intent to communicate the strength and similarity of Ukraine to its Western partners. Zelenskyy visited Washington DC days after being in the front lines, with photos published of Zelenskyy in the Oval Office with President Biden⁴⁸ and Washington recognizing Zelenskyy's arrivals by hanging Ukrainian flags on Pennsylvania Boulevard.⁴⁹ @ZelenskyyUA released a video with soaring music and high-quality imagery of Zelenskyy arriving at the White House in a motorcade with President Biden and the First Lady greeting him warmly.⁵⁰ The video then includes Zelenskyy briefing the Cabinet table, with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs listening intently and capturing notes. @POTUS shared a similar video days after, adding to the credibility of the exercise.⁵¹ These images and videos communicate Zelenskyy's status and prestige as a *Western* global leader.

This time segment continued to evoke negative feelings about Russia. Like time segment 3, in time segment 4 war crimes for early in the war were represented to generate an emotional impact. Time segment 4 included some gripping documentary films featuring interviews with people that survived Russian occupation in Hostomel at the start of the war.⁵² The footage includes very emotional interviews with civilians ranging from children to seniors and everything in between. Long-form stories were told about civilians surviving around Hostomel during the initial invasion with many civilians shot by Russian soldiers, and a story about a children's school where civilians were forced into basements and many suffocated. The videos detail how some suffocated due to the cramped quarters full of people, and how those who ran were shot.⁵³ These stories, told by the survivors themselves, tell a much longer, more detailed story than the quick snippets of information with imagery that X/Twitter generally relies on. The documentary footage recalls things that

happened either in time segment 2 or early in time segment 3. The descriptions of Russian cruelty are therefore not contemporaneous like recent evidence of missile strikes on civilian spaces; however, they are presented to build on the real-time narrative of Russian cruelty even though these incidents were not. The time shift does not fundamentally matter at an emotional level. Whether documenting real-time events or recalling recent events, they are taking together to present a narrative of Russian cruelty.

These negative feelings are also used to attempt to leverage antagonism toward Russian participation in the Olympic Games. Images connect the idea of the Russian military to Russian athletes – whether destroying apartment blocks⁵⁴ or murdering civilians.⁵⁵ An infographic declares every Russian athlete a promoter of Russia's five Olympic rings: rape, murder, torture, kidnapping and terrorism.⁵⁶ These images are very direct and seek to connect Russian athletes with Russian war crimes, leading the viewer to the conclusion that allowing Russian participation at the Games is tacit tolerance of war crimes. The presents the audience with a choice: sport neutrality or surrender to Russia's brutal force.

5.1.4.2 *Target Audiences & Narratives*

Time segment 4 continued with the same general narrative, sub-segment targeting, and humanizing Ukrainians. The humanizing content in time segment 4 continued from time segment 3, showing the human side of soldiers and Ukrainian civilians. Soldiers playing musical instruments was repeated from time segment 3, along with images of soldiers with animals. The narrative in time segment 4 used the events in Ukraine to build on the notion of momentum and inevitable victory by showing liberated terrain and the use of Western equipment. The lack of victory yet was also heavily implied as the reason for sustained military shipments from the West. After a year of fighting, Ukraine had not only avoided defeat but had fought Russia back from much of the territory they captured in the year since the February 2022 invasion. The evidence of steady progress toward victory and the consistently positive spin on the messaging combine to present a narrative of momentum toward a certain victory for Ukraine over the brutality of Russia.

In time segment 4 there was clear targeting of American voters, presumably to accelerate delivery of new equipment like tanks and possibly fighter jets. The narrative appears intended to target voters generally, while also making clear overtures to conservative values. Zelenskyy is presented as a hero, whose value is recognized by America. A video juxtaposes a pre-war Zelenskyy with an in-war Zelenskyy is intended to show a durability and resilience of the leader personally as a symbol of Ukraine. Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey* emphasizes the role of a leader as the embodiment of meeting and overcoming challenges, as a standard structural part of a story of redemption and overcoming.⁵⁷ The image of having 'arrived' as the hero is presented through Zelenskyy's visit to Washington and the pomp and circumstance of being received at the White House by the President and First Lady. This speaks not only Zelenskyy's prestige, but its acceptance by official American power and ceremony. This is mixed with much more populist imagery of Zelenskyy attending the national prayer breakfast, re-emphasizing a connection to American evangelicals and conservatives that was pursued in time segment 3.

After Christmas, the connection to American values was emphasized again. Zelenskyy gave a speech at the National Prayer Breakfast held in Washington in January. Zelenskyy's speech spoke to the power of faith and prayer to see people through the hardest times, indicating a clear appeal to religious Americans including

evangelicals. @ZelenskyyUA also re-shared content from @NFLNetwork recognizing President Zelenskyy and players from the Ukrainian League of American Football that were attending the Superbowl at State Farm Stadium,⁵⁸ a clear appeal at fostering feelings of familiar identity between American football fans and Ukraine. Ukraine did target American conservatives and evangelicals in time segment 3, and this continues that trend in time segment 4.

Ukraine also targeted a defeatist narrative at Russian soldiers, with the intent of English language audiences seeing it. Minister Reznikov's address to Russian soldiers made clear that more of them will die if they do not surrender. This message may have been shared beyond X/Twitter to Russian audiences, though the choice to share on an English-language X/Twitter account indicates that Ukraine also wanted English-speaking audiences to hear them threaten Russian soldiers. It would not have been posted to the English account otherwise. Such a bold and brazen threat communicates confidence and certainty in Ukrainian momentum, building on a similar narrative presented for Western audiences.

Lastly, the counter-narratives on the Olympics were key to time segment 4. The video content presented equated Russian athletes with the military, turning javelins and shotputs into missiles striking apartment buildings and hospitals. The counter-narrative connected the five rings of the Olympics – intended to be a celebration of sports excellence and human determination – into the five rings of Russia: rape, torture, murder, kidnapping and terrorism. This counter-narrative is intended to generate disgust with Russia and equate its athletes with war criminals. It is impossible to quantify how effective this counter-narrative was, though Russian athletes were prevented from using their national flags at the 2024 games, and many athletes that openly supported the Russian war were prevented from participating. This narrative appears to have enabled a moral victory for Ukraine, separate from the war itself.

5.1.4.3 General Comments on Time Segment 4

Time segment 4 continued with many of the key themes we saw in previous time segments. The core narrative of Ukraine enduring against and unjust invasion by Russia was central, with the theme of Ukraine as the underdog consistent throughout. The sense of momentum and in the inevitability of victory was emphasized throughout this time segment. Ukraine also sought to internationalize the conflict somewhat by emphasizing its role as the breadbasket to the Global South and seeking international assistance to prevent Russia from causing a global famine by blocking Ukrainian grain exports.

There was a distinctly populist feeling to time segment 4, with more appeals to explicitly American themes like religion, football, and showing more traditional family values of men in uniform and taking care of aging people. This time segment also, somewhat paradoxically, saw more sub-segment appeal with science fiction references, combat videos with music dubbed over, and other in-group lore references to art, history, poets, and other easily identified themes to those who are part of the in-group.

After one year of war, Ukraine's X/Twitter-based information operations campaigns had clearly become much more sophisticated and broad-based in their intended audiences. Before the invasion, @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU were largely used to rebroadcast the content of others and mixed Ukrainian and English regularly. By the end of time segment 4, both accounts were generally publishing their content in English;

delivering much higher production value in video and imagery; were sharing mainstream media video that was pro-Ukraine; were targeting a broad range of American voters with different messages, and sub-segmenting their content to appeal across age demographics. By time segment 4 we can see order and logic to connecting messages to narratives and delivering counter-narratives to undermine Russian themes about Ukraine and about the war.

The data collection for this work ends on the one-year anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine. Deeper study of how Ukraine's X/Twitter campaigns evolved over the remainder of 2023, 2024 and 2025 is beyond scope, and worthy of additional study.

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- ²⁸ @DefenceU, 30 September 2022. <https://x.com/DefenceU/status/1575738476858773506>
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6 Comparing Results with Literature

The results across the full period of study shows alignment with some of the existing literature on warfare that includes information operations, international relations theory, and theory about information operations and persuasion; and is at odds with other elements.

Section 5.1 will compare the results across the period of study to identify where the *presumed purpose* of Ukraine’s English-language X/Twitter information operations aligned with theoretical concepts, and where the *execution* of the information operations leveraged the concepts themselves in the content. The difference is important because the presumed purpose is about delivering information operations that supports and serves Ukraine’s strategic objectives (i.e.: domestic, long-term vision) and where the content of the message seeks to connect with Western audiences in a way that makes them support Ukraine (i.e.: foreign acceptance of Ukraine’s narrative).

6.1 Concepts of Modern Warfare

The concepts of modern warfare discussed here include information operations. The key difference between concepts is whether the concept emphasizes the role of information operations only in the context of war and armed conflict—either during conflict, or in anticipation of conflict—or a broader tool of statecraft and international politics, which includes the possibility of war. Ukraine’s current context is war, but the main audience for English-language information operations is Western audiences to shape their political preferences, and therefore more closely aligned with statecraft. Therefore, the concepts that emphasize statecraft and international politics—namely, *Unrestricted Warfare* and *The New Rules of War*—are more useful for understanding Ukraine’s current approach than *4GW*, *Hybrid Warfare*, *Grey Zone*, or *Dragons & Snakes*. The table below provides a condensed comparison of how the concepts of modern warfare align with Ukraine’s actions, and areas of difference.

TABLE 2: CONCEPTS OF MODERN WARFARE - COMPARISON OF UKRAINE'S ACTIVITIES TO CONCEPTS

| Concepts of Warfare | | |
|---|---|---|
| Concept & Core Tenets | Alignment of Ukraine’s Actions to Core Tenets | Differences of Ukraine’s Actions to Core Tenets |
| <p>4GW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Narrative of legitimacy of the armed non-state group ▪ Strength of group identity, connecting members to group | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Building narrative of legitimacy of Ukraine’s war and struggle ▪ Resisting a stronger enemy ▪ Clear attempt to create strong Ukrainian identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ukraine is a state, not armed non-state group ▪ Ukraine attempting to create sense of shared identity in the minds of Western voters with Ukraine (connecting Western voters to group) |
| <p>Hybrid Warfare</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can be stand-alone activity to weaken target society without fighting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Combination of information operations and kinetic activity to achieve strategic ends | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ukraine not attacking Western countries, and thus not combining information with combat at the same target |

| Concepts of Warfare | | |
|--|--|--|
| Concept & Core Tenets | Alignment of Ukraine's Actions to Core Tenets | Differences of Ukraine's Actions to Core Tenets |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be combined with military operations, subversion, cyber, etc., to undermine target | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ukraine is focused on building positive narrative in Western eyes, not undermining stability |
| <p>Unrestricted Warfare</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competition is what matters, not the tools: war and peace are not useful concepts Using the right tools at the state's disposal for the objective (kinetic for issues that can be solved by force; non-kinetic for all others) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information being used for persuasion in support of political goals; military force being used on the battlefield Information campaign being used for materiel, economic, and political purposes to gain advantage over adversary Appealing to global consensus across multiple issues (war sanctions, shipping grain, war crimes, etc.) through international organizations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ukraine is not engaged in competition with the target audiences (the West) from which it seeks support |
| <p>Grey Zone</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities below the threshold of armed conflict (i.e.: avoiding escalation to actual war) Engaging in non-kinetic activities (information and cyber operations) with ambiguity on attribution and proportionality of response | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A – Ukraine is not using information to harm the West | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ukraine is fighting a war against Russia Ukraine's X/Twitter operations are clearly attributed to Ukraine Ukraine is targeting Western countries with X/Twitter operations, not Russia |
| <p>Dragons & Snakes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Horizontal escalation of crisis outside of main theatre of confrontation Add dilemmas to an adversary's calculation about activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating horizontal pressure (Western military support, economic support, sanctions pressure, etc.) outside of main theatre of confrontation (Ukraine-Russian lines) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information operations are non-kinetic Information operations not targeting Russia directly (i.e.: seeking Western support for Ukraine) |
| <p>"New Rules of War"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wars never end, so long as one side continues to plan for resumed competition or confrontation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ukraine is unlikely to end information operations targeting the west. Ukraine's long-term goals (NATO, EU) rely on mutual commitment Russia is unlikely to change its overall historical narrative about Ukraine as part of Russian empire | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ukraine is not seeking to maintain a dominant advantage over the West |

6.1.1 4GW

Fourth-generation warfare (4GW) concepts rest on the idea of building a narrative of legitimacy for armed non-state groups fighting states with much greater conventional military power, where the weaker power enjoys a much stronger sense of identity and connection to members of the identity group.¹ While Ukraine is leveraging the idea of an identity group that has special power over its adversary, Ukraine is a state, not an armed non-state group. In that sense, the object of 4GW's analysis – guerrillas, insurgents and other non-state actors – does not align with Ukraine. However, its leverage of identity does align.

During the 2022 Russian invasion, Ukraine was a weaker military power than Russia, with Russia's intention was assessed as capturing as many cities as possible, quickly, to attempt for force NATO to accept the new status quo, rather than fight for it.² However, Ukraine emphasize in the first days of the war that they were holding out despite having less overall combat power than Russia. Messages from @DefenceU saying "We used to hear about heroes. Now we seen them! Proud to be Ukrainian!"³ and "Our defenders are ready to meet the enemy. All fighters have a fighting spirit and a great desire to destroy the occupiers. Everything will be Ukraine! Together for victory!"⁴ make clear appeals that Ukraine has an intangible strength that Russia lacks. This appeal is to notions of Ukrainian heroism, and a greater willingness of defenders to fight for their home than invaders have to conquer it.

In the weeks after the invasion, RAND published commentary on Ukraine's high morale and willingness to fight as being a differentiator for Ukraine as it was for the Vietcong during the Vietnam War. A deeper willingness to endure greater sacrifice than the adversary is often more important than traditional measures of combat power.⁵ The notion of being weaker was fused with the idea of an inherent Ukrainian toughness and willingness to fight for the identity group. The frequent refrain '*Slavo Ukraini*' (or 'Glory to Ukraine') presents a slogan that captures that sense of determination. In the early days of the war, convincing domestic audiences that the government would endure was probably more important than convincing international audiences. In the short-term, survival was paramount.

The main difference between 4GW concepts and Ukraine's use of identity was the efforts to not only show the humanity of Ukrainians and their likelihood of victory, but to fuse that identity with the stated principles of most Western governments (democracy, rule of law, right to self-defence). The target of Ukrainian's identity in its English-language X/Twitter campaign was not convincing Ukrainians of their Ukrainianness: it was to convince Western voters that the qualities of strength and determination Ukraine was showing were the same as Western values. Videos and images showing the liberation of previously occupied territory, the raising of flags, and the smiling faces of soldiers all painted a strong picture of the power Ukraine's identity, and its similarity to images of World War Two of Allied forces liberating occupied territory from Nazi control. The use of 'humanizing' messaging and images in time segment 3 re-enforces the notion of Ukrainian determination by showing members of Ukraine's armed forces in uniform in relatable situations that do not involve combat.

6.1.2 Hybrid Warfare

The term Hybrid Warfare has been the source of some disagreement. The American hybrid warfare concept presented by Frank Hoffman emphasizes the combination of combat operations at the tactical level, with novel technology, irregular warfare, and novel approaches to create a deluge of kinetic and non-kinetic dilemmas in real-time, while the Russian concept of hybrid warfare (or *Gibridnaya Voyna*) emphasizes information operations, subversion, and other non-kinetic activities targeting the culture and society of the adversary – perhaps not even its military – to avoid fighting altogether.⁶ Others in Russia have taken hybrid warfare to mean manipulation of public perceptions through media activity about who is a friend, enemy or neutral, without ever having the manipulation directly attributed to its actual attacker.⁷ The only common thread to these three definitions is the use of information operations, either in conjunction with military operations in the Hoffman definition or as a stand-alone activity designed to weaken or distract an enemy such that combat operations, with their costs and risks of escalation, are avoided while still achieving the objective.

The Russian concepts of hybrid warfare do not apply well to Ukraine's English-language information operations on X/Twitter, beyond the combination of information operations for strategic purposes (weapons donations for the west) to continue combat operations. Even in the adversarial context in 2022-2023, Ukraine was clearly not using information operations as a precursor to invade Russian territory (though that would come later). During the period of study, Ukraine allegedly targeted things like the Kerch bridge connecting Russian to Crimea,⁸ and allegedly assassinated the daughter of a prominent Russian theorist and philosopher.⁹ These operations are far more likely to create a sense of insecurity inside Russia than English-language social media; however, these are kinetic activities. Moreover, it is not clear that attempting to undermine Putin's regime or create uncertainty in the Russian government would help Ukraine. There is no guarantee that a successor to Putin would decide the end the war in Ukraine, or that political uncertainty in nuclear-armed Russia would be better for global stability or better for Ukraine. Ukraine is clearly not engaging in English-language information operations to attempt to overthrow the Russian government or seek regime change.

Ukrainian tactical information operations may be targeting Russian military and political centres of power; however, those are outside the scope of this work. Ukraine's English-language operations are clearly a strategic level operation targeting public will *in order to* sustain the flow of weapons and ammunition for Ukraine's war effort. Ukraine's English-language information operations are being used at the same time as combat operations, but there is little reason to believe they are deliberately coupled. It is more likely that evidence of combat operations at the tactical level is being deliberately shared in order to deliver strategic level messaging to Western publics. Therefore, the information operations targeting Western public do not fit will into the existing Hybrid Warfare concept because that concept aligns combat and information operations on the adversary only, not on partners and friends.

6.1.3 Unrestricted Warfare

The Chinese PLA concept of *unrestricted warfare* eliminates the difference between the concepts of war and peace, and sees no difference between military and non-military tools of international politics because the

key element in unrestricted warfare is competition.¹⁰ There are clear differences in the costs and utility of different tools of international politics – military power, economic power, the legal system, the media, etc. – and they all have clear purposes for different applications. Unrestricted warfare focuses on the non-fungibility of different kinds of tools of international politics, but that they all serve the purpose of competition and maintaining advantage over an adversary.

Ukraine's English-language information operations will not achieve a battlefield effect against Russian personnel that never see it or don't understand it, and a successful Ukrainian armoured assault on Russia lines will not built support for Ukraine's war effort in Wisconsin if nobody there ever sees the combat footage. However, both are clearly necessary for Ukraine to win. Successful combat operations will eliminate Russian forces and seize ground, and the combat footage set to music with photos of Ukrainian service personnel set to catchy music with a good slogan can help build support for Ukraine's cause in the United States and in the West.

Ukraine's information operations include positive messages to build Ukraine's credibility and negative ones to attempt to undermine Russia's credibility. Ukraine appeals to international organizations like the United Nations General Assembly, the European Union, and NATO through its English-language information operations, and @ZelenskyyUA regularly reports on bi-lateral meetings with other world leaders. All of these meetings surely contain more content, context, and discussion than Ukraine shares, though the X/Twitter content is part of presenting Ukraine's narrative. Ukraine has also appealed to the International Atomic Energy Association to help stop Russian military forces from menacing nuclear power stations,¹¹ with the implied reminder that nuclear disaster carries the risk of massive global consequence. Likewise, Ukraine reminded the world that Russian targeting of Ukrainian grain stocks risks famine in the Global South if that product cannot be safely exported to some of the most food-vulnerable people on Earth.¹² Ukraine has also attempted to name-and-shame companies that continued doing business in Russia after the February 2022 invasion.¹³ Ukraine has also called for sanctions for Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, and many calls for future war crimes tribunals to hold the guilty accountable.¹⁴ These appeals are in addition to those made by Ukraine to the United States, the United Kingdom, France and others for military assistance that Ukraine's defence industrial base cannot provide on its own.

Ukraine is doing all these things simultaneously to maximize its advantage over Russia in global competition through all tools available. Military equipment and ammunition improve Ukraine's combat capacity, and therefore its ability to confront Russia on the battlefield. Harming Russia financially through sanctions is intended to impose costs on the Russia state overall, impacting Russia's ability to bear the costs of a war and running the non-war parts of the state simultaneously. Pressuring companies to pull out of Russia largely impacts Russian prestige of the practical impacts of western technology companies (Cisco, Microsoft, SAP¹⁵) leaving and the need to find replacement suppliers. Ukraine is using the information tool to promote the actions of other tools (military, sanctions agreements with allies, etc.) as part of the broader competition. The approaches and understanding of competition outlined in *Unrestricted Warfare* are being used by Ukraine, and the information domain is being used to promote financial and business measures being asked for to target Russia. *Unrestricted Warfare* provides the best existing theoretical model though which to understand Ukraine's information operations.

6.1.4 Grey Zone other Western Concepts

The 'Grey Zone' concepts presented by Western militaries focus on actions that fall between the traditional duality of war and peace¹⁶ and the ambiguity of hostile actions taken by states against others that fall below the threshold of armed conflict and traditional concepts about escalation and proportionality of response. Much discussion on the grey zone is about ambiguity of who the impacts are perceived, and therefore how we conceptualize retaliation and proportionality of response.¹⁷ How many units of cyber operations does a victim of a cyber attack respond with? How do we even measure that? The same applies to the impacts of information operations, interfering in domestic politics through subversion and other non-kinetic spaces.

This model does not apply well to Ukraine since the 2022 invasion was a full-scale conventional war launched by Russia. Concerns about escalation between a nuclear-armed invader and a non-nuclear state are less concerning than if both states were nuclear armed, or if there was only the threat of war, not an actual war ongoing. For Ukraine, the 2022 full-scale invasion was an escalation from the 2014-2022 period of annexation of Crimea and active combat operations along defensive lines in Donbas. Though there is clear use of information operations and an attempt to sway global public opinion in Ukraine's favour, these operations are not being conducted in a context of avoiding escalation. They are being done to sustain the flows of military and financial aid so Ukraine can win on the battlefield. The core 'grey zone' concept does not apply to Ukraine's activities, even if the importance of information operations is captured.

The Dragons & Snakes by David Kilcullen presents the idea of managing *horizontal escalation* (that is, adding new planes of competition below the threshold of armed conflict) rather than *vertical escalation* (or, conventional military escalation). Horizontal escalation is the idea that an enemy can be forced into new dilemmas by attacking sanctuary spaces, changing the type of targets, and attacking in different theatres that still matter to an adversary, forcing the adversary to spread resources and attention beyond the main line of conflict.¹⁸ Ukraine is evidently engaged in horizontal escalation with Russia, however it is largely kinetic. The alleged assassination of Darya Dugina in Moscow was allegedly the work of Ukrainian military intelligence,¹⁹ and Ukraine allegedly destroyed the underwater Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline in September 2022 that was an essential vector for Russia to export its natural gas to Europe.²⁰ After the period of study Ukrainian special forces were allegedly operating in Sudan to target Russian Wagner fighters operating there,²¹ and ongoing long-range drone operations targeting Russian oil and gas refineries 1,000km from Ukraine, forcing Russia to harden those targets against future strikes.²² These operations are forcing Russia to take measures they would otherwise prefer not to, but they are in response to kinetic activities, not information operations.

There is some horizontal escalation in the information domain because Ukraine is raising global awareness of issues like global grain supplies, allegations of war crimes, and the bravery of its fighters – and crucially, Ukraine has persuaded partners, allies and international organizations to take measures to help. Russia has been removed from the SWIFT global banking system; sanctions have limited a massive list of export commodities; prominent Russian oligarchs have been personally targeted including those living in the West.²³ These actions have forced Russia to consider its position outside the Ukraine-Russia axis, and concern itself with more countries and institutions in international politics that it would otherwise have to if Ukraine had

not raised these issues for global awareness. It is not clear whether Western publics are aware of *horizontal escalation* is taking place, however, Ukraine is certainly creating these dilemmas for Russia.

Sean McFate's *New Rules of War* points out that defining clear 'winners' and 'losers' in wars – as defined by an end of hostilities, with both sides accepting an outcome – is a dead concept because even the party who fared worse in combat can continue competition through politics, narrative and manipulating perception.²⁴ Though Ukraine sought to create a perception of the inevitability of victory and created an impression of sustained momentum toward victory, this reality has not materialized. It is possible that cessation of hostilities as a result of military operations along will never happen. During the period of study there were overtures toward negotiation in April 2022, and discussion about Ukraine's terms to end the conflict through a 'peace formula' articulated by President Zelenskyy's office.²⁵ None of this precludes an ongoing conflict that is never fully militarily resolved with continued competition through other means. It is reasonable to assume that Ukrainian information operations will be ongoing after some kind of settlement because Ukraine will need the sustained support of Western partners for whatever peace comes.

6.1.5 Conclusions

The closest alignment we see between concepts of war and Ukrainian information operations are the concepts contained in *Unrestricted Warfare* and the *New Rules of War*. Ukraine is using all the tools at its disposal to win the competition with Russia – both on the battlefield, and in the 'court of public opinion' with focus on Western publics. The *4GW*, *Hybrid Warfare*, *Grey Zone*, and *Dragons & Snakes* concepts included information operations as part of their concepts, but they are bound by contextual factors that do not reflect Ukraine's current reality. *4GW* focuses on non-state actors in war; *Hybrid Warfare* focuses on combining military and information activities against an adversary target; *Grey Zone* focuses on avoiding conflict; and *Dragons & Snakes* focuses on military escalation. None of this applies neatly to Ukraine's current situation.

All the concepts discussed here include information operations as a tool of statecraft and war. The difference in the emphasis on war (*4GW*, *Hybrid Warfare*, *Grey Zone*, *Dragons & Snakes*) or the emphasis on war as one of many tools of competition and statecraft (*Unrestricted Warfare*, *New Rules of War*) is the defining factor in the applicability of Ukraine's information operations campaign targeting Western audiences. Ukraine is using information operations as a tool of international politics and statecraft *in order to* better prosecute its war with Russia to either win or resolve it favourably. Ukraine's use of information operations targeting Western audiences is about securing the necessary military capabilities to fight its war, while also securing financial and political support for its goals of statecraft (harming Russia as best possible, and securing its own future).

Unrestricted Warfare concepts explicitly reject the division between peace and war and see no difference between kinetic and non-kinetic tools as instruments of competition. Ukraine is at war, and is using its military instruments to fight; its diplomatic and political instruments to build state-to-state support and the support of international institutions; and it is using information operations to target publics in Western nations with a wide variety of content; and it is doing all of those things simultaneously as part of an overall campaign of resistance and competition. The flexibility inherent in *Unrestricted Warfare* is the concept of modern warfare that best captures Ukraine's inherent challenge: matching the tools at its disposal to build

political, economic, and materiel support from as broad a coalition of international partners as possible in order to win the war (or end its war on favourable terms) with Russia.

6.2 International Relations Theory

We can observe themes from IR theory, generally, in Ukraine’s information operations. Immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, liberal institutionalist themes were included in messaging. The “if we fall, you fall” video was Ukraine attempting to underline that if Ukraine falls, other European countries will be targeted by Russia next.²⁶ Another video claiming “Ukrainian Defence forces protect not only our state, but the whole Europe”²⁷ makes the same point. These appeals are to the self-interest of the West, that if Ukraine is not supported Russia will move its power and influence westward and potentially attack a NATO member (forcing significant decisions about Article 5 and Great Power war). Ukraine announcing success in some of those measures, including: the United Nations General Assembly condemning Russia’s invasion in March 2022;²⁸ the World Bank’s mobilization of \$700m in emergency funding in early March 2022;²⁹ the EU’s implementation of sanctions against Russia within weeks of the invasion;³⁰ and the ICJ issuing an order calling on Russia to end its invasion.³¹ Realism is also implied in decrying Russia’s naked use of power in invading its neighbour because it held a long-standing grievance and because there was nothing stopping them. However, the presence of these themes is less significant than the overwhelming appeals to the inevitability of victory, the deservingness of Ukraine of Western help, and stoking anger over Russia’s harm of civilians.

The more useful IR theory lenses to understand the messaging are the English School, Soft Power, and Public Diplomacy.

TABLE 3: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY – COMPARISON OF UKRAINE’S ACTIVITIES TO CONCEPTS

| International Relative Theory | | |
|--|---|--|
| Concept & Core Tenets | Alignment of Ukraine’s Actions to Core Tenets | Differences of Ukraine’s Actions to Core Tenets |
| <p>English School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘International societies’ comprise like-minded nations that embrace common values ▪ Members within an international society have more efficient relationships because of shared values and understanding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ukraine regularly portrays Russia as being outside of the group of nations (‘the West’) with commonly held values. ▪ Ukraine regularly portrays itself as being part of the West and emphasizes share values and principles. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ N/A – Ukraine’s appeals regularly invoke idea of Ukraine as Western, and Russia being outside ‘international society.’ |
| <p>Soft Power</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Persuasion based on social and cultural attractiveness of the state persuading ▪ Exercising power by shaping the terms of the policy discussion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presenting Ukraine’s values, mindset, and actions as Western ▪ Using variety of symbols and imagery that project values Ukraine wants to demonstrate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ N/A – Ukraine’s messaging does not reject the power of cultural and entertainment-value appeal. |

| International Relative Theory | | |
|--|---|--|
| Concept & Core Tenets | Alignment of Ukraine's Actions to Core Tenets | Differences of Ukraine's Actions to Core Tenets |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capitalizing on broader cultural and media trends to link Ukrainian image to trends | |
| <p>Public Diplomacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging in a layered approach that includes listening, advocacy, public broadcasting, cultural exchange and diplomatic exchange. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listening: there is some evidence of Ukraine abandoning some themes and embracing some new ones—presumably, because they are 'listening' to preferences of their target audiences. Advocacy: Ukraine was making clear appeals for weapons systems deliveries, sanctions and boycotts against Russia, and other measures in clear details. Public broadcasting: Ukraine was sharing its X/Twitter content to reach Western audiences online. Some of its content was also covered by television media, giving the social media campaign greater reach. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exchange diplomacy: N/A – that cannot be done, practically, via social media. It takes much longer than advocacy and public broadcasting and is typically done in-person. Cultural diplomacy: N/A – Ukraine was generally not trying to educate the West about Ukraine. They were seeking to make Westerners view Ukraine as Western. |

6.2.1 English School

The English School is never explicitly mentioned, but the concept of an international society is at the core of Ukraine's appeals to its partners and allies. Specifically, Ukraine's narrative makes clear that Ukraine is part of the international society that includes the United States, NATO, and the EU and that Russia is very clearly not part of that international society. For English-speaking audiences, Russia is regularly and deliberately othered to emphasize to X/Twitter users that Russia is not "one of us" or part of the Western international society. @ZelenskyyUA made clear that Russia does present a risk to the world, saying: "Thank you @POTUS for your leadership, robust support of (Ukraine) and understanding that (Russia) is a threat to entire civilized world. Together we are defending values of freedom common to both..."³² Using both @ZelenskyyUA and @DefenceU, Ukraine made crystal clear that Ukraine is Western and that Russia simply is not part of the civilized world (i.e.: the "West" as an international society). Quoting President Zelenskyy: "This is a war for values. When we win this war the Europeans will continue to enjoy their freedom. If the person who wants to destroy any kind of freedom in Ukraine and Europe wins that means dark times will come for the whole continent."³³ We previously discussed Ukraine's humanizing content showing Ukrainian military personnel in human moments with their comrades, intimate partners, and pets and how it is intended to show common culture and values between Ukraine and the West.

Additional messages make the point that Russia is outside Western international society, saying "terror has long crossed the line beyond which it became obvious to many in the civilized world that it is a matter of global security to punish russia (sic), a terrorist state, for everything it has done against Ukraine and the

international legal order.”³⁴ This content is all in addition to comparison between Russia today to Nazi Germany during the Second World War, and images of bodies being exhumed, torture chambers and other war crimes. The deliberate attempt to connect Russia with an ‘outsider’ status is to reinforce the narrative that Ukraine shares common values with its Western partners and that Russia does not. Additionally, but casting Russia outside a common rule set it enables Ukraine to present Russia as violent, brutish, irrational and undeserving of the same dignity and respect that other states are owed. This kind of othering has been used by the Confederacy, the Nazis, and contemporary anti-Semitic organizations as the basis to justify political ostracization and/or organized violence against the ‘other.’³⁵ Unlike those historical cases, Ukraine is doing so from a position of relative military weakness to Russia, and making the argument as an appeal for help in defence—not as justification for offensive predation against Russia.

6.2.2 Soft Power

Soft power is the idea that states can persuade other states toward policy choices based on the attractiveness of its culture and values to present a moral authority that is also perceived as legitimate by target audiences.³⁶ In this sense, Ukraine has exercised soft power both to Western leaders and to domestic publics. Western leaders – from national leaders to multilateral institutional leaders – have collectively been persuaded to provide hundreds of billions of dollars in military, economic and humanitarian support to Ukraine. The limitation for using the soft power lens to explain Ukraine’s information operations is that the concept clearly states that soft power is not a replacement or substitute for military power or economic power: it is used in addition to those things to create consensus and build coalitions for policy options that will be jointly implemented.³⁷

First, Ukraine’s pre-war military power was limited and focused on holding defensive lines in the Donbas against Russian annexation. Even if Ukraine had greater military power, it is not the most useful tool for building a coalition of allies and partners except in a defensive context prior to war; not during an ongoing one. Second, Ukraine’s economic output varied significantly in the period leading up the war, with many years of negative GDP growth from 2008-2021.³⁸ Leveraging economic power was never a practical option. Third – and most importantly for Ukraine – any use of soft power means since the Russian invasion was not about proposed a future action, but an existential response against invasion. Soft power is presented as a way for moral persuasion to complement other tools like military and economic power – not replace them – to build a global consensus for an as-yet-taken policy choice.

If we look only at the elements of making a national identity attractive and familiar, Ukraine has clearly relied on the precepts of soft power in their information operations (leveraging attractiveness of culture) targeting Western publics. They have done this by mixing very easy-to-understand elements of Ukrainian culture – and crucially – have mixed those elements with cultural symbols more familiar to Western target audiences. @DefenceU published a United24 video that provides a very brief history of Ukrainian Cossacks, showcasing their combat victories over enemies, their seafaring ability, and summarizing their combat victories over superior forces.³⁹ That video blends the Ukrainian elements by comparing them to other more recognizable cultural groups with the caption “Did you know that (Ukrainian) Cossacks were warriors as cool as the Vikings or pirates of the Caribbean Sea?”⁴⁰ The Cossack story is not presented independently: it is presented as being similar to other concepts, and thus more relatable. There is a Netflix series called *Vikings* that ran six seasons,

and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film series included five films, making those specific references more readily identifiable.

@DefenceU shows a video of Ukrainian soldiers playing soccer with the caption “While there is a winter break in the Ukrainian Football (sic) League, our soldiers traditionally don’t stop.”⁴¹ Another post talks about the Ukrainian Football Championship, and how it lasted over four hours because the match needed to be halted because of air raid alarms.⁴² In May 2022, @DefenceU marked Mother’s Day, thanking Ukrainian mothers for their strength and support for their children, showing images of mothers with their children in the park and in bomb shelters.⁴³ There are many other examples already referred to of western music dubbed over video content, quotes from prominent people including authors and celebrities to show Ukraine aligning their story to Western cultural symbols and references. Ukraine is seeking to make their culture attractive by showing it in terms that reference existing Western concepts.

6.2.3 Public Diplomacy

Ukraine’s public diplomacy efforts were coordinated (eventually) to deliver a clear and coherent narrative about what they wanted from the West, and why they were deserving of help. Notably, the content shared on X/Twitter was overwhelmingly true, with only a single demonstrably disprovable set of messaging—that of the Ghost of Kyiv. This incident was reported by the Western media, and Ukraine essentially admitted the Ghost of Kyiv was the embellishment of the accomplishments of an entire tactical aviation squadron as the work of one pilot. That example is important because it shows that Ukraine’s message was, with one exception, truthful.

Ukraine’s information campaigns clearly align with major elements of the public diplomacy literature. First, the advocacy and public broadcasting components align with Ukraine using its own means of dissemination—X/Twitter—to engage with foreign publics. The information operations had a clear narrative (eventually) and made a clear case for why it needed help from Western countries, and why Ukrainians were deserving of it. The narrative was repeated consistently across time segments 3 and 4, and there were deliveries of many of the military platforms that Ukraine requested. Though a detailed analysis of the content from *United24* is outside of the scope of this work (beyond being shared in X/Twitter posts), the *United24* content is also clearly part of the advocacy and public broadcasting component of public diplomacy. Ukraine also showed interviews with President Zelenskyy and the fighter pilot ‘Juice’ on major American broadcast networks. Ukraine understood that X/Twitter content can be used to reinforce and amplify appearances in Western media, expand the potential reach of their messages.

We can presume that some level of listening was being conducted, because Ukraine abandoned some themes during the period of study and added new themes over the period of study. The Hollywood parody content (memed media posters, the ‘Ukraine Oscars 2022’, etc.) were not re-used, and neither were the themes. This implies some level of ‘listening’ to how the content was received (presumably not well) if the parody construct was not repeated. Conversely, the #FreedomIsOurReligion appeals to American evangelicals only began well into time segment 3, in September 2022. American evangelicalism is a well-known strain in American political life, and these themes were not mobilized for the first six months of the war. This implies a

level of ‘listening’ to inform the messaging and targeting in the advocacy and public broadcasting components of public diplomacy.

Cultural diplomacy and exchange diplomacy are difficult to identify using social media analysis—especially given the longer time frame required for these approaches to take effect. We can see in the X/Twitter content that Ukraine was regularly publishing summaries of diplomatic meetings with heads of state and leaders of multilateral organizations like the EU, United Nations, and others. However, this is not the same as cultural and exchange diplomacy. The closest we can see is Zelenskyy’s appearance at cultural events like the Berlin Film Festival, the appearance of Ukrainian-American football players at the Superbowl, and a Ukrainian football league. However, these are not true exchanges in the sense of bi-directional engagement. For this reason, we cannot observe any practical cultural diplomacy or exchange diplomacy across the period of study with the methods used for this study.

Additionally, cultural diplomacy is generally about sharing an appreciation of the sender’s culture in the minds of the receiving audience. Ukraine made very little effort to educate Westerners about Ukrainian cultural. The use of the blue and yellow for Ukraine’s flag and the Ukrainian Tryzub were images more than real cultural exchange. The lone example in the period of study was the re-sharing of a *United24* video in which Ukraine provided a short explainer-video about the history of Ukraine. The video talked about pirates and warriors, and was meant to share very surface-level details about Ukraine’s history and culture via social media. Cultural diplomacy refers to sharing history and culture with an audience over a long period. Short videos are not what is meant by cultural diplomacy.

6.3 Propaganda, Persuasion, and Information Operations Theory

Propaganda, persuasion, and information operations theory is rich and diverse. We see many of the principles defined in classical theory at play over the period of study, underlining the enduring nature of many previous observations about human perception and susceptibility to persuasion. The biggest debate remains the disagreement about the ultimate purpose of propaganda and information operations to shape opinions alone, or to shape opinions in order to mobilize action.

6.3.1 Persuasion Theory

ELM shows that using emotion for persuasion is more effective than logical argumentation alone, and that people are more likely to be persuaded by arguments from people they consider to be part of the same identity group. Both emotion and identity are, therefore, “short-cuts” to improving the persuasive power of information operation. Ukraine mobilized both emotion and identity as part of its information operations.

TABLE 4: PERSUASION THEORY: COMPARISON OF UKRAINE’S ACTIVITIES TO CONCEPTS

| Persuasion Theory | | |
|---|--|--|
| Concept & Core Tenets | Alignment of Ukraine’s Actions to Core Tenets | Differences of Ukraine’s Actions to Core Tenets |
| <p>Emotion & Persuasion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leveraging emotion as a simpler cognitive pathway that dispassionate persuasion ▪ Focus on what <i>feels true</i> to make it more compelling that relying on logic and reason alone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ukraine using evocative imagery of war crimes to elicit negative emotions toward Russia ▪ Ukraine presenting images of military and civilian determination to evoke positive images | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ N/A – almost no non-emotional appeals. Those that were tended toward diplomatic language thanking world leaders. |
| <p>Identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Appealing to national identifiers through nationality. ▪ Appeals to sub-identities through ethnicity, race, language, religion, occupation, socio-economic status, etc. These can be sub-national or transnational. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ukraine using national appeals, linking to national-level identity. ▪ Ukraine using appeals to sub-national and transnational constituencies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not all content appealed to identity explicitly. Much content showcased Ukraine’s strong identity as attractive and worthy of praise |

6.3.1.1 Emotion & Persuasion

Ukraine’s use of emotion in its English-language information operations clearly aligned with using emotion as part of its approach to persuasion.

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion presents two basic pathways to persuasion: the central route where the target audience is persuaded through facts and argumentation, and the peripheral route where emotional and identity-based appeals are used to enhance the persuasive value of an argument; including though emotions like anger.⁴⁴ *Elaboration* is essentially a term indicating a willingness to consider a problem thoughtfully. Ukraine’s English-language information operations generally focus on more on peripheral appeals – that is, emotionally laden appeals – that on dispassionate persuasion. This is partly the nature of the X/Twitter platform that prioritizes short, sharp, emotional-focused engagement to keep users consuming the kind of data they prefer.⁴⁵ Across the period of study we saw a mixing of positive and negative emotions, with more negative emotions as the war progressed.

Emotion was clearly used to connect with audiences, including positive emotions to connect audiences with the humanity of Ukrainians, to negative emotions eliciting outrage at Russian targeting of civilian spaces and evidence of war crimes against civilians. Each time segment section addresses the content in more detail above in sections 4.2.1.2, 4.2.2.2, 4.2.3.2, 4.2.4.2. These sections provide ample evidence of mobilizing emotion over the entire period of study.

The high frequency of using negative emotions with respect to framing Russia’s actions strongly implies that Ukraine was seeking to create greater confidence in its target audience that Russia was wrong to invade and

that war crimes are unjust. The use of negative emotion is likely to resonate with those audience with low elaboration who are therefore more susceptible to emotionally based arguments: anger especially. Whether this was consciously part of Ukraine's information operations strategy is unknowable, however Ukraine showed images and videos about war crimes and harm to civilians and children. Ukraine also used positive emotions to showcase the bravery and humanity of Ukrainian soldiers, often mixing hardship with images of hope (soldiers with animals, soldiers in bombed out buildings playing music, etc.). These appeals were likely intended to show the positive value of Ukrainianness in support of creating positive feelings toward Ukraine and its struggle.

Some content presented by @ZelenskyyUA was not as explicitly emotional, and was typically used formal, diplomatic language when thanking foreign leaders for their assistance. This type of content was, however, in the narrow minority of all content.

6.3.1.2 Group Identity

Ukraine was clearly using appeals to identity—both national, and sub-groups within states—as part of its appeals to Western audiences. There was also clear promotion of a Ukrainian identity, presented as sharing the same values as its Western target audiences.

Group identity is a powerful element that influences the weight people give different arguments. For example, people are generally more likely to agree with statements from people or groups with whom they share an affinity.⁴⁶ Berger notes that identity for often relies on race and ethnicity as strong indicators for identifying membership in a group, religion, nationality and country of origin are also very important markers.⁴⁷ Trades, guilds, socio-economic groups and others all form the basis for sub-identities, with assumptions about how those sub-identities have distinctions compared to the identity of a larger national whole.⁴⁸ If we refer to ELM theory, emotional appeals tend to short-circuit our critical thinking and accept emotional influence into our perception about the strength of competing arguments. Ukraine and relied on all these markers – in combination, or stand-alone – as part of their segmentation of their target audience to include both national level appeals, and appeal to sub-national or transnational identities.

There are few Ukrainian speakers in the West, and this helps explain why shortly after the invasion Ukraine slowly stopped using Ukrainian script on @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA. Both accounts increasingly used English subtitles for all video dialogue in Ukrainian and also began specifically targeting different identity groups and sub-segments of Western populations. There were many appeals to national heroes in the 'kill cards' with quotes from Shakespeare, Polish poets, German philosophers, and repeated specific thanks to foreign leaders for their donations of military equipment. During Zelenskyy's visit to Washington DC around Christmas in 2022, there was a clear promotion of the prestige and dignity of Washington as a capital and of the White House. Ukraine was clearly appealing to Western national identities and seeking to shorten the perceived social distance between Ukraine and the West. Ukraine was clearly targeting many sub-segments with its English-language information operations to appeal to as many sub-national groups as possible to capture those groups not persuaded by national appeals alone.

To emphasize its religiosity for more religious sub-segments of the Western public, Ukraine began showing images of destroyed churches, cathedrals and any physical location associated with religion. Most likely targeting American evangelicals specifically, Ukraine used the hashtag #FreedomIsOurReligion to appeal to the narrative of ‘freedom’ that is often associated with American evangelicals, in addition to direct appeals to religiosity. Ukraine sought to present itself as relatable to Western culture by showing common ethnicity, cultural values, and religiosity, and used subtitles to cross the language barrier wherever possible. Zelenskyy himself increasingly spoke English in many of his speeches – likely to add an additional layer of relatability.

Not all of Ukraine’s content appealed explicitly to a specific in-group identity. Much of the content was an indirect appeal to a shared set of values, by humanizing and showing Ukraine’s bravery and determination in the face of invasion. These messages highlighted a presumed Ukrainian identity, with similar values to those of many Western viewers. This is a subtler, less specific appeal, without specific appeal to a group or sub-group.

6.3.1 Competition and Mobilizing the More Compelling Perspective

Ukraine presented a clear narrative that communicated meaning to the target audience about Ukraine’s determination in the face of a brutal invasion. Ukraine’s messaging aligned with the tenet of theory on this point. Ukraine also aligned on the importance of images, symbols, the role of their leader as outlined in theory. Ukraine presented images of its citizens, soldiers, and Zelenskyy in alignment with those principles. Images of Ukrainian heroes were regularly posted—specific and implied. There was only one attempt at inoculation against a counter-narrative, and this appears to be because Ukraine found out about impending Russian disinformation. The denial was rapid and clear. To best compete in the information space, Ukraine presented very clear, unambiguous messaging that underlined the basic Ukraine-good/Russia-bad narrative. Accordingly, there was almost no implied messaging. Clear, unambiguous language was the norm in Ukrainian messaging.

TABLE 5: COMPETITION AND NARRATIVES - COMPARISON OF UKRAINE'S ACTIVITIES TO CONCEPTS

| Competition and Mobilizing the More Compelling Narrative | | |
|---|---|--|
| <i>Concept & Core Tenets</i> | <i>Alignment of Ukraine’s Actions to Core Tenets</i> | <i>Differences of Ukraine’s Actions to Core Tenets</i> |
| <p>Narrative as Meaning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The meaning of the story is more important than the facts ▪ The meaning communicates something about the value and perspectives of the in-group | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Positive stories about the determination, courage and tenacity of Ukrainians in the face of invasion ▪ Negative stories about how missile strikes deny Ukrainian’s the right to pursue freedom and happiness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ N/A – content overwhelmingly contributed to an overall narrative about Ukraine’s status as brave, deserving underdog |
| <p>Inoculation to Counter-Narratives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Preparing audience for information operations from another source by | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Single case of Ukraine attempting to inoculate the audience against false Russian information | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The remainder of Ukraine’s content made no attempts at inoculation |

| Competition and Mobilizing the More Compelling Narrative | | |
|--|--|---|
| Concept & Core Tenets | Alignment of Ukraine's Actions to Core Tenets | Differences of Ukraine's Actions to Core Tenets |
| explaining the source is trying to dupe them | | |
| <p>Images, Symbols & Memes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visual elements signaling affinity for the in-group and its values and aspirations Marker for cultural alignment and affinity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ukraine presented some key symbols that communicate affinity with Ukraine Images played a very prominent role, in showing the strength and defiance of Ukrainians and evidence of war crimes committed against them | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited use of memes by Ukraine, though Ukraine endorsed the “NAFO Fellas”—a major producer of pro-Ukrainian memes |
| <p>Leaders, Heros & Myths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The leader as the embodiment of the movement or the struggle Heroes as overcoming adversity for the sake of the movement General myth of being changed by the struggle and stronger for it. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zelenskyy as leader, and clear symbol of Ukraine (most frequent and prominent) Heros memorialized specifically, and the overall heroism of its soldiers. Some references to myths, but much less than Zelenskyy as leader or heroism of soldiers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A – all themes included. |
| <p>Framing the Implied Question</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relying on subtext and heavy implication of meaning to present meaning without saying it directly. Take advantage of existing worldviews by implying them. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A – messages were clear (send X/Y/Z weapons system) N/A – messages were used clear language ('murder', 'rape', 'hero', 'glory') to express negative meaning N/A – clear messages about grain embargo, banning Russia from Olympics, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ukraine implied almost nothing. Messages were delivered clearly – from characterizing the enemy, to making clear asks for what they wanted from the West. |

6.3.1.1 Narrative as Meaning

As discussed in the sub-sections 4.2.1.3, 4.2.2.3, 4.2.3.3, 4.2.4.3 about narrative, Ukraine has followed the concepts of Ajit Maan and taken the facts of its war, and sought to make them meaningful to the target audience as resonating with the groups' self-image.⁴⁹ The missile strikes on apartment buildings are not simply about the building, they are about denying a new family a safe home; denying a family the expectation of children to grow up with parents; the expectation of the elderly to live in dignity. The images are connected to a story that presents the value, perspectives, and struggles of those involved as they weather a conflict.⁵⁰ Missile strikes on hospitals, maternity wards, schools, kindergartens, churches, monasteries, theatres, museums, gym and cultural centres are all meant to communicate something about the callous and cruel nature of the attacker against targets that are non-combatants and incapable of fighting. The meaning

is expressed very clearly about who is wrong and who is just, and invites empathy for those who harmed, and those who survive the dead.

Likewise, the positive narrative about Ukrainians is intended to show their humanity, their dignity, their perseverance and their relatability. Western audiences are intended to see compelling stories play out and are also intended to see elements of their own values, ideals, and concepts of right and wrong. Images of Ukrainian civilians singing in a bomb shelter by candlelight gives the audience a view of dignity in the face of adversity. Images of soldiers dancing, playing with kittens, playing music, goofing around with their comrades and combat action sequences shows the audience that soldiers are fighting for their country while retaining their humanity. The humanity appears intended to be the relatable part that connects the audience with the people they are seeing, thus giving those stories meaning.

6.3.1.2 Inoculation to Counter Narratives

Inoculation to counter-narratives is the act of telling an audience how someone is about to trick or mislead them in order to prepare them against the false claim. This has also been called ‘pre-bunking’, in a reverse reference to ‘de-bunking’: the false claim is addressed before it is even made, to undermine its believability. This approach has some show success in clinical studies to ‘inoculate’ an audience against misinformation.⁵¹

There is only one notable example of pre-bunking in the period of study.⁵² On 5 September 2022, long before the actual deliveries of either Leopards or Bradleys, @DefenceU warned of “Anticipatory lies. russian (sic) propagandists are reporting about destroyed M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and Leopard 2A4 tanks in the south of Ukraine. However, the decision to provide Ukraine with this equipment hasn’t been made.”⁵³ The announcement for the donation of those vehicles only happened on 6 January 2023.⁵⁴ This is the only real example, indicating this was not a prominent part of Ukraine’s approach.

6.3.1.3 Images, Symbols & Memes

Ukraine relied heavily on the use of images, symbols and memes as part of its information operations campaign. Images communicate something about shared values and are often used as a short-hand to embody what “the cause” is trying to achieve.⁵⁵ Memes, in contemporary parlance, are effectively the same thing for the digital era, reflecting the values of the in-group in rapid, easily understood—sometimes self-referential—images.

As summarized in sub-sections 4.2.1.1, 4.2.2.1, 4.2.3.1, and 4.2.4.1, Ukraine used a wide range of symbols and emotions. The Ukrainian Tryzub, iron cross, and the mix of blue and yellow were familiar images. Western military equipment was often held up as not only superior to Soviet-era legacy equipment but also as a symbol of Western and Ukrainian unity. There are countless other images of soldiers and civilians fighting Russian forces or cleaning up after their attacks that all serve the same purpose of communicating Ukrainian tenacity and bravery. Similarly, images of Russia—especially the ‘Z’ painted on much Russian equipment—was used as synonymous with both war crimes and brutality, with other images equating it with the swastika. Symbols and images played a prominent role.

Ukraine created a meme of sorts for its X/Twitter feed: the “kill card”. This card follows a template that shows a tally many times weekly of how much Russian equipment has been destroyed and how many casualties Russia has suffered. This content is not strictly a meme, because it makes no reference to culture or identity on its own. Someone can read one for the first time and understand it: it is an infographic, albeit one that follows a consistent template (whose stylistic cues were changed only a few times across the period of study). The strongest work on memes was from the “NAFO Fellas” who relied on the same dog meme face (Shiba Inu ‘doge’) that is then customized by the user (adding clothing, military equipment, headdress, etc.). However, “NAFO Fellas” is not a government or official component of Ukraine’s information operation, though the Ukrainian X/Twitter accounts did officially endorse “NAFO” as an organization and the constituent “Fellas” that post content.

6.3.1.4 *Leaders, Heros & Myths*

Ukraine relied on the likeness of their President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as a key symbol of their war against Russia. Ukrainian military personnel were presented as a generic hero figure in the content. There was little in the way of formal myth, though the idea of an underdog fighting a bigger adversary was clearly implied.

Leaders and heroes are exceptionally important for any movement. The leader becomes the physical embodiment of something intangible, giving the leader the power of a ‘saviour’, connecting the audience the organization or movement by affirming basic principles and key values.⁵⁶ Joseph Campbell emphasizes that to become the *hero*, the *person* must become a new version of themselves and experience a death of the man and the birth of hero through some traumatic series of events that were overcome.⁵⁷ President Zelenskyy clearly fits this mould. Before the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, he dressed like the president of a nation: clean shaven, suit, white shirt and tie, and polished shoes. On 24 February 2022 he issued a message from an office with ornate woodwork on the walls, wearing a suit with no tie, and delivering a dour speech in Ukrainian.⁵⁸ After this point, his image as a leader changes completely. He became a wartime leader.

Zelenskyy underwent a personal transformation in his dress, his appearance, and his manner. He also invited the world to see the emergence of something latent within Ukraine’s people. Zelenskyy talked not about himself to the world; he was the symbol. He embraced the structure of mythology of the man that is changed by the struggle. The myth became the courage and endurance of Ukraine’s people, and Zelenskyy the immediately identifiable symbol of it to foreign audiences. On 25 April 2022 he said “The future of Ukraine directly depends on the strength of our resistance - in all its forms. The future of us all. Each of our cities, each of our villages. And I am grateful to everyone who realizes this.”⁵⁹ Zelenskyy remains the symbol that has undergone the visual journey as a symbol, and he uses that position to share the stories of the people. This serves the dual purposes of emphasizing that Ukraine’s people are enduring, while also solidifying his role as leader. He is the hero representing his people.

Other Ukrainian heroes were represented specifically, and more generally as a symbol. Some individual soldiers that displayed exceptional bravery—especially those killed in the line of duty—were named Heros of Ukraine,⁶⁰ along with more generic references to the heroism of Ukrainian soldiers that held off the Russian invasion in the early days of the war.⁶¹ There was also a single references to Ukraine playing the role of David to Russia’s Goliath, with Ukraine cast as even stronger than David.⁶² More frequently, images showed

Ukrainians as everyday “Davids”, acting as heroes by standing up to adversity and the very real threat of death. Images of surgeons operating on patient by flashlight; soldiers playing violin in bombed out buildings; children and their parents singing in the metro stations being used as bomb shelters; and many similar images present an implied message of the heroism of everyday people who have not lost their humanity during a brutal war that is going on all around them. This is an implied myth of every soldier as a David, even if the individual is not recognized by name.

6.3.1.5 *Framing the Implied Question*

The notion of implied messaging in a competition for ideas does not apply well to Ukraine’s English language X/Twitter campaigns. The appeals to values and preconceived notions are clear and direct.

Framing is important in messaging because it provides common and familiar mental models through which the audience can situate a message.⁶³ The use of subtext is intended to appeal to preconceived ideas in a way that is subtle, and thus powerful because most audiences will seek to filter new information through existing concepts.⁶⁴ Ukraine has relied far more on direct, blunt messaging than on implied messaging.

The specific examples are far too numerous to list, though it is clear Ukraine relied on very, clear obvious messages. The words ‘terrorist’, ‘rapist’, ‘thug’, ‘criminal’, ‘looter’, and other pejorative appear in much of Ukraine’s X/Twitter content describing Russia. These are not subtle terms. Less hyperbolic appeals to sub-segments like quotes from anime characters, authors, film characters, poets, former national leaders, bible verses and others are not particularly subtle either. It is quite clear who the target audience is when specific in-group references are made. Ukraine has been invoking value-based arguments and appeals to right and wrong; but they have not been implied or subtle. They have been very clear about showing evidence of war crimes and calling Russia a terrorist and have been clear about humanizing Ukrainians fighting for their freedom and existence.

6.3.2 Prompting Action & Shaping Discourse

Ukraine was not seeking any action from the voting publics in Western countries through their English-language information operations. There were a few attempts early in time segment 2 to encourage foreigners with military experience to join a Ukrainian Legion (combat force), but this was the extent of explicit request for action from individuals in the West. Ukraine did ask Western governments and international organizations for military equipment, financial help, sanctions regimes, resolutions, and support with negotiations. However, these requests are normal diplomatic and wartime statecraft requests. Western publics were not asked to take action against Russia, embassies, or Russian nationals living in the West. They were simply persuaded to support the idea of Ukraine and its deservingness of support.

TABLE 6: PROMPTING ACTION & SHAPING DISCOURSE - COMPARISON OF UKRAINE'S ACTIVITIES TO CONCEPTS

| Prompting Action & Shaping Discourse | | |
|--|--|---|
| <i>Concept & Core, Tenets</i> | <i>Alignment of Ukraine's Actions to Core Tenets</i> | <i>Differences of Ukraine's Actions to Core Tenets</i> |
| <p>Shaping Beliefs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Greater certainty in messaging, with less accuracy ▪ Shape opinions toward support for a general idea or thing ▪ Shaping ideas away from support for a general idea or thing. ▪ Shaping discourse about a certain topic, by creating consensus around a topic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Regular exaggerations and leaps of logic to make point emphatically ▪ Strong support of all things Ukrainian and defensive ▪ Untruths told, wrapped in a more emotionally appealing story than the truth. ▪ Anger toward Russia with evidence of war crimes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Generic, imprecise diplomatic language often when referencing foreign leaders and international institutions. |
| <p>Prompting Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shaping beliefs is the precondition for eventually prompting action from the target audience. ▪ Action is the eventual goal of all propaganda | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ambiguous: Ukraine sought no violence or street action from ordinary people. The action is sought was from national leaders and international organizations. However, propaganda was less likely to be as effective as diplomacy and negotiations for those organizations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There were few official appeals at recruiting westerners to join a Ukrainian legion. ▪ Ukraine sought no specific action from Western voters against Russian abroad or symbols of the Russian government. ▪ Specific asks of Western governments for military platforms, economic assistance, sanctions regimes, and diplomatic help. |

6.3.2.1 Shaping beliefs

Ukrainian messaging generally aligns with the tenets of theory as pertains shaping beliefs though clear (if sometimes untrue) messaging, emphasizing the positive of the in-group, emphasizing the negative of the out-group, and presenting repetition of messaging that align with key themes.

Laswell refers to propaganda as speaking with greater certainty and clarity using all the means available, while speaking with less accuracy.⁶⁵ This idea reflects the idea of bold, clear ideas being communicated for their value as a story and less as truth. In @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA we can observe hyperbole, leaps and logic and exaggeration. The invasion was the trigger point of escalating to bold language (not surprisingly) because the threat of war had materialized. In time segment 2, 76% of @DefenceU's content was coded for card-stacking / hyperbole and 53% was coded for leaps of logic. In time segment 3, 95% included hyperbole and 85% included leaps of logic and in time segment 4 the results were similar to time segment 3 with 94% of the content included hyperbole and leaps of logic in 88% of the time. The data shows that @DefenceU is speaking with great certainty.

The only exception to this, was much of the diplomatic language from @ZelenskyyUA that appeared focused on diplomatic audiences in foreign capitals. Words like “taking steps”, “coordination”, “grateful” and “thankful” appear regularly in content, which often includes reference to conversation with other leaders or multilateral institutions. This should not be surprising, given that President Zelenskyy is seeking to sustain positive relationships with partners and is speaking in broad and positive terms about the relationships with actual and potential partners. However, the audience was presumably not ordinary people: much more direct messaging targeted that audience.

As for ‘less accuracy’ from Laswell’s description, there is only one notable example where Ukraine spoke with less factual accuracy. The only story that Ukraine has published that was later proven false was the ‘Ghost of Kyiv’ story, about a Ukrainian fighter pilot who allegedly shot down my Russian adversaries in the air over Kyiv in the opening days of the war. The Ukrainian government admitted in late April 2022 that the Ghost of Kyiv story was, in fact, not true – though not entirely false. Ukraine admitted it had not been one pilot, but a “collective image of the pilots of the 40th Tactical Aviation Brigade of Air Force, which protects the sky of the capital...they suddenly appear when not expected.”⁶⁶ Ukraine did not create a story out of whole cloth. There were videos posted of a Ukrainian Mig-29 over Kyiv, though additional footage added by private accounts was later found to be video game footage.⁶⁷ Ukraine’s walk-back with the Ghost of Kyiv was about scale: the actions of a single pilot vs. the collective effort of an aviation brigade. Ukraine used the opportunity to re-emphasize the notion of brave pilots defending Kyiv in the air. The baseline inaccuracy was about the number of pilots, not the act of defence. In that sense, Ukraine continued to shape beliefs about its air force while admitting an element of the story was false. The lie was factual, but the emotional message about defiance and bravery in the face of a larger, stronger adversary remained consistent

Bernays talks about propaganda as the repeated and consistent effort to shape opinions about a group, enterprise or idea.⁶⁸ For Ukraine, we see exactly this. As outlined in Section 4.2 @DefenceU was delivering between 5 and 7 original English-language X/Tweets per day after the February 2022 invasion, and @ZelenskyyUA ranged between 1.26 to 3.44 per day after the invasion. These are average figures sustained across time segments 2, 3 and 4. The variety of content also shows a repeated and consistent effort to shape opinions. The mix of video (something with popular music dubbed over) and images that a wide variety of scenarios like civilians mourning, soldiers in combat, soldiers in calm moments, soldiers goofing about with their comrades, families in bomb shelters, soldiers liberating villages from Russian, and first responders showing up to missile strikes to rescue people to name only some. The repetition and variety show a dedicated effort to shape Western beliefs about Ukraine and the war it is fighting for its survival. Bernays’ definition speaks directly to narrative, where each individual message is less important than the sustained effort that shapes beliefs and attitudes about a particular thing.

Hoffer presents a similar definition that introduces the idea of competition of ideas, calling propaganda the effort to shape beliefs away from one set of ideas toward another idea.⁶⁹ Like Bernays, Hoffer’s definition is about shaping opinions and beliefs. It also makes explicit that opinions can be shaped away from an idea. Ukraine’s counter-narratives and negative messages about Russia are intended to do exactly that. The many images of burned-out apartment buildings are not about the building; it is about anger toward the perpetrator who deliberately targeted the civilian occupants and building sympathy for those who lost their homes. The

many images of the evidence of war crimes connect sympathy for the victims and anger for the perpetrators. These messages are intended to shape beliefs away from Russia's narrative of defending itself against imagined Nazis and toward the idea of Ukraine's dignity in defence of its territory.

Krieg's theory on shaping discourse is similar to Hoffer's. This is not just about shaping beliefs and is certainly not about prompting action. It is more about slowly and systematically making a set of assumptions about a certain topic or thing the accepted wisdom or consensus,⁷⁰ which presumably then influences action or inaction around the subject. This is about creating a consensus on a subject, such that there is little thought given by audiences to their responses to the subject being raised.⁷¹ The presentation of Russia's actions as being something inherent to Russia ("the war criminal wanted to kill children"⁷²; "once a war criminal, always a war criminal"⁷³ "killing is entertainment for them"⁷⁴) is essential to creating this consensus. The image of Russia is one of an inherent and unchangeable threat to Ukraine. The actions are bad, and Ukraine appears intent on creating that view as the default assumption about Russia.

Ukraine faces long-term security challenges, so long as Russia seeks Ukraine as a subordinate to its empire. Ukraine also faces more immediate challenges with respect to having sufficient weapons, soldiers and global political support to continue fighting. Ukraine's persistence in showing evidence of war crimes is most likely about trying to shape discourse about Russia to increase the likelihood of securing support for its short-term objectives *and* its long-term objectives. Effectively shaping discourse in its favour would enable a consensus in Western nations around supporting Ukraine's short-term objectives and its longer-term security needs.

6.3.2.2 Prompting Action

Ukraine did not seek action from ordinary Westerners. The real action Ukraine sought was decision from national leaders and international institutions about material and political support for Ukraine; and this support was more likely sought through direct diplomacy and negotiations.

LeBon argued that action is the ultimate purpose of all propaganda, and that psychological and emotional persuasion is the pathway by which a crowd will act.⁷⁵ Ellul believed the same, viewing material of psychological persuasion as *sub-propaganda* and *propaganda* as the content that finally prompts action.⁷⁶ Lenin adopted the Marxist revolutionary frame of inculcating the masses into the 'correct' consciousness (with propaganda) before being prompted to class-based revolution in the streets.⁷⁷ Braddock writes on reasoned action theory, saying that thoughts and beliefs must align in order for a person's actions to make sense to them, moderated by the belief that a person's social group will approve of the actions.⁷⁸ In all approaches there is a clear connection between shaping beliefs and opinions as a precursor to action.

In the case of Ukraine, there is very little in the way of direct calls to action. On 28 February 2022, four days into Russia's invasion, @DefenceU called for foreigners to travel to Ukraine to fight in the 'International Legion.'⁷⁹ A similar call was made on 5 March 2022, emphasizing no visa requirements with support provided.⁸⁰ These were the only calls ever made by @DefenceU and @ZelenskyyUA for foreign volunteers. The closest thing to another call to action targeting individuals was @ZelenskyyUA sharing a United24 video that also solicits donations to Ukraine so they can buy more drones to fight Russia.⁸¹ Early figures shared by the Government of Ukraine claimed up to 20,000 foreigners had travelled to Ukraine to fight in the

International Legion, though by that figure was estimated by some foreigners on the ground to be closer to 1,000 to 3,000 combatants, and few thousand more foreign trainers and civilians supporting the war effort.⁸² In the context of “the West” comprising hundreds of millions of people, the turn-out is rather low. The efforts to convince foreigners to fight in Ukraine were resonating with some, but not likely enough to effect long-term outcomes.

The nature of the relationship between Ukraine as its target audience helps us understand why there is little in the way of call to action. The theoretical connections mentioned above are about either revolution, social rejection, or radicalization. LeBon’s work was influenced by the Paris communes in 1871; Lenin was a communist revolutionary intent on overthrowing Tsarist Russia and expanding his vision globally; Ellul was a sociologist writing about manipulating social change; and Braddock is writing about radicalization by non-state actors concerned with violent overthrow of governments. Ukraine is not seeking to incite revolution or violence in Western countries by radicalizing their voting publics. They are more likely seeking to persuade and convince the voting publics that continuing to support Ukraine is the right thing to do, and that they should support their respective governments’ actions. The call to action that Ukraine is making is for political and economic support: not violence in the streets.

6.3.3 Targeting Nations or Targeting Sub-Populations

We discussed the issue of targeting national populations and sub-national and transnational populations above in 6.3.1.2 about group identity. To avoid repetition here: it is clear that Ukraine was targeting both national populations with clear national identity messages and targeting sub-national and transnational populations with messages that appealed to those affinities also. This appears to be an effort to capture as many key demographics as possible to build as broad a base of support as possible, and to access sub-populations that may be motivated more by sub-national identity totems than national ones. The appeal is to intangible affinity and support of Ukraine and its war effort; not an explicit call-to-action. The action Ukraine seeks is from the governments representing those voters Ukraine is targeting with information operations.

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7 Alignment with Hypotheses

The main hypothesis of this work is: *If Ukraine has realized that it needs military and political support from the United States from NATO partners to effectively fight the war against Russia, then Ukraine's English-language official X/Twitter accounts are being used to mobilize the support of the voting publics in partner nations.*

This sub-section will show where this is alignment in the data set and findings with the hypothesis and the sub-hypotheses.

7.1 Emotion

One sub-hypothesis for emotional appeals is H1: *to build support with Western publics, Ukraine will target voters with emotionally-based identity messages and narratives with themes familiar to Western audiences to establish a sense of shared identity around values like freedom, democracy, community, and the right to self-defence in the face of attacks.*

This hypothesis is true. Ukraine leveraged negative and positive emotions (and mixtures of both) to create a clear narrative about Ukraine as good, Russia as bad, and Ukraine fighting a righteous and defensive war against an unjust invasion. These emotions portray Russia as a brute, and Ukraine as deserving help from the Western world as it defends itself, Western values, and the rules-based order.

The overall emotional appeal was to baseline values about right and wrong (it is wrong to harm civilians; hope and determination are good things), mixed with clear appeals to sub-segments of Western societies that are more about creating a common sense of identity between those sub-segments and Ukraine. Ukraine's emotional appeals, therefore, mix appeals to universal emotions—both positive and negative—with sub-segmented content that targets specific demographics. These appeals are inherently emotional, and as per ELM theory discussed earlier in this work, appear intended to make persuasion more effective than relying on strictly rational appeals alone.

7.1.1 Emotional Targeting of Voters

The use of the Miller framework for coding emotional appeals shows that Ukraine overwhelmingly used emotional appeals throughout the period of study. Ukraine used negative emotions like anger and outrage at Russia's treatment of Ukraine and its citizens to generate negative feelings about Russia. Ukraine used positive feelings like hope, courage, and the tenacity of the underdog to engender positive feelings about Ukraine. This basic dichotomy is consistent throughout the period of study, as discussed early, with some variation in the proportion of negative and positive emotions.

7.1.2 Identity Narratives

To connect with specific target audiences Ukraine also sought to make appeals based to national identities, and to sub-national and transnational identity groups in Western countries. Ukraine mixed identity narratives

with more high-minded ideas about democracy, international law and respect for human rights. Ukraine presented much content about Ukraine's role in defending the rules-based order and also relied on in-group lore for different age and presumed political belief sub-segments of the population.

There are clear appeals to Western audiences and their values. Appeals to democracy and the rules-based order are regularly presented, evoking the idea of a civilizational or 'way of life' being under attack from Russia in addition to Ukraine's sovereignty. Much more direct appeals to sub-segments are also very prevalent. Youth are explicitly targeted with content that appeals to anime, electronic dance music, first-person shooters, and other meme-culture content oriented toward youth. Generation-X and Baby Boomer demographics are also targeted with popular music and film references from the 1970s and 1980s. Clear appeals to American conservatives were also made with appeals to religion, imagery of churches, football, and traditional gender roles, and appeals to progressive voters by showing Ukrainian women in military service (including in combat roles, and senior leadership roles).

Of note, these appeals to sub-demographics avoid demonizing another demographic's popular media preferences, with no criticism of any Western sub-group (other than businesses that continue to do business in Russia). The appeals to identity groups in the West appear to strenuously avoid appealing to any group at the risk of losing the support of another. Ukraine's appeals to identity are intended to be non-exclusionary in order to maintain the broadest possible base of popular support in Western nations—especially the United States.

7.2 Symbols & Images

There is one sub-hypothesis for emotional appeals is H2: *To focus its targeting on smaller sub-populations in Western countries (and transnationally across Western countries), Ukraine will use symbols, memes, and slogans that are specifically targeted to those sub-populations to generate easily recognizable images that reinforce emotionally-based identity messages.*

This hypothesis is partly true: Ukraine used many existing Western symbols and images in addition to Ukrainian symbols. Though Ukraine mobilized many fixed symbols like President Zelenskyy, the blue and yellow of the Ukrainian flag, and the Ukrainian Tryzub, the X/Twitter accounts also used many similar images of people and situations as ethereal symbols of ideas. Things like military personnel and Ukrainian civilians are used as symbols, with many images of different people. They are ethereal in that each individual symbol is less important than the symbolic role each of them play in presenting a broader zeitgeist, aesthetic or narrative about Ukraine.

Similar to the mobilization of emotions discussed above, Ukraine has apparently sought to appeal to broad values and sentiments through Ukrainian images for all audiences and also mobilized images and symbols of specific things to appeal to national and sub-national demographics.

7.2.1 Use of Ukrainian Images

President Zelenskyy clearly became a symbol of Ukrainian resistance and defiance from the earliest days of the invasion. His refusal to be evacuated (“the fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride.”), his walks through Kyiv despite being targeted by Russian assassination teams, and his insistence on wearing earth-toned military-inspired clothing since the invasion made him a clear symbol. His appearance was fixed, and his speeches—though varied in content—consistently communicated Ukraine’s determination, humanity and tenacity. Zelenskyy has an image that has endured into 2025, well beyond the period of study.

The “Ghost of Kyiv” became a short-lived symbol until the story was determined to be an exaggeration, and the fighter pilot “Juice” played the role of stand-in for Ukrainian fighter pilots. Many Ukrainian soldiers have been featured in X/Twitter posts, but not specifically as individuals outside of their roles as otherwise-nameless symbols of Ukrainian defiance. The tank driver playing with a dog; the soldier playing the violin; the soldier exercising in the trenches; or the soldier dancing are not being presented with names and stories about who they are (though they are all fully formed humans). They are being presented as symbolic of a larger idea of Ukrainian defiance in the face of Russian aggression, with clear humanity in their art, their smiles, or with dancing. These symbols are different from the more fixed symbol of President Zelenskyy.

7.2.2 Use of non-Ukrainian images

The other national appeals on Ukrainian X/Twitter are visits to foreign capitals from Zelenskyy and other senior Ukrainian officials. For example, the treatment Zelenskyy received during his Christmas 2023 visit to the White House was clearly intended to appeal to Americans. The same is true for Zelenskyy’s visits to Britain and France. Then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s walk through Kyiv months after the invasion was intended to appeal to British voters, showing the commitment of Johnson to Ukraine by walking about a city where missile strikes were a regular occurrence.

Ukraine used images familiar to sub-segments of national and sub-national populations to connect with as many audiences as possible. Kill cards typically include quotes—ranging from Polish poets to English playwrights. Slow-motion shooting of artillery set to music, helicopter gun-run footage, and other combat footage all appeal to first-person video game culture. Images of harmed children appeal to parents, and images of harmed elderly people appeal to the children or others that care for them in a vulnerable state. Like the images of soldiers, the individuals are less important than the sympathy and outrage the image evokes. These images all appeal to a sense of identity, either of in-group lore through hobbies, or by showing situations that sub-segments of the population understand at a visceral level.

The appeals using non-Ukrainian images did not require Ukrainian information operators to build a new set of symbols or aesthetics: they simply relied on the existing ones easily recognizable by national or sub-national audiences.

7.3 Showing Western Equipment

There is one sub-hypothesis for showing western equipment; H3: *to emphasize that military aid is being used for the stated purpose, Ukraine will showcase the use of donated Western military equipment – including*

some battlefield losses – to show Western voters that the equipment being sent is being used in combat (i.e.: the military aid is being used for the purposes for which it was donated, and not abandoned, diverted, or sold).

This hypothesis is true. Ukraine showed donated equipment across the period of study, often very shortly after it arrived in Ukraine. This showed the world Ukraine’s urgency in putting equipment into action. Donated military equipment also became a symbol of proving that Ukraine is using the donated aid to maximum effect. This is partly to address the recent disappointment in some sectors of American political life at the billions of dollars of American weapons and equipment abandoned by the Afghan National Army to the Taliban as they recaptured the country.

7.3.1 Showing Battlefield Wins

Ukraine also showed some combat footage deliberately. Javelin and NLAW anti-tank missile strikes against Russian tanks and armoured vehicles, and western-donated shoulder-launched air defence missiles shooting down helicopters were shown with some regularity at the start of the war. This is because those were the only weapons being donated immediately after the invasion. As the war carried on, more substantive equipment (vehicle platforms) was needed: tanks, artillery, armoured fighting vehicles, etc.

Ukraine made a point of showing images of all the Western equipment that was donated, no matter which country it came from. American HIMARS, M777 howitzers were regularly shown. Artillery systems like the French Cesar, German PzH2000, Czech Vampir rocket artillery and Slovak Zuzana were all shown in combat action to remind donor nations the equipment was being used to good effect. This was true for all donated Western equipment—from shoulder-launched weapons systems to long-range fires. The images of military hardware shows the Ukraine is using the donated equipment and is grateful for the support. Each nationally donated system is a clear appeal to the public of the donor nation, to show that their equipment is being used to defend Ukraine and Western values.

As Ukraine began pushing Russian forces back and recapturing territory, images and video of liberation of civilians became more prominent. These images showed cheering, happy, thankful civilians being liberated from the invader by their own national army. These images serve as strong images of Ukrainian tenacity and perseverance and also build the sense of momentum toward eventual Ukrainian victory. Battlefield victories featuring Western weapons achieve the similar construct discussed in the previous two sub-sections: it combines emotional values like self-defence and defending civilians with clear national appeals to donor states by showing Western-donated equipment being used for victory.

7.3.2 Showing some Battlefield Losses

Ukraine did not regularly show battlefield losses, but there was imagery of the (losing) battle for Azovstal and an image of an Australian-donated Bushmaster, presumably from combat action. The purpose of these images is to show that Ukraine will fight on, even when the equipment is damaged, rather than abandon it in the face of the enemy. The damaged donated vehicle proves to the audience that Ukraine will fight, even if it

means combat damage to the donated equipment. This image serves as proof-positive that Ukraine is fighting and not avoiding confrontation with Russian forces.

7.4 Timing

There is one sub-hypothesis for timing of events and decision points; H4: *to coordinate messaging with decision points, Ukraine will emphasize some specific narratives to coincide with major events that involve decisions from its allies (Summits, Presidential visits, etc.) to gain more media attention and therefore increase positive public pressure in the run-up to decisions being made.*

This hypothesis is generally true in that Ukraine mentioned upcoming events. However, this was not consistent and does appear to be a significant part of Ukraine's information strategy. Ukraine did not commit the same volume of X/Twitter traffic to communicating the value of these summits as other simpler concepts like the arrival of new equipment, evidence of Russian war crimes, or the acts of kindness of Ukrainian soldiers toward their comrades, civilians, and animals. Neither did they apparently connect their general information operations campaign to coincide with major multilateral meetings, other than making reference to the events (Ramstein NATO summits, etc.). Making reference to the timing of upcoming events occurred; however, not all events were referenced and the effort on Ukrainian X/Twitter accounts was not consistent. Moreover, there was little in the way of strong, evocative emotions in the timing of events compared to images of war crimes, Ukrainian bravery, tenacity, and willingness to fight.

7.5 Counter-Narrative

There is one sub-hypothesis for counter-narratives; H5: *to prevent Russian messages from undermining Ukraine's esteem among Western publics, Ukraine will actively present counter-narratives to Russian messages targeting English-speaking audiences.*

This is generally true, however more context is needed. Ukraine sought to undermine the claims of 'Ukrainian Nazis' that predicated Russia's logic for invading Ukraine in February of 2022. There were also attempts to reverse the Nazi theme, by making Russian behaviour appear the same as Nazi behaviour during the 1941 invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine spent far more of its X/Twitter effort showing evidence of Russian war crimes as a counter-narrative to undermine any Russian claim. Evidence of civilian buildings destroyed by Russian missiles (apartments, hospitals, schools and kindergartens, churches), and the torture and murder of civilians was regularly showed for this purpose. Russia was not specifically denying these claims or committing major effort to convince Western publics that apartment blocks were in fact military targets. Ukraine's purpose appears to have been undermining *anything* Russia says by characterizing Russia as a deliberate and methodical war criminal.

7.5.1 Countering Russian English-Language Messaging

Ukraine confronted the allegations of Nazis in Ukraine and Russia's predicate the Ukraine needed to be 'de-nazified' directly. Parallels between the German invasion of the Soviet Union via Ukraine in 1941 were made in the early days of the war, sometimes with juxtaposed images of Kyiv from 1941 and 2022. Showing Holocaust survivors that were killed by Russian bombing in 2022, Russian bombing of Holocaust memorials,

and emphasizing President Zelensky's Jewish heritage were all very persuasive data points undermining the 'de-Nazification' narrative Russia presented on the eve of the invasion. Russia eventually abandoned this narrative altogether. It is not clear if it was because Russia believed their narrative was not convincing Western publics, or they simply did not care what Western publics believed after the invasion bogged down.

Having largely undermined the de-Nazification narrative, Ukraine shifted to emphasizing Ukraine's difference and separateness from Russia and showing proof of war crimes. Ukraine did not explicitly say "we are not part of *Novorossiia*" in English-language X/Twitter posts because Russia was not making that argument to English-speaking audiences generally, and Ukraine likely did not want to introduce a Russian narrative that was not otherwise there. The *Novorossiia* narrative was reserved for Russian-speaking audiences and Ukrainians sympathetic to Russia. However, Ukraine consistently asserted its difference from Russia and its independence from Russia. A simple phrase like 'Slavo Ukraini' emphasizes Ukrainian identity. Images and videos showing yellow and blue tones are subtle, yet unmistakable, affirmations of Ukrainian identity. The affirmation of "Ukrainianness" was not so much addressing a Russian narrative as much as preventing any attempt to present a Russian narrative that suggests that Russia, Ukraine and Belarus should be one entity.

Lastly, Ukraine dedicated significant effort to showing Russian war crimes against Ukrainians from destroyed buildings to murdered and tortured civilians. This content was not intended to undermine a Russian narrative where Russia denied the evidence—because Russia was not making a concerted effort to deny the allegations to the English-speaking world. The content appears to have been to show the Western world proof of what Russia was doing to undermine *anything* Russia said on the subject of Ukraine and its invasion. The repeated use of terms like 'terrorist' and the evidence of deliberately harming civilians conjures images of Iraq or Afghanistan with suicide bombers on markets or public streets. American audiences likely understand the idea of not negotiating with terrorists or taking their statements at face value. The intent appears to be undermining Russia's credibility on any subject communicated to a Western audience in English. In the narrowest interpretation, this is not a counter-narrative because it is not undermining an existing Russian narrative. However, it is a clear counter-narrative in the sense that it represents an information offensive against any credibility Russia may have enjoyed with people lacking strong opinions before the invasion.

7.6 Unexpected Results

The most significant unexpected result was the explicit appeal to American conservatives with the hashtag #FreedomIsOurReligion. The use of the term 'Freedom' has become something of a group identifier for conservatives in the United States and in Canada and is sometimes used to show affinity toward political issues. It was unexpected that Ukraine would use this term for fear of being perceived as pursuing alignment with conservative partisan causes at the expense of moderate, liberal and progressive ones. In the United States the debate around the use of the word 'freedom' often revolves around ideas about personal liberty for all, and ideas about elites wanting freedom from any sort of regulation or intervention in their daily affairs by the government.¹ The issue of gun ownership and whether or not people should have unlimited rights for personal ownership and use of gun, or if there should be some government oversight in a hotly debated topic

in American life. Moreover, opinions tend to fall along highly partisan lines, with some polling showing almost three times as many Republican voters own guns compared to Democratic voters.²

As discussed earlier, much of Ukraine’s sub-segment targeting was apparently to build affinity with sub-segments. In a partisan context, explicitly appealing to one sub-segment may alienate others. The risk is fusing Ukraine’s cause with another set of domestic partisan issues and thus making Ukraine part of partisan discourse. The combination of the words ‘freedom’ and ‘religion’ appears to be an intentional appeal to conservatives, with ‘freedom’ often serving as short-hand for affinity for 2nd amendment rights, etc., with many American voters. ‘Religion’ appears to be an appeal to American evangelicals, with a clear appeal to God and church attendance.

Based on polling, there was clear cause for caution in invoking any partisan language—or anything that could be perceived as such. Between May and September of 2022 Democratic voters were more likely to believe that America was not doing enough to support Ukraine, and Republican voters were more likely to believe America was doing too much.³ When framed as question about support specifically for President Biden’s handling the response to the war in Ukraine, the responses broke down more sharply along partisan lines with Democratic voters almost three times as likely to endorse Biden’s response as Republican voters.⁴ There was a clear partisan tendency, and therefore we would expect that Ukraine would steer away from anything that could be perceived as partisan.

One possible explanation is that Ukraine knew that Republican voters were less likely to endorse Ukraine’s cause and therefore sought to appeal to them as a sub-segment of the population like any other to gain their support and used language they believed likely to appeal to that demographic. The obvious risk is turning support for Ukraine into a partisan issue. It is possible that Ukraine calculated they would pay a price for not appealing to directly to Republican voters (i.e.: missing the opportunity to gain supporters) and believed that Democratic voters would not reduce their support for Ukraine as a result.

This result was, at any rate, unexpected. Though it did not comprise a large proportion of @DefenceU’s content, the invocation of a potentially partisan line of communication was nonetheless unexpected because of the risks of rendering support for Ukraine even more partisan than some polling suggested it already was.

7.7 Ambiguous Results

Ukraine’s X/Twitter accounts did not regularly re-share content from American news broadcasts. Where they did, they were re-shares of appearances on popular shows like those hosted by Fareed Zakaria or Anderson Cooper on CNN. Ukraine did re-share content from a second appearance by a fighter pilot called “Juice”, this time on Fox News. With millions of daily viewers, it is curious that Ukraine did not re-share more media content.

There are at least two possible explanations, and both are ambiguous. The first is that Ukraine did not want to be part of the partisan allegations about the bias of different media networks by their opponents—either calling a network “propaganda” or “fake news”—and therefore appeared on both. By appearing on cable

television news shows, Ukraine was reaching the regular viewers of those shows, while also amplifying the content online. To avoid being characterized as being partisan for either American political party, Ukraine appeared on both networks. However, we know that Americans are increasingly polarized and tend not to consume media of their partisan opponents, with this phenomenon more statistically pronounced for dedicated Republican voters.⁵ With that in mind, why attend either network if there are concerns about being linked to a partisan issue? The most plausible explanation is that accessing voters of both sides is better than accessing only one side and providing fodder for partisan accusations or appearing on none and missing the opportunity to curry favour with anyone.

The second explanation is that Ukraine wanted to maintain independence in their narrative and distribution channels, and preferred limiting re-sharing cable news show appearances to avoid being linked to other stories from cable news networks. Ukraine has exclusive control over their X/Twitter traffic and over things like United24 videos. Ukraine has no control over the editorial choices of television news channels for any of their content. It is possible that Ukraine limited their re-sharing of cable news stories to avoid being linked with heavily partisan coverage from any cable news network, thus reducing risks they could not control.

¹ Annelien de Dijn, 'Freedom' Means Something Different to Liberals and Conservatives. Here's How the Definition Split—And Why That Still Matters,' Time Magazine. 25 August 2020. <https://time.com/5882978/freedom-definition-history/>

² Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Ruth Igielik, J. Baxter Oliphant, Anna Brown, '1. The demographics of gun ownership,' Pew Research. 22 June 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/06/22/the-demographics-of-gun-ownership/>

³ Andrew Daniller, Andy Cerda, 'As war in Ukraine continues, Americans' concerns about it have lessened,' Pew Research Centre. 22 September 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/09/22/as-war-in-ukraine-continues-americans-concerns-about-it-have-lessened/>

⁴ Pew Research Centre, 'Americans' Concerns About War in Ukraine: Wider Conflict, Possible U.S.-Russia Clash,' 10 May 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/05/10/americans-concerns-about-war-in-ukraine-wider-conflict-possible-u-s-russia-clash/>

⁵ Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press. 2018.

8 Implications

This work has shown that information operations are not something that happen spontaneously. In addition to being a tool for adversarial competition, information operations can be used by allies and partners to influence each other and drive policy choices in international politics. Ukraine showed there is a need to align political objectives and relationships with state leaders and international organizations with the narratives and messages targeting national and sub-national populations to build a coalition of possible supporters. This work shows that the principles outlined in many works of information and persuasion theory still apply; and that those principles sometimes require re-interpretation in order to understand how friendly nations use them to target their partners and allies.

The data and analysis in this work presents conceptual implications for theories of warfare that focus on military action are less useful than theories that focus on statecraft and competition.

This work also shows clear implications for how we think about theories of information operations, specifically, 1) how information operations are a tool of competition, statecraft and war, but do not replace any of the other, more traditional means of national power like military force, economic might or natural resource wealth; 2) the ongoing relevance of much of the theory on propaganda, persuasion and information operations for non-adversarial targeting—especially for seeking to shape discourse and consensus positions on key international political issues; and 3) policy implications for planning for future information operations and audience targeting and sub-segmenting.

8.1 Armed Conflict and War

The following are the implications of this work for understanding the application of information operations in the context of war and armed conflict.

8.1.1 Information: A Tool for Competition, Statecraft and Warfare

The existing theories of contemporary warfare are generally too limiting for understanding the full implications of information operations. Theories like *4GW* and *Hybrid Warfare* are too narrowly focused on information operations in the context of warfare and armed conflict only and assume an adversarial context. There is certainly value to considering how adversaries use information operations in the context of war and armed conflict. The Islamic State notably used a wide range of information operations while expanding their territorial holding, promoting the religious piety and battle-worthiness of their commanders, and undermining rival commanders—even other Islamists challenging the Islamic State’s brand and power.¹ They used the internet for global recruitment of largely disaffected youth, and for targeting its rivals; either for harassment or for killing if they could physically reach them.² The Taliban also used information operations to recruit fighters and to issue warnings against those in towns and villages that would oppose them, or violate their religiously-driven edicts on personal behaviour and comportment.³ All of these information operations sought to build the fighting force, while threatening rivals or opponents as a means of potential reducing the costs of controlling territory through intimidation. However, this is far from the limits of application.

Information operations without any connection to violence, threats, or intimidation are effective as tools of statecraft in line with the core of many definitions of propaganda: to manage the perception of an organization, movement or enterprise. Ukraine's information operations have clearly shown that deliberate campaigns devoid of any threat of violence are perceived as useful as tools of statecraft; specifically, as a means of persuading voters in democratic states to support Ukraine, its people, and its military in the war against Russia. The West has delivered billions of dollars worth of military hardware and have done so because their leaders and voting publics have been persuaded that it is in their interests, thus worth the investment. Information, therefore, is not simply a tool of warfare but a vital tool of statecraft and competition. *Unrestricted Warfare* clearly articulates that war and peace as a conceptual dyad is losing utility, and that competition across all domains—information, economic, legal, cyber, and military—is a more effective way of viewing the future of conflict that relying on outmoded definitions and concepts with military power at their core.⁴ This concept sees all planes and tools of competition as what constitutes modern conflict. Nothing in the *Unrestricted Warfare* concept prevents us from analyzing the use of information operations in the context of war; however, those theories that are rooted in a coercive and adversarial context do not translate well to broader analysis about statecraft and international politics.

8.1.2 Information does not Replace Military Power

Military power still undeniably matters. Crimea was annexed and Donbas was occupied in 2014 with military and paramilitary forces, and were successful largely because most Ukrainian units understood they were outgunned and chose surrender or defection rather than fighting and losing.⁵ Crimea and Donbas were political contested before 2014, with the people in that region often expressing skepticism with the central government in Kyiv, but they were still administered by that government, and the government could enact policy in Crimea and Donbas. Not so, after the military invasion. Military power imposed a solution by force. The 2022 invasion shows the same pattern: though Russia was exerting political influence over Kyiv between 2014 and 2022, it was clearly not satisfied with the level and influence and wanted outright control. The 2022 invasion was likely intended to destroy Ukraine as a state, undermine its national identity to the greatest extent possible armed subsume its territory into Russia.⁶ In both 2014 and 2022, Russia's use of military power was the essential difference between political competition and war. Military power has no peer for controlling territory, destroying infrastructure, compelling an adversary's actions by creating dilemmas for either fighting or seeking a negotiated settlement (or accepting surrender on the adversary's terms). Information operations cannot blunt an offensive as artillery and anti-tank weapons can. Information can, however, be used to raise awareness of an issue and generate enough pressure for a global consensus to provide sustained military and economic support to meet military power with military power.

8.2 Information Operations Theory

The following are the implications for understanding how the theory of information operations applies to modern non-adversarial targeting in a digital environment based on the findings of this study.

8.2.1 Shaping Discourse and Consensus

Ukraine's information operations targeting national and sub-national populations across the West. Ukraine's appeal was not to individual citizens. Ukraine was not asking X/Twitter users to *do anything* other than

embrace Ukraine's position. Ukraine was asking Western leaders to authorize shipments of military hardware, equipment, ammunition and financing to sustain the war. Krieg's statement that consensus can be shaped to make an idea or attitude toward a certain thing⁷ appears to be true in the case of Ukraine. As of August 2025, roughly 60% of Americans continue to support the idea of providing military assistance to Ukraine and roughly 75% support additional sanctions on Russia—including a growing bi-partisan consensus on support for Ukraine.⁸ Many major European allies have similar public sentiment. A recent poll shows that roughly 69% of the British public, 67% of the French, 51% of the German, and 49% of the Polish want to see sustained support for Ukraine until they have defeated Russia in Ukraine.⁹ While it is always challenging to attribute one information campaign to a clear outcome, recent polling suggests there is a general consensus around support for Ukraine.

The consensus requires no action from the voting publics. Ellul, LeBon and Lenin all viewed propaganda as being for the purpose of eventual action. The action, in the case of Ukraine's appeals, is focused on elected leaders, not the voting public. If any action is being asked from the publics, it is an ask for tacit support, or at least not active opposition. This outcome aligns far more with the theory as outlined by Bernays, Lippman, Chomsky, and Krieg that shaping positive attitudes and impressions about a certain thing, idea or enterprise is the real goal of propaganda and information. Stanley pointed to propaganda as being for the purpose of excluding certain topics from discourse and based on the polling above there is no critical mass of voters for the idea that military support for Ukraine can be halted altogether. EH Carr's assessment that propaganda is for the purpose of shaping state action by influencing the population applies to the case of Ukraine targeting its allies.

The implication for contemporary war and conflict is that democratic publics are an important target for information operations, even if nothing tangible is asked of them. The tangible action from the state, with its tax revenue base, industrial capacity, and military capability. The population is targeted for persuasion that a general idea, thing or concept is preferable to the alternative.

8.2.2 Emotional Appeals Matter

The core of Ukraine's information operations relied on emotional appeals, appealing to shared sense of identity and values and moral revulsion at the adversary. Images of the most vulnerable civilians being harmed – Holocaust survivors, children, the elderly, women protecting their children – are all intended to elicit sympathy for the victim and rage for those who would deliberately violate such basic principles of dignity. Conversely, images of Ukrainian soldiers smiling under duress, embracing civilians in recently liberated spaces are all intended to generate positive feeling about the humanity and perseverance of Ukrainian civilians and military personnel. Ukrainian messaging appealed to a sense of common humanity and aligns with theory on identity and finding common ground about who "we" are contrasted with who "they" are.

The digital means of delivery are highly significant in the modern era. Battlefield footage can be quickly turned into bite-sized video content with music overlaid to resonate with the target audience, and broadcast to global audiences. A video of Zelenskyy visiting a hospital ward or a Holocaust memorial site can likewise be shared without changes to communicate the emotional gravity of a situation. The speed of this

transmission is significant, and the appeals remain consistent with theory. This strongly implies that human nature is the unchanging variable across propaganda, persuasion and information operations theory. The basic concepts of appealing to a sense of place, community, group, shared values and emotional responses to stimulus about the value of the in-group and treachery of those who would threaten the in-group remain central to connecting a narrative to an audience.

8.2.3 Facts Matter

Jacques Ellul pointed out that facts are preferable in any development of propaganda, but not absolute. What is more important is that messages have emotional resonance with the target audience, and that rather than focusing on truth entirely, they should be difficult to disprove above all else.¹⁰ For those already emotionally committed to an identity group, convincing them of anything that does not align with the 'party line' of the group is very difficult.¹¹

Ukraine has focused on truth throughout its narrative and with its messages by presenting images and videos to substantiate their claims. However, this doesn't mean that Ukraine has told only objective truths. We know the "Ghost of Kyiv" was the combat record of one unit, not one pilot, and there was no independent evidence to substantiate the claim that Zelenskyy said "the fight is here. I don't need a ride: I need ammunition" in the hours after the 2022 invasion. Ukraine seemingly paid no price for the Ghost of Kyiv because the story was *partly* true, and the version that was shared presented an emotional truth that audiences were satisfied with.

This does not mean, however, that states can fill their information operations messaging with blatant falsehoods and imagined facts. Russia's claims of Ukrainian Neo-Nazis and biological weapons labs were not believable by people not already bought into Russia's emotional truth because there was no compelling visual evidence to substantiate the claims. Conversely, Ukraine's narrative about Russia unjustly targeting Ukrainian civilians was substantiated with evidence over and over again. Video of murdered civilians on the street of Bucha and in basements provided compelling evidence. The exhumation of bodies from mass graves clearly showed people were killed and buried together. Regular images of apartment buildings being struck by Russian missiles presents clear evidence of the attacks. Ukraine's claims of war crimes against civilians are hard to refute with such a compelling body of evidence.

Additionally, in an era of digital media and transnational coalitions of online users, trafficking in blatant falsehoods is an increasingly high-risk proposition for anyone conducting information operations. So-called 'open-source intelligence' (OSINT) groups like Bellingcat have conducted extensive investigations on global political issues, including the war in Ukraine. They have produced pieces about how Russia's 'ghost fleet' of semi-deniable ships have been evading sanctions by smuggling stolen Ukrainian grain¹² and revealed how Russia has intentionally flooded civilian areas before attacking them.¹³ If Ukraine was building narratives from whole-cloth and making broad, demonstrably disprovable claims, it stands to reason that others online would be pointing that out and debunking claims. Showing that Ukraine was not telling the truth would be a highly significant news story. So far, Ukraine's claims have not been disproven or even refuted (other than the Ghost of Kyiv).

The clear implication is that facts still matter in contemporary information operations; in part, because there is so much opportunity for people online to research any claim made and cast doubt upon it. In information operations in the digital age, facts still matter because those not deeply committed to an identity group are more likely to form their opinions and impressions on fact-based material infused with emotion.

8.2.4 Establishing a Clear Narrative

Once Ukraine developed a coherent narrative in time segment 3, it did not change for the remainder of the period of study. The narrative focused on Ukraine's tenacity and pluck as an underdog fighting against a brutal and unjustified invasion. Contained in that narrative were clearly affirmations of principles, both abstract and tangible. The abstract principles that Ukraine mobilized were that violating the rules-based international order by invading your neighbours is wrong; that liberal principles like democracy and respect for the rule of law are superior to the anarchy and "might-makes-right" of authoritarians; and that coming to the aid of people who share common values is morally correct. The more tangible principles that Ukraine articulated include things like deliberately killing civilians is wrong; rape, murder, torture are all very wrong; acting in self-defence against invasion is always morally correct; and that bravery and tenacity in the face of threats is admirable. These principles are the core that informs the overall narrative and the messaging that Ukraine shares.

Ukraine's messaging regularly changed based on changing facts on the ground. Once military equipment was delivered, Ukraine did not keep asking for the same platform. With every new round of missile strikes on civilian targets, Ukraine shared the evidence of those strikes and news about casualties. However, the overall narrative did not change. The basic construct of Ukraine-good/Russia-bad did not change. New events became additional evidence and support for the existing narrative.

The implication for future information operations is that affirming a clear, simple position is important to communicating a narrative. The literature on emotions and motivation clearly shows that propaganda and persuasion are most effective when they strike at emotions and a sense of identity. The literature also shows that repetition is important to present a coherent narrative to audiences. A principles-based narrative connects those two concepts, by clearly articulating where the sender of information operations "stands." This enables all subsequent messaging *irrespective of the target audience sub-segment* to receive the same basic statement of principles, tailored to resonate with the idioms, images, symbols and preferences of the sub-segment. The value of having a clear and consistent set of principles, is that it allows eventualities and contingencies to be wrapped around the principles. This means that as events unfold, the *meaning* of the narrative is not changed because the principles do not change.

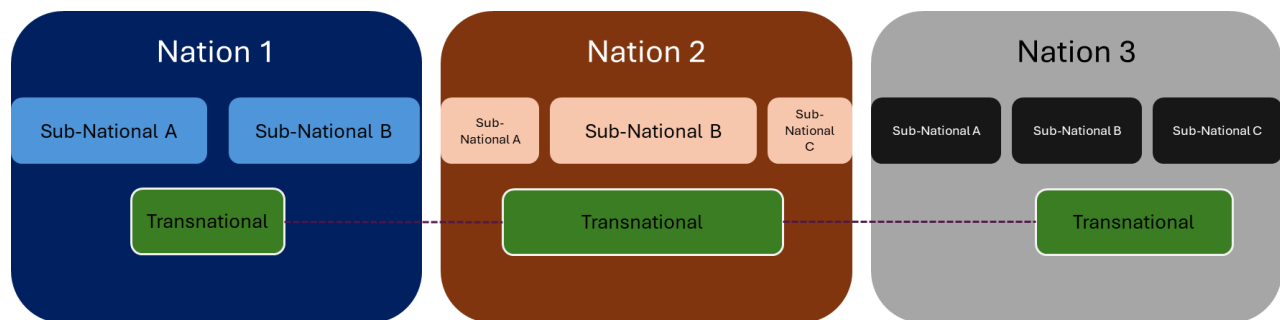
8.2.5 Targeting National, Sub-National and Transnational Audiences

A clear implication from this study is that non-coercive contemporary information operations should seek to build as broad a base of supporters as possible, and this means crafting a narrative that appeals to as many target demographics as possible. When targeting friendly democracies this means appealing to the broadest possible number of sub-segments of the voting public in order to maximize penetration of your issue across as many parts of the winning coalition of voter blocks as possible. In the digital era, this means appealing to

audiences based on appeals to national identity, sub-national identity within an existing nation, and transnational identities that are not based on country.

Figure 7 below shows sub-national groups (American evangelicals, for example) nested without an existing national identity, and transnational identity groups that have adherents spread across many countries. Ukraine developed an over-arching narrative, as described above, and then tailored a range of messaging targeting sub-segments of the Western public based on nationality, age, gender, religiosity, hobbies, and subjects of interest. This was most likely an attempt to develop affinity in the broadest possible number of people and sub-segments of the population as possible to create a more diverse base of support.

FIGURE 7: NATIONAL, SUB-NATIONAL, AND TRANSNATIONAL TARGET AUDIENCE CONCEPT



Most people have many identity markers whose significance fluctuates based on contextual factors, and proximity to the subject matter.¹⁴ For example, people are never more rabid sports fans or musical artist fans as when they are at ‘the big game’ or at a live concert. Ukraine does not appear to have been attempting to make all voting publics Ukrainian absolutists but sought to build support for Ukraine based on links to contextual factors like subject matter interest in anime, sci-fi, first-person shooters, film and music, and other existing interests. In time segment 3, Ukraine solidified its narrative that clearly presented Ukraine as the underdog with a strong fighting spirit that never lost its dignity, despite war crimes, violence and indignities against Ukrainians civilians and prisoners. This narrative was clearly sub-segmented for maximum appeal, with messages tailored for gen-Z, millennials, gen-X, and boomers; across different interests ranging from science fiction, anime, first person shooter video games, poetry, art, philosophy and history; and across genders and national identities.

For information operations targeting friendly nations, ‘winning’ is a more amorphous concept. Ukraine surely prefers Western governments that endorse a policy of providing Ukraine with weapons, ammunition and political and financial support. Sustaining national will in a democracy requires appealing to as many sub-segments of a nation as possible. In democratic electoral politics, there are more countries than not that rely on coalitions of parties to form government, and thus smaller parties with slightly different interests will band together to maximize their likelihood of winning because none have enough support from voters to win on their own.¹⁵ In multi-ethnic civil wars we observe a similar phenomenon, where factions band together to form a winning coalition to maximize each group’s share of the post-war political power by dint of their contribution to the winning side.¹⁶ In both electoral politics and war, there is a zero-sum perception because someone must form government and the war must be won, lest it go on indefinitely.

Building a coalition of pro-Ukraine voters in democratic states helps generate a consensus around an issue and reduces the risk of “zero-sum” calculations. If Ukraine can appeal to enough sub-segments across multiple political coalitions, it increases the likelihood of establishing a consensus around supporting Ukraine because the issue will be a point of agreement across coalitions and therefore reduce the risk of the issue being a plane for debate, negotiation and political horse-trading. Political coalitions and parties still generally exist in a zero-sum world: only one party or coalition can win. However, If Ukraine can create bi-or-tri-partisan support for pro-Ukraine policies, the debate becomes about how and how much to support Ukraine, not a dyadic a debate about whether to support at all.

With more complex international landscapes, like appealing to as many nations as possible, the “zero-sum” construct is less stark. NATO members, for example, are likely to “go along to get along” on major policy issues that are central to the alliance’s interests. Nations still have agency, but coalition pressures limit the range of options available. This helps us understand, in part, why appeals to transnational groups are important. Appealing to interest groups that span national borders provides Ukraine another avenue to build support. Additionally, appealing to as many different types of voters as possible—including through transnational appeals to identity—reduces the risk of a zero-sum outcome in a coalition environment.

8.3 Policy Implications

The following are the implications for policy makers, based on the findings of this study.

8.3.1 Planning and Preparing: Essential and Endless in the Information Domain

Ukraine was clearly not ready for the Russian invasion in February 2022. The Ukrainian leadership – including Zelenskyy himself – was not convinced that the Russian invasion was going to happen, despite American warnings and America preparing logistical efforts ahead of an anticipated invasion.¹⁷ As a result Ukraine could have been better prepared for war. The same is true for the information domain: Ukraine was not ready for information operations on the eve of the invasion. During time segment 2 much of the messaging was focused on showing that key leaders in the Ukrainian government were still alive (Zelenskyy, Reznikov, and others) and counting the number of hours and days of successful Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion. There was no compelling narrative during time segment 2, especially not when compared to the narratives in time segments 3 and 4. The value of supporting Ukraine was not likely immediately clear to people unfamiliar with the history of Ukraine and Russia, and the significance of the invasion for the rules-based international order. It took until time segment 3 for a coherent narrative to be established.

War plans for the information domain appear to be as essential as wartime plans—especially for countries that have defence industrial dependencies on partners and allies. Effectively, any country that might be faced with invasion should have a clear understanding of why an adversary might attack them, and what the story should be about why the invaded party needs and deserves help. The factors that impact these narratives – potential adversaries, economic power, military power, dependence on allies and partners – shift slowly enough that states can minimize the uncertainty about their place in the world by explicitly defining those things. Developing the most the most compelling narratives possible prior to a crisis means having a baseline

story to tell the world: governments, the voting publics from countries whose support is vital, and international organizations.

War plans are often maintained in perpetuity against known strategic threats. The United States maintained and updated war plans throughout the 1920s and 1930s for war with Mexico, Cuba, America's then-colony the Philippines, Japan and the Pacific, China, and war with the British empire including Canada, with key facts like infrastructure and industrial targets.¹⁸ NATO maintained plans for defending Berlin during the Cold War, including land and air-based contingencies to keep Berlin connected, and similar plans for shows-of-force against the Soviets at sea – including the possibility of demonstrative uses of nuclear weapons.¹⁹ As the case of Ukraine shows, without readiness and actionable plans, a coherent narrative becomes secondary to presenting rapid, largely reactive messaging (as we saw in time segment 2). Giving information operations planning the same care and attention as war plans – or including information operations as an integral part of any war plan – will likely shorten the lag between a crisis unfolding and presenting a coherent, considered narrative. With foreknowledge on the likely context of potential wars or crises, narratives and key priority target audiences can be identified before crisis to expedite information operations planning during a time of crisis.

We cannot currently foresee an end to non-kinetic competition outside a major shift in the status of great powers. The word 'infinite' is historically not accurate to characterize great power short-of-war because rivalries, great power interests, and relative power shifts over centuries.²⁰ However, practically speaking, predicting when powers will overtake each other is impossible. Even if we could, it is not clear that any military outcome will deliver lasting political outcomes on their own. Sean McFate has observed that no wars are final in the modern era, and that the political object of war will never be fulfilled so long as one side continues to fight on, even if through non-kinetic means after military defeat.²¹ Tactical and operational victories will never be fully translated into strategic wins, so long as one group continues to struggle for its own strategic objective.²²

The implication is that information operations planning and updating should be understood, practically, as a task without end. Some nations may collapse, regimes may be changed by war, competition and rivalries may ebb and flow, but the imperative for communicating a narrative remains. For example, at time of writing, the war in Ukraine has not concluded. Whether the war ends in a combat defeat of one side or the other, or a negotiated settlement of some kind, the need will remain to present coherent narratives about Ukraine to the world – whether that is territorially-reduced Ukraine, or a Ukraine at peace with the ubiquitous menace of Russia attacking in the future. Though far less successful than after the Russian invasion of 2022, Ukraine did not stop fighting and appealing to the West for help after the Russian annexation of Donbas and the occupation of Crimea in 2014. Despite falling to the Taliban in August of 2021, Western stories about Afghanistan have not ended. Stories about the treatment of women since the Taliban's return, the ejection of NGOs doing humanitarian work, the fate of people who worked for NATO or NATO members since the Taliban took over and others have not ended. They are less prominent, but they have not ended.

For information policy leaders and operations planners, the task of planning for information operations is therefore ongoing. The relative strengths and abilities of adversaries may change during a single conflict; the

opinions of allies, partners and neutrals about who is the ‘good’ party and who is the ‘bad’ party during a war may change in the face of shocking information; and domestic political moods shift over time. At the time of writing, many of Ukraine’s donor nations have had changes in government leadership. Germany and the United Kingdom both changed leaders twice (Merkel to Scholz to Merz; Truss to Sunak to Starmer) and the United States changed leaders (Biden to Trump). Clear changes in political leanings from target audiences did not cause Ukraine to cease its information operations; they simply shifted some of the messaging to better connect audiences with different preferences to the existing narrative. This means that ongoing planning is necessary in the information domain because information operations must keep pace with the changing realities and preferences of target audiences.

8.3.2 Knowing the Audiences in a Competitive Information Environment.

As we saw in the findings and analysis section, Ukraine struggled to develop a clear, compelling narrative prior to the invasion and in the early days of resistance (time segment 1 and time segment 2). The messaging did not form a coherent narrative initially, and key sub-segments were not being explicitly targeted. Ukraine did resolve this challenge in time segment 3 and established sophisticated population sub-segmentation in its targeting.

For future conflicts and crises, understanding the preferences, attitudes, and perspectives of target audiences is essential. Ukraine deliberately connected national symbols and icons for targeting national populations and used in-group lore to target sub-national and transnational audiences. Connecting with audiences requires an understanding of their preferences. For policy makers and information practitioners, this means having foreknowledge of target audiences to the greatest extent possible. The cost of failing to understand target audiences (national, sub-national, and transnational) is the opportunity cost of having non-resonant information operations until those audiences are understood, and narratives and messages can be developed that appeal to those audiences. In a fast-paced global digital environment, that opportunity cost could have significant impacts in effectively ceding the information momentum to an adversary or group that *has a better understanding* of target populations. The information environment remains competitive and failing to understand different audiences’ preferences risks maintaining a strong position in information competition to an adversary that can adapt messages to the audience preferences faster than friends, allies and partners can.

¹ Omar Ashour, *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt*. Edinburgh University Press. 2021. 79-80.

² Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: the Digital Caliphate*. Saqi Books. 2015. 10-16.

³ Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: the Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict*. Oxford University Press. 2017. 35-84.

⁴ Qiao Liang, Wang Xiangsui. *Unrestricted Warfare*. Translated from the original People’s Liberation Army documents. Echo Books. 1999. 28-43.

⁵ Paul D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War (2nd Edition)*, Cambridge University Press. 2023. 219.

⁶ Anne Applebaum, ‘Chapter 5: How the War Will End,’ in: Hal Brands (ed.), *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, Johns Hopkins University Press. 2024. 86-88.

⁷ Andreas Krieg, *Subversion: The Strategic Weaponization of Narratives*. Georgetown University Press. 2023. 72-75.

⁸ Dina Smelz, Craig Kafura, ‘Dramatic Risk in Republican Support for Ukraine.’ The Chicago Council of Global Affairs. 15 August 2025. <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/dramatic-rise-republican-support-ukraine>

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- ⁹ More in Common, 'International public opinion on the Ukraine peace process: snap polling across Britain, the USA, Germany, France and Poland. 28 November – 2 December 2025.' <https://www.moreincommon.com/media/4gxlm0nv/dec25-mic-ukraine-polling.pdf>
- ¹⁰ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: the Formation of Men's Attitudes*. Vintage Books. 1973 (originally published by Alfred Knopf, 1965). 47-48, 55-56.
- ¹¹ Eric Hoffer, 'The True Believer: Thought on the Nature of Mass Movements,' Harper & Row, 1951 (2010 reprint). 83-87
- ¹² Bellingcat, 'Russia's Ghost Ships and the Evolution of a Grain Smuggling Operation,' 21 August 2023. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2023/08/21/russias-ghost-ships-and-the-evolution-of-a-grain-smuggling-operation/>
- ¹³ Michael Sheldon, 'Satellite Imagery Reveals Russia Caused Flooding in Occupied Ukrainian Town Before Counteroffensive,' Bellingcat. 29 June 2023. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2023/06/29/satellite-imagery-reveals-russia-caused-flooding-in-occupied-ukrainian-town-before-counter-offensive/>
- ¹⁴ Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, *Wrong: How Media, Politics and Identity Drive our Appetite For Misinformation*. Johns Hopkins University Press. 2023. 74-81.
- ¹⁵ Sona Nadenichek Golder, 'Pre-Electoral Coalition Formation in Parliamentary Democracies,' *British Journal of Political Science*. Volume 36. 2006.
- ¹⁶ Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*. Cambridge University Press. 2012.
- ¹⁷ Michael Kimmage, 'The Failure to Deter,' in: Hal Brands (ed), *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*. Johns Hopkins University Press. 2024. 82-83.
- ¹⁸ John Major, 'War Plan Red: the American plan for war with Britain,' Historian-London Historical Association. 1998.
- ¹⁹ Contingency Planning for Berlin – List of Declassified NATO Documents. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_history/20161208_E2-Berlin-Contingency-Planning_NPR.pdf
- ²⁰ Ibid. 17.
- ²¹ Sean McFate, 'The New Rules of War: How America can Win – Against Russia, China, and Othe Threats,' William Morrow. 2019. 229-335.
- ²² Ibid.

9 Conclusions

This study provided a detailed data analysis of Ukraine's use of X/Twitter to conduct information operations targeting English-speakers in Western countries. The conclusions of this study are that information operations are a powerful non-military tool to shape global perceptions about a conflict, specifically because they can frame general understanding about a conflict and build affinity for a party in a conflict. Affinity for that party idea enables shaping a discourse and consensus about the conflict and about what the logical response from others should be. Shaping consensus is valuable in international politics because it reduces the costs and friction of building coalitions for policy positions. Shaping consensus in national, sub-national and transnational audiences is also important in the modern era because it limits the potential impact of domestic considerations on leaders and governments when making calculations and international political choices, as there is already general agreement on doing *something*.

Building consensus is vitally important for information operators, because it reduces barriers to achieving a political outcome by (hopefully) framing the outcome as a logical extension of basic agreement on a worldview. The human is the target of information operations, no matter if it is delivered by digital means. The human tendency toward emotional appeals and emotional connection with identity groups and sub-groups means that logical reasoning can be short-circuited somewhat by emotional appeals, and that it can be done at-scale using digital means of distribution.

9.1 Information is a Tool of International Politics

Joseph Nye's vision of "soft power" is about the attractiveness of culture to persuade others to voluntarily accept multilateral policy proposals in international politics and about setting the agenda for international policy discussions. Nye was speaking, essentially, about the power of prestige and its ability to persuade others without using any of the more traditional and coercive tools like persuasion based on military or economic power. For Nye soft power is not a stand-alone tool: it is underwritten by the hard power of a state, that it does not rely on when soft power is available.

Ukraine has showed, through its information operations campaigns that information can be a valuable tool of international politics *even without the coercive components* that a state needs to use "soft power," so long as it is seeking the help of those countries that do. Ukraine presented a clear narrative about itself, about Russia, about Ukraine's role as the trip-wire warning against Russian military action further westward, and the risk posed to the rules-based international order. *It did so without having the ability to coerce its allies and partners.* Supporting Ukraine was fundamentally in the interest of the United States and NATO members so long as they view Russia as a threat to Eastern and Central European security and security in the Baltics. Ukraine was appealing to a scenario NATO has considered and planned for as part of the deterrence function of the alliance.

Despite not having the "hard power" to underwrite the "soft power," Ukraine's information operations campaign generated some degree of public pressure on elected leaders from voters by creating a positive impression of Ukraine. Quantifying the impact of information operations is discussed in Section 3.1.3 and is

fundamentally unknowable, though we can see that Ukraine's requests for weapons systems and military assistance from 2022 were almost all granted by 2024. In the lead up the war in 2022, Western powers were providing anti-tank guided missiles, ammunition for small arms and personal equipment. When Ukraine survived the initial Russian invasion—both the state and the government—the requests for greater military contribution began almost immediate because Ukraine knew its military industrial base could not compete with Russia's.

Beyond the period of study, military support for Ukraine has expanded. Some specific weapons systems have not been provided—French Leclerc tanks and US-made F-35, for example—however, virtually every other type of weapons system requested on Twitter/X was provided. This is a significant finding, because it shows the power of information operations to create greater public awareness and pressure around a single issue of international politics by targeting voters through global digital media platforms. Determining the proportional effect of information operations compared to diplomacy, and coalition pressure is, however, unknowable.

If Clausewitz is correct that war is simply politics by other means, information operations should surely be considered “other means” though which statecraft in international politics can be conducted—as distinct from the conventionally military, financial and resource-based sources of power. Information operations are not a substitute for military power. Nothing is. Xs/Tweets are not going to defend Ukrainian trench networks against Russian attack. But information operation operations have the power to shape perception, attitudes, and therefore discourse and consensus among key allies and partners in international politics. This means that information operations have the power to shape the terms of the debate and therefore close off some options and make other options appear obvious, or even better, the assumed default position.

9.2 Information as a Tool for Shaping Discourse and Consensus

Classical theory is divided on whether propaganda and information operations are for the purpose of shaping opinions and attitudes alone, or if the purpose of shaping opinions and attitudes is for prompting specific action later that align with shaped opinions. This question is important because other than a few appeals in time segment 2 for Westerns to join the fighting under the “Ukrainian Legion”, there were no specific asks of national or sub-national populations. There were many asks of *governments* for weapons shipments and economic support, and for *international organizations* to impose sanctions, begin war crimes proceedings, etc., but there were none of publics. The focus of Ukrainian messaging targeting publics was all about shaping the global discourse in favour of Ukraine and building the consensus that aligned with the core narrative (Ukraine good/Russia bad).

This is consistent with observations from Andreas Krieg in his book *Subversion* that focuses on shaping opinions, over time, with consistent messages about the inherent logic and “common-sense” of a particular political position.¹ This is also consistent with the observations of Russian General Valery Gerasimov that the United States in the 1990s sought to build a consensus around future military activity by supporting civil society and creating media awareness to prepare publics for war (even if Gerasimov's ideas were mischaracterized later).² Both present the political value of sharing narratives and messages that persuade a

broad enough consensus of domestic and global citizens to accept a political proposition—even if there is no ask.

Ukraine did not make asks after time segment 2 and focused on shaping discourse. This was done by producing content for X/Twitter directly for audiences, and by using X/Twitter as the fountainhead for other messaging. X/Twitter regularly shared source images and footage, serving as the source of primary content that was then covered by mainstream media networks (television, print, radio) and other online outlets. Ukraine also used its information operations to provide raw material for Western media outlets, selecting the information to share publicly, focusing on highly compelling images like exhumation of mass graves, evidence of executions, war crimes, etc. This is not censorship, in the sense of controlling negative information to prevent negative stories from surfacing (though that may be happening). By sharing raw footage and images using its X/Twitter accounts, Ukraine is providing compelling, curated imagery for mainstream media that helps Ukraine shape discourse and consensus in a way that serves its military and strategic objectives. Though outside the scope of this work, Ukraine also evidently allowed the release of raw combat footage from armoured vehicles and drones to unofficial pro-Ukraine X/Twitter accounts to sustain engagement for those audiences that like combat footage.

Ukraine also sought to reach people through mainstream media interviews, choosing highly visible figures like President Zelenskyy, then-Defence Minister Reznikov, and fighter pilot “Juice” to appear on CNN. These appearances were then re-broadcast of X/Twitter to support the *feedback loop of narrative through television and social media audiences*. In all cases, these media appearances did not prompt Western audiences to any specific action other than support Ukraine. There were no calls to demonstrate outside Russian embassies, harm Russian living in the West, or engage in violence against any element of Russian power. Ukraine’s core ask appears to have been for publics to vocally support Ukraine, or at the very least do not oppose supporting Ukraine. This kind of implicit call to support is what influencing discourse and building consensus is all about. It is about solidifying a social consensus that supporting Ukraine is the right and logical thing to do. If consensus can be effectively shaped, it means the scope of debate is more likely be about *how much* support to give Ukraine, not about whether to support Ukraine at all.

9.3 Coherent Master Narrative as the Baseline for Audience Targeting

Ukraine’s targeting relied on a two-layered strategy of presenting messages that appealed to national and sub-national audiences (appeals to national identity tropes, or groups within a nation) and to transnational identities (appeal to cultural idioms that exist across Western countries). Despite two distinct approaches to targeting, Ukraine relied on a consistent master narrative once it was developed in time segment 3. The master narrative is that Ukraine is an underdog that is part of Western / European politics and culture, who was unjustifiably attacked by its brutal Russian neighbour who then subjected Ukrainians to murder, torture, sexual violence, and deliberately targeted civilian centres. This is the Ukraine-good/Russia-bad construct. A consistent narrative allowed Ukraine flexibility in how to connect major events to a clear story about Ukraine-good/Russia-bad. In that sense, a coherent master narrative enabled Ukrainian information operators to wrap new events—a night of Russian missiles on Kyiv, a breakout in Kherson, a successful river crossing, etc.—into “new” messaging to provide repetition to solidify the impression Ukraine in the minds of the

audience. It also allows negative messages about Russia and the actions of the Russian military to serve as evidence of the negative narratives about Russia.

The sub-targeting—whether national, sub-national or transnational—focused on explaining to those audience *how Ukraine* was just like them and doing so in a way that resonated with existing world-views and beliefs. This method of targeting is the *“think globally, act locally” equivalent of information operations*. Ukraine developed a “global” master narrative in time segment 3 and then tailored their “local” messages to resonate with national and transnational audiences. For American evangelicals, Ukraine presented images of their own religiosity and appreciation of traditional gender roles. For young (presumably male) audiences, video content showed low-level helicopter attacks, first-person combat footage from helmet-mounted cameras, and other combat action, all set to electronic dance music. For slightly older audiences, similar video was shown with AC/DC or Metallica. Anime, fantasy and science-fiction aficionados saw Ukraine presented as the hero in the construct of their respective stories and lore. All this sub-targeting, however, pointed back to the central master narrative about Ukraine being the “good guys”, and therefore deserving of help. All messaging flowed from that basic master narrative.

For counter-narrative, there was little customization required. Russia’s initial “de-Nazification” narrative fell apart rather quickly in the face of Ukrainian counter-narratives that sought to connect Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 to Nazi invasion of Ukraine in 1941. Russia eventually abandoned the “de-Nazification” narrative, either because it was no longer useful once the “special military operation” failed to achieve its goals and the fig-leaf predicate was no longer useful, or because they believed they were being outmaneuvered in the information space by Ukraine. In either case, the Ukrainian counter-narrative was consistent: they showed images of alleged Russian war crimes and targeting of civilians for all audiences. These were not customized, presumably because these were negative messages, not positive ones. Any audience can understand the perpetrator of brutal violence as “the bad guy” in a narrative. The positive messages were customized for national and transnational audiences, but negative counter-narrative messages were not, and remained consistent.

9.4 Human Attitudes and Feelings are Still the Target in a Digital Age

This work has showed the tenets of classical theory from authors like Ellul, LeBon, Lippman, and Bernays (many of which are reflected in ELM) all remain relevant. The value of emotion, group and sub-group identity and their respective tropes and stereotypes and presenting a dyad between a thing to support and a thing to oppose are all clearly highly relevant for understanding Ukrainian English-language information operations. Ukraine used clear emotional appeals to build affinity for Ukraine through images and videos eliciting joy, hope, admiration for resilience, and anger toward Russia for targeting Ukrainian civilians. Furthermore, Ukraine’s appeals sought to build an image of Ukrainian identity to resonate with both national identities in the West, and sub-national and transnational identities.

Digital technology has brought unprecedented reach, range and speed to communications. Data collection about users’ digital data consumption preferences and dislikes provides equally unprecedented insights on individual users and group of users. Despite the digital means of connection and profiling, the human being

and the psyche remain the target. Writings from Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke are centuries or millennia old, and their reflections on human nature inform contemporary discussions in international relations theory. Their works are still studied today, on the implicit assumption that their observations about humans remain relevant in the modern era. Likewise, classical theories about how and why propaganda and information operations work remain relevant in the digital era, because the human psyche remains the target, and human emotions and desires for identity has not changed.

9.5 Areas for Future Research

This work used coded data from two X/Twitter accounts to address questions about how Ukraine used information operations in the four months leading up the 2022 invasion, and one year after the date of the 2022 invasion. This work identified key narratives, messaging, and image and video types and themes that Ukraine used to generate emotional and identity-based appeals to Western audiences. In some senses, this study focused on the supply of information operations, with demand inferred by the consistency in messaging. Presumably, if Ukraine continued to use messaging, it is because they had indication that it was connecting with digital audiences.

The simplest area for future research is to use the method and approach of this work and extend the period of study to include the remainder of 2023, 2024, 2025, etc., until some kind of end or pause in major combat operations. This approach would provide longer period of study and would allow for more analysis of changes (or not) to messaging, narratives, counter-narratives and targeting of audiences.

Other areas of research could consider 1) the demand side of the information operations equation by understanding any general media consumption habits in national, sub-national and transnational audiences, and how statecraft-specific information operations inform those habits (if they do); 2) delving deeper into the degree to which target populations were aware they changed their attitudes based on online Ukrainian information campaigns, 3) the degree to which elected and senior officials were aware of Ukrainian information operations, and if they were part of their calculation on making decisions about providing military, economic and political support, and 4) the evolution of Russian narratives and counter-narratives on the war in Ukraine—both for domestic consumption and for Western consumption.

Benkler, Faris and Roberts conducted a comprehensive study of the impacts of the attempts to influence the 2016 US President election through social and digital media.³ This study sought to map how content was shared online and to show the contours of the ecosystem.⁴ An area of future research could be to map national and sub-national audiences (particularly in the United States) to better understand the contours of the ecosystem for official English-language X/Twitter. Specific areas of interest could include identifying if any sub-populations are more insular than others in their online data consumption (i.e.: more likely to consume data from identity-aligned sources than general sources). The analysis could also identify any key characteristics about other data consumption (i.e.: not specific to Ukraine) of national, sub-national or transnational populations. The purpose of this analysis would be to understand what other identity elements are contained within those target populations.

We discussed the importance of shaping discourse in the pursuit of establishing a consensus on supporting Ukraine. While quantification remains an elusive challenge, more research could be conducted with target audiences to determine if they knowingly changed their attitudes (or had existing attitudes reinforced) about Ukraine based on digital information about the war. This research is highly unlikely to provide a quantifiable output; however, it would be useful to better understanding if audiences are aware of Ukraine's efforts to shape consensus about providing assistance.

Lastly, research could be conducted with elected leaders and senior officials in Western countries to determine if their decision-making was influenced, or if organizational consensus was influenced either by Ukrainian information operations, or knowledge that their domestic populations were being targeted by information operations. Using the models of analysis used by Allison in *Essence of Decision* (leaders as rational actors, organizational processes, and the governmental politics model)⁵ it should be possible to better understand if people were directly influenced (rational actors) and/or if organizational and political consensus was influenced (organizational process, government politics) by Ukrainian information operations. Research with leaders and decision-makers could investigate to what degree leaders and organizational reporting acknowledged the role of Ukrainian information operations. This analysis could include decisions on a range of topics, like support for sanctions against Russia, support for financial assistance to Ukraine, or platform-specific decisions about military assistance (i.e.: Why not a no-fly zone? why HIMARS? Why fighter jets?).

This work studied Ukraine's narratives and counter-narratives against Russian information operations. However, given the volume of television programming that Russia delivers to domestic audiences,⁶ there is opportunity for further research to determine if there is any correlation between the narratives Ukraine presents to Western audiences and Russian messaging. A similar framework to this work could be used, identifying the images, symbols, emotional tones, identity narratives, etc., contained in Russian narratives, and any evidence suggesting that Russia is attempting to counter Ukrainian narratives to sustain the support of their own domestic population.

¹ Ben Jebb, Andreas Krieg, "Subversion: The Strategic Weaponization of Narratives," The Irregular Warfare Podcast. *The Modern Warfare Institute at Westpoint*. 20 October 2023. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/irregular-warfare-podcast-the-strategic-weaponization-of-narratives/>

² Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace*. Georgetown University Press. 2019. 14-15.

³ Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press. 2018.

⁴ Ibid. 190-234.

⁵ Graham Allison, Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Addison, Wesley, Longman. 1999.

⁶ Julia Davis, *In Their Town Words: How Russian Propagandists Reveal Putin's Intentions*. Ibidem-Verlag. 2024.

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