Digital Media and War: Social Media as a Propaganda Tool for the Russia-Ukraine Conflict in the Post-truth Era

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Abstract. Social media has become an information battleground over the Russia and Ukraine wars by manipulating it into disinformation and bias. The conflict that should have subsided, instead made things worse by spreading disinformation. Russia and Ukraine both use social media to bring each other down as well as to win public opinion. This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach with an analysis of discourse and language reconstruction from Michael Foucault. The social media analyses were random choices sourced from social media directories as well as findings from credible institutions that broadcast hoaxes or disinformation related to the Russian-Ukrainian war conflict for February and March 2022. The results revealed that social media has become a digital propaganda field in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Social media has become a means of forming public opinion, seeking global support, and the spread of hoax disinformation. Therefore, the public needs to equip themselves with digital literacy skills, namely the ability to sort information on social media so that they are not easily trapped in misleading information in the post-truth era.

Keywords: Digital Media · Propaganda of War · Public Opinion · Social Media · Post-Truth Era

1 Introduction

In the past, wars occurred in the real world physically on the battlefield, but now wars occur in the digital world through social media as a propaganda field (Stevoka et al., 2016). Social media has quite a role in the running of the conflict as well as being the main source of information for people who are hunting for news from around the world (Fuchs, 2021). The digital community uses social media to become a reliable medium for obtaining information easily and quickly. The Digital News Report 2021 shows that six out of 10 people in the world who can access the internet rely on social media as a source of daily news (Newman, 2021). Social media has become a major source of information for news-hungry audiences around the world trying to understand the Russia vs Ukraine war. Previous research (Aro, 2016) Russia is taking over social media as a

new information warfare tool mobilized by an army of fake social media fans, known as 'trolls' (Jones, 2019).

Various social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter have been used by the global community (Sacco & Bossio, 2015). The three platforms are also the most commonly used platforms for sharing political and other content (Qarayeva et al., 2021). Social media is one of the mainstays of information channels regarding news of the armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia. However, it should be noted that this platform is one of the information battlegrounds (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010). Audiences need to be wise and careful in choosing the information they received in the post-truth era.

According to Bialy, The use of social media is increasing, including in global political issues, and has an important role in global and international issues, one of which is the conflict between countries (Bialy et al., 2016).

In Indonesia, social media users have experienced a significant increase every year. When viewed by age group, most social media users in Indonesia have the age range of 25–34 years, followed by the 18–24 year age group. As many as 93.5% of the millennial generation group already have a social media account (We Are Social, 2021, n.d.). According to the 2021 Digital Literacy Status survey report compiled by the Katadata Insight Center (KIC) with the Ministry of Communication and Informatics, the majority of Indonesians prefer to seek information on social media rather than on other media. The survey found that 73% of respondents searched for information the most on social media (Ahdiat, 2022).

Currently, the attention of the world's population is focused on the Russian military aggression that invaded the territory of Ukraine. Without being searched for, information on the development of this armed conflict situation appears on various types of social media. Social media is one of the fundamental assets as an instrument in war. To borrow Brooking's (2018) term, "the invasion was launched with a hashtag." The word 'Uraa' has gone viral since Putin invaded Ukraine, it is quoted and shared over and over again in the text, images, and videos on social media (Helmus et al., 2018). It is important to note that disinformation content is one of the "weapons" used in the armed conflict in Ukraine (Goswami, 2018). For example, on February 25, 2022, the day after Russia launched an attack on Ukrainian territory, media affiliated with the Russian government spread the news that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had fled abroad. After the news spread, President Zelenskyy uploaded a short video showing himself in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv (Hristakieva et al., 2022). This example is proof that disinformation is also one of the tools of propaganda in warfare in the digital era.

Social media has become the most vulnerable means of spreading hoaxes and hate speech (Jones, 2019). Because, social media is an online media, where users can easily participate, share and create content. (Carlson, 2020). People need to be careful and get used to filtering any information circulating (Stevoka et al., 2016). Through social media, people can act as consumers as well as information makers. Its egalitarian nature makes social media contain not only quality content, but also disinformation (Yadlin-Segal & Oppenheim, 2021). The type of disinformation content is information that is manipulated in such a way as to deceive the audience about the facts (Astuti, 2019).

This research was conducted to analyze and map how social media became a propaganda tool for information wars between countries in armed conflict to win over public opinion. Propaganda is a means of communication used to manipulate or influence the opinions of individuals or groups to support certain goals or beliefs (Boyd-Barrett, 2019). There are at least 9 ways to know if the news is a hoax or hate speech that leads to propaganda. According to Jowet (2012) propaganda techniques include giving nicknames or name-calling, using glittering generalities, transfers, testimonials, plain folks, bandwagons, card stacking, emotional stereotypes, and rhetoric.

Indonesian netizens did not escape the targets of Russian and Ukrainian propaganda. It is very interesting to photograph the involvement of netizens in Indonesia which is contrary to the official stance of Indonesia's foreign policy which supports the UN resolution condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine. On social media, Putin is described as a dashing and charismatic figure while Zelensky is described as a comedian. Plus the narrative displayed on social media that Putin is pro-Islam and Zelensky's background is Jewish, so this makes Indonesian netizens look more inclined to support Russia. This is one of the threats to society in the post-truth era, namely a condition where objective facts no longer have a major influence in shaping public opinion, instead, personal beliefs and emotional attachments get the most support from the community.

2 Method

The method used is a descriptive qualitative approach with an analysis of discourse and language reconstruction from Michael Foucault. Discourse in Foucault's perspective is not a series of words or propositions in the text, but something that produces something else. Therefore, in discourse analysis, one should consider language events by looking at language from two aspects, namely in terms of meaning and reference (Eriyanto, 2016). Foucault's discourse provides an understanding of the concept of perception construction as the core of communication to the audience.

The analysis is carried out on discourses that develop and are developed by interested parties who have power, by producing dominant discourses to dominate the public sphere so that other parties are also dominated and controlled (Foucault, 1980). The social media analyzed were random choices sourced from social media directories as well as findings showing propaganda related to the war conflict between Russia and Ukraine for the period February and March 2022. The data obtained were primary data and secondary data derived from direct observation by visiting and exploring social media to find data and information about content and conducting literature studies.

3 Result and Discussion

The war that has taken place in Ukraine since the Russian invasion has not only caused casualties but has also produced various misinformation. This is due to the propaganda war carried out by Russia and Ukraine on social media, resulting in various misinformation, as well as hoaxes or disinformation (Carlson, 2020).

Manipulation of information that is used to achieve certain goals can be referred to as propaganda. Playing propaganda in the war was popularized by Joseph Goebbels, the

Fig. 1. Video the Russian President on TikTok saying word "Ura". Source: Media Sosial Tiktok (2022)

Nazi Minister of Propaganda in the Hitler era, which Goebbels did by repeating a lie. The repetition of this lie will eventually be accepted as the truth. The following are some analyses related to social media which have become a propaganda tool for the Russia and Ukraine conflict on social media and are presented from two sides.

1. Name-calling
   Used to vilify someone by giving them a funny or cynical title so that the person being influenced is completely convinced. In various social media outlets such as FB, Twitter, Instagram, and Youtube President Putin is described as a dashing and charismatic figure while Zelensky is described as a comedian. This type of propaganda is not only spread through social media, conventional media also preach it. In March 2022 there was a narrative posted on social media that Putin was pro-Islam and Zelensky's background was Jewish and anti-Islam.
2. Glittering generalities
   Propaganda uses bombastic words so that people subconsciously follow them. In early March 2022, a video circulated on Tik Tok of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin saying the word "Ura or Uraa". Then the word was followed by all Russian military forces simultaneously. The shout of the word Ura or Uraa became a scene and went viral on social media, including in Indonesia (Fig. 1).

   The history of the call "uraa" or "Huuraa" dates used back to world war II when the Red Army invaded Germany. In difficult situations, they shouted "Uraa Uuraa" non-stop until they finally won. Ura was always used by the Soviet Union (Russia) troops to raise spirit and mental patriotism. Loud shouts and military parades show that they have a formidable army.

Fig. 2. The meme that show terrifying situations. Source: Media Social Twitter (2022)

3. Transfer

   Done by redirecting to another object. On February 24 the official Twitter account of Ukraine posted political memes that capture the terrifying situation. And it's shitposting at its finest to spread awareness of the current situation (Fig. 2).

   Ukraine from its Twitter handle shared a cartoon of Adolf Hitler looking proudly at President Vladimir Putin with his hand placed in his face - a sharp criticism of Putin's unprovoked attacks. While posting a political cartoon amidst an actual war seems strange, the account in a follow-up Tweet explained that the account had shared a meme about the "headache" that living next to Russia is. While headache is a mild term, it points to the horrors of sharing a border with the aggressive Russian government.

4. Testimonials

   Recognition can be gained by using the name of a famous person such as a movie star or influencer, even though the person in question does not use it. In March 2022 a video spread on Tiktok of a propaganda campaign created and first discovered by Ukrainian photographer Christina Magonova. He made a video compilation in which several popular TikTok influencers uploaded videos with the same narrative content.

   The narrative is to try to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine, under the pretext that Ukraine carried out a genocide against Russian-speaking citizens of the Donbas region over the past eight years. This propaganda was used by Russia as a justification for the invasion of Ukraine.

5. Flain folks

   A technique that politicians often use to influence people. In February 2022 Facebook spread disinformation about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy who was said to have fled the capital Kyiv. The disinformation was created by the Russian news agency, Tass, which quoted a member of the Russian parliament as reporting that Zelenskyy was in a hurry to leave Kyiv. This news soon spread via social media

Fig. 3. The video that shows Ukraine's President surrendering to Russia went viral on Twitter. Source: Media Social Twitter (2022)

around the world. Through this propaganda, Russia wants to show Zelenskyy's cowardice so that he does not deserve the support of the Ukrainian people, in addition to increasing the Russian people's support for Putin.

6. Bandwagon

Addressed to influential people such as office heads, party leaders, village heads, and so on. On March 16, 2022, a video showing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky surrendering to Russia went viral on Twitter. It turned out that the video was a deep fake and has now been removed by several social media platforms (Fig. 3).

The deep fake video was first broadcast by Ukrainian news site TV24 after the alleged hack. The video shows Zelensky standing behind the podium and declaring that Ukraine has decided to return the Donbas to Russia and admitting their fight has failed.

7. Card stacking

Trying to present facts to convince others. For example, "behind the news, he covered his shortcomings." In February 2022 Twitter reported the death of a CNN journalist, Bernie Gores, who reportedly died due to the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, and was tweeted by hundreds of thousands of people on social media. While CNN Afghanistan reported that Bernie's death was executed by the Taliban in 2021 and February 2022, CNN Ukraine reported that Bernie's death was due to the Russian military invasion. While the fact is, Bernie Gores is not a CNN journalist at all and is only framed by the media. This is what forms the basic pattern of the error that puts all people on earth against each other.

8. Emotional stereotypes

Propaganda techniques to foster emotional suspicion. On February 26, 2022, A video was viewed more than a million times on various social media posts after being shared with claims that it shows Russian and Ukrainian soldiers fighting in February 2022. The video was uploaded on Facebook and has been viewed more

Fig. 4. Video amateur that shows the battle between two countries. Source: Media Social Facebook (2022)

than 1.3 million times. The status of the upload reads: "Amateur video recording of Ukraine vs Russia, the battle between the two countries is heating up." (Fig. 4).

However, the claim is false. The video has been circulating since at least 2019 in social media posts about French Foreign Legion troops in battle.

9. Rhetoric.

Used by choosing words that can attract someone so that person can obey his will. The circulation of a video of Vladimir Putin's speech on February 24, 2022, on various social media platforms stating "War Against Ukraine and Invading the Ukrainian State". Narratives embedded in all media and even hashtags will spark public interest without weighing them down. Slowly, the narrative will form a polarization that is embedded in the soul, mind, and brain of humans and even make them point fingers at each other. Both countries played their respective roles with the same theme, namely "war". The propaganda is packaged in the news that is continuously published by all media in the world.

The study also finds several identifications of power discourses in the selection process of war propaganda posts on social media, namely power which, according to Foucault, is productive, in the sense of making things exist, and not working alone, but through power relation. The results of the identification are as follows: 1) The power of netizens who work through the ability to produce, consume and reproduce information on the internet network has led to a trend of misinformation and disinformation related to the war between Russia and Ukraine.

The trend that often appears is false claims, including those regarding the fabrication of fatalities. 2) The construction of perceptions that shape reality can directly or indirectly influence public opinion about the war in Russia and Ukraine. 3) Perceptions that have been formed are communicated verbally and non-verbally to produce discourse.

Technically, the manipulation of information can effectively lead public opinion and even action to the level of action. Propaganda is not necessarily bad like the perception we have, sometimes propaganda conveys correct information but what we find is often misleading because the information conveyed is not all conveyed. Moreover, Propaganda is seen as bad because it tended to spread bad information to its opponents. The information is usually in the form of facts but has been exaggerated to make the opponent's image look bad.

4   Conclusion

This study concludes that social media has become a digital propaganda tool in the Russia-Ukraine war and has become one of the sources of conflict that has exacerbated the situation by spreading false and biased news. Russia and Ukraine both use social media as a battlefield for information from both warring parties to "control" psychological aspects, public opinion, and good actions by the people of Ukraine, Russia, and even the world. Propaganda content such as fake news that spreads around us needs to be balanced with the ability to sort out information on social media by mastering and practicing digital literacy. This ability is needed to be able to use social media wisely and responsibly.

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