



RUSSIA INVADES UKRAINE

# THE ROLE OF PROPAGANDA

— MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION, AND DEMOCRACY



It is a gripping six-minute YouTube video. It strikes everyone who sees it. The clip shows a fearless, unarmed, young Ukrainian girl. She is angrily confronting a stone-faced Russian soldier. He is carrying guns and invading her country. The girl's bravery appears to demonstrate the courage of Ukrainians.

## FACTS UNDER FIRE

The problem? The clip was filmed 10 years before the current Russia-Ukraine war. The confrontation didn't even take place in Ukraine. It occurred in the Middle East. The girl was in fact Palestinian. She was

challenging an Israeli soldier – not a Russian.

Such falsely identified images and stories are common today. And they have **proliferated** during the Russia-Ukraine war. That's because the two nations are also waging a battle on social media. Their goal is to try to convince the public to support their cause.

## ABOUT MISINFORMATION . . .

Sometimes people post wrong information by mistake. They're assuming that what they are sharing with others is factual. They haven't **verified** that the source material is **legitimate**, but

they believe it to be true. We call that *misinformation*.

Misinformation had already reached **epidemic** proportions before the war. For instance, **conspiracy theories** about COVID-19 have spread like wildfire. So have inaccurate stories about election fraud in the United States.

Why? Because social media makes it so easy to spread misinformation. Platforms such as Facebook and TikTok use **algorithms** to grab our interest. Algorithms drive eye-catching stories to the top of online feeds. Even if the stories are fake, they take off.

## DEFINITIONS

**ALGORITHM:** a set of steps that are followed in order to solve a mathematical problem or to complete a computer process

**CONSPIRACY THEORY:** a belief that some secret but influential organization is responsible for an event or phenomenon

**EPIDEMIC:** a sudden increase in something bad or unpleasant that affects many people

**LEGITIMATE:** real, accepted, or official

**PROLIFERATE:** to quickly increase in number or amount

**VERIFY:** to check or to prove that something is true or correct



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You, too, might be spreading misinformation without realizing it. Let's say a friend sends you a popular clip. It shows a passenger complaining to flight crew about an unvaccinated passenger. The dramatic footage looks real enough. So you send it to your cousin and five others. They, in turn, pass it along. Soon, hundreds of thousands of people have seen it. And before you know it, many people accept the video as fact.

## ...AND DISINFORMATION

Suppose you had dug a little deeper. Here's what you would have learned. The fight was an act. Someone staged it hoping it would go viral. It did. It was viewed about 42 million times.

People posting false stories like that are trying to mislead you on purpose. Sometimes they just do it to create mischief. Often, however, they are trying to push their own political agenda. How? By creating doubt or confusion. Or, by convincing others of their perspectives. They don't care if that involves lying. This material that people produce to deceive others is called *disinformation*.

## SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

In 1949, British author and journalist George Orwell published a novel, *1984*. It delivered a strong warning about the dangers of propaganda.

In the book, a **totalitarian** government creates a language called Newspeak. It is a form of propaganda because it is used to control all messaging and to eliminate opinions the government doesn't like. Those who seek the real truth are dealt with severely.

Today, it's never been more important to determine if a message is **objective** or has been slanted to deceive or mislead. So how do you tell the difference? Media experts offer the following advice:

- Become a truth detective. Verify all images and claims before sharing them. One way to do that? Use a free reverse image search, such as the one offered by Google or Tineye, to find out if an image has been used before and, if so, when and how.
- Ask yourself: Who made this? Who paid for it? Who benefits or is hurt by this message? Do the research to find out.
- Read multiple accounts covering the same subject to get all points of view. Look beyond social media to get your news. Instead, seek out reliable sources, like well-established newspapers, that try to report all sides of a story.
- Be especially wary of posts that are designed to provoke strong emotions during crises. This is when disinformation is most commonly spread – and we are most vulnerable to it.
- Be conscious of your own biases. You may be tempted to seek out and believe information you agree with. Instead of buying in immediately, take a step back and a deep breath, and approach the information with your head – not your heart.

All misinformation and disinformation is bad. However, political disinformation is especially dangerous. It can spread racism, sexism, and

intolerance. It can discourage honest debate. It can undermine democracy. It can even weaken our ideas about what's true and what isn't.

## DEFINITIONS

**OBJECTIVE:** only influenced by facts and not by feelings

**TOTALITARIANISM:** a political system in which there is only one party, which has complete power and control over the people



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## THE PROPAGANDA WAR

Sometimes governments mislead people with disinformation. Or, they only report one side. That's called propaganda. In wartime, the amount of disinformation and propaganda explodes. To gain public sympathy for their side, manipulators twist or ignore the truth.

Take the video of "The Ghost of Kyiv," a Ukrainian hero pilot. He supposedly shot down six Russian warplanes. Then, a fact-checking group looked more closely. It discovered that the clip is actually from a video game. Ukrainian officials knew that this "ghost" never existed. Yet they circulated the video anyway. They likely wanted to boost the **morale** of war-weary Ukrainians.

What about propaganda coming from the Russian side? Observers say it has been far more aggressive. For example, Russia claims Ukraine has been taken over by **Nazis**. They are supposedly killing pro-Russian Ukrainians. When Russians shelled homes in Ukraine,

Russian authorities said Ukrainians were responsible. And they claim actors are portraying injured Ukrainian civilians. None of that is true.

## SILENCING THE TRUTH

The propaganda campaign has been fairly successful in Russia. The reason? The government controls the media and the **Kremlin** doesn't allow any story to be reported that goes against what it says is true. People reporting the truth face jail terms of up to 15 years.

Most citizens have no other sources of information. Access to social media and foreign news outlets is blocked. Still, some brave souls are getting out the facts. One Russian journalist, for example, took a big chance. She held up an anti-war sign during a Russian newscast.

Given half a chance, the truth will always **prevail**. ★

## DEFINITIONS

**KREMLIN:** the seat of the Russian government

**MORALE:** the amount of confidence or hope for the future that people feel

**NAZI:** someone who follows the ideology of Nazism, the political and economic beliefs put into effect in Germany from 1933 to 1945 by Adolf Hitler

**PREVAIL:** to be the strongest influence or element in a situation



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## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain what an **algorithm** is.

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2. When people post information online that may seem to be true, but actually is not, this is called:

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3. Why is it so easy to spread this type of information?

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4. Explain what **disinformation** is.

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5. What kind of disinformation is especially dangerous?

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6. What is **propaganda**? Explain.

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7. Why has Russia's domestic propaganda campaign been fairly successful? Explain.

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8. What could happen to someone in Russia who reports unauthorized information?

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## ASSIGNMENT

In 1949, British author and journalist George Orwell published an iconic novel entitled *1984*, in which a totalitarian government creates a language called Newspeak that is used as a propaganda vehicle to control all messaging and to eliminate options the government doesn't like. This novel was a warning to its readers about the dangers of propaganda.

Below are some classic quotes taken from the text of *1984*. Choose one of the quotes to analyze and discuss within a small group, using the following guiding questions to lead your conversation:

- What is the literal meaning of the elements of the quote?
- How do the elements of the quote relate to each other?
- What does the quote say about the concept of propaganda?
- How does the quote relate to the Russia-Ukraine conflict?
- What simple summary can you share about the quote?

*"In a time of deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act."*

*"If liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."*

*"The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became the truth."*

*"The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those that speak it."*

*"But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought."*



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## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. The article suggests that sometimes people reshare social media posts without verifying them, assuming they are factual. What do you feel is your personal responsibility in sharing OR resharing information on social media platforms? What do you feel is the responsibility of social media networks in verifying the information that is uploaded to their platforms? Support your thinking with examples.

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2. As you see it, in what ways might disinformation impact democracy? Explain.

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## QUESTIONS FOR ONLINE EXPLORATION

*Note:* The links below are listed at [www.lesplan.com/en/links](http://www.lesplan.com/en/links) for easy access.

1. Learn more about how Vladimir Putin has used propaganda to justify invading Ukraine and to continue to garner support from Russian citizens during this conflict:

<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2006655043723>

<https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/03/an-information-dark-age-russias-new-fake-news-law-has-outlawed-most-independent-journalism-there/>

<https://www.msnbc.com/the-reidout/watch/putin-holds-pro-war-rally-in-moscow-feeding-russian-propaganda-machine-135738437862>

What conditions has Mr. Putin created in order to make this propaganda campaign successful in Russia? Explain.

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2. Bellingcat is a Netherlands-based investigative journalism group that specializes in fact-checking and open-source intelligence. Visit the group's site to learn more about how the legitimacy of source material posted on social media networks is verified: <https://www.bellingcat.com/> Then, watch the following interviews with Bellingcat investigator Giancarlo Fiorella to learn how the group is tracking the events in Ukraine and Russia:

[https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2007106115571 \[1:59\]](https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2007106115571)

[https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2007539779575 \[5:50\]](https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2007539779575)

Identify 2 things that you learned about how this group fact-checks online source material:

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3. How do you know that the information you're receiving is accurate and whether or not you should reshare it? Check out these links to learn more about how to do your own fact-checking and how to avoid spreading misinformation:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/ukraine-how-to-avoid-spreading-misinformation-1.6366136>

<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2007440451821>

How might the ideas presented impact how you use social media? Give examples to support your ideas.

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## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

A. Write the letter that corresponds to the best answer on the line beside each question:

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. Facebook uses \_\_\_\_\_ to determine which stories are ranked high.

- a) bloggers
- b) algorithms
- c) hackers
- d) bitcoin

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. Russia falsely reported that Ukraine had:

- a) surrendered Kyiv to Russian forces
- b) been taken over by Nazis
- c) discharged a large chemical weapon
- d) agreed to a ceasefire

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. When a government intentionally misleads people with disinformation, this is called:

- a) propaganda
- b) deep state
- c) hype
- d) freedom

B. Mark the statements T (True) or F (False). If a statement is True, write one important fact to support it on the line below. If a statement is False, write the words that make it true on the line below.

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. True or False? Ukraine has posted videos of actors pretending to be severely injured.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. True or False? Russian authorities have severely restricted access to unofficial information.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. True or False? Ukraine released a song about a hero pilot called “The Ghost of Putin.”  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

C. Fill in the blanks to complete each sentence.

7. The seat of Russia's government is called the K\_\_\_\_\_.

8. Anyone in Russia who reports unauthorized data can be jailed for \_\_\_\_\_ years.

9. In 1949, George Orwell published a novel called \_\_\_\_\_ that warned about the dangers of propaganda.

D. Respond to the following question in paragraph form. (*Use a separate sheet of paper if necessary.*)

10. As you see it, what is the significance of this article? Give reasons to support your response.  
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