CAIS Paper: The Social Study of Information Work: StopFake.org and Ukraine's Online War with Russia

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Abstract: The grassroots Ukrainian organization, StopFake.org, performs the information work of combatting Russian-generated disinformation. The Internet allows a network of supporters scattered around the world to evaluate, and undercut, claims made in Russian propaganda. This case illustrates that virtual internet communities can distribute work that once required a centralized, well-financed team.

1. Introduction: After a popular revolt unseated pro-Russian Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovych in February 2014 Russia responded quickly. Its military seized the Crimean Peninsula, which was abruptly annexed following a vote of the Russian Parliament. In the months that followed, Russia channeled arms, volunteers, intelligence operatives, and eventually active duty troops into Eastern Ukraine where they fomented a civil war. The narrative above, while backed by a great deal of supporting evidence, has no resemblance to reality as reported inside Russia. Its leaders have themselves described their campaign in Ukraine as a new kind of "hybrid warfare" or "postmodern warfare" in which military actions, propaganda, political activity, and online campaigns are seamlessly and unpredictably combined.

Our paper presents work in progress on the part played in this hybrid warfare by a new kind of information organization. Several young Ukrainian journalists founded StopFake.org in March 2014. It works primarily to combat the plethora of Russian generated disinformation, although on occasion the group has debunked Ukrainian government claims. StopFake.org received recognition in Ukraine and in the West, including coverage in the mainstream press as well as academic journalism (Van der Schueren 2015; Chimbelu 2014; Tomkiw 2014; Haynes 2015; Pomerantsev 2015).Work is coordinated by a rotating core of twelve people in Kiev, including journalistic, editorial, and technical staff. A larger international network of online volunteers submits propaganda for evaluation, provides translation services, and works collaboratively to locate counter evidence. This work takes place via email and social media. One example of the group's work was to show that a picture allegedly showing a young woman who martyred herself as a rebel suicide bomber to destroy a Ukrainian tank was actually taken from the Facebook page of a Russian who remains alive and well (Capron 2014). On another occasion the group proved that a Russian media outlet circulated an online report about the shelling of a particular town before the shelling in question actually occurred, raising questions about the coordination of rebel action and propaganda (StopFake 2014).

2. Background: To win the hearts and minds of its audience, propaganda creates a mythic world; one that draws on and strengthens people's presuppositions and speaks to their desires. Propagandists believe they are educating the public about hidden forces that drive visible events. They then suggest corrective measures to construct a world in line with the mythic reality they cherish. In the case of Nazi Germany, according to Jeffrey Herf in *The Jewish Enemy* (2006), propagandists created a mythical Jewish enemy that threatened the German homeland and needed to be corrected by both military intervention

and also genocide.

Much of the Russian propaganda is designed for international audiences. The state-owned Russia Today channel, carried widely in Western countries thanks to subsidies provided by Moscow to cable and satellite operators, mimics the form of conventional news channels such as CNN or BBC World News while immersing its viewers in a parallel world where Western standards of journalistic practice have no place. For example, the channel provided saturation coverage of entirely bogus claims that the Ukrainian army, composed of anti-Christian fascists, had crucified a small child after assembling the entire town in Lenin Square to watch. The child's mother was then allegedly dragged to her death behind a tank (Nemtsova 2014; Ostrovsky 2014). Additionally, Russia has adopted newer technologies, including the creation of Sputniknews.com in late 2014, which reports in 13 languages and argues it "points the way to a multipolar world that respects every country's national interests, culture, history and traditions" (Sputnik International 2015). The Russian government employs large numbers of Internet trolls, who post the Kremlin's talking points on social media, discussion forums, and in the comments sections of articles on Ukraine posted by Western media sites such as *The Guardian* (Seddon 2014). This crowds out reasoned discussion, and research has shown that online comments play a crucial role in determining readers' responses to online stories (Kareklas, Muehling and Weber 2015).

The propaganda effort relies in part on the reluctance of Western journalists to be seen as taking sides without overwhelming evidence that one side in a dispute is lying (Gans 2004). Thus reports of the presence of thousands of Russian troops inside Ukraine, confirmed by NATO, satellite images, and the direct observations of Western reporters, are invariably balanced by the Russian disclaimers that no invasion had taken place. Recently, Timothy Snyder observed that Russian propaganda about the Ukrainian crisis has employed two effective themes, first that the Ukrainian revolutionaries were fascists and second that the Ukrainian crisis was a geopolitical struggle between Russia and the United States. For example, Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly referred to Ukraine's army as a "foreign legion" (*RT.com* 2015). In the current crisis, Snyder maintains, Russian propaganda has been successful in Western Europe for four reasons. First, because it was released very quickly, when people were surprised and confused about the events in Crimea. Second, the propaganda slows action by confusing people, leaving them uncertain about what to do. Third, by employing the sensitive trope of a geopolitical struggle between Russia and the U.S., it has left Europeans divided on whether to intervene. Fourth, Western journalists follow the value of objectivity where they seek to report two sides to every story. Finally, Russian propaganda was successful early in the Ukrainian crisis because news outlets did not have reporters on the ground (Snyder 2014). In the West at least, the object of the campaign has been as much to create the appearance of uncertainty as to convince its targets of the complete truth of the Russian narrative.

3. Argument: The information work carried out by the StopFake network is, in many respects, a unique product of the digital age. While Russia's propaganda campaign has followed the classic effort to shape public opinion, culture, and perceived reality within the confines of a nation state (Ellul 1973; Herf 2006; Barghoorn 1964), it has also, thanks to the Internet, been easily observable from outside those boundaries and been aggressively projected by Russia into the Western media sphere. Online tools make it possible to located counter-evidence, for example the original context of pictures mislabeled in propaganda posts. The activities of StopFake show the power, and the constraints, of grassroots activism against a well-organized state machine. The

organization relies on the work of volunteers, but thanks to the Internet it can harness a network of supporters scattered across the world who have the language skills, time, and inclination to evaluate claims made in Russian propaganda and provide convincing links to evidence undercutting them. This is a classic example of the ability of virtual internet communities to distribute work that would once have required a centralized, and well financed, team. The success of StopFake in disseminating counter narratives has also relied on the power of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to spread its work and bring it to the attention of journalists who might themselves lack the time, language skills, or specialist knowledge needed to definitively rebut Russian claims before filing their stories.

Placing the conflict in historical context helps us to understand what is, and what is not, truly novel about these new information practices. The backgrounds of the authors, in information science, history, and communication exemplify the intentions of the social studies of information to integrate disciplinary perspectives around the study of particular aspects of information. In this case, our historical perspective allows us to place both the broader conflict around Ukraine, at the heart of Europe's twentieth century "Bloodlands" (Snyder 2010), and the particular media practices involved into revealing juxtaposition with the pre-Internet age. While Russia has expanded the technologies it employs to disseminate propaganda, the propaganda shares historical similarities with older Soviet programs. Likewise, our expertise in communication and media studies provides us with both an understanding of the theory of propaganda as well as knowledge of the crucial role of the media, both traditional and new, as content producers engaged in soft power to extend their domination and control.

4. Evidence & Method: This research is based on online observation of the StopFake website and work processes, coupled with extended face-to-face interviews with two of the site's key founders. They will give us access to internal materials and statistics. We also plan to conduct online interviews with Canadian volunteers, exploring the specific information practices and sources they bring to their participation in the network. As well as the methods used to evaluate claims, we are interested in the process by which the group selects the specific stories chosen for investigation and the methods used to recruit and motivate volunteers.

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