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The Global Digital Information Warfare in the Context of the Ukraine War

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Abstract: The special issue “Crisis Communication and Challenges of Disinformation in an Era of Information Warfare: The Ukraine War,” published by *ESSACHESS - Journal for Communication Studies* earlier this year (2023), offered a forum for addressing aspects related to both the effectiveness and the ethical implications of the particular type of crisis communication constituted by wartime communication. This special issue, “The Global Digital Information Warfare in the Context of the Ukraine War,” published by *ESSACHESS - Journal for Communication Studies* as a follow-up, provides an opportunity to further discuss aspects related to how the war is perceived and acted upon worldwide.

Keywords: information warfare, Ukraine war, disinformation, misinformation, crisis communication

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Perspectives mondiales sur la guerre de l'information dans le contexte de la guerre en Ukraine

Résumé : Le dossier « Crisis Communication and Challenges of Disinformation in an Era of Information Warfare: The Ukraine War », publié par *ESACHESS : Journal for Communication Studies* plus tôt cette année (2023), a offert un forum pour aborder les aspects liés à la fois à l'efficacité et aux implications éthiques du type particulier de communication de crise constitué par la communication en temps de guerre. Ce numéro spécial, « La guerre mondiale de l'information numérique dans le contexte de la guerre en Ukraine », publié par la revue à titre de suivi, offre l'occasion de discuter plus en détail des aspects liés à la manière dont la guerre est perçue et mise en œuvre dans le monde entier.

Mots-clés : guerre de l'information, guerre en Ukraine, désinformation, communication de crise

An article published by the Associated Press (AP) specifies that the war between Russia and Ukraine which has been unfolding since February 2022 is not only “the deadliest conflict in Europe since World War II,” but also the first war “to see algorithms and TikTok videos deployed alongside fighter planes and tanks” (Klepper 2023). While traditional warfare has been employed in the battle for local territories, information warfare has been used in the fight for aid and support from local to global settings. Under such circumstances, there is a critical need for scholarship that can help explain the roles played in the Ukraine war by algorithms and the forms of digital communication they help propagate and strengthen. Specifically, scholarship can account for the ways in which algorithms and communication platforms contribute to the spread of specific types of messages with appeal to particular audiences. The special issue “Crisis Communication and Challenges of Disinformation in an Era of Information Warfare: The Ukraine War,” published by *ESSACHESS: Journal for Communication Studies* earlier this year (2023), offered a forum for addressing aspects related to both the effectiveness and the ethical implications of the particular type of crisis communication constituted by wartime communication. This special issue, “The Global Digital Information Warfare in the Context of the Ukraine War,” published by *ESSACHESS: Journal for Communication Studies* as a follow-up, provides an opportunity to further discuss aspects related to how the war is perceived and acted upon worldwide.

According to AP News, while Russia has relied heavily on state media outlets “to spread pro-Russian talking points,” Ukraine and its allies used the global power of Western media and scored victories “by predicting Russia’s next moves and by revealing them publicly.” Moreover, European governments and U.S.-based tech companies have sought “ways to turn off the Kremlin’s propaganda megaphone” and in particular to counter disinformation campaigns using thousands of fake social

media accounts (Klepper 2023). Such communication aspects pertaining to the Ukraine War were discussed from a variety of perspectives and with a diversity of approaches in the special issue “Crisis Communication and Challenges of Disinformation in an Era of Information Warfare: The Ukraine War” (2023, vol. 16, no. 1). Articles featured in the special issue depicted the rhetorical battle between strategic narratives of various Western leaders and of Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, aimed at legitimizing differing ideological stances and addressing differing target publics, as well as the rhetorical formulation of strategic narratives used by Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky to rally the international community in favor of the Ukrainian cause. However, the special issue also revealed that, in the face of an information warfare, a web of actors, not just the key political players, help shape public discourse. Several articles analyzed mediated responses to the war in Ukraine, including for example, the online resistance organized by the Ukrainian civil society and reactions from users of social media platforms. A finding of particular importance was that, while public opinion internationally might be polarized in regard to the war, the initial communication influx shaped perceptions the most, as people came to pay less attention to both accurate information and disinformation with the passage of time. However, disinformation narratives were documented to remain strong across cultural spaces, especially when they were geared toward propagandistic messaging.

This special issue, “The Global Digital Information Warfare in the Context of the Ukraine War” (2023, vol. 16, no. 2) focuses on manifestations of the information warfare in Eurasia, Africa, the United States of America, and in academic settings in Russia. The article “De-Westernize the Digital Information Warfare on Google News: An East-Eurasian Perspective of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict” compares Google News aggregations pertaining to the Ukraine War in four nations from East-Eurasian settings, namely Georgia, Poland, Serbia, and Turkey. Taking a postcolonial approach, the article conceptualizes a Western-centric vision of the war and discusses its dissemination through the Google News aggregations towards peripheral areas of the Western world such as South-Eastern European and South-Western Asian settings. The study shows that a digital news aggregator such as Google News, which is a commercial enterprise but also a U.S.-based company contributing to the spread of Western media content and ideologies, assembles different media diets as well as different combinations of media frames across countries during the contemporary period of information warfare. Due to a variety of factors including political trends and interregional relations, Google News provides Georgia and Serbia with cross-national media diets, but offers Poland and Turkey nationalized media diets. Moreover, while all four countries examined get their news on the war aggregated according to several major frames, including conflict, dialogue, escalation, identity, culture, consequences, and new perspectives, ratios and interpretations are specific to each country based on geography and geopolitics. The study shows that where one is located matters in terms of access to news about the war, with consequences on information consumption, comprehension, and negotiation. Furthermore, the article “Les médias occidentaux face à la crise militaire russo-ukrainienne: quel impact en Afrique de la sémantique d’« aggression? »” argues that Western leaders might blame

African nations for refusing to take a pro-Western stance in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, but that such leaders fail to understand that war communication and its results depend on the political consideration by recipients of information of the direct and indirect belligerents. In the African context specifically, according to the article, opinions on the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine are less impacted by the treatment of the news by the Western media, and more by the political reputation of the warring parties and their strategic engagements in Africa. One of the mistakes that some Western leaders often make is assuming the African countries share similar views on world issues. The continent is diverse, and countries therein cannot be swayed in one direction solely by media engagement. The article, “Reputation of the Russian Federation after the Invasion of Ukraine,” uses survey methodology to evaluate how the reputation of the Russian Federation changed in the United States after the invasion of Ukraine. Based on a comparison of survey data before and after the invasion of Ukraine, the study shows that the Russian Federation suffered significant reputational damage because of the invasion. Of significant note is that respondents to a survey administered after the Russian invasion of Ukraine had a negative view of the Russian political system and negative feelings toward Russia. Interestingly, the only dimension of reputation that remained neutral, according to the scale, was products and services, which highlights that there is potential for commercial engagement of the United States with Russia after the war. Finally, the article “Russian Academia in 2022 and Research on Ukraine” offers a critical review of academic research published in Russia in 2022 focusing on the Ukraine-Russia crisis. According to this study, the attitude towards the war in Ukraine among Russian academics was not monolithic. Russian academic articles that mention the Ukrainian crisis include texts that openly support Russia’s military action, that cautiously allude to disagreement with the authorities, or that treat the conflict objectively without indicating a political view. Interestingly, as the article mentions, at the time of crisis, Russian academics found relief from the performance of a song called “We are no zeros” at a concert in Moscow (IvasiRu, 2022).

Like the previous special issue on this topic, this special issue constitutes a space in which communication scholars discuss the framing of the war and its long-term implications. As outlined in the studies included in this special issue “The Global Digital Information Warfare in the Context of the Ukraine War” (2023, vol. 16, no. 2), the Russian-Ukrainian war has provided opportunities to question the universality of any specific ideology and has unveiled alarming similarities between democratic and authoritarian political practices during conflict. This allows for the critical consideration of various aspects of warfare and the ethics of information during conflict.

While the list is not exhaustive, some potential lessons are deduced from the articles included in this special issue as well as in the previous one:

Hybrid warfare is here to stay. Hybrid warfare, which combines conventional military actions with non-military tools such as sophisticated information warfare, has become a significant concern for nations worldwide.

Disinformation will increase, aided by new technologies. Some players involved in conflict are using disinformation campaigns to spread false or misleading information to manipulate public opinion, create confusion, and sow discord to gain strategic advantage. In this context, there is a need for public communication to counter disinformation and provide accurate access to reliable data. The development of international norms and regulations in cyberspace is also essential. Creating rules of engagement for the digital space may contribute to stability and prevent conflict escalation.

Cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure will increase. Cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, such as energy grids or communication networks, can be part of information warfare strategies. Therefore, safeguarding against cyber threats is a crucial aspect of national security.

The global response is complex. Information warfare is transboundary, thus requiring a global response by governments, civil society, media organizations, and international organizations. However, the global response to conflict situations at international levels is not cohesive or coherent, due to the competing power of differing ideological stances and sets of interests. Perceptions on warfare and its implications in various regions of the world are impacted by geostrategic alliances in addition to news content.

Media literacy is necessary to build resilience. Building resilience against information warfare involves educating the public about media literacy, critical thinking, and the recognition of disinformation and misinformation. Various institutions, including educational ones, can play important roles in developing and executing programs to enhance public awareness.

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