Truth and Reality, Lost in Translation: Russia and the Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies in the Information Environment

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Abstract

Revolutionary changes in the information environment have altered the way humans learn about the world and share their lives in community. The information environment is characterized by global, highspeed connections; abundant, easily accessible information; and emerging technology that can produce and manipulate data. This paper argues that emerging technology in the information environment impedes people's capacity to distinguish truth and reality. At the same time, philosophical trends that dismiss objective truth and prioritize subjective experience amplify the disorientation and hinder ethical action. This paper explores how information and communication affect human thinking and shared communities in the context of advances in the information environment. It then explores the philosophical trends animating contemporary culture before using Russia as a case study to demonstrate ethical implications.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, emerging technology, information environment, postmodernism, Russia, truth

Introduction

The forged document "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" was first published in Russia in 1903, likely the work of the tsarist secret police in Paris. The Protocols purported to be the meeting minutes of a group of Jewish elders conspiring to topple Christendom and rule the world. The Protocols eventually spread from Russia and were translated into dozens of languages. They were printed in the United States in 1920 by Henry Ford to warn of the Jewish "peril."

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Adolf Hitler mentioned them in *Mein Kampf*, and in the 1930s, three decades after their first appearance in tsarist Russia, he used them in schools in Nazi Germany.[1]

In 1983 the Soviets fabricated a story that the United States had created the virus causing AIDS. They planted the story in an Indian news publication to mask its origins. Soviet agents pushed it for several years, reprinting it in Soviet-friendly publications and building its legitimacy over time. Four years after it first appeared, Dan Rather reported it to the American public on the CBS evening news in 1987.[2] Today the timeline from production to the widespread consumption of information has been radically compressed. Those same stories can be produced, disseminated, and make global headlines in less than four hours.

The modern information space has amassed millennia of the world's collective knowledge and connected the globe in ways unimaginable in the past. At the same time, in today's hyper-connected information space, troll factories, automated bots, and state-controlled media in multiple languages can spew lies that corrode social trust 24 hours a day. Bad actors can target entire populations with false narratives and disinformation at low cost and little effort. Emerging technology, utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, can now produce deepfakes that convincingly show known personalities saying and doing things they never have in reality said or done. AI can write stories around key phrases with no human intervention. The metaverse will soon allow humans to interact in an entirely simulated world. The information environment, already shambolic and polarizing, has the potential to become exponentially worse. The complexity and speed of the information environment challenge human understanding of reality and truth.

What are the ethical implications of the evolving information environment? The two converging trends have significant repercussions on ethical behavior. First, emerging technology in the information environment makes it harder for people to distinguish truth and make sense of their world. Second, philosophical trends that dismiss objective truth and prioritize subjective experience and emotion amplify the problem. The implications for ethics, or right

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[1] "A Hoax of Hate: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" Anti-Defamation League. Last modified Jan. 5, 2013. https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/hoax-hate-protocols-learned-elders-zion

[2] Ben Popken, "Factory of Lies: Russia's Disinformation Playbook Explosed." *NBC News*. Nov. 5, 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/business/consumer/factory-lies-russia-s-disinformation-playbook-exposed-n910316.

action in the world, are profound: people are both less convinced of the existence of objective truth and at the same time less able to orient their judgments based on reliable information.

Russia is used here as a case study to demonstrate the ethical implications inherent in the emerging information space and philosophical milieu. Russia is at the forefront of a holistic, state approach to the information space, combining propaganda, disinformation, cyber capabilities, and emerging technologies to influence perceptions and behavior. The philosophical basis for Russia's approach to information blends a potent mixture of political realism built on a foundation of postmodernism that actively rejects objective truth and reality. These same trends are evident in many countries, but as thinker Peter Pomerantsev observes, "the future arrived first in Russia,"[3] and thus, it provides a unique window into this brave new world.

The first section explores how information and communication affect human thinking and shared communities. It then considers the effects of emerging information and communication technologies on these vital human experiences. The second section traces the philosophical concepts that animate contemporary culture, focusing on the elevation of the subjective self as the arbiter of truth. The third probes how Russia uses the modern information space to challenge truth and reality, the philosophical ideas that inform Russia's approach to the information space, and how emerging technologies support Russia's practices. Throughout the paper, ethical concepts will be considered in light of the context of the tech-empowered information environment. These concepts shed light on the importance of the human ability to discover truth and orient themselves in reality to behave ethically.

Scope

This work does not focus on one specific emerging technology like AI or deepfakes. Instead, it takes the entirety of the modern information environment, characterized by global, highspeed connections, troves of easily accessible information, and the emerging automated systems that can produce and manipulate data. It understands all aspects of the information environment to be a novel technology that fundamentally shifts the way humans learn about their world and share their lives in community.

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[3] Peter Pomerantsev, "Why did the Future Arrive First in Russia?" Interview by Demetri Kofinas, *Hidden Forces*, Episode 229, Jan. 14, 2022, https://hiddenforces.io/podcasts/peter-pomerantsev-future-arrived-first-in-russia/.

　　While many philosophical concepts are discussed here, this work does not intend to be a robust reflection of the latest academic dialog around philosophical questions. Instead, the focus is on general manifestations of significant philosophical ideas in popular culture and politics. Readings from Hannah Arendt, in particular her discussion of the fragility of facts in her essay "Truth and Politics,"[4] as well as Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of emotivism in *After Virtue* were foundational texts to the author's thinking.[5]

Information and Communication: The Basis of Truth and Shared Reality

　　"*As some psychiatrist once put it, we all build castles in the air. The problems come when we try to live in them.*"

　　-Neil Postman[6]

　　When the digital age first dawned, many predicted it would usher in an era of fact-based shared understanding. Whereas in the past, humans had been limited by ignorance and superstition, now they would be able to quickly find the facts and adjust their beliefs accordingly. Computers would cull gigabytes of data and serve up truthful information at the speed of a Google search. Citizens armed with smartphones and video evidence would be a bulwark against the lies of dictators. The ability to share information and organize online would spread democracy throughout the world. The predictions were predicated on the fallacy of technological determinism, which is the idea that technology drives social, political, and economic outcomes with humans subordinate to it. However, as is often the case with emerging technologies, its initial promise has given way to a darker side.

　　In recent years, technological advances have resulted in an explosion of information and a flattening of the information space. Today, the average person is exposed to more information in one day than they would have been in a lifetime

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[4] Arendt, Hannah. "Truth and Politics." *The New Yorker.* Feb. 17, 1967, pg. 49. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics.

[5] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* 3rd edition, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) Chapters 2 and 3.

[6] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business,* Read by Jeff Riggenbach, (Audible Audiobooks, Jan. 16, 2007) 4 hrs. 49 min.

in the 15th century.[7] The internet and now social media give an equal platform to all voices. While this means that anyone anywhere can access the vast troves of human information accumulated over thousands of years, it has also led to what many are calling information disorder or information pollution.[8] There is so much information available that it is nearly impossible to assess its origins, truthfulness, and importance in day-to-day life. Falsity appears alongside truth. Unwarranted attention is paid to inconsequential stories while significant events may be given short shrift. Bad actors can easily disguise themselves behind false identities.

Individuals' and societies' response to the chaotic information space has demonstrated the complex ways humans process information, make sense of the world, and participate in community. Researchers have yet to crack the code on how humans use information to understand and interact in their environment, but it is clear they do not form judgments and beliefs on a purely rational basis. It turns out that human cognition and perception, and its resulting belief systems, are much more complex and enigmatic than once thought. In addition, humans orient themselves in the world and in community by building "representations" of reality through complex systems for understanding and imparting information.[9] Most accepted ethical systems are rooted in either rational judgment, as in Kantian deontological ethics and utilitarianism, or in observable reality, as in natural law theory or virtue ethics as put forward by Thomas Aquinas or Aristotle. However, the complexity of the information space combined with the way people process information makes ethical foundations based on objective truth and reality more tenuous.

Information: Human Cognition and Perception

Retaking the opening examples of the fabricated Protocols document and the Soviet disinformation campaign around the origin of HIV, both stories have been thoroughly debunked, and their deceptive origins unmasked. Yet, a study in 2005 revealed that of a randomly sampled group of African Americans, 30 percent of men and 24 percent of women persist in the belief that "AIDS was produced in

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[7] Gaia Vince, "Cities: How Crowded Life is Changing Us." *BBC Future*, May 16, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20130516-how-city-life-is-changing-us.

[8] Council of Europe. *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking,* by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, *(*Sept. 27, 2017) 7, https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-november-2017/1680764666.

[9] Will Starr, "How, Exactly, Do Our Brains Construct Reality," *Literary Hub,* Mar. 11, 2020, https://lithub.com/how-exactly-do-our-brains-construct-reality/.

a government laboratory."[10] In the case of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," the document is still actively in circulation despite being exposed as a fraud an entire century ago by *The London Times*. *The Times* showed in 1921 that The Protocols had been plagiarized from the 1864 French satire *Dialogues in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*, which never even mentioned Jews. According to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Protocols are still taught in many Arab and Muslim countries as fact, and as recently as 2002, Egypt aired a miniseries based on the fabricated document.[11]

Why these stories persist can be explained by the complex way humans take in and accept information. Humans do not study information and form opinions disinterestedly; they use heuristics and tribal thinking to make sense of their world. Tribal thinking is the result of tribalism, which is understood as "groupness" or "group affiliation," whereby people take on the opinions and ideas of their group affiliation.[12] These tendencies provide people mental shortcuts to simplify and manage incoming information. By simplifying information, humans can think quickly through a high volume of new informational inputs, but these mental shortcuts can also serve as impediments to nuanced understanding.

Confirmation bias, for instance, is the phenomenon by which humans accept information that agrees with their preconceived ideas and reject information that contradicts their opinions and beliefs. Thus, if a portion of the African American community has developed a distrust for the government for a variety of valid reasons, and the story they hear validates that distrust, they are more likely to believe it and reject evidence to the contrary. Studies have shown this clear tendency. In one famous study, pro- and anti-capital punishment individuals received two invented studies, one giving evidence supporting capital punishment and the other in opposition to capital punishment. The study participants were asked which study was more credible in their view, and unsurprisingly the majority chose the study that favored their initial position. Not only that, but at the end of

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[10] Michael W Ross et al., "Conspiracy beliefs about the origin of HIV/AIDS in four racial/ethnic groups," *Journal of acquired immune deficiency syndromes (1999)* vol. 41,3 (2006): 342-4. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1405237/.

[11] U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, *"Protocols of the Elders of Zion,"* Holocaust Encyclopedia, Accessed May 31, 2022, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/protocols-of-the-elders-of-zion.

[12] Carolina Kitchener, "The Trouble with Tribalism," *The Atlantic,* Oct. 17, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/membership/archive/2018/10/trouble-tribalism/573307/.

the experiment, their opinions on the subject were even stronger.[13] They selected the information that confirmed their existing belief, and by doing so, the belief became even further entrenched.

In addition to confirmation bias, recent studies show that humans delegate much of their thinking to their "tribe." In *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*, cognitive scientists Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach explain "the illusion of explanatory depth," whereby people think they know much more than they do.[14] They suggest this is because humans think in community. Thus, humans unconsciously outsource much of their thinking to friends, experts, and authorities and take on their views without realizing how little they understand the issue at hand. The tendency to think in groups can become a self-sustaining ecosystem, in which false information and shared narratives may continue unexamined.

Humans also generally process information uncritically. Much research has demonstrated that people approach information with a truth bias; that is, they assume information they encounter is true rather than false.[15] In addition, the more familiar a particular piece of information "feels," the more likely a person is to accept it as true. Thus, if a person is exposed to a message multiple times, even if it is false, they are more likely to consider it accurate because it "feels" familiar.[16] This effect was found with even one exposure to a particular statement or claim, and the effect grew with additional exposures. Even when people were told the information was false, they persisted in believing it to be true.[17] At the same time, humans tend to judge easier-to-process statements as more likely to be true than harder-to-process statements.[18] This effect can be elicited in studies, for instance, by repeating the information to make it seem more familiar and easier to understand. If a piece of information seems to fit one's mental narrative, it is easier to understand and accept. Lastly, according to Elizabeth Marsh and Matthew

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[13] Elizabeth Kolbert, "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds," *The New Yorker,* Feb. 19, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds.

[14] Steven Sloman and Philip Fernach. *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017) pg. 23.

[15] R. Greifeneder, M.E. Jaffé, E.J. Newman, and N. Schwarz, (Eds.), *The Psychology of Fake News: Accepting, Sharing, and Correcting Misinformation*, 1st ed., (Routledge, 2020): 116, https://doi.org/10.4324/978042929537.

[16] Greifeneder, Jaffe, Newmann, and Schwarz, Psychology of Fake News, 78.

[17] Greifeneder, Jaffe, Newmann, and Schwarz, Psychology of Fake News, 135.

[18] Greifeneder, Jaffe, Newmann, and Schwarz, Psychology of Fake News, 134.

Stanley, the human cognitive "system accepts inputs that are 'close enough' even when we know better."[19] Consequently, people frequently accept information based on false presuppositions, like answering the question: "Water contains two atoms of helium and how many atoms of oxygen?" Of course, water does not contain helium, but few people recognize the error in the information set. This means that false premises can proliferate unchallenged in the information space.

The modern information space makes it more challenging to wade through oceans of data and understand their significance, intensifying human reliance on heuristics and tribal thinking. If, in the past, one false story like the Protocols or the HIV conspiracy could affect communities for decades, today a torrent of false or misleading information can misinform at a global scale. At the same time, compressing complex stories into pithy tweets on Twitter or short scrolling headlines on Facebook encourages users to do what already comes naturally – think quickly, uncritically, and in groups. Whereas these traits have arguably helped humans navigate their environment for thousands of years, in the information environment they can lead to the proliferation and entrenchment of unexamined ideas and narratives.

Information: Maps of Reality and Shared Experience

Complicating the picture, people take their bearings in the world through information and communication. Traditionally, theorists saw communication in a simple information transmission paradigm. Transmission conveys the means by which entities transmit messages: there is a sender, a message, a means of transmission, and a receiver. It focuses on connectivity rather than the cognitive effects. But of course, the picture is much more complex. According to communications theorist James Carey, people use information to assess the nature of reality. They use information they receive to first "produce the world by symbolic work" (i.e., they represent a space with a mental map) "and then take up residence in the world we have produced" (they use the mental map they drew to get from point a to b).[20] Writer Will Starr, based on the work of neuroscientist David Eagleman, describes the process as the brain constructing a hallucinated

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[19] Greifeneder, Jaffe, Newmann, and Schwarz, Psychology of Fake News, 138.

[20] Carey, James W. *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. (Rev. ed.: Routledge, 2008), 30.

"model" of the world.[21] The brain takes in innumerable data points through complex sensory processes that allow it to construct a working representation of the external environment in the mind's eye. In the case of the physical environment, the mental map has to reasonably correspond to reality for people to safely and accurately navigate their surroundings. Humans must constantly test their mental maps against physical reality. However, in the case of the information environment, which is characterized by belief systems, that same principle does not necessarily hold.

Let's take an example to illustrate the point: In 2016, a conspiracy theory, charging that Democratic Party officials were operating a child sex trafficking ring out of the basement of a Washington DC pizza restaurant, circulated on social media. It included real information like the restaurant's address and photographs, but the accompanying story was fabricated.[22] So powerful was its resonance that a North Carolina man went to the restaurant to investigate. His visit ended in a four-year prison sentence after pointing a gun at an employee and firing shots in the restaurant, where no children and no basement were found.[23] This story is a powerful portrait of how information impacts humans' understanding of reality. In this case, the man's actions in physical reality put the lie to rest; however, in most cases, people cannot test their beliefs against reality. Thus, they go on ordering their mental worlds around a distorted map of reality.

Communication becomes even more complex when considered within its role in the community. James Carey contends that communication should be seen both in terms of transmission and ritual. Whereas the transmission view focuses on conveying information, the ritual view of communication, according to Carey, is "linked to terms such as 'sharing,' 'participation,' 'association,' 'fellowship' and 'the possession of a common faith.' In this view, communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared

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[21] Will Starr, "How, Exactly, Do Our Brains Construct Reality." *Literary Hub,* Mar. 11, 2020, https://lithub.com/how-exactly-do-our-brains-construct-reality/.

[22] Mike Wendling, "The saga of 'Pizzagate': The fake story that shows how conspiracy theories spread," *BBC News*, Dec. 2, 2016. https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-38156985.

[23] Kennedy Merrit, "'Pizzagate' Gunman Sentenced to 4 Years in Prison," *NPR,* June 22, 2017, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/06/22/533941689/pizzagate-gunman-sentenced-to-4-years-in-prison.

beliefs."[24] A news story then not only imparts the new happenings of the day, but "it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it."[25] People project themselves and their beliefs into the stories they read and hear about. A Council of Europe report on Information Disorder suggests, "we must recognize that communication plays a fundamental role in representing shared beliefs. It is not just information but drama — 'a portrayal of the contending forces in the world.'"[26] The ritual view of communication brings additional light to how the fake stories around the origin of HIV or a Jewish conspiracy can resonate in communities despite their falsity. People share stories and information in community that correspond to their commonly held values.

Again, an example will help illustrate how the ritual response plays out in the modern information space. In 2018, a story about a group of high school students from Covington, Kentucky, who allegedly blocked a Native American protest in Washington, DC, went viral. The initial, erroneous headlines described President Trump-supporting teenagers obstructing a peaceful Native American protest from proceeding up the stairs of the Lincoln Memorial. Accompanying the story was a photo of what appeared to be a smug teenager smirking at a Native American. The image seemed to tell the entire story. Within hours, individuals, celebrities, and politicians from across the country called for the kids' expulsion from their school. Many shared the school's phone number, and some even attempted to identify and share the students' personal information online. Many couched the image and the story in terms of their broader beliefs and ideals, which the news story seemed to confirm and validate. It took several days and hours of additional video for journalists to correct the story's false narrative, but its initial power was not so much in its content but rather in the "portrayal of contending forces" it seemed to confirm.[27] The social media outpouring was more akin to a ritual act of shared belief.

The ritual view of communication opens up an interesting possibility about how humans perceive "reality." It asserts that information can be communicated based on observable reality, but powerfully, the inverse can also be true: in the

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[24] Carey, *Communication as Culture,* 18.

[25] Carey, *Communication as Culture,* 7.

[26] Council of Europe. *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking,* by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, (Sept. 27, 2017) 7, https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-november-2017/1680764666.

[27] Caitlin Flanagan, "The Media Botched the Covington Catholic Story," *The Atlantic,* Jan. 23, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/01/media-must-learn-covington-catholic-story/581035/.

ritual view of communication, "reality," or the map humans choose to inhabit, can be *created* via information and communication. According to Carey: "We create, express, and convey our knowledge of and attitudes toward reality through the construction of a variety of symbol systems: art, science, journalism, religion, common sense, mythology."[28] Thus, people can create and inhabit a constructed shared reality in some real sense. Later, we will see how Russia has used information to construct a shared reality for its citizens. Another example involves the QAnon conspiracies.

In the United States, the QAnon conspiracies demonstrate how people can construct a shared reality. The anonymous leader Q posts conspiracy theories in forums like 4chan and 8chan, where community members can actively participate in their propagation. According to an investigative piece in *The Atlantic* in 2020, "the QAnon belief system looks something like this: Q is an intelligence or military insider with proof that corrupt world leaders are secretly torturing children all over the world; the malefactors are embedded in the deep state; Donald Trump is working tirelessly to thwart them… The eventual destruction of the global cabal is imminent."[29] In most cases (Pizzagate notwithstanding), the truth of the claims cannot be verified, but the belief in them has led thousands, if not millions, to make common cause in their shared reality. In the virtual reality of the modern information space, unlike in physical reality, people can easily create and propagate "a reality" of their own making. However, as Neil Postman pointed out in the opening quote to this chapter, while "we all build castles in the air. The problem comes when we try to live in them."[30] If the "reality" people construct is based on faulty information, they will inhabit and base their actions and beliefs on a distorted version of the world. This phenomenon is prevalent in the information-saturated digital space.

Information Disorder: Maps to Nowhere

Revolutionary changes in the information environment mean a deluge of information and conspiracy theories can achieve instantaneous global reach. In

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[28] Carey, *Communication as Culture,* 13.

[29] Adrienne LaFrance, "The Prophecies of Q: American Conspiracy Theories are Entering a Dangerous New Phase," *The Atlantic*, June 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/.

[30] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business,* Read by Jeff Riggenbach, (Audible Audiobooks, Jan. 16, 2007) 4 hrs. 49 min.

fact, two teams of forensic linguists tracked down Q of QAnon fame to a South African software developer as the likely, but still unconfirmed, source.[31] In a 2017 report for the Council of Europe on "information disorder," the authors argue that "contemporary social technology means that we are witnessing something new: information pollution at a global scale." Information pollution refers to irrelevant, inconsistent, or incomplete information that clutters the information space and hinders humans' ability to filter and make sense of it.[32] Writer and Professor Michael P. Lynch aptly conveys the effect of information pollution, noting "Googling is like being in a room with a million shouting voices." One cannot hope to understand and order all the information available. Thus, according to Lynch, "the most disturbing power of information pollution is that its repeated use can dull our sensitivity to the value of truth itself."[33] People give up on pursuing truth altogether as undiscoverable.

The Council of Europe conceptualizes information pollution as leading to "information disorder," which they outline as misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information and define based on their falseness and intent to harm. Misinformation is false information shared with no intent to harm others. The sharer generally does not know the information is wrong – depending on whether Q believes the information he shares, he and his followers would fall into this category. Mal-information is truthful information shared to cause harm. Leaked phone conversations or emails, for example, would fall into the category of mal-information. Disinformation, on the other hand, "is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm."[34] Bad actors and unwitting citizens contribute to the disorder that characterizes the digital information space.

In recent years, disinformation has been weaponized at a scale the authors of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" or the HIV deception could have only dreamed. Islamic State fighters used staged photos and the promise of viral social

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[31] David D. Kirkpatrick, "Who is Behind QAnon: Linguistic Detectives Find Footprints," *The New York Times,* Feb. 24, 2022,
https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/technology/qanon-messages-authors.html.

[32] Levent Orman, "Fighting Information Pollution with Decision Support Systems." *Journal of Management Information Systems* 1, no. 2 (1984): 64,
http://www.jstor.org/stable/40397792.

[33] Michael P. Lynch, "The Disturbing Power of Information Pollution," *The MIT Press Reader,* June 6, 2019, https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/disturbing-power-of-information-pollution/.

[34] Council of Europe. *Information Disorder,* 5.

media exposure to accuse U.S. soldiers of atrocities in 2015.[35] Russian trolls created personas and social media groups to inject disinformation into the U.S. public square in 2016. For instance, the Russians created Facebook groups like: Blacktivist, United Muslims of America, Army of Jesus, and Being Patriotic to push narratives that resonated with targeted audiences.[36] Blacktivist had more followers in 2016 than the authentic Black Lives Matter group. The images, stories, and memes shared in these groups did not resonate because they were true but because they seemed to confirm a particular group's larger truth or shared account of the world.

Ethical action in a digital world unmoored from physical reality and observable facts is difficult because the truth of any event or action is often distorted. Thus, people's mental maps of the world are warped, and they are unable to rely on reason to properly navigate the world. No doubt, the perpetrator in the Pizzagate incident believed it was his ethical duty to act on behalf of vulnerable children. Indeed, had there been trafficked children at the pizza restaurant, his actions would have been considered courageous acts in pursuit of justice. Yet, his actions were ultimately and rightly punishable because his information was wrong, and thus his resulting beliefs and actions were wrong. As in a computer program, when the information inputs are inaccurate, the program does not work as intended. Likewise, when humans build their operating system on corrupted code, their resulting behaviors are also perverted. Unlike a computer code, which can be easily corrected, the human system, is far more complex and challenging to repair.

This chapter explored how the digital age created a novel environment, detached from physical reality, in which people process information and build their understanding of the world. It showed how humans process data through a complex system that relies on unconscious phenomena like heuristics and outsourcing to make sense of incoming information. At the same time, human communication is not only the transmission of messages from sender to receiver but a ritual act that expresses shared beliefs and value systems, frequently decoupled from the

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[35] Emerson T. Brooking and P.W. Singer, "War Goes Viral: How Social Media is Being Weaponized Around the World," *The Atlantic,* November 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/11/war-goes-viral/501125/.

[36] Nicholas Confessore and Daisuke Wakabayashi, "How Russia Harvested American Rage to Remake U.S. Politics," *The New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/technology/russia-election-facebook-ads-rage.html.

traditional understanding of truth as verifiable facts corresponding to reality. The modern information environment encourages these tendencies. The implications for ethics are profound in that people cannot easily orient their actions in the world without a correct understanding of truth and reality. In light of this, it would seem logical that people would hold more fervently to factual truth and observable reality. Interestingly, the opposite is true; emerging trends in the information environment coincide with a philosophical movement that decries truth and reality. Next, this paper explores how cultural trends in worldview compound the ethical problems brought on by emerging technology in the information space.

Whose Truth? What Reality? Who Decides?

> *"My contention that morality is not what it once was is just to say that to a large degree people now think, talk and act as if emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical standpoint may be. Emotivism has become embodied in our culture."*

> *-Alasdair MacIntyre*[37]

The postmodern age arose in the mid-twentieth century as a repudiation of the modern age that had only recently emerged from decades of war and strife. Whereas belief in objective truth characterized the modern age, postmodernism is characterized by its rejection of objective truth in favor of subjective experience and uncertainty. Informed by emerging science like quantum physics, reality likewise became contingent and subject to the perspectives of the observer.[38] The metanarratives and conventions that had informed the modern age gave way to deconstruction and skepticism.[39] Deconstruction in literature, for example,

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[37] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* 3rd edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 22.

[38] Benjamin Carlson, "Did Quantum Physics Lead to Postmodernism?" The Atlantic, May 27, 2010, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/05/did-quantum-physics-lead-to-postmodernism/340795/.

[39] University of Minnesota, "Cultural Periods," Libraries, Accessed May 31, 2022, https://open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/1-6-cultural-

focuses on the complex underlying subjective assumptions or constructs of the author, which make a definitive understanding of any text ultimately unknowable. While few people are familiar with the nuances of postmodern thinking in philosophy, many of its ideas pervade popular culture and public discourse.

In a 2020 survey of American worldviews by the Cultural Research Center of Arizona Christian University, no holistic worldview predominated across respondents. Rather the beliefs of most participants fell into the category of "syncretism," which the Center described as "the name for a disparate, irreconcilable collection of beliefs and behaviors that define people's lives. It's a cut-and-paste approach to making sense of and responding to life. Rather than developing an internally consistent and philosophically coherent perspective on life, Americans embrace points of view or actions that feel comfortable or seem most convenient."[40] Thus, Americans' beliefs and practices often reflect elements of multiple worldviews. For instance, they may hold that all moral systems are socially constructed and dependent on the cultural beliefs of the society in which they occur rather than independently existing. At the same time, they may condemn certain practices, like child marriage, as universally wrong. The views are often internally inconsistent and mutually exclusive, but in a cultural milieu of subjective experience and feeling, the inconsistency is unsurprising.

In the same survey, 54 percent of Americans do not believe in objective truth. Survey director George Barna explained, "Most people would say all truth is subjective, and there's no kind of objective truth based on an external standard. They would say they're the standard that determines what truth is."[41] Like in the 2019 Disney hit *Frozen 2*, Elsa, the protagonist, discovers that she herself is the source of the knowledge and understanding she has been searching for, singing:

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periods/#:~:text=The%20Modern%20Age,%2C%20scientific%20discoveries%2C%20an d%20globalization.

[40] Arizona Christian University, Cultural Research Center. "American Worldview Inventory: America's Dominant Worldview Syncretism," Press Release, Apr. 13, 2021, https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CRC_AWVI2021_Release01_Digital_01_20210413.pdf.

[41] Sean Salai, "Poll: Most Americans Say Truth is 'Subjective,' No Absolute Right or Wrong," *The Washington Times*, Oct. 20, 2021, https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/oct/20/most-americans-say-truth-subjective-no-absolute-ri/.

Show yourself
Step into the power
Grow yourself
Into something new
You are the one you've been waiting for
All of my life
All of your life[42]

When Elsa sings, "You are the one you've been waiting for…all of your life," the implication is that she is the source of knowledge. The subjective self is the final arbiter of truth.

With the subjective experience rising to a new level of prominence, emotions are likewise predominant in public discourse. In 2016, the Oxford dictionary declared "post-truth" the word of the year, defining it "as an adjective relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals." The word seemed to aptly describe a period in which interaction was mainly online and characterized by emojis. These little digital faces expressed emotion at the click of a button. Information was passed along the interwebs using algorithms that weighted its emotional resonance more than its detached newsworthiness.[43] Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre identified emotivism, which contends that moral language and judgment is an expression of emotions and attitudes, to be a grave danger to moral discourse back in 1981. MacIntyre explains that "emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling..."[44] He argued compellingly that emotivism results in interminable debates because they are based on rival premises that cannot be reconciled. For instance, debates about socialism place the principles of equality and liberty at loggerheads, and the deciding factor is each person's subjective feelings about which principle to prioritize. MacIntyre states, "From our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises; but when we

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[42] Idina Menzel and Evan Rachel Wood, "Show Yourself" (from Frozen II), Walt Disney, Wonderland Music Company, 2019.

[43] Bobby Allyn, "Here are Four Key Points from the Facebook Whistleblower's Testimony on Capit0l Hill," *NPR,* Oct. 5, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/10/05/1043377310/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-congress.

[44] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* 3rd edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 11-12.

do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion."[45] It becomes a test of wills or emotional persuasion rather than a logical argument. At the time, he did not imagine the debate would eventually extend to the factual world and limited his argument to the world of moral discourse.

However, in contemporary society, his arguments can be taken an additional step to the factual realm. Today, what would have been considered fact in the past now has a subjective element. The cultural debate over microaggressions is illustrative. The impact of words or facial expressions is prioritized over their intent. For instance, the question "Where are you from?" could be considered a microaggression because one could experience this question as an assumption of otherness and thus inferiority.[46] The "fact" of aggression is determined by subjective experience. In his book *Homo Deus*, Yuval Harari labels this approach to ethical knowledge as humanism and describes it through the equation: Knowledge = Experience x Sensitivity. He explains that in this view to "answer [] any ethical question, we need to connect to our inner experiences and observe them with the utmost sensitivity."[47] Connecting to emotion in this view is a critical aspect of knowing and by extension behaving ethically.

The idea that there are many possible truths is also deeply embedded in contemporary culture. The refrain that one should "speak their truth" and "live their truth" captures this idea.
Prominent postmodern thinker Jean-Francois Lyotard "theorized, [the world] was one of micronarratives instead of grand narratives—that is, a multiplicity of small, localized understandings of the world, none of which can claim an ultimate or absolute truth."[48] One's truth would depend on one's perspective, which is contingent upon a multitude of cultural inputs and constructions.

At the same time, reality has become a fungible concept in contemporary culture. It, like truth, is a function of perspective and can be remade subjectively.

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[45] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 8.

[46] Wing, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, Esquilin. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice." *American Psychologist*, 2007, 62, 4, 271-286. https://sph.umn.edu/site/docs/hewg/microaggressions.pdf.

[47] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 2017), 239.

[48] University of Minnesota. "Cultural Periods." Libraries. Accessed May 31, 2022. https://open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/1-6-cultural-periods/#:~:text=The%20Modern%20Age,%2C%20scientific%20discoveries%2C%20and%20globalization.

Lauren Perlaza

Kurt Andersen of *The Atlantic* notes in a 2017 article, "Today, each of us is freer than ever to custom-make reality, to believe whatever and pretend to be whoever we wish. Which makes all the lines between actual and fictional blur and disappear more easily. Truth in general becomes flexible, personal, subjective."[49] Andersen argues that the rejection of objective reality originated with thinkers in the 1960s who contended, "The rulers of any tribe or society do not just dictate customs and laws; they are the masters of everyone's perceptions, defining reality itself." Thus "reality is simply the result of rules written by the powers that be." In this telling, reality itself is constructed, changeable, and determined by the dominant power structure rather than a reflection of an existing reality external to all subjective experience.

The ethical considerations here are complex because the subjective experiences of individuals or collectives can lead to conflicting judgments regarding the basis for ethical action. Traditionally, most ethical systems, at least Western ones, forbade lying for instance. However, in the modern context of subjective experience and personal truths, the idea of lying is no longer a simple concept. The very notion of lying assumes a corresponding notion of an objective truth in contradistinction to subjective truth. If there is no objective truth and only subjective truths, there are no lies. There are only different perspectives. At the same time, if "reality" is the result of structures put in place by the dominant group, then it is reasonable to deconstruct and reconstruct it subjectively. However, this concept undermines the foundations of the liberal world order and makes shared ethical values difficult to attain.

The implications of these ideas quickly migrate from the ethical and philosophical realm to real-world implications in the political and social sphere. Before moving into the case study, which will explore how Russia as a nation-state manifests the two converging trends illuminated in this paper, it is worth pausing to distinguish how postmodern cultural trends manifest at the nation-state level in the United States. The United States is fundamentally different from Russia in that it is in word and deed a pluralistic democracy. At the nation-state level, that means its ideas and policies, like the people it represents, can be syncretic; that is, they may represent conflicting worldviews. For example, U.S. politicians may profess there is no truth, while at the same time vigorously advocating for universal truths like human rights. Competing ideas play out in the culture and affect the political

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[49] Kurt Andersen, "How America Lost its Mind," *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/how-america-lost-its-mind/534231/.

direction of the United States over time. Thus, cultural debates over abortion, gun rights, or transgenderism may lead to eclectic policies for many decades. Individual subjective truths abound in the United States, making truth seem evanescent and difficult to pin down at the national level.

While the cultural debates play out among individuals and groups, at the level of the nation the U.S. government generally still holds to an order based on truth and objectivity, especially in the realm of foreign policy where the liberal order is based on truth and objectivity. For instance, the liberal order consists of rules-based institutions, like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Criminal Court among others, which assume shared facts and reality. These institutions are meant to investigate the truth of a matter and adjudicate between conflicting parties. Their existence and functioning are fundamentally undermined if objective truth and reality are no longer seen as valid universal frameworks. In a democracy though, cultural trends may not show up consistently in government institutions and policies for many years. Interestingly, the apparent inconsistency between America's cultural debates and government action is a point of criticism for numerous countries.

Several nations have pointed out the incoherence of America's syncretic beliefs and visible elevation of subjective experience in recent years. For example, in 2019 the Hungarian State Opera in Budapest staged George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess. The Gershwin estate requires black performers be cast in the piece as part of the license. The United States considers it paramount to abide by licensing agreements. At the same time, many in the United States profess the importance of subjective experience. Thus, the Hungarian State Opera, to get around the requirement to cast black performers, had the performers sign letters claiming they identified as black. The letters stated, "African-American origin and consciousness are an integral part of my identity."[50] The director said they were simply playing by the "absurd rules" the United States had created, alluding to discussions around gender identity in the United States. Likewise, Russia has used similar lines of reasoning to undercut the United States and the truth-based principles the U.S.-led liberal order represent. While ethical issues are not synonymous with political and social issues, they frequently overlap and influence one another. The concepts of truth and reality have undergirded the social, political, and ethical systems of the

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[50] Palko Karasz, "Hungarian Opera Asks White Cast of 'Porgy and Bess' to Say They are African-American," *New York Times*, Apr. 10, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/10/arts/hungary-opera-porgy-and-bess.html.

West for hundreds of years, and their marginalization has profound implications in all spheres.

Russia provides an excellent window into the implications of the two converging trends explored thus far. At the state level, Russia has utilized the information environment as a primary tool of both domestic and international policy. At the same time, this author argues that Russia, unlike the United States, has systematically and faithfully taken up and acted out postmodernist philosophy on a grand scale. Russia has unabashedly enacted postmodern thought systems in its rhetoric and actions in the information environment. Thus, the recent experience of the Russian system can offer important insights into the ethical consequences of a worldview unbound by truth and reality and an information space that facilitates it.

Case Study: Russia's Information War on Reality

> *"But where Soviet propaganda was anchored in ideological truth claims, the contemporary Russian variant can be compared to a kaleidoscope: a light piercing through it is instantly transformed into multiple versions of reality."[51]*

According to an April 30, 2022, statement of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, one million Ukrainian citizens had been "evacuated" to Russia following Russia's invasion of the country in February. He suggested they were refugees, but those who have escaped from Russia tell a tale of torture and killings, as Russian forces claim they are eliminating supposed "Ukrainian Nazis."[52] At the time of this writing, Russia is bombarding eastern Ukrainian cities after having been pushed back by Ukrainian forces around Kyiv. In their wake, human rights organizations have received reports of rape and torture and have uncovered

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[51] Katri Pynnöniemi and András Rácz (eds.), *Fog of Falsehood: Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine*, 2016, 14, https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/fog-of-falsehood.

[52] "Why is Russia Setting up Detention Centres in Ukraine?" *The Economist*, Apr. 30, 2022, https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/04/30/why-is-russia-setting-up-detention-centres-in-ukraine.

evidence of mass killings of Ukrainian civilians by Russian forces.[53] One Ukrainian woman said incredulously of the Russian forces, "These are our 'brothers.' We have similar languages. I never thought they would behave like that."[54] However, since 2014 Russian media and leadership have been portraying Ukraine as a country infested with neo-Nazis led by an illegitimate puppet regime of a NATO-expanding United States. President Putin justified Russia's 2022 invasion based on these specious narratives, which had been carefully groomed in the information environment for many years. Russia fabricated narratives and constructed a shared reality around them that eventually led to the horrifying actions the world is now witnessing in Ukraine.

Russia has been at the center of foreign policy discussions regarding state actions in the information environment over the last decade. It has orchestrated all aspects of information disorder – disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information – to create cognitive and behavioral impacts that are advantageous to its strategic goals. Russia frequently uses information to sow confusion and chaos or undermine and discredit. However, more interestingly, Russia also uses information to ostensibly construct new realities, a possibility that has become more potent as the cyber realm removes humans further from physical reality. While Russia's tactics in the information environment are not new, the mediums and thereby the reach and impact have changed. In addition, Russia's modern information war is not in service to a particular ideology or truth claim, but rather it is in service to the rejection of all truth claims.

The Soviet Union was well-known for its nefarious use of information to undermine the West during the Cold War. The Soviets referred to this technique as "active measures." Active measures were deliberate programs to manipulate adversaries, often based on lies, forgeries, and front organizations. For instance, in 1960, on the eve of the Olympics, Russian KGB agents forged a letter purportedly from the Ku Klux Klan and sent it to UN delegates from several African countries with the heading, "The Olympics – for the Whites Only!" and the text: "A foul

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[53] Yousur Al Hlou, Masha Froliak, Evan Hill, Malachy Browne and David Botti, "New Evidence Shows How Russian Soldiers Executed Men in Bucha," The New York Times, May 21, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/world/europe/russia-bucha-ukraine-executions.html.

[54] Anelise Borges, "Ukraine war: Bucha resident Olga, 94, says Russia's invasion is worse than Nazi's WWII occupation," *Euronew,*. May 4, 2022, https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/05/ukraine-war-bucha-resident-olga-94-says-russias-s-invasion-is-worse-than-nazi-s-wwii-occupa.

stench spreads out from the East River and hangs over New York like a pall – the greasy sweat of the Black Races of Africa and Yellow Races of Asia which have pervaded the United Nations. It is enough to make every white Protestant American vomit." The letter included the image of a monkey being lynched.[55] The letter's goal was to discredit the United States and sow division at the UN by exploiting and exacerbating racial tensions in the United States. Around the same time, a race-related tract was distributed in Congo purportedly from fellow black people in America to warn the Congolese of American racism and claimed: "special units of racist killers" were to be sent to Congo.[56] Similar "active measures" operations accused the United States of imperialism. Others exploited and created "peace movement" front groups to oppose U.S. weapons systems and hamstring NATO defenses.[57] The goal was to undermine the capitalist U.S. to pave the way for the spread of communism.

Similarly, today's active measures have many goals, and one is to sow doubt and create confusion to keep the adversary from effectively responding. The difference today, however, is that Russia offers no competing ideal. In *This Is Not Propaganda*, Peter Pomerantsev describes Russia's disinformation tactics, saying that stories "are just thrown online or spewed out on TV shows, more to confuse than to convince, or to buttress the phobias of audiences predisposed to seeing plots all around them."[58] For instance, on July 17, 2014, a Russian missile fired from Ukrainian territory by Russians from the 53rd Air Defense Brigade shot down the civilian airliner, Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, killing all 298 civilians aboard. The Russians had consistently denied their direct involvement in Ukraine for months, framing the conflict as an organic uprising of Ukrainian separatists against an oppressive regime in Kyiv. In the wake of the incident, Russia introduced multiple conflicting storylines into the information space to obfuscate reality. They claimed Ukraine had accidentally shot down the plane in a failed attempt against the Russian president. The Russian commander in charge of the 53rd Air Defense Brigade claimed the CIA had filled the plane with corpses and provoked the Russians to shoot it down. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov peddled a version in which Ukrainian air traffic controllers had ordered the flight to lower its

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[55] Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*, (New York: Picador, 2020), 136.

[56] Rid, *Active Measures*, 138.

[57] Rid, *Active Measures*, 266.

[58] Peter Pomerantsev, *This is Not Propaganda*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), Audiobook.

altitude while Ukrainian fighter jets were in the area, suggesting that they were at fault.[59] While the stories were implausible and even contradictory, they were enough to convince the Russian population and confuse many in the West as to what had really happened. In September 2014, 85 percent of Russians believed Ukraine was to blame; that number remained consistent a year later, even after a full investigation showed unequivocally that a Russian missile fired by Russian miliary members had brought down the airliner.[60]

Russia has also used information to undermine and discredit adversaries. In 2014, mass protests erupted in Ukraine in response to then-President Yanukovych's reneging on his promise to sign a political association and free trade agreement with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Russia. Ukrainians considered Yanukovych's deal with Putin to be corrupt personal enrichment at the expense of the Ukrainian people. As the protests on Kyiv's central square, the Maidan, grew the Russian information campaign to discredit them sprang into action. Russian officials and state media accused the protestors of being right-wing fascists, labeling them "Banderites" after a World War II-era Ukrainian nationalist, who the Russians accused of collaborating with the Nazis. The participants of the peaceful Maidan protests represented a diverse group of Ukrainians without a controlling ideology, language, or ethnicity.[61] The first person to call for the protests was Mustafa Nayyem, a student from a Muslim refugee family.[62] Among those protesters killed by government snipers in February 2014 were an ethnic Armenian, a Belarussian, and three Ukrainian Jews among others.[63] Yet Russia's mere framing of the event as a right-wing, fascist manifestation prompted discussion and headlines. Many Western outlets published stories about the extent of right-wing nationalist influence on the Maidan. Even if the reports concluded that far-right groups had minimal influence at the protests, the very fact of the stories and headlines helped Moscow create the illusion that neo-Nazis led the uprising. It undermined the Ukrainian protesters, who were then forced to justify their intentions and convince the world their fight was for dignity against corruption rather than a dangerous, nationalistic manifestation.

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[59] Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. (United States: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 178-182.

[60] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 182.

[61] Snyder, The Road to Unfreedom, 153

[62] Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Kremlin's War on the Internet*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 275.

[63] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 153.

Russia also used the information space to shape the physical reality in its takeover of Crimea and its invasion of the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk in February and March 2014. Russia undertook its invasion in direct response to the success of the Maidan protests and the subsequent ouster of President Yanukovych. In Crimea and eastern Ukraine, Russia created the illusion of an organic movement against invented Ukrainian oppression to justify its invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea. "Little green men" first appeared in Crimea and later in Donetsk and Luhansk. They bore no insignia but methodically took over government buildings and helped install new pro-Russian leadership.[64] They claimed to be "volunteers," and Russian authorities and television framed the takeovers as part of a grassroots response of oppressed Russian-speaking Ukrainians against what they portrayed as an "illegal coup" in Kyiv and its purported "Banderite" and fascists propagators.[65] From the outset, it was abundantly clear that the "little green men" were Russian special forces; observers noted their Russian accents and use of Russia-specific slang. Some of the soldiers themselves admitted their affiliation. However, by simply removing insignia and lying, the Russian state created enough confusion in Ukraine and Western nations that they could not respond appropriately to what constituted a military invasion of a sovereign state by another.[66] So successful was this tactic at creating another reality that when peace talks were finally conducted, Russia was able to portray its participation as a "facilitator" rather than the belligerent and aggressor it was.[67] The peace negotiations were framed as being between the Russian-created, -directed, and -supported Ukrainian "separatists" and the Ukrainians, normalizing the fiction that it was a Ukrainian civil war rather than a Russian invasion.

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[64] Vitaly Shevchenko, "'Little Green Men' or 'Russian Invaders'?" *BBC News,* Mar. 11, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26532154.

[65] Maria Snegovaya, "Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine," *Institute for the Study of War,* Russia Report 1. September 2015, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%201%20Putin's%20Information%20Warfare%20in%20Ukraine-%20Soviet%20Origins%20of%20Russias%20Hybrid%20Warfare.pdf.

[66] Steven Rosenberg, "Ukraine Crisis: Meeting the Little Green Men," *BBC News*, Apr. 30, 2014.,https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27231649 .

[67] Kurt Volker, "Don't Let Russia Fool You About the Minsk Agreements," *Center for European Policy Analysis,* Dec. 16, 2021, https://cepa.org/dont-let-russia-fool-you-about-the-minsk-agreements/.

Indeed, Russia has continued the specious narratives it began in 2014 and has made them the basis for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In announcing his "special military operation" against Ukraine, President Putin claimed it was necessary to "de-nazify" the country.[68] What began as a fabricated story to undermine the Maidan protestors in 2014 had blossomed into a full-blown invented reality and basis for war. Likewise, three days before the invasion, Russia livestreamed its national security council meeting where it pretended to deliberate its response to the request for formal recognition by its installed leaders in Donetsk and Luhansk.[69] The charade Russia began in 2014 remained its faux reality in 2022. Sadly, what began in the virtual reality of the information environment has led to thousands of deaths and millions of displaced people in the real world.

Ethically speaking, the Russian population appears to believe Russia's "special operation" is a just act based on the "constructed reality" that Ukrainian leadership is an oppressive neo-Nazi force. This "reality" has been generated, amplified, and confirmed in the information space since 2014. There is significant anecdotal evidence that even when speaking with Ukrainian family members who are witnessing Russian atrocities in their towns, many Russian citizens refuse to accept the factual reality of the situation.[70]

As this paper laid out in the first chapter, people take in information and orient themselves in the world and in their communities through complex cognitive processes. People's natural tendencies to filter information through a set of mental shortcuts makes the need for truthful interactions paramount. Otherwise, the representations of reality that people construct in their minds are distorted and ineffective to guide ethical action. At the same time, if people believe there is no truth and even reality is subjective, the ethical implications are even more profound. In the Soviet Union, people could test the truth of communism against their lived reality and understand its failures. Modern Russia professes no truth,

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[68] Miriam Berger, "Putin Says He Will 'Denazify' Ukraine. Here's the History Behind That Claim," *The Washington Post*, Feb. 24, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/24/putin-denazify-ukraine/.

[69] Patrice Taddonio, "What an 'Unhinged' Meeting Reveals About Vladimir Putin's War on Ukraine," *PBS*, Mar. 15, 2022, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/video-putin-war-ukraine-documentary/.

[70] Michael Wasiura, "Russians With Ukrainian Relatives Trust Their TVs More than Their Family," *Newsweek*, May 12, 2022, https://www.newsweek.com/russians-ukrainian-relatives-trust-their-tvs-more-their-family-1705942.

and as one interviewer put it wants "to make truthfulness an irrelevant category."[71] In that way, there is no external standard by which to assess reality. At the same time, without objective truth, there is no ethical yardstick by which to judge Russia's actions.

Postmodern Weapons for a Totalitarian Future?

> *The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed.*
>
> *-Hannah Arendt[72]*

"We've lived through a communism we never believed in, democracy and defaults and mafia state and oligarchy, and we've realized they are illusions, that everything is PR,"[73] a producer at a Russian television studio told British journalist Peter Pomerantsev in the early 2000s. The momentary optimism that prevailed at the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 faded as quickly as it appeared in Russia. The chaos of Russia's attempted transition to democracy and a market economy in the 1990s, combined with the loss of its empire left many rudderless and disillusioned. According to Pomerantsev a "triumphant cynicism" became the working milieu of Russia's elite, if not much of its population.[74] Whereas many citizens behind the Iron Curtain looked to Western freedom and democracy for hope during the Cold War, by the 2000s, many Russians were convinced that all politics and all claims to higher ideals were simply a charade and "PR" – the

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[71] Peter Pomerantsev, "The Russian Roots of Our Misinformation Problem," Interview by Sean Illing, *Vox*, Oct. 26, 2020,
https://www.vox.com/world/2019/10/24/20908223/trump-russia-fake-news-propaganda-peter-pomerantsev.

[72] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," *The New Yorker,* Feb. 17, 1967,
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics.

[73] Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), 73.

[74] Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True*, 176.

acronym for public relations borrowed directly from English into the Russian language.

Just as postmodern philosophers arose in the West in response to the destruction wrought by the world wars and the perceived failures of modernity, in Russia their ideas -- skepticism of metanarratives; denial of objective reality; and a rejection of logic, reason, and truth – found a receptive audience. For instance, in the 1990s French postmodernist philosopher Francois Lyotard's critique of cultural metanarratives and Jacque Derrida's deconstruction of language were fresh and fashionable ideas.[75] The Kremlin's chief image-maker, Vladislav Surkov, according to Pomerantsev, in the 2000s was quick "to invoke new postmodern texts just translated into Russian, the breakdown of grand narratives, the impossibility of truth, how everything is only 'simulacrum' and 'simulacra.'"[76] The disillusionment of the transition era created fertile ground for an anti-ideology to take root, characterized not by a set of ideas or principles but by its lack of commitment to any particular idea and a rejection of truth, consistency, and even objective reality.

Emory professor Mikhail Epstein noted the trend as early as 1995 and argued it was a pattern in Russian history. He notes, "Communist teachings arrived in Russia from Western Europe and seemed at first completely alien to this backward, semi-Asiatic country; however, Russia turned out to be the first nation to attempt an enactment of these teachings on a worldwide scale."[77] In his view, "the same paradox pertains to the problem of Russian postmodernism," whereby a Western concept is enacted on a grand scale by the Russian state.[78] For Epstein, the key aspects of Russia's postmodernism are "the production of reality as a series of plausible copies, or what the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls "simulation' …Models of reality replace reality itself, which then becomes irrecoverable."[79]   Indeed, Russia has adopted many international democratic conventions, but they approach them as actors in a play, standing on their marks and reading from a script.

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[75] Peter Pomerantsev, "Putin's Rasputin," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 33. No. 20. Oct. 20, 2011, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n20/peter-pomerantsev/putin-s-rasputin.

[76] Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True*, 74.

[77] Michael Epstein, "The Origins and the Meaning of Russia's Postmodernism," (The National Council for Soviet and East European Research, Jul. 16, 1993), 2, https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/1993-807-21-2-Epstein.pdf.

[78] Epstein, "Origins of Russia's Postmodernism," 2.

[79] Epstein, Origins of Russia's Postmodernism, 2.

Unlike the Soviet Union, which worked hard to maintain a veneer of truth, today's Russia fundamentally rejects the idea of truth. "This new propaganda is different. Putin isn't selling a wonderful communist future. He's saying, we live in a dark world, the truth is unknowable, the truth is always subjective, you never know what it is," Pomerantsev explains. Surkov describes Russia's approach as more "honest" than the West's. In his cynical view, everyone is participating in the same truthless charade; only Russia dares to admit it. Writing in 2019, Surkov argued the ideals of the West were fiction and that the "illusion of choice… is the main stunt behind the Western way of life in general and the Western style of democracy in particular, and it has more to do with P. T. Barnum than with Cleisthenes." He snidely remarks that "The United States still invokes the virtues and values of its semi-fictional founding fathers." He describes Western democracy as an "imported chimera" not suitable to Russia's historical heritage. The Russians, in his words, rejected "the illusion" of democracy "in favor of pre-determined reality." However, Russia acts out many Western constructs for "appearance sake," but "These institutions are like a dress uniform to greet strangers; everyone knows that you don't wear that at home."[80] Thus, unlike the Soviet Union, which eagerly held to its narrative of world communism and forced its citizens to participate in the lie, the new Russia assumes everyone knows they are participating in lies and that is simply the way the world is.

Interestingly, simulation is an idea with deep roots in the Russian psyche. The term Potemkin villages originated in Russia in the 1700s to describe impressive facades supposedly constructed along the Dnipro River to hide the true state of Russia's countryside from its empress Catherine the Great. Political technologist and former Kremlin insider Gleb Pavlovsky explained in a 2017 *PBS* interview that Vladimir Putin was himself a kind of Potemkin village. In his telling, former Russian president Boris Yeltsin's administration carefully chose his successor based on sociological research about the type of leader the Russian people favored.[81] Pavlovsky explained that the character and the story were created first, and Putin was made to fit the line: "I knew the plot. I needed an actor. The plot was ready six months [before Putin was chosen]." Television made Vladimir

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[80] Herman Pirchner, Jr., "'Putin's Brain' an Echo of Absolute Tyrants," *The Hill,* Mar. 8, 2019, https://www.afpc.org/publications/articles/Putins-brain-an-echo-of-absolute-tyrants#translated%20article.

[81] Gleb Pavlovsky, "Putin's Road to War, The Putin Files," Interview by Michael Kirk, *PBS Frontline*, July 13, 2017, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/gleb-pavlovsky/.

Putin, who went from a virtual unknown to legitimately winning a Russian election in a matter of months in 1999 and early 2000. Pavlovsky, who has since fallen out of favor with Putin, has described the creation of the modern Russian media as entirely scripted from the Kremlin. He noted that factuality had no bearing on the news; rather, "You can just say anything. Create realities."[82] In this view, one can never know whether the chicken or the egg comes first. Pavlovsky asks: "Is there more interest in conspiracy theories because far-right parties are growing or are far-right parties growing because more conspiracy thinking is being pumped into the information space?"[83] It is hard to discern whether information created reality or simply described reality. In the modern information space, both options can be true.

Pomerantsev observes that for the Russian state, "information … precedes essence."[84] Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre coined the original term, "existence precedes essence," which Pomerantsev paraphrases, to describe the philosophy that humans exist first and then create their own values and meaning. This idea contradicted the traditional notion that humans are born with an innate identity and value (i.e. essence). In the world of information, this means that a story or narrative can be created first and reality shaped to fit it. It turns on its head the idea that facts and objects exist first, and then humans discover and describe them, as in Western science and journalism. Thus, when Russia's main TV channel presented a woman pretending to be a Ukrainian refugee and telling a gruesome, fabricated tale of a three-year-old Russian-speaking boy crucified by Ukrainian soldiers in a square in Ukraine, it did not matter that the story was false. The point was the meaning it created and conveyed to its audience. When asked about the story after Western journalists found it to be false, the deputy director of Russia's state TV replied that the Russian audience liked the content they produced.[85]

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[82] Snyder, The Road to Unfreedom, 161.

[83] Peter Pomerantsev, "Russia and the Menace of Unreality: How Vladimir Putin is Revolutionizing Information Warfare," *The Atlantic,* Sept. 9, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/russia-putin-revolutionizing-information-warfare/379880/.

[84] Peter Pomerantsev, *This is Not Propaganda, (*London: Faber & Faber, 2019), 82.

[85] Peter Pomerantsev, "Russia and the Menace of Unreality: How Vladimir Putin is Revolutionizing Information Warfare," *The Atlanti,*. Sept. 9, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/russia-putin-revolutionizing-information-warfare/379880/.

The idea that information precedes and forms reality permeates Russia's official thinking. Mason Clark, a researcher with the Institute for the Study of War, notes that Russia's war machine is secondary to the information campaign. The reality is created and shaped prior to the application of force: "The Russian military defines a "hybrid war" as a strategic-level effort to shape the governance and geostrategic orientation of a target state in which all actions, up to and including the use of conventional military forces in regional conflicts, are subordinate to an information campaign."[86] Thus, the influence of information and narrative has primacy over actions in the real world.

Notable Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, who has been described as a key influence on the Kremlin's geopolitical ideology, rejects the idea of universal truths and values and uses postmodern thinkers to support his claims. In an interview with the BBC in 2016, when asked by a BBC journalist whether he believed demonstrably false stories on Russian television, Dugin answered, "Absolutely!" He explained that postmodernism and modern sociology led by its founder Emile Durkheim supports the idea that "total facts" are a question of what society accepts as true. He goes on: "Postmodernity shows that every so-called truth is a matter of believing, so we believe in what we do. We believe in what we say, and that is the only way to define the truth. The truth is [a] question of belief."[87] In this telling, there can be no appeal to common facts. Belief is the only required element of truth.

Dugin also invokes Ludwig Wittgenstein Theory of Language to justify the idea that language is always an interpretation of so-called facts. Wittgenstein proposed that the meaning of words was defined by their use rather than by a rule or definition. Following from this idea, in Orwellian fashion, Surkov coined the term "sovereign democracy" as Russia turned toward authoritarianism. It, of course, did not mean democracy or sovereignty but rather an inversion of both concepts, the Russian state's complete control over "democracy."[88] Likewise, the coerced and orchestrated uprisings in Donetsk and Luhansk were described as the

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[86] Mason Clark, "Russian Hybrid War," *Institute for the Study of War, (*Military Learning and the Future of War Series, Sept. 2020), 8, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf.

[87] Aleksandr Dugin. "We Have Our Special Russian Truth." Interview by Gabriel Gatehouse. *BBC Newsnight,* BBC, Oct. 28, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGunRKWtWBs.

[88] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom,* 46.

"Russian Spring," playing off Western descriptions of the Arab Spring. Once again, they used a term meant to convey a powerful, grassroots effort to describe the exact opposite event in Ukraine. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was deemed a "special military operation," and Russian citizens and journalists who called it a "war" were arrested.[89] The word "war" did not convey the reality the Kremlin wished to project.

This same phenomenon can be seen at the level of ideas, where whataboutism is used prolifically to assert moral equivalency to actions without any fidelity to distinguishing characteristics. Thus, when the West condemns Russia's invasion of Ukraine, they say "What about Libya? What about Iraq!" President Putin repeatedly turned to this tactic in an interview with NBC in June 2021. When the interviewer asked him about the imprisonment of Russian opposition leader and anti-corruption activist, Alexei Navalny, as a foreign agent Putin turned the conversation to the United States. "The law on foreign agents wasn't something we created! You created that back in the 1930s, and your law is much harsher than ours."[90] When the interviewer asked him about protesters being arrested in Russia, Putin shot back that the police would have shot them if it had happened in America. A distorted mirror is purposefully reflected back at the West at every turn. As far back as 2007, Kremlin officials were using the example of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's four terms in office to encourage President Putin to run for a third term despite Russian laws.[91] In this way, Russia sets up a false equivalency between its actions and those of the West, understanding that most people will accept the underlying presuppositions uncritically.

Russia's modern anti-ideology has differed from preceding authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. It has not propagated a competing system as the Soviets did through communism and its worldview centered around class or the Nazis did through a worldview based on race. Despite this difference, much of what Hannah Arendt wrote in her monumental investigation of the subject in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is identifiable in modern Russia. In fact, Arendt's words about

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[89] Pashaeva, Yana. "How the Russians Arrested for Protesting the 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine Are Being Treated." *Slate*. Mar. 11, 2022. https://slate.com/technology/2022/03/russia-protesters-arrests.html.

[90] Putin, Vladimir. "Exclusive: Full Interview With Russian President Vladimir Putin." Interview by Keir Simmons. *NBC News*. June 14, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6pJd6O_NT0.

[91] Erika Niedowski, "Putin as Russia's Franklin Roosevelt?" *Baltimore Sun*, Mar. 4, 2007, https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2007-03-04-0703020014-story.html.

Nazi Germany written in 1951 bear a remarkable resemblance to Russia's current state of affairs.

> In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true. ... Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow. The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism.[92]

That psychological assumption is the foundation for Russia's global actions in the information environment. It need not convince others of its correctness. It only needs to create doubt that there is any correctness to be found.

In an illuminating example of how modern Russia systematically distorts facts once considered undisputable, in a discussion May 21, 2022, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova even twisted the notion of totalitarianism itself. She was asked how Russians should respond to accusations that Russia had become an Orwellian totalitarian state. She responded: "For many years we thought Orwell had been describing totalitarianism. That's one of the world's fakes. Orwell was writing about how liberalism would drive humanity into a dead end. He wasn't writing about the USSR. He was writing about the society in which he was living, about the collapse of the idea of liberalism. But the notion has been imposed on you that he was writing about you. So, tell them that he wasn't writing about us, but about them. Tell them, it's you abroad living in a fantasy world, where people can get canceled."[93] In modern Russia, even Orwell's masterpiece can be distorted and given a "new perspective" from which to view reality.

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[92] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism, (*New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
1973), 382.
[93] Francis Scarr, Twitter Post, May 21, 2022, 2:37 pm.
https://mobile.twitter.com/francis_scarr/status/1528082681673678848.

Thus, not only is it impossible for one to orient their moral compass for right action, but ultimately, in this view, there is no knowable right action to undertake. Russia has used postmodern philosophical ideas to critique and cast doubt on accepted narratives and norms. They have justified their own actions by inverting language and appealing to subjective belief systems. At every turn, they filter facts as through a kaleidoscope, fracturing truth into multiple perspectives on reality. Pomerantsev describes this phenomenon as "a strategy of power based on keeping any opposition there may be constantly confused, a ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it's indefinable."[94] When people cannot orient themselves based on a truthful reality, it is debilitating to ethical behavior. The tech-empowered information space further cultivates a sense of truthlessness and unreality.

'Question More' – Emerging Technology Takes Russia's Anti-Reality West

Technologies created to connect the world proved to be the entrée for Russia's corrosive methods against what Russian theorists term the global "psychosphere."[95] At the same time as Putin consolidated his power in the 2000s, new social networking platforms exploded around the globe. Today, Facebook is approaching 3 billion users worldwide. In 2012, when the platform had only 721 million, research concluded that any two people on the globe were within four degrees of separation from each other on Facebook, a striking indicator.[96] News often breaks on X, formerly Twitter, where opinion makers convene to share pithy news, comments, and analysis. Powerful algorithms decide which content is served to which user with virality trumping veracity as the key factor for further dissemination. Into this new "public square," Russia gleefully injected its cynicism and theater.

Russian media, with the multimillion-dollar backing of the Kremlin, extended its reach beyond Russia's borders to offer the world a new "perspective." By 2014 Russian platforms like RT and Sputnik were broadcasting in multiple

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[94] Pomerantsev, "Putin's Rasputin," https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n20/peter-pomerantsev/putin-s-rasputin.

[95] Peter Pomerantsev, "Inside the Kremlin's Hall of Mirrors," *The Guardian*, Apr. 9, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/apr/09/kremlin-hall-of-mirrors-military-information-psychology.

[96] Lars Backstrom, Paolo Boldi, Marco Rosa, Johan Ugander, Sebastiano Vigna. "Four Degrees of Separation." WebSci 2012. June 22, 2012. https://research.facebook.com/publications/four-degrees-of-separation/.

languages in more than 100 countries and ran highly successful social media platforms. Complementing the broadcast media complex, Russia used the modern information environment to employ thousands of trolls, bots, and cyborgs to blanket the information environment with new "truths" and "realities."

Russia's international media platforms aim not to inform audiences but rather to create doubt in accepted narratives, to deconstruct them. The tagline of RT is "Question More," inviting its audience to doubt what it thinks it knows. At the RT launch in Argentina in 2014, President Putin stated explicitly that RT's purpose was to challenge the international mainstream media's monopoly on the "truth" and provide a different "perspective."[97] The perspective of RT in practice is to erode faith in Western ideals and institutions. Thus, most of its stories are a negative framing of whatever the United States and Western institutions do or say. On one afternoon in March 2022, a survey of RT in Spanish's Facebook page included a report claiming the EU's ban of Russian flights in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine would have a negative global impact on prices, routes, and the climate.[98] Another story blamed Western restrictions on Russian gas for Latin America's rising gas prices, and another post focused on a Chinese government official parroting Russian accusations of U.S. biological laboratories in Ukraine.[99] None of the stories tell the story of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Instead, they seek to undermine the West's response to it.

While RT and Sputnik operate openly as state-sponsored media organizations, an ecosystem of human trolls and machine bots work alongside the official media to create content, astroturf the information environment, and amplify narratives. Several former employees have described their work at the Internet Research Agency, later labeled the "troll factory" in St. Petersburg, Russia. Their job was to create the perception of organic engagement favorable to the Kremlin on social media. According to insiders, they were given the storylines to promote throughout the day and had a quota of comments and original postings they were required to complete. The IRA had departments for each major social media platform, like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter (now X), and

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[97] "Cristina Kirchner Y Vladimir Putin Firman Acuerdo De TV Para Dar a 'Conocer La Verdadera Rusia Y La Verdadera Argentina,'" *La Nación,* October 9, 2014. https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/cristina-kirchner-tendra-una-videoconferencia-con-vladimir-putin-nid1734179/.

[98] Facebook, RT en Espanol, March 15, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/ActualidadRT.

[99] "China Urges Pentagon to Open Up about 'Biolabs' in Ukraine." *RT*. Mar. 8, 2022. https://www.rt.com/russia/551468-china-details-pentagon-biolabs/.

domestically popular ones in Russia like VKontakte. Social media allowed the Russian trolls to interact directly with Americans and other target audiences outside Russia's borders. The work included impersonating Americans to create and pump false stories into the American information space to exploit divisions and provoke outrage.[100] To amplify the human content, automated Twitter accounts, or bots, were programmed to tweet, retweet, and comment to achieve virality and get stories to trend online. In fact, in 2016 the top two stories on social media, both heavily promoted by the IRA, were that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump for president and that Wikileaks had confirmed Hillary Clinton had sold weapons to the Islamic State (ISIS).[101] Russia used a potent mix of human ingenuity, social media-enabled connectedness, and AI-powered automation to simulate the appearance of genuine interaction.

Russia has also used hacking and cyber-attacks to push its information narratives. Where in the past spies had to infiltrate organizations, today hackers can burrow into networks from thousands of miles away and steal and release information. This technique is considered mal-information in that the information is true but used with the intention to cause harm. In 2016, for instance, Russia hacked the Democratic National Convention and released troves of emails that damaged the image of then-candidate Hillary Clinton.[102] In 2014, a phone call between Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, discussing how to help Ukrainian leaders move forward as the Yanukovych regime fell, was recorded and released to promote the narrative that Ukraine was a client state of the U.S. State Department.[103]

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[100] Adrienne Chen, "The Agency," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html.

[101] Tim Weiner, *The Folly and the Glory: America, Russia, and Political Warfare 1945-2000*, First edition, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020), 250.

[102] Nakashima, Ellen and Shane Harris. "How the Russians Hacked the DNC and Passed its Emails to Wikileaks." *Washington Post.* July 13, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/how-the-russians-hacked-the-dnc-and-passed-its-emails-to-wikileaks/2018/07/13/af19a828-86c3-11e8-8553-a3ce89036c78_story.html.

[103] Krishnadev Calamur, "U.S. Diplomat's Leaked Phone Call Gets Poor Reception," *NPR*. Feb. 7, 2014. https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/02/07/273020508/u-s-diplomats-leaked-phone-call-gets-poor-reception.

Mal-information, assured virality by its exposé nature, was pumped into the information space and used to give credence to Russia's prefabricated narratives.

Observers have watched Russian tactics and warned that new technologies would make Russia's penchant for obfuscation and distortion even easier. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine has indeed been accompanied by new means to spread disinformation. Deepfakes, which are synthetic content produced from manipulated audio and video files, have been a growing concern among observers. In March 2022, a deepfake video of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky emerged in which the fake Zelensky called on Ukrainians to lay down their arms in the face of Russian invaders. While the video was not high quality and media-savvy Zelensky immediately disavowed it, it is easy to see the real-world consequences similar tactics could have in the future.[104] In addition, video conferencing has opened new avenues to nefarious actors. The British Defense Minister was tricked into holding a video meeting in March 2022 with someone purporting to be the Ukrainian defense minister. The meeting went on for ten minutes before the British official became suspicious and ended the call.[105]

The Chinese-owned mega app, TikTok, has also emerged as a hotbed of disinformation about the war in Ukraine. A *New York Times* investigation uncovered that many of the videos on TikTok included audio uploaded to the platform long before the war began. In one case, audio from a 2020 explosion in Beirut, Lebanon, was said to be from the war in Ukraine. In others, visuals of Ukrainian tanks turned out to be from a video game. The application's focus on short videos makes it particularly believable and difficult to monitor. Commenting for the *New York Times*, Alex Stamos, director of the Stanford Internet Observatory and former head of security at Facebook said, "Video is the hardest format to moderate for all platforms."[106] When social media and easy portable video capability emerged, it was lauded as a means of "citizen journalism" and a means to ascertain the truth. Unfortunately, emerging technologies are also making

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[104] Bobby Allyn, "Deepfake Video of Zelenskyy Could be 'Tip of the Iceberg' in Info War, Experts Warn," *NPR*, Mar. 16, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/03/16/1087062648/deepfake-video-zelenskyy-experts-war-manipulation-ukraine-russia.

[105] "Ukraine War: Ben Wallace and Priti Patel Targeted by Hoax Calls," *BBC News,* Mar. 17, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-60783558.

[106] Sheera Frenkel, "TikTok is Gripped by Violence and Misinformation of Ukraine War," *The New York Times,* Mar. 5, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/technology/tiktok-ukraine-misinformation.html.

it possible to produce convincing fabrications that make reality harder and harder to discern.

Vladislav Surkov gloated in a 2019 essay for Russian publication Nezavisimaya Gazeta, "Foreign politicians allege Russian interference with elections and referenda across the globe. In fact, the matter is even more serious -- Russia interferes with their brain, and they do not know what to do with their own altered consciousness."[107] Considering Surkov's penchant for performance, the claim may be inflated, but the problem it elucidates is genuine. For Russia, their actions in the information environment are not only a matter of snarky comments by trolls or hacking for an advantage, they seek to shift people's very perception of reality -- to redraw the maps from which they direct their individual and national course. As the technology grows more sophisticated, the lines between truth and falsehood, reality and illusion will be harder to distinguish.

This chapter has shown how Russia uses modern technology and the information space to both transmit messages and to shape reality and perception. In Ukraine, the "reality" they created through actions in the information environment shaped the events on the ground. Not only that, Russia's fabricated narrative about Ukrainian neo-Nazis and Western aggression became the basis for a full invasion in 2022. At the core of the Russian state's actions is a worldview that hinges on the idea that reality and truth are constructed and not independently existing. Rather than trying to persuade people of the truth, they work to undermine the very idea that truth exists. The information environment is increasingly conducive to Russia's philosophical approach, as sophisticated technology like AI can increasingly create experiences that "feel" real.

Conclusion

> *The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world not only for a time but, potentially, forever.*
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> *-Hannah Arendt*[108]

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[107] Vladislav Surkov, "Putin's Persistent Nation-State," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta,* Feb. 11, 2019, https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html?print=Y.

[108] Arendt, "Truth and Politics," https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics.

Ethically speaking, the converging philosophical and technological trends are deeply problematic. If there is no objective reality, then it is acceptable to create it. If there is no truth, there can be, by definition, no lies. If "truth" is only a matter of a society's or an individual's belief in it, with no need for corresponding evidence or logical coherence or even pragmatic sensibility, then there is no space for debate or common ground. Each community's or individual's beliefs based on their subjective experiences and perspectives are sovereign.

Taking this idea to its logical conclusion means there is no basis for shared understanding. Power, in this view, is the primary animating force and the only arbiter between competing interests or "truths." As Dugin said in the BBC interview, "only war could decide [sic] who is the boss."[109] This is the clear implication of Russia's war in Ukraine. Two irreconcilable "truths" collided, and Russia has made clear its "truth" is not bound by facts. Hannah Arendt warned in her 1967 essay "Truth and Politics" that facts were the most vulnerable type of truth. She observed that:

> Facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories ... Perhaps the chances that Euclidean mathematics or Einstein's theory of relativity – let alone Plato's philosophy – would have been reproduced in time if their authors had been prevented from handing them down to posterity are not very good either, yet they are infinitely better than the chances that a fact of importance, forgotten or, more likely, lied away, will one day be rediscovered.[110]

It is paradoxical that in a world of abundant information, truth can be lost, but it is a distinct possibility.

While Russia provides a stark example of the dangers of embracing a society detached from factual reality, many other countries have manifested similar tendencies. Pomerantsev noted in a 2020 interview that "The same sort of politics I saw in Russia years ago is the same kind of politics I'm seeing now in the UK and Brazil and the Philippines and the US. And the internet and digital media

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[109] Dugin, BBC Interview, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGunRKWtWBs.

[110] Arendt, "Truth and Politics," https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics.

technologies have been the essential tools behind all of it."[111] Importantly, technological advances now allow humankind to convincingly create truth and a competing reality for the first time in history.

The world's population already exists increasingly in digital reality, and digital reality's sophistication continues to grow explosively. A recent study estimated that the average adult would spend approximately 44 years of their life on screens.[112] More and more time will be spent gathering information and communicating online. Information will become more ubiquitous and fast-moving between entities. Orienting oneself in a factual world will be increasingly difficult and thus ethical decisions will become more fraught. As the global village careens into the digital universe, it is worth considering how truth and reality may become its unwitting casualties. Russia provides a stark warning that the world would be wise to heed.

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[111] Pomerantsev, "The Russian Roots of Our Misinformation Problem," https://www.vox.com/world/2019/10/24/20908223/trump-russia-fake-news-propaganda-peter-pomerantsev.

[112] "Average U.S. Adult Will Spend Equivalent of 44 Years of Their Life Staring at Screens: Poll." *People.* June 3, 2020. https://people.com/human-interest/average-us-adult-screens-study/.

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