

Social Media Dominance: Ukraine's Key Strategy in the Information War Against the Russian Invasion

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Abstract

Russia once again invaded Ukraine in early 2022 by deploying thousands of troops and mobilizing thousands of tanks and other weapons. The attack, which began in February, covered areas along the eastern border of Ukraine. As Ukraine realized that its military power was imbalanced with Russia, it applied information warfare techniques by dominating social media content. This study aims to analyze Ukraine's success in using social media as a tool to combat Russian invasion through social media domination. This research used the descriptive – qualitative method. The data were obtained from the information that were determined which were then analyzed by qualitative method. Netwar theory and propaganda theory are used to analyze this study. The results of this study show that Ukraine has utilized social media to fight against Russia's invasion and has achieved significant success in garnering global support. Social media domination has played a crucial role in Ukraine's efforts to win the support of countries worldwide. The use of humanitarian issues has been heavily emphasized in social media content to condemn Russia's actions. The impact of such content has resulted in a sharp decline in support for Russia. Misinformation spread through social media has also contributed to the decline in support.

Keywords: *Social Media, Ukraine, Russia, Invasion*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Russia and Ukraine entered a new phase in February 2022, particularly after Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a military operation to invade Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The conflict between the two countries started in 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula, which was previously part of Ukraine (Lauren et al, 2015). Russia claimed the Crimean Peninsula as part of its territory, while it was decided in 1992 that the Crimean Peninsula would be an autonomous region of Ukraine after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 raised major questions for Ukraine. There were speculations that the event happened due to the role of the then Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich.

The former Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich, was known for his pro-Russia stance, which eventually led to large demonstrations due to his alignment with Russia. Particularly after he cancelled an agreement with the European Union and chose to cooperate with Russia. Being too pro-Russia, Yanukovich was eventually ousted from his position as President by the Ukrainian people. After that, Ukraine inaugurated Petro Poroshenko as the new President to replace Yanukovich (BBC, 2014). Not long after, through a referendum held in Crimea, Russia declared its claim over the Crimean Peninsula with the support of pro-Russia individuals. Russia's decision was protested by various parties, including Ukraine, which regarded the referendum as illegal, which then triggered the conflict between Russia and Ukraine to heat up until today.

Several efforts have been made to improve the relationship between Russia and Ukraine through an agreement made in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, namely the Minsk Agreement 1 in 2014 and the Minsk Agreement 2 in 2015. The agreement contains several discussion points, but the main point is to discuss the special status of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions, which are the two border regions between Russia and Ukraine (TASS, 2018). In essence, the agreement can be a step in restoring the relationship between the two countries, but due to different interpretations, it further worsened the situation between them at the time.

The tension between Russia and Ukraine has also been caused by the involvement of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Ukraine's desire to join NATO has been strongly opposed by Russia, as President Putin believes that this move would threaten Russia's sovereignty and national interests. Ukraine is the largest country that shares a direct border with Russia, making it an important concern for Russia. As a result, Russia has attempted to prevent the dominance of the United States and NATO in approaching Ukraine. However, the United States, considering itself a superpower, has made serious decisions by fully supporting Ukraine against Russia. This move by the United States has caused President Putin to intensify the invasion of Ukraine.

According to several news sources, since Russia announced its invasion of Ukraine, there have been around 190,000 Russian troops deployed on the border with Ukraine. Russia claims that the placement of these troops is used in a peaceful effort to defend against separatist groups in eastern Ukraine. However, Ukraine, the United States, and NATO have a different view, as Russia's actions are seen as a step towards occupying Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. Therefore, the United States has warned Ukraine to be cautious and prepare itself, as the number of troops deployed by Russia could exceed the number of Soviet troops used in World War II.

The deployment of Russian military forces to the border with Ukraine is considered excessive if it is viewed as a peacekeeping effort, as can be seen from the deployment of troops which are spread out almost along the Ukraine-Russia border, and not just in Eastern Ukraine as previously stated by President Putin. The Institute of the Study of War provides a depiction of the distribution of Russian forces deployed by President Putin in the invasion of Ukraine. In terms of military strength, Russia is considered to have a greater military power than Ukraine. However, Ukraine is trying to remain strong in its stance by considering the United States and NATO as relationships that can provide assistance if Ukraine is unable to handle Russian attacks. The military power imbalance between Ukraine and Russia has prompted Ukraine to launch attacks through information warfare tactics. The current technological developments have led to the growth of many media platforms such as cyberspace, which can be used as a means to launch attacks against the enemy. Ukraine can see this as an opportunity to fight against the invasion by Russia. Ukraine is trying to gain sympathy from the international community regarding the attacks by Russia on Ukraine.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research will be conducted using a qualitative descriptive method with a literature study. According to Sugiyono (2016:9), this qualitative descriptive research aims to depict, explain, clarify, and provide a more detailed answer to the research questions. Qualitative research is considered a very sharp research method in explaining the phenomena that occur. Through a case study design, this research is carried out in 6 (six) stages, namely conducting preliminary research, finding and formulating existing problems, collecting data,

examining the validity of the data, analyzing and describing the data, and drawing conclusions from the research results obtained. This research will focus more on explaining and providing an overview of Ukraine's efforts to dominate social media as a step in countering the invasion from Russia, especially in garnering sympathy from the global community regarding the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

"Netwar" can be defined as a type of warfare where one party in a conflict tends to use a strategy that involves a network and communication in their actions. Usually, netwar is conducted by a party that has a smaller military defense capability compared to their main opponent, so they will rely more on the internet media in their resistance against the opponent's attack (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1996). Although this type of warfare is not conducted directly, it is organized and has a strong network. Currently, netwar can be an opportunity for conflicting actors to carry out attacks, including terrorist groups. Social media is one of the platforms that are widely used in the implementation of netwar, especially nowadays, because of its easy access. Many cases of propaganda dissemination through social media have been found.

Propaganda can be defined as the dissemination of information to the public through mass media, aimed at influencing public opinion on a particular phenomenon. Paul Joseph Goebbels was a Nazi figure in Germany known as the "Master of Propaganda" because he spread his propaganda through mass media. The propaganda techniques promoted by Goebbels involved the continuous dissemination of information so that the information would later be regarded as the truth by the people. The use of broadcasting media such as mass media during World War II was also considered effective in shaping public opinion. Although at the end of World War II, Goebbels' propaganda techniques were ineffective and tended to fail, initially Goebbels successfully influenced the German people through his propaganda (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2011). There are several principles followed by Goebbels in the implementation of his propaganda (Doob, 1950), including:

1. Propaganda must be connected to intelligence, especially regarding events and public opinion;
2. Planning and implementation must be carried out by a single specific authority;
3. Consideration of the consequences that may arise from a particular propaganda;
4. The goal of propaganda is to influence the enemy's strategy and actions;
5. Identification of the purpose, content, and effectiveness of a particular propaganda;
6. Effective propaganda provides a label for an event and a particular party with a unique slogan;
7. Propaganda cannot directly influence strong counter-tendencies, but it offers forms of action or diversion or both.

The military strength of Russia, in terms of both weaponry and personnel, is far stronger than that of Ukraine. According to "Global Fire Power" in an article titled "2022 Military Strength Ranking," Russia ranks second after the United States, while Ukraine ranks 22nd. During the invasion of Kyiv by Russia, Ukrainian military forces in some regions were seen to be struggling to repel attacks from Russian forces. In addition, Ukraine's arsenal, such as Western-supplied anti-tank missiles, is starting to run low. However, there are other factors that enable Ukraine to hold its ground and prevent Russia from taking over its territory. One of Ukraine's strengths is the implementation of information warfare (Gardner, 2022).

Ukraine is vigorously waging an information war as a means of resisting the Russian invasion. Ukraine is not only using mass media to implement its information war, but also using social media to provide the world with a view of the conditions it is experiencing after the Russian invasion. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter are used for circulating content shared by Ukrainians and their supporters. The content is related to humanitarian issues, and they are trying to spread propaganda about the brutality of Russia's invasion (Harwell & Lerman, 2022).

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also uses social media to spread propaganda during the invasion, even when he was in a bunker hiding from a major attack (France24, 2022). President Zelensky is frequently active on Twitter, providing information about his activities and the development of the situation in Ukraine. An example of a tweet from President Zelensky is:

“Russia treacherously attacked our state in the morning, as Nazi Germany did in #2WW years. As of today, our countries are on different sides of world history. Russia has embarked on a path of evil, but Ukraine is defending itself & won't give up its freedom no matter what Moscow thinks.”

The tweet by President Zelensky posted on February 24, 2022, has been retweeted over 16,000 times, and there are thousands of public comments from around the world expressing support for Ukraine and condemning the invasion by Russia. However, some comments also show support for Russia and call on Ukraine to stop behaving in a way that could further inflame the escalating invasion.

The circulation of photos and videos depicting the conditions related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on several social media platforms has made people around the world aware. Ukrainian propaganda through social media has successfully presented a negative view of Russia's brutality during the invasion of Ukraine, which has claimed many lives and caused severe damage. Moreover, the traumatic effects on children have been a primary focus of the issue raised and disseminated through social media. The world's population agrees to address the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict between the two countries, in which many people have become victims and suffered losses. The circulation of photos and videos depicting the brutality of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has prompted the world to support Ukraine and condemn the actions of Russia. One such example is the circulation of photos and videos on social media showing Ukrainians affected by the conflict forced to live in bomb shelters that are threatened by food, electricity, and water crises.

According to H.E. Dr. Vasyl Hamianin, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of the Republic of Ukraine to the Republic of Indonesia, at the Ambassadorial Lecture entitled "The Ukrainian Questions in Global Politics," propaganda is crucial to combat propaganda. The use of the hashtag #StopRussia on social media content is used to gather support for Ukraine and denounce the invasion by Russia. Dr. Vasyl added that the world's population may like Ukraine or Russia, but if the context is a humanitarian issue, they must support Ukraine because the people who have become victims of the invasion are Ukrainian. He also hopes that Indonesian society, especially students, can support Ukraine through comments or content on social media because he believes that every action and post on social media will be significant in Ukraine's fight against the Russian invasion.

Ukrainian propaganda in garnering support from the world's population must also be further researched for the accuracy of the information disseminated because many false photos and videos (hoaxes) are found circulating that do not correspond to the facts. Such false information, disseminated by certain individuals, can mislead people worldwide about the conditions resulting from the conflict, which will directly spread to their nearby environments

and circulate quickly. The spread of such false information is believed to be carried out by Western parties using social media platforms. The dissemination of such false information has resulted in a decrease in the level of support from other countries towards Russia's actions. The picture below shows information related to the decline in support for Russia from countries around the world.

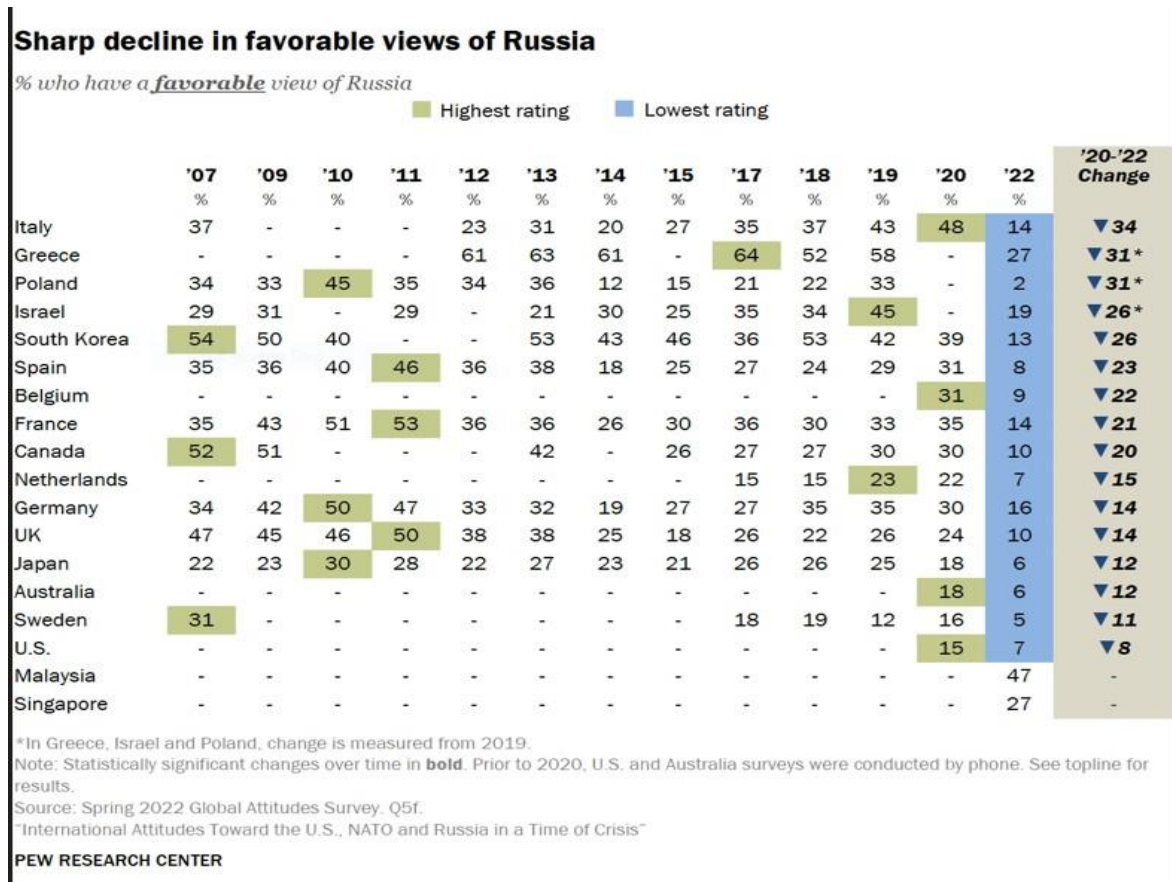


Figure 1. Sharp Decline in Favorable Views of Russia
 Source: Pew Research Center, 2022

According to the results of a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, almost all of the countries included in the survey sample gave unfavorable responses towards Russia, although the extent of the decline varied among each country. The most significant decrease was recorded in Italy, where there was a sharp decline of around 34%, resulting in Russia's rating among the Italian population being only about 14%. A similar decline was observed among the populations of European countries, particularly those that are members of NATO, including the United States, which currently gives Russia only around 7% support. However, Malaysia's results differed, with a relatively high percentage of 47%, which is the highest among all the countries surveyed, indicating that Malaysia still has a positive outlook towards Russia. Nonetheless, there is still a diversity of opinions among the Malaysian population regarding Russia's actions, particularly after the use of information warfare on social media. The use of social media as a means of information warfare by Ukraine against Russian aggression has a significant impact on public opinion and support for Ukraine. Ukraine has utilized this opportunity to garner support from the international community to counter Russian aggression, as Ukraine's military capabilities are not a match for Russia's. Thus, the role of social media has become crucial in national defense efforts, especially as technology continues

to advance. Ukraine has successfully identified the role of social media in mobilizing resistance, enabling Ukraine to counter Russian aggression.

CONCLUSION

The role of social media dominance as a means and tool for Ukraine in fighting against Russian invasion has a significant influence on the support of countries around the world for Ukraine. The use of humanitarian issues is highly emphasized in the content spread on social media so that the world community condemns the actions of Russia. As a result of this content, there has been a sharp decrease in support for Russia. This decrease is also due to the spread of hoax information depicting the post-attack situation by Russia. Therefore, people need to be careful in spreading information on social media, especially about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Ukraine has been greatly helped by social media in fighting against the invasion by Russia. It has been proven that, despite having a military force weaker than Russia, Ukraine was able to fight against Russian invasion using information warfare techniques through the dominance of information dissemination on social media.

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