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“Confronting Russia’s Weaponization of Information”

We are dealing with an organization that does not play by the rules. Where the facts on the ground and the reality that citizens face as a result of them do not matter - at least when that reality clashes with Russia’s foreign policy agenda. In that case, an alternative reality is pushed, or in most cases, several alternative realities - anything to deflect from the facts and confuse the public.

Of course, Russia has a history rich in propaganda. We are well aware of the role it played in the Soviet Era. But for a while, it seemed to lie dormant as many hoped that a reset in diplomatic relations meant a change in direction. But a new propaganda campaign emerged with slick graphics and a seemingly keen resemblance to Western media. During the war in Ukraine, the Russian-funded television channel RT was mobilized as a propaganda tool. It was used as weapon to manipulate people into believing half-truths and lies, skewing reality in the Kremlin’s favor.

I saw firsthand how this was orchestrated. When protests erupted in Maiden Square, it was made to look not like a popular uprising, but a coup comprised mostly of bloodthirsty neo-Nazis and fascists. Through suggestive and misleading language, RT pinned the blame on the West for fomenting unrest in Ukraine. When Russian troops invaded Crimea, Russian media looked the other way, playing into the Kremlin’s denials. These denials were given credence not only in Russian-funded media, but Western media organizations that indirectly gave strength to Russia’s lies for the sake of balance. It became a game of he said, she said: the West is saying this, Russia is saying that. But behind the deliberately confusing rhetoric, were essential facts. Russia invaded a sovereign country and lied about it. When it became impossible to deny the presence of what later became known as the “little green men,” they were dubbed “self-defense forces” or volunteers compelled to help out fellow Russians being oppressed by the fascists in Ukraine. Through denial, deception, omission of critical facts, conspiracy theories, and outright lies, Russia was able to shape reality or at least make it difficult to find out what the reality is. With the international community stunned and incapacitated, Russia sent in tanks, troops, and weapons. Crimea was annexed and Russian-backed separatists gained ground in Eastern Ukraine.

The themes and disinformation tactics employed by RT during the war in Ukraine have been used before, though not as vigorously and strategically. The most celebrated hosts at the station held staunch anti-Western views. Conspiracy theories are given a platform at the channel, along with guests with viewpoints that range from unconventional to deranged. It didn’t matter how credible the voices were, as long as the underlying message was reinforced over and over again – that the U.S. and the West is crumbling,

corrupt, and hypocritical - intent on destroying Russia and other countries that stand in the way of carrying out its hegemonic goals.

There was a running joke among some employees about adopting this mindset by “drinking the Kool-Aid.” I saw how employees and viewers eventually drank it all up. It’s the result of being engrossed in an environment where hating America was rewarded. It’s a mentality that is perpetuated online by Internet personalities that gain followers and a sense of belonging by spewing hate and disinformation without regard for the truth.

Russian media provides a home for a spectrum of political beliefs as long as they are skeptical of the political establishment. While some of the theories peddled are outright absurd, there are a surprising amount of people prone to being manipulated that think it’s hip to believe in any alternative theory, feeling proud of perceiving themselves to be enlightened and even prouder when they amass sizable social media followers that hang on every misguided and outright false theory that is propagated. Russia is aware of this population of paranoid skeptics and plays them like a fiddle.

Those that challenge any narrative against Russia are branded CIA agents, of being puppets for neo-conservatives intent on reigniting a cold war, and face the ire of seemingly countless online trolls or hecklers on the internet that hijack online discussions. I was accused of being all of these things and faced the constant stream of Internet hate for being perceived as such. This is just a minor example of this new propaganda technique in action.

Meanwhile, within Russia, every protest or demonstration, every strained relation with a foreign country, any economic troubles - Russian media would like to convince as much of the world as possible that its woes are the result of Western meddling. The paranoia extends to believing that Western media is not only complicit, but instrumental in ensuring Western dominance.

The Russian bosses say that the organization is simply providing another perspective – one that is ignored by Western media. The implication is that there is no such thing as an objective truth and that every possible theory uttered by anyone is equally plausible. The Kremlin sees this as an opportunity to mold reality.

But let’s not get duped by this falsehood. Someone is responsible for pulling the trigger that killed Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov. Someone, some entity, is responsible for launching the BUK missile that downed MH17, killing all 298 passengers on board. This is not up for debate or open to interpretation. Because behind the strategically false finger pointing, there is a *true* story. And in both cases, the true story has yet to be uncovered and proven, there are still so many questions that remain unanswered and justice not served for the victims. There is someone that prefers it stays this way.

We shouldn’t let it slide. We need to take notice and take action. The best weapon against this rapidly expanding propaganda campaign is the truth. We just need to fight

for it. We fight it by refusing to look the other way when a lie is told, by not giving undeserved benefit of the doubt after being deceived time and time again, and by spreading awareness about this new disinformation stream that is polluting the airwaves and online discussions which shape our perceptions of world events. We fight it by considering the source, thinking before you click, retweet, or share an article that aims to deceive. While it's true that the truth is oftentimes difficult to uncover and not always immediately apparent, we should seek to find the truth, spread that information, and learn from it - whatever that truth may be.