Data Analysis of Russian Disinformation Supply Chains: Finding Propaganda in the U.S. Media Ecosystem in Real Time

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Abstract

This paper uses artificial intelligence to identify a Russian disinformation narrative and track it to its original sources online. This project, using online content that is collected and categorized by the VAST (Veracity Authentication Systems Technology) OSINT system, identifies and analyzes content associated with Russian propaganda with strategic narrative insights. We use the example of accusations of Nazism in Ukraine, specifically related to the Ukrainian Azov regiment, to demonstrate how different stories within this propaganda narrative appear on far-right U.S. websites. At the same time, our study shows little engagement with these stories in the mainstream U.S. media. This paper demonstrates how to scale human content analysis by using artificial intelligence to analyze how foreign propaganda penetrates the U.S. media ecosystem. Our analysis shows that Russian propaganda content is most likely to enter the U.S. media through conspiracy websites on the extreme Right of the U.S. online sphere, but this is not the only vector. While this echoes earlier findings, it also allows us to demonstrate with more precision which Russian propaganda is more likely to resonate with U.S. outlets online. Using this technology, we can identify disinformation 'supply chains' and hopefully disrupt this supply more effectively than we have in the past.

Keywords: Russia, disinformation supply chains, propaganda, U.S. media, Nazis, Ukraine, Azov regiment, strategic narratives

Introduction

It is fairly straightforward to measure who is winning a war on land, at sea, or in the air. The metrics are relatively unambiguous – so many soldiers killed, so many civilians perished, so much territory gained or lost – even if the final resolution may take months or even decades. It is much harder to understand who is winning the propaganda war that parallels military movements, because the battle for hearts and minds is not visible on a chart or map. Rather, information war consists of a complex array of message production, dissemination, consumption, and response by the targeted audience. As a result, although analysts understand the critical importance of information warfare, much of the conversation about it lacks precision and clarity.

In order to address this issue, we propose the concept of disinformation supply chains, using Russian propaganda in its 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a critical case study. This paper showcases how to translate expert knowledge about a political and media sphere into real-time measurement using natural language processing and network analytics. As a result, we can identify the origin of Russian propaganda, track its spread in a specific media environment, and identify who is spreading (or countering) the propaganda. For this paper, we initially tested the analysis of two Russian propaganda narratives, one that promoted the 'Ukrainians are Nazis' conspiracy with the framing of the Ukrainian "Azov" regiment and the other that the U.S. was planning "false flag"[1] attacks to justify military aggression in Ukraine. While we had interesting findings from the false flag propaganda, the Azov Nazi propaganda provided the clearest test of this approach.

This paper identifies and situates these specific propaganda narratives in Russian strategic narrative operations in general. The axiom that truth is the first casualty of war is particularly apt in describing how Russia attempts to justify the invasion. While the Kremlin uses many of the same strategic narratives it has long deployed into Western communication ecosystems, there are unique elements to Russian propaganda about its latest invasion. In particular, Russian President Vladimir Putin has chosen to augment Russia's long-term strategic narratives that emphasize Russia's role as both victim of Western aggression and resurgent great nation by adding conspiratorial elements about Nazism and false flag operations.

Much has been observed and written recently about Russian propaganda (Badawy, Ferrara, and Lerman 2018; Bastos and Farkas 2019; Giles 2016; Golovchenko 2020; Gordon and Robertshaw 2019; Helmus et al. 2018; Helmus et al. 2020; Howard et al. no date; Jamieson 2018; Kolga 2019; Meister 2016; Nimmo et al. 2020; Paul and Matthews 2016; Pynnöniemi and Rácz 2016; Rogers and Tyushka 2017; Treyger et al. 2022; U.S. Department of State, August 2020; U.S. Senate, January 10, 2018). Domestic and international factors are often interwoven in discussions of Russian propaganda. For example, concerns about Russian information warfare have been split along political lines in the United States as Republicans accuse Democrats of using "Russophobia" as a way to critique former President Donald Trump and unfairly amplify fears about Russian aggression (Oates et al. 2021). That division has significantly narrowed since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 and generated common outrage, but difficulties remain in that freedom of speech in the United States makes it challenging to curtail pro-Russian disinformation narratives.

This work seeks to simplify countering disinformation warfare in three key ways. First, experts have long recognized there are particular narratives and patterns for Russian international propaganda campaigns that make them relatively easy to identify. Second, by applying computational tools such as NLP and network analysis to selected corpora of traditional and social media, it is possible to identify with a high degree of certainty which Russian messaging spreads most widely in the United States. Finally, conceptualizing the spread of these messages as "disinformation supply chains" gives us the ability not only to recognize how the information enters into the U.S. media sphere, but also gives us the ability to either counter it more effectively or even cut off the supply.

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[1] A false flag operation is an act committed with the intent of disguising the actual source of responsibility and pinning blame on another party.

Our work operates within the content layer of media analysis (Oates, 2008). As such, we do not examine the motivation of the Russian government for producing these messages (the news production layer), although we assume they are to support their kinetic military efforts. Nor do we examine the effect of these messages on the targeted population (the reception/audience layer). While we recognize that the measurement of effects is important – indeed, if no one cares at all about the Russian point of view, why worry about the supply chain? – it is beyond the scope of this study. Given previous studies cited above that have linked the ability of Russia propaganda to penetrate free media systems with anti-democratic messaging, we believe that identifying and countering disinformation supply chains from nefarious foreign states is particularly important. After all, isn't it better to stop the barrage than just to hand out some flak jackets? In other words, we believe that addressing the problem at its source through disinformation detection is more effective than universal media literacy training (although the latter has value in its own right).

This paper uses a system devised by VAST-OSINT, which is an automated global platform content data ingestion and enrichment system. The advantage of this system, designed to tag and track disinformation in real time at scale, is that it allows us to leverage our knowledge of Russian propaganda with a state-of-the-art digital forensics system. In particular, the VAST system is powerful because it uses a fusion of several tools, notably natural language processing that works across multiple languages to augment its methods for finding clusters of disinformation as well as a huge connection to billions of online sites. While disinformation can lurk in many places online, the VAST system acts as a powerful magnet to cluster the disparate locations that promote disinformation into visible threads.

Content Analysis, Framing, and Strategic Narratives

Content analysis is a broad methodology that embraces everything from the minute examination of particular phrases to tracking millions of keywords through computational linguistics (Benoit 2013). Our approach balances a qualitative approach by identifying known Russian strategic goals and communication channels with the ability to mine up to three billion URLs to track message dissemination in the VAST system. To bridge that gap, we identify linguistic patterns that transmit key Russian propaganda messages.

We recognize there is both confusion and disagreement about the terms used to talk about information strategy and warfare. The broader category we are considering is propaganda, which is defined by Jowett and O'Donnell as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (2015, Kindle location 425). We note that this definition does not specify a moral judgment about the intent of the propagandist, but it does indicate that the intention is not to inform, but to shape, manipulate, and direct. This distinguishes it from news, which has the intent of informing.

Some critics of journalism have argued that it is difficult to tell the difference between news and propaganda (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Indeed, Trump often accused the news media of carrying out propaganda when he disagreed with their coverage (Meeks 2020). However, news and

propaganda have distinctive linguistic features and patterns (Jowett and O'Donnell). While Hearns-Branaman (2014) notes that a standard of "objectivity" in reporting can never realistically be reached, striving toward it as a goal creates a difference between news and propaganda. There are also features of news in the United States such as transparency, sourcing, balance, timeliness, willingness to correct, etc., that are absent from propaganda. While propaganda can contain facts, its allegiance to creating a desired outcome or even worldview distinguishes it from news that seeks to inform citizens.

All countries engage in some form of propaganda on the world stage. However, Russia also uses a large degree of disinformation, which is defined by Merriam Webster as the deliberate use of false information in order to both influence public opinion or obscure the truth. As noted below, Russian propaganda both attempts to proactively build a strong and protective image of Russia for Russians, while at the same time attacks democracy and the West.

While this study is focused on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it's important to understand the long-term strategic goals of the Russian state as expressed through their strategic narratives. Traditionally, scholars have discussed media 'framing' far more than 'narrative.' How does the well-developed concept of framing fit within the burgeoning idea of narrative analysis that would seem to better embrace Russian information strategy? Framing is a concept at the heart of political communication research and is used to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman 1993, p. 52).

Framing illuminates many of the patterns in propaganda; as Entman notes, frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. For example, U.S. media have traditionally framed homelessness around the failings of *individuals* while the elite British media frame it as a failing of *society* toward its most vulnerable citizens. Frames play out in implicit and explicit ways throughout media content. The concept of framing allows researchers to identify, code, analyze, track, and discuss how framing – of issues, individuals, social challenges, etc. – appears in different media content across time and space. Unsurprisingly, there is an enormous amount of political communication research that relies on measuring frames.

The key difference in the concept of frame and narrative is that framing operates within an organized view of reality and essentially accepted fact-based journalism. A narrative is more about a story that may or may not be grounded in facts. While a frame highlights the organization of material, a narrative resonates with a particular way of looking at the world. This makes the study of narratives particularly useful for analyzing propaganda.

We operationalize a narrative as a concept broader than a frame, yet still detectable and measurable in news. While the concept of narrative is becoming of greater interest to political communication scholars, the field still lacks a shared definition of the term. Halverson, Goodall, and Corman (2011) wrote that narratives are "powerful resources for defining cultures and framing actions, and it is particularly important to understand how they operate if we hope to understand and counter

them" (page 1). A narrative is broader than a story, which Halverson, Goodall, and Corman define as "a particular sequence of related events that are situated in the past and recounted for rhetorical/ideological purposes" (page 13) while a narrative is "a coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations according to the known trajectories of its literary and rhetorical form" (page 14).

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2017) offer a range of approaches on how to specifically define narratives by narrowing the concept of narrative into a particular category: "strategic" narrative used by countries for propaganda. According to Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin, strategic narratives have the following components (page 7): character or actors, setting/environment, conflict/action, tools/behavior, as well as a resolution (either suggested, realized, or merely a goal). For example, a Russian strategic narrative that democracy is fatally flawed may include stories about media bias, evidence of media corruption, or lack of fair coverage. Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin argue that narratives are "more important for ordering the chaos" in a world "with leaders who are ill-prepared for its complexities" in a more interdependent global community (2014, page 74).

By establishing recurring stories about conflicts and consequences, states intend strategic narratives to shift audience expectations about certain actors and influence future audience perceptions. Russia's strategic narratives form the foundation for its influence operations. State-directed media outlets mold news coverage to fit strategic narratives that push audiences toward Moscow's policy on a given issue. The goals for strategic narrative are both concrete and more ephemeral, as Szostek notes "a state's struggle through strategic narrative to be recognised as a particular kind of self is driven simultaneously by the desire to achieve concrete political and economic objectives and the desire for more abstract rewards – pride and prestige" (2017, p. 576).

Viewing the transmission of information through the lens of narrative could illuminate how specific stories fit into compelling and widely shared narratives. Thus, while scholars such as Starbird (2017) have been justly puzzled by the prevalence of demonstrably false conspiracy theories having surprising popularity in the online sphere, the existence of "false flags" and "crisis actor" conspiracies make more sense within the *narrative* of a lack of trust in government and media.

Russian Strategic Narratives

But where do these strategic narratives come from? In the case of democracies, they are often linked to long-term social issues and desires of the citizens, although they are also shaped by powerful leaders and institutions. In authoritarian regimes with controlled media systems, the narratives are constructed much more purposefully and disseminated from the top down. In the case of Russia, strategic narratives can be clearly traced to public speeches and statements by Putin and other key government officials. Narratives are relatively consistent, stable, and predictable in Russia, although narratives will adapt and change somewhat given the circumstances. Russian strategic narratives are

the amplification of Russian desires about both the nature of the global order and their place within it.

So what do Russians want? Over time, the Kremlin has directed Russian television and other key media outlets to develop four dominant strategic narratives: Russia is a resurgent great nation; the West and NATO are out to destroy Russia; Russia protects Russians no matter where they live; and Western democracy is corrupt and failing (Oates and Steiner 2018, Steiner and Oates August 2019). This definition of the central Russian strategic narratives arises both from a wide range of studies, many of which are cited above, but also from our observations and analysis of Russian propaganda over the past three decades.

Miskimmon et al. note that strategic narratives are important for "ordering the chaos," but they do not have to be grounded in reality. Many analysts argue that Russian propaganda and disinformation are more concerned about spreading chaos and confusion rather than any logic and specific communicative goal (Pomerantsev 2015, U.S. Senate, Roberts and Tyushka). Kolga notes that Russian propaganda is often reactive to particular events, such as the shooting down of the MH17 airliner in 2014 by Russian troops operating in Ukraine. There have been times when Russia has tried to project a more positive message of state strength, such as during the 2014 Sochi Olympics and for its tech innovation initiatives (Szostek), but these attempts have met with little success.

Szostek also notes Russia has found little success in attempting to project a positive image in general and has embraced somewhat hypocritical narratives. On the one hand, Russia wishes to be an influential part of the world order and resents the way it believes it has been sidelined by the West in general and the United States and NATO in particular. At the same time Russia complains about a lack of international respect, it carries out actions such as invading Ukraine that put it outside the bounds of international law and respect for sovereign states. In other words, Russia simultaneously wishes to be a part of the world order, but also to subvert it. In the Russian zero-sum perspective, Russia can only gain strength if it takes power away from other states, or as Szostek puts it "the Russian public and elite experience greater affirmation of their desired international status by defying Western criticism than by pursuing Western approval on Western terms" (p. 572).

In keeping with research by Starbird (2017) and others, it's important to consider the role of conspiratorial thinking in Russian strategic narratives. Russian political communication has long had a strong tradition of conspiratorial thinking, much of it rooted in the Cold War. As Starbird notes, conspiracy theories not only are more enduring and persistent in much of the online sphere, seemingly disparate storylines often reinforce a fundamental conspiratorial worldview.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is a manifestation of all four of the long-term strategic narratives discussed above, yet also exhibits some new rhetorical characteristics that suggest the rise of conspiratorial rhetoric. In particular, Putin has broadcast his conviction that the Ukrainian people are actually part of historic Russia and are not a separate people, as well as the idea that the innocent Ukrainian people are being cynically manipulated by Western governments in order to

both separate them from their Russian family as well as forcing them to serve as a puppet state for NATO to threaten Russia.[2]

Long-term narratives for the war in Ukraine
While the territorial ambitions amplify the desire to be a resurgent world power, Russia also has consistently claimed that Ukraine denies rights to the many ethnic Russians living in Ukraine. These claims are largely false, particularly given that Russian was widely accepted as national language until Russia's invasion of Eastern Ukraine (and seizure of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula). Russia also has consistently claimed that Ukraine is being used as a puppet state by the West, which engineered the 2014 Euromaidan revolution in which a pro-Russian president was forced to resign and flee the country. In particular, Russians are deeply aggrieved by any sign that NATO would expand eastward. Finally, Russians consistently point to any democratic movements in Ukraine as dangerous, given that Western democracy is corrupt and failing.

New narrative elements for the war in Ukraine
In the months and weeks leading up the invasion, Putin emphasized the need to "liberate" the Ukrainian people from their "neo-Nazi" leadership. One key document is a 7,000-word article that appeared under Putin's name entitled "On the Historical Unity Between Russians and Ukrainians" on July 12, 2021 (English version here on the Russian presidential website). The article includes a long discussion of Russian history reaching back several centuries, that attempts to demonstrate the common roots of the Russian and Ukraine people. Given that few in Russia and very few in the West would be familiar with these historical references, they form a general impression of a storied past but are difficult to verify that they are being deployed accurately. They certainly would be challenged by Ukrainian historians.

Putin states that "the wall that has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space, to my mind is our great common misfortune and tragedy." Here it is clear that Putin is building on the notion of a communal 'motherland' and Great Russian nation. He then turns to conspiratorial thinking, saying that this division is the "result of deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity" with the "overarching goal being to divide and then to pit the parts of a single people against one another." This fits with the "West is out to get Russia" narrative and casts the United States, NATO, and the democratic world in general as the existential enemy of Russia and her people.

A content analysis of the "historical unity" article by one author (Oates) for this paper shows a strong emphasis on the idea – argued mostly through the lens of Putin's interpretation of history – that Ukraine and Russia are one people and one nation. There are 37 mentions of this concept in Putin's article. There are also six mentions of Nazis and Nazism, split between historical references to World War II and accusations that "neo-Nazis" are rampant in contemporary Ukraine. While "Nazi" is a very evocative word in general and particularly given Russia's glorification of its role in fighting Nazis in World War II, its deployment in relation to modern Ukraine is a key linguistic 'hook' now used consistently by Putin and other Russian officials.

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[2] From a review of Putin's speeches and statements from July 2021 to August 2022 by Oates.

The fantastical element of the article is the repeated accusations – eight in total – that Ukraine is responsible for the violence and war. There is no reference to the fact that the Russian military invaded Ukraine (covertly in the case of Crimea) in 2014. There are four mentions of alleged Ukrainian corruption. While there is only one direct reference to NATO, there are 16 references that fit the strategic narrative that the West is out to destroy Russia (often with reference to how Ukraine is being manipulated by the United States to establish an American military front along the Russian border) and 17 references to Russophobia, the unfair and unreasoning hatred of Russians. Putin's article is both something old – paranoia against Western military incursions and Russophobia have been consistent parts of Russian strategic narrative for years – along with the newer element of the 'Nazi' threat in Ukraine.

How consistent were these frames and narratives in the year after Putin published his "historical unity" article? Research for this article analyzed an additional 19 documents posted on the Russian Presidential website between July 13, 2021, and August 17, 2022, which ranged from Putin's annual press conference to reports on phone calls with U.S. President Joe Biden. The analysis found the strategic narrative that the West was out to get Russia dominated with 57 mentions found via content analysis.[3] There was also an emphasis on the "Russia as a resurgent great nation" narrative, with 17 mentions. There was only minor mention of protecting Russians (four, typically in the context of Ukraine) and only one mention that could be linked to "democracy is flawed and failing." Thus, the overwhelming message was that of the West as the existential enemy of Russia. NATO was mentioned specifically as a threat to Russia 21 times throughout the documents. Russophobia is mentioned 11 times.

In these documents, Putin continued to emphasize the idea that Ukraine and Russia were one people, which was mentioned seven times. In the 19 documents, statements that Ukraine itself was responsible for the violence were made 27 times by Putin. Nazis and Nazism also were mentioned, often in historical context, seven times. Conspicious by its absence was any mention of Russia's military invasion and total war (what some would call genocide) in Ukraine. Instead of the current war, Putin constantly references World War II, which the Russians typically call the Great Patriotic War. There were 33 mentions of World War II, often in the context of commemoration, and seven references to the Russian "motherland."

While the notion of one great Slavic people and the myth that Russians and Ukrainians are one – an idea strongly rejected by Ukrainians – fits with long-term Russian strategic narratives, the insistence on 'reunification' strikes a new note. While suggesting that Russia protects Russians no matter where they live is a familiar Russian strategic narrative, the notion that Ukrainians are also 'Russians' is a more recent interpretation that Putin makes clear in his July 2021 article. It is a

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[3] This analysis was also carried out on the English-language documents by Oates with Provalis analytical software, highlighting mentions that ranged from a phrase to a paragraph. Thus, the unit of analysis varied slightly but was based on the minimum amount of content to make a coding decision. The items were selected out of the hundreds of documents posted over the year based on whether they had any relationship to Ukraine and the four dominant strategic narratives identified in Oates and Steiner. The Russian language documents are available via the website, but the choice was made to use the English documents in order to analyze language for external audiences.

departure from a rational strategic narrative into more what analysts such as Pomerantsev would consider to be the construction of an aspirational world that is not based on reality.

On the subject of a lack of reality, Putin ascribes all the hostility shown by Ukrainians to "neo-Nazi" forces and leadership in Ukraine, as well as the machinations of the United States, NATO, and West. He does not acknowledge that the death and violence in Ukraine – in Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine – were caused by the military invasion by Russia. It is a breathtaking example of omission and misdirection, so blatant that it's clear that Putin has no concern about ground truth. This transcends the notion of disinformation, propaganda, or even "fake news": Putin is simply writing about a world that does not exist.

In translating Putin's statements into strategic narrative we can consider three issues. First, Putin is pulling at threads of collective memory and understanding of history that would resonate with much of the Russian population. For example, one of the most powerful shared memories for Russians is that of their victory in World War Two. What is left out of this narrative, however, is that the Russians initially cooperated with the Nazis in the 1940 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Second, the Russians are creating an alternative reality. Finally, Putin is looking in a distorted mirror to accuse the Ukrainians of doing things that the Russians are actually doing. For example, the people who are carrying out violence against Ukrainians are Russian troops, who invaded the country in 2014 and have engaged in a war ever since.

Thus, Putin is ascribing to all three of the ways that strategic narrative plays out in the Russian environment. First, he is invoking particular history and symbols that might resonate with a sense of Russian nationalism. Second, he's lying, both by omission and by accusing the Ukrainian officials of falsely manufacturing anti-Russian sentiment. Third, he is constructing a world as he would like it to be.

Translating Putin's Rhetoric into the Russian Disinformation Supply Chain

Putin's words sit at the very top of the supply chain of Russian disinformation. Our task is to now translate this into specific linguistic patterns that can be tagged and traced in a media ecosystem. We chose to look for specific stories that served as 'anchors' or 'hooks' for key strategic narratives. How can we operationalize the known elements of Russian propaganda so that we can identify them in the U.S. media? There are a range of approaches, all of them useful yet limited in terms of universal reach.

For example, analysts are very much aware that the Russian English-language outlets RT America and Sputnik are key distribution nodes for Russian propaganda aimed at the Western audience. In particular, RT has a popular presence on YouTube and this is augmented by the Russian Rupt.ly outlet. Orrtung and Nelson (2019) studied the content of the RT YouTube presence, finding that the most popular videos tended to be sensationalist, yet apolitical in nature. It is assumed that Russian propaganda follows a similar pattern on newer platforms such as TikTok, although so far there are few studies. In addition, groups such as NATO, the Center for European Policy Analysis, and the Atlantic Council actively track Russian propaganda content and specific campaigns.

There is also work via both network analysis and content analysis that analyzes how Russian messages travel through social networks (Golovchenko, Kolga, Pynnöniemi and Rácz). A major focus in examining Russian propaganda was from the social media ads placed on Facebook and Twitter in an attempt to amplify discord in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections (Jamieson). More recent work has highlighted how Russian messages target and exploit partisan divisions in the United States (Helmus et al. 2020).

All of this work has been critical to informing policymakers and the public alike about the way in which Russian (and other foreign) propaganda is woven into the media ecosystem in the United States. However, there has been relatively little work on the more subtle influence, particularly the way in which rightwing media promote Russian narratives such as Russophobia (Oates et al. 2021). A grammatically suspect Facebook post complaining about immigrants is one issue; a highly influential U.S. television host repeating Kremlin talking points is something else. While analysts and journalists have identified some high-profile cases of support of Russian narratives – particularly Fox celebrity Tucker Carlson supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine <u>to the point he is featured on Russian state television</u> – there is little widespread work on the systematic way in which Russian propaganda influences the U.S. media.

The VAST system automates the measurement of the similarity in online content between Russia and U.S. sources in order to measure the penetration of Russian messaging into U.S. content. The VAST system uses a proprietary algorithm that employs a linguistic match between Russian content and U.S. content across the two languages. While it is possible to see Russian propaganda aimed at the U.S. on sites such as RT and Sputnik, the ability to analyze Russian-language content and match it to English content in real time gives a much wider lens for the interplay between Russian messaging and the U.S. media ecosystems.

For this study, the VAST system does not include social media content, although much of the traffic to these sites is generated by social media.

VAST analysis of Russian Messaging about Ukraine

The VAST system ingests and enriches content data from over three billion online domains and subdomains. This highlights a key challenge in tracking the spread of information in the online sphere: Although it is relatively easy to identify known sites that promote Russian propaganda, for every visible site there could be hundreds or even thousands of different URLs with similar content. The VAST system uses a combination of NLP and network analysis to detect the similar stories to surface the actors behind the amplification. In order to find matching content, the system can query by factors including the date content was added, the country in which the domain is physically located, the title of the content, the text itself, and the similarity among these factors.

For an analysis of content about Russian's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the VAST system identified 28,522 domains in mid-August 2022 that were engaged in presenting information on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The system identified 1,084 domains in the Russian language and 25,343

domains in English. VAST identified a corpus of 317,625 stories across these domains. The ability to geolocate the origin of each domain is still being developed by VAST, so this study used language as a proxy for target/location of information.

Unsurprisingly, in a general query about information on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the U.S. media ecosystem, major news sites dominate in terms of estimated visits. *The New York Times*, the U.S. newspaper with one of the strongest traditions of international coverage, dominates the media sphere with more than 2.5 million monthly visits to content about the war in Ukraine.

Figure 1
Monthly estimated visits to English-language websites that host information about Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in millions, August 2022
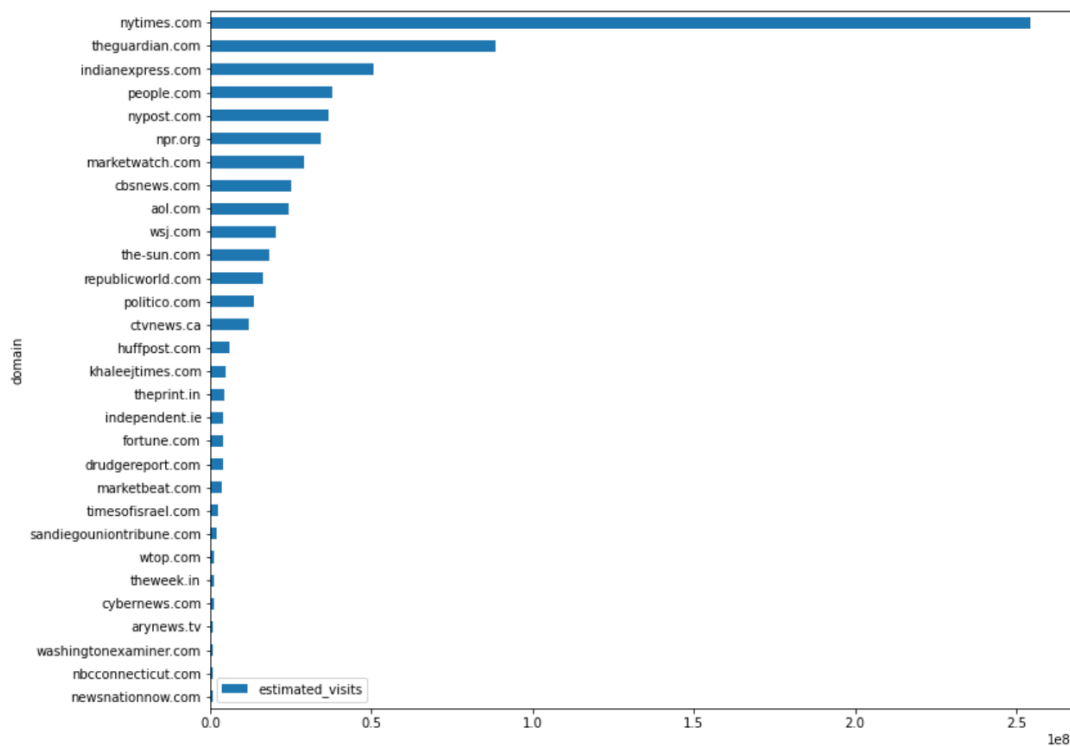
Source: VAST-OSINT

While this gives us a general overview of the engagement of online users with news about the war in Ukraine, the engagement with a reputable news source masks where pro-Russian narratives enter the U.S. media ecosystem. But what about material that is clearly part of a Russian propaganda campaign, such as this story[4] that appeared on the website Beforeitsnews.com on May 24, 2022, with the headline "Is US Conspiring to Sink Russian Black Sea Fleet Ships?" This fits into the West Against Russia strategic narrative discussed above and the first paragraph of the story echoes this narrative:

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[4] As with any unknown URL, take due care in opening any links.

On 20 May, in an exclusive for Reuters, the US government announced it would be providing advanced anti-ship and land-attack missiles to the Kiev regime, in yet another major escalatory move aiming to prolong the conflict and make it as bloody as possible for both sides. While some might dismiss such statements as simply being a part of the information, or more precisely, disinformation war, they should be taken extremely seriously, as it certainly wouldn't be the first time the political West, with the US at its helm, delivered advanced weapons to the Kiev regime.

While this type of content is quite common on sites such as Beforeitsnews, which has been identified as a node in online Russian propaganda by the RAND Corporation (Helmus et al. 2018), how far does it spread in the U.S. online sphere? The VAST system clustered the stories in the Ukraine war corpus and found 20 instances of the same story (as measured with linguistic similarity and a human review of the results) hosted on 20 different websites. While two-thirds of the postings were in Russian, one-third were in English. The English-language domains that were hosting the story on the alleged plans of the United States to sink the Russian Black Sea fleet were sites fitting the pattern of anti-media, anti-vax, anti-governance outlets. Indeed, some of them shared other stories that were the same (notably with slurs against gay men with monkeypox).

While the accusations that the U.S. was out to destroy the Russian Black Sea fleet found some resonance in far right U.S. sites,[5] other stories have far less of an echo in the English-language online sphere. The Russian media outlet *Argumenty i Fakti* ran a story on February 25, 2022, with the headline (in translation) "Ukraine refused to negotiate with Russia." This is a common claim by Russian officials and media. This is a standard propaganda technique in terms of accusing the victims of acting in bad faith, when in fact they were attacked by Russia.

According to the VAST data, this story remained in the Russian language sphere, with 95 percent of the content being circulated in Russian and just 5 percent of matching text in English. None of the same rightwing outlets (URLs) that echoed the Black Sea Fleet story that occured somewhat later picked up this story.

Once we had established how a human coder might identify a particular story, we decided to analyze two propaganda narratives, one about alleged Nazis in Ukraine anchored in stories about the Azov regiment and the other about how the U.S. might exploit "false flag" operations by staging an attack to justify military action in Ukraine or anywhere near Russia. While we were able to find stories clustered around the "false flag" propaganda narrative, the Azov Nazi story provided a clearer example of how human-machine detection worked. Thus, while we garnered some insights from the false flag data, we choose to highlight the findings from the Azov Nazi propaganda in this paper.

Azov regiment and accusations of Nazism

Given Putin's claim that Ukraine has been come under the influence of neo-Nazi leadership (with echoes of Ukrainian Nazi collaboration in the past), it would be expected that Russian propaganda

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[5] It is beyond the scope of this paper to establish the exact owners, location, and aims of these English-language websites and the determination of their content is based on a brief read of their homepages.

sources would promote any possible evidence of Nazism in contemporary Ukraine. Russia has exploited stores of the Ukrainian "Azov" regiment, in which some members have used symbols that could indicate links with Nazism or made statements that resonate with the far Right (for a detailed history of the Azov regiment see Umland 2019).

Using clustering, VAST was able to identify large families of stories pushed by Russian outlets. Azov was one of the largest clusters. The VAST system returned 93 matches of unique URLs for the query, ranging from strong hits that found matching content on 12 different websites to less resonant results that found examples of Azov Nazi stories that appeared on only one or 2 websites. While all of the stories identified for the corpus shared the same linguistic origins, stories about the Azov regiment and Nazis appeared at different locations over different times. While the average lifecyle of an online story about Azov Nazis was 6.2 days, some stories travelled for less than a single day whereas as one story endured almost four months (112 days) from its posting on the first website to its appearance on the last website in the corpus. The median life cycle of a story was about three days for the 93 stories collected through the VAST linguistic matching system. The VAST system retrieved stories from January 31 to July 11, 2022.

The most resonant story in terms of linguistic match and spread was launched on Gateway Pundit on March 3, 2022, with the headline "They May Want to Take a Step Back and Reevaluate: Israel Is Arming Neo-Nazi Group in Ukraine." This was first circulated on a pro-Trump website and then was repeated on 10 different websites. Because the VAST database is proprietary, we will not list the specific website addresses, but instead characterize the nature of the websites through human analysis.[6] All of the URLs that shared this story were right-wing websites that also were engaged with conspiracy theories (such as the stolen 2020 election or that COVID vaccines are a plot to control humans).

Other highly resonant stories claimed that the United States is a "headquarters for 'Nazi death cult' of bioweapons war criminals," more accusations that Israel is linked to Ukraine's neo-Nazi movement, that a Ukrainian TV host quoted a Nazi war criminal in an "impassioned call to kill Russian children," and many stories that mention the Azov regiment uniforms that had symbols one could associate with Nazi insignia. Thematically, these stories often link the United States to Ukraine in general and specifically claim that the United States supports neo-Nazis in Ukraine (such as by funding or training the Azov regiment). For example, these headlines reflect these themes: This is the Real, Americanized, Nazi-Dominated, Ukraine and EXCLUSIVE: FBI Documents Uncovered that Tie Americans to "Neo-Nazi" Azov Battalion in Ukraine.

These stories tend to recycle frequently among rightwing or conspiratorial websites but fail to gain traction outside them. This paper does not analyze whether these rightwing websites are sponsored Russian propaganda sites. Earlier research suggests that rightwing sites often use Russian propaganda because it resonates with their worldview and is often a vector to attack liberal democracy (Oates et al. 2020). The website for Sputnik, Russia's English-language site, only

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[6] We recognize that this obscures a level of detail, but the point here is not to call out specific websites or even speculate about who funds or sponsors the websites. Rather, we are interested in the nature of the media ecosystem and the spread of propaganda in general.

appears as the origin of Azov Nazi stories four times in this corpus and amplifies specific stories just five times in the period searched. The broader work of spreading these stories in the English online sphere is done by the rightwing, conspiratorial websites for the most part.

In rare cases, the Azov Nazi stories are carried by the mainstream U.S. media and in one case by an academic analysis site (*The Conversation*). This suggests one of two phenomena. First, this could be a discussion of the issues in a more balanced manner or even a debunking of the story that happens to share linguistic patterns with the propaganda. Second, it could be an unwitting echo of the Azov Nazi conspiracy stories.

In the three articles found, the former is the case. In examining the stories that originated on professional media websites (as opposed to rightwing conspiracy sites), the Reuters news service ran a story about a Greek citizen who spoke about fighting for the Azov regiment while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was addressing the Greek parliament. While Zelenskyy garnered applause, the story implied that the support of a Greek citizen for a regiment with suspected neo-Nazi origins drew outrage from some Greek politicians. The Reuters link harvested by the VAST system no longer works, but the Reuters story (Reuters content is licensed by other media outlets) appears here. Unlike many of the more extreme accusations about Nazism in Ukraine, this story is factual.

Another story in the corpus is from Britain's Sky News: "Do protests show Russians don't buy Putin's 'Nazi' Ukraine rhetoric? It's too early to tell." This story, published on March 2, 2022, repeats the Russian propaganda claims that Ukraine is being run by a "clique of Nazis and pro-Western puppets" and needs to be "liberated from Nazism." However, the story mocks and refutes the propaganda, noting that this is "Pretty rich from a government that's just launched possibly the biggest military campaign in Europe since the Second World War." The article acknowledges that there is little opposition to the war in Russia, although the war could damage Putin's legacy as well as "weaken his chances of securing his future and succession." Although this story was identified as being on message about the threat of Nazism in Ukraine, it is not propaganda but rather a news analysis/opinion piece that has evidence of balance. Clearly, this formula did not go viral as the article does not appear anywhere else in the corpus and was not picked up by another website. This may be because Sky News is a commercial outlet and hence more proactive in protecting its copyright, but it also does not resonate with conspiratorial thinking found on many rightwing sites.

The non-profit online outlet *The Conversation*, which showcases academic research in journalistic form, appears in the corpus with an article by a scholar who discusses the history of Judaism and Nazism in Ukraine. It was shared on one other website called RealClearHistory, which is an online outlet that promotes a more conservative view of history although it links to a wide range of content. This is an example of the difficulty of applying one category to online content: While the *Conversation* link was linguistically similar to propaganda about alleged widespread Nazism in Ukraine, it was a carefully researched historical article. Why it was republished by RealClearHistory is not apparent. As noted in earlier research (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2018), sometimes outlets

re-publish content (especially if it is freely available) with little reflection if it appears to be a topic of interest. In other words, it may get shared by an outlet without being read.

The three stories discussed above from Reuters, Sky News, and *The Conversation* are exceptional in the corpus – out of 93 stories, these three are the only ones that clearly ascribe to some kind of journalistic standards. Each is slightly different from the other, but overall they vary significantly from the 90 stories (96.8 percent) out of the 93. These 90 stories share many characteristics of propaganda as defined by Jowett and O'Donnell cited above: "the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."

In particular, these 90 stories have many of the features that define propaganda (Hobb and McGee 2014), such as the seven characteristics of propaganda listed on Table 1. The seven features listed on Table 1 generally attempt to use more positive emotions, while the stories in the Azov Nazi corpus depend on taking an association with far-right ideals and some Nazi symbols by a handful of Ukrainian ultra-nationalist defenders to mean that all Ukrainians are Nazis. As with earlier Russian propaganda that often strayed into the absurd – such as claiming that the Malaysian Airline flight shot down by a Russian missile was full of AIDS corpses (Oates 2014) – these stories freqently exaggerate or even lie, such as by saying that Zelenskyy is somehow a Nazi.

Overall, what do we learn from the VAST analysis of this spread of the Azov Nazi story online? First, this particular propaganda story, with its roots in an association of a handful of people with far-right ideology and Nazi symbolism, is repeated in a variety of slightly different stories across many far-right websites in English. While the roots of this story are in Russian propaganda efforts, the stories do not appear with hyperlinks to Russian sources. Rather, matching content appears on a relatively small number of other websites (ranging from 12 to 2). The NLP used by the VAST system is able to detect this without the presence of hyperlinks.

Interaction with mainstream U.S. media is almost non-existent, except for a single story that reports on anger in the Greek parliament at a Greek citizen who was fighting in the Azov regiment. This is significant in that there is widespread concern that Russian propaganda is able to influence U.S. media narratives, as Russia's timed leak of the Democratic National Committee emails were able to do in the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections (Jamieson). Rather, the VAST system gives us insight into a closed, micro-universe of Russian propaganda echo chambers. That is not to say it is without influence: This was the study of a single propaganda storyline.

Another advantage of the VAST system is that the NLP groups together stories that are similar, but not alike, which gives researchers the ability to review the related stories as a group. In this way, analysts can rapidly acquire a corpus that shows how propaganda adapts and changes across different stories. It also demonstrates the dominance of particular themes. Taken separately, it might be difficult to see common themes underlying the Azov Nazi stories. Taken as a group, it is clear that Nazism is linked to U.S. influence, which has no logic but could create a strong emotional reaction.

The ephemeral quality of the stories within the Azov Nazi propaganda narrative is particularly interesting. The system recorded both the first and last appearance of each of the 93 stories. This varied enormously – from a few hours to 117 days. This highlights the importance of NLP in propaganda detection: While most of these stories on their own had little reach, overall they formed a coherent and critical mass that pushed a particular falsehood (that Nazism in Ukraine is widespread) that fit within a powerful conspiracy narrative (that the West is out to destroy Russia, in this case by supporting Nazis in Ukraine). The constant repetiton of the Azov Nazi storyline is particularly interesting in that Starbird first noted a different arc of story volume for conspiracy theories: Unlike traditional news stories that have a burst of interest that quickly dissipates, stories that are linked to conspiracy theories, such as a narrow group of elites secretly control the world, endure online for years. Propaganda stories may come and go, but they build into powerful conspiracy theories that attract long-term attention.

Conclusions

This paper set out to measure the spread of Russian propaganda in the online U.S. media, using an archive of three billion websites collected and analyzed by VAST. We had a lofty ambition: to be able to illuminate the 'battlefield' for hearts and minds the way that we can follow tanks, ships, and missile attacks on a physical map. We demonstrated that a system such as VAST can leverage human content analysis and domain knowledge – in this case of specific Russian strategic narratives and propaganda campaigns – to more precisely identify where this influence is reflected in stories in the online sphere. Our identification of stories primarily on rightwing sites that have a conspiratorial outlook is not surprising, given earlier studies that have linked Russian propaganda to the extreme right in the United States. Indeed, Russian strategic narratives were often amplified by former President Trump himself.

There are two findings in this paper that could contribute significantly to the detection and deterrence of foreign propaganda in the United States. First, the VAST system allows for an exponentially more thorough and rapid detection of resonant stories. As VAST does not rely on network analysis alone, the system can detect echoes of Russian propaganda across the U.S. media ecosystem in real time. In this way, we can detect with a much greater precision the disinformation "supply chain" – and disrupt and counter it with far more ease and without nearly as much danger of suppressing free speech from U.S. citizens. The other key finding in this paper is that social scientists can use commercial systems, while commercial entities such as VAST may benefit from scholarly research in tackling disinformation.

We would be remiss, however, if we did not say that it is always challenging to break new paths. The aims and working practices of a commercial tool to fight disinformation and scholarly study are not designed to be in sync. While the three authors all work in the sphere of disinformation detection, we have different backgrounds and different roles in terms of dealing with the data. Scholars can often struggle to operationalize broad concepts such as disinformation, while software designers need operationalization to write good code. The VAST system is proprietary, thus the exact methodology cannot be shared (or replicated by other scholars) from this paper. Despite its challenges, though, this type of partnership in which each applies their talents and backgrounds to

the problem of detecting disinformation can move the needle faster on addressing and resolving a critical issue for our society. It does mean, however, thinking differently about the scholarly process. If scholars are to make a meaningful contribution to addressing the imminent danger posed to democracy by disinformation, forming partnerships to leverage data and tools is a promising way forward.

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Table 1: Seven Propaganda Devices with Examples from U.S. History

Name	Definition	Example
Name Calling	Trick to make us accept a conclusion without full considering of essential facts in the case	Father Coughlin calls President Franklin D. Roosevelt "a liar"
Band Wagon	A trick used to seize our emotions, to make us follow the political Pied Pipers and bring others along with us	Everybody's doing it
Glittering Generalities	An attempt to sway emotions through the use of shining ideas or virtues, such as freedom, justice, truth, education, democracy in a large, general way	"What America needs," says Roosevelt, "is economic security for all
Flag Waving	A trick in which the propagandist holds up a symbol, such as a flag, that we recognize and respect	Roosevelt made a symbol of the horse and buggy when he spoke of an anti-New Deal Supreme Court decision
"Plain Folks"	A trick in which the propagandist demonstrates they are like the rest of us or just "plain folks"	It is proverbial that political candidates always kiss babies
Testimonial	Best represented by the straw vote, this trick involves getting not only good, plain, solid citizens, but also social and business leaders to endorse the party or the candidate	If large numbers of individuals can be seen voting for Roosevelt or for Landon, it is likely to cause many additional votes for them
Stacking the cards	A trick in which the propagandist intentionally or unintentionally stacks the cards against the facts	In 1936, with unemployment still the serious issue in America, the Republican propagandists blame the Democrats for not ending it

Source: Miller and Edwards (1936)