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## Introduction

Donald Trump could be the greatest gift to the Russians in the history of propaganda. This is not because of evidence that Russians held secret information on him or manipulated him through some undetected network. Trump became a foreign asset because he produced both words and actions that could be used to attack democracy, a key strategic goal of the Russians. Trump consistently denies reality, vilifies the free media, and broadcasts disinformation. This opens the door for foreign disinformation to flow into the U.S. news, hidden in plain sight by Kremlin-style rhetoric from a U.S. president and amplified by the right-wing media. Through the 2020 election, the Stop the Steal conspiracy, and the Capitol insurrection, Russians found myriad ways to publicize the end of American democracy and the rise of Russia.

The convergence of strategic narratives from a U.S. president and the Kremlin created historic opportunities for Russian information warfare. While Russian propaganda may have less opportunity to profit from the war in Ukraine, the struggles of U.S. democracy and traditional media empowered Russia's global narrative for the massive invasion in 2022. This elevation of Russian soft power could not have happened without Trump, who has been aided and abetted by politicians and U.S. outlets that favor propaganda over information.

The threat of Russian disinformation is real, and it played a significant role in the 2016 U.S. elections. Despite knowledge of the risk and resourceful work by analysts and journalists in tracking down Russian propaganda in the United States, the problem of foreign disinformation continues to this day. As this book will demonstrate, this is in part due to exploitation of the American tradition of free speech and the open nature of the U.S. media system. The much more dangerous menace lies not in how foreign governments attempt to manipulate the media but in how our media system has been compromised by domestic actors who follow an authoritarian playbook. When it is hard to tell the difference between what the Russians are saying about the Democrats and how Fox News is covering Joe Biden, it is time to realize that some U.S. outlets have crossed the line from news to propaganda.

These forces came to a head again on January 6, 2021. Trump's manipulation of the media, honed over years of creating narratives that resonated more with myth-making than democratic reality, played a central role in the assault on the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters seeking to overturn his loss in the 2020 election. Just as the Russians learned to seed disinformation narratives over the years, Trump deployed classic tactics of propaganda. He began projecting the narrative of a stolen election in 2020 months before the vote as his support in the polls fell amid the expanding COVID pandemic, taking the extraordinary step of pre-emptively refusing to accept election results that were not in his favor. With his powerful pulpit, unquestioningly supportive right-wing media, and devoted following, he summoned his supporters to Washington and told them to march to the Capitol and "fight much harder" (Associated Press 2021).

Trump's post-election propaganda campaign had one immediate goal: to keep him in office. But its deeper, more important purpose was to delegitimize his opponent's victory, establishing a tactic adaptable to any future election and thus undermining American democracy. A crucial element of this strategy was vilifying and disempowering the media because journalists had the duty and responsibility to report on and expose Trump's lies. This matches a central goal of Russian propaganda to take power away from the media.

These tumultuous events, as well as Russian propaganda's recurring role in them, have come at a time when the U.S. media is consumed with its own deepening crisis. With the power of the Trump presidency and much of the Republican Party allied against the press, public trust in the media has declined. At the same time, the economic struggles of the U.S. media make them increasingly vulnerable to Russian attacks. The strategy many U.S. outlets adopted to survive—and indeed profit—in this period was to abandon the notion of objectivity and the independent monitoring of power to work in the service of Trump and propaganda. This is an exceptionally dangerous trend. Without professional news outlets, there is no truly free press. Without a free press, there is no democracy worthy of the name.

### **The Fusion of Russian and Republican Propaganda in the News**

This book illuminates how Russian disinformation, Russian propaganda themes, and tactics adopted by Republicans have come to colonize the

information environment of the United States. It may seem like U.S. democracy successfully weathered its recent storms. The Capitol was cleared of the armed mob in a matter of hours, Trump left office in early 2021, Biden was sworn in peacefully, and candidates who echoed Trump's conspiracy theories about a stolen presidency largely failed in the 2022 midterm elections. The electoral system withstood an enormous test under a president who desperately deployed massive resources to try to overturn an election. He failed in large part because the courts, some with judges appointed by Trump, chose the law over political favoritism. But the threats to democracy have not gone away.

As a society, we need to know our enemy. Russia is a classic foe of U.S. democracy. That's not only due to the historic rivalry and enmity between the two countries, but also because the U.S. serves as the primary target for Russian outrage over Western dominance in global political and economic affairs. The United States is Russia's Enemy Number One in its ongoing global information war. But the deeper danger to U.S. democracy is internal: Propaganda tactics that we recognize and understand from foreign information wars are now routinely deployed by domestic politicians on their own population. Yet, once we recognize these tactics, we can work to take away their power.

This book addresses this ongoing threat. We demonstrate how our free media systems are infected with both Russian propaganda and U.S. news that echoes Kremlin talking points—from the appearance of Russian-generated text on the U.S. alt-right website Infowars to the amplification of crucial Russian narratives that resonate with the Trump administration on Fox News—and suggest ways to counter this danger. We also highlight where journalistic norms of balance and objectivity can sometimes work to amplify Russian propaganda.

### **Why the U.S. Media Is Vulnerable**

At the center of this issue lies the peculiar institution that is the U.S. media. Both uniquely vulnerable and particularly powerful compared to counterparts in other liberal democracies, the U.S. media function under a commercial model that is quite different from corresponding systems in other countries. Almost all nations have significant state-funded media sectors, including major national television channels that are paid for with

government funding. In theory, if not always in practice, these act to counterbalance media organizations that follow strictly commercial logics. U.S. media rely strongly on advertising to fund their operations, making the profession and practice of journalism far more vulnerable to market forces.

This independence from a state-run media sector is viewed as critical to American democracy because it means the media can serve its citizen-customers and not the powerful governments who fund state media. But this decentralized, liberal system with almost no government control and a strong tradition of free speech is also susceptible to manipulation. This is especially the case now that the audience engagement that draws advertising dollars is increasingly separated from high-quality journalism that functions in the public interest.

### The First Big Warning

The U.S. media's growing vulnerabilities, as well as the ability of both Trump and Russia to exploit them, came into sharp focus during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Democratic contender Hillary Clinton was dogged by wave after wave of negative news coverage. Much of it came from the orchestrated release of her hacked emails that were published by WikiLeaks, news that directly competed with the *Access Hollywood* video that showed Trump bragging about assaulting women. In the fog of campaign coverage, it would seem that journalists were simply following the news. But later investigations revealed that Russian propaganda played a role in shaping coverage of Clinton and, by extension, influenced an American election.

This was a glorious moment for Russians, who have felt marginalized by their country's loss of global status since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was a more confusing moment for Americans. Older citizens could remember dire warnings about Russian disinformation, but this was a distant memory mixed up with "red scares" and cartoonish propaganda from decades ago during the Cold War. For younger generations, it was just a puzzling part of a much broader political storm as Trump swept into the presidency against the odds. Why were Russians posing as Americans on Facebook and other social media? Why did the Russians appear to support Trump? Why did Trump appear to support the Russians? And what exactly was this Russian propaganda, and did it reach many Americans?

It was clear that a Russia-influenced information war was now embedded in American politics. Yet U.S. action on this challenge was elusive. During

the crowded and contentious 2016 Democratic primaries and into the general election, there was no organized response from the U.S. government to Russian propaganda. From 2017 on, despite an outcry against Russian meddling, congressional hearings, the Mueller investigation, and increased U.S. sanctions on Russian interests, there was little clarity or action on identifying and countering Russian messaging as it leached into the U.S. media system.

A key feature of this information war was an attack on the notion of traditional American democracy and the amplification of a central strategic narrative that democracy is flawed and failing. This was the most successful convergence between Russian and Republican narratives, although the Kremlin also is able to use political division and right-wing media outlets to push its narrative that the West and NATO, with their unreasoning hatred of Russia expressed in what Russians call rampant “Russophobia,” are out to destroy Russia.

This convergence sometimes makes it hard to distinguish Russian propaganda from U.S. right-wing rhetoric. Indeed, when doing research for this book, often we either could not tell the messages apart or discern whether Russian propaganda was recycling and amplifying Republican messaging. Was this a deliberate alliance in information warfare? No. While there are parallels between Russian and U.S. right-wing narratives, it’s not particularly useful to search for a direct, conspiratorial link between the two; the reality is more complicated and far-reaching. It’s much more beneficial to analyze scientifically how narratives from the Kremlin and narratives from the U.S. right align and dynamically influence one another.

We began our research by using tools for identifying foreign propaganda hiding in plain sight in the U.S. media system. We found resonance between Russian and Republican narratives in campaign coverage of Biden, in the Stop the Steal conspiracy, and in the Capitol insurrection. In these cases, the Russians were pushing at an open door, as Trump’s rejection of traditional news and democratic values amplified propaganda narratives. We found that some important Russian propaganda campaigns, particularly against NATO and the Western military, found little traction in U.S. news until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, we detected a pattern in elite U.S. media outlets of repeating Putin’s talking points that blamed NATO for the invasion of Ukraine without always countering them by showing the Russians are the aggressors.

As a deeply divided American public struggled to navigate political and social challenges under Trump, Russian propaganda attempted to disinform,

disengage, and disillusion U.S. citizens. As this book will demonstrate, this strategy is part of a major information war aimed at weakening the United States as the primary enemy of Russia. Foreign propaganda is most effective at driving wedges into existing political and social fissures. That's much easier if the domestic media are recycling and amplifying the messages. As Marlene Laruelle points out, it is not that Russia can transform American society, but Russia can act as "an echo chamber" for American society's "own doubts and transformations" (2019, 198). In this scenario, it is often difficult to know if the negative coverage about American democracy is coming from RT (formerly Russia Today) or from Fox News.

Our research shows how Trump's constant attacks on the free press, embraced by many on the U.S. right, gave an unprecedented opportunity for foreign adversaries to attack the country at a vulnerable time. This book analyzes the Russian influence on U.S. national news narratives at four crisis moments in American and global politics: the divisive 2020 U.S. presidential election campaign, the Stop the Steal conspiracy, the 2021 Capitol insurrection, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russia is not the only foreign adversary infiltrating U.S. media, as China in particular actively carries out propaganda campaigns. However, by using our in-depth knowledge of Russian propaganda, we outline an effective way to detect and deter foreign propaganda in the U.S. media in general.

Americans *can and should* know if the source of what we read, watch, or listen to is coming from Washington or Moscow. We show how to track disinformation back to its source to identify, deter, and even counter a key element in the erosion of American media freedom. Rising above the usual debates over "fake news" or attempts to claim foreign propaganda is easily isolated from U.S. journalism, this book uses powerful analytical tools to define and demonstrate where Russian-based narratives appear in the U.S. news. It also shows where Russian propaganda tactics are deployed by the U.S. right-wing media by looking at news narratives, which characterize how stories are told to support end goals.

## Understanding the History of Russian Propaganda

Why—and how—would Russia make the United States its primary global target for propaganda more than three decades after the U.S.-Soviet superpower rivalry came to an end? This is both an echo of the Cold War and a

reflection of current Russian realpolitik. During the Cold War, both nations had active propaganda campaigns aimed at championing their ideological values. All Soviet media was saturated with pro-communist propaganda. Indeed, the central purpose of the Soviet media was to support and promote the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Siebert et al. 1956). The United States spent lavishly on American-produced “public diplomacy” aimed at the Soviet Union. This included Voice of America and Radio Liberty.

The Soviet Union’s collapse just two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall was seen at the time as a permanent global victory for Western ideals and way of life. Russia, however, did not embrace Western-style democracy despite some flirtation with free elections and media. Rather, power was quickly consolidated in the hands of a group of oligarchs, who also seized control of national assets to amass staggering personal wealth. Today, Russia is an authoritarian state that relies heavily on media messaging to control its population under the popular figurehead of President Vladimir Putin. He has been elected, with no viable opposition, enough times to have now ruled Russia for more than two decades, and a 2020 change to Russian law will allow him to stay in office until 2036.

Putin’s domestic influence is boosted by his response to external threats, both real and imagined. The founding of the Russian Federation in 1991 was marked by economic instability, rampant inflation, insecurity about neighboring states, and a long civil war in Chechnya. Russia was deeply angered by the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War in 1999, as the Western alliance proceeded with the strikes without authorization from the United Nations Security Council to evade a Russian veto. This was a significant signal to Russians about their lack of influence in their own neighborhood of Eastern Europe. Although Russians like to tell an uncomplicated narrative about NATO as a historical threat to Russia, there were times when Russian and American leaders even broached the idea that Russia could join NATO. But for Russia, NATO has come to represent its failure to find a dominant role in the world. Although NATO is technically a defensive alliance, for Russia it stands as an existential threat.

Inculcating fear about foreign threats is a useful method to bolster public support of a regime that is unable to offer democratic choices to citizens or build a society free from rampant corruption. It is more expedient to manufacture consent by framing Russia as an encircled, embattled state that must protect the Russian motherland and her people from being overrun. At the same time, demonstrating the power of the Russian nation through limited

wars in places as diverse as Georgia and Syria is a powerful driver of positive domestic public opinion. A “rally-round-the-flag” syndrome is certainly not new or limited to Russia: Ratings for U.S. President George W. Bush soared after the 9/11 attacks and allowed his White House to craft a “War on Terror” frame and launch the second Gulf War. This changed U.S. politics and policy in ways that resonate to this day.

So, if using foreign threats or even limited invasions is not new, what is different about Russia’s 21st-century information strategy? It combines three elements that significantly amplify its traditional projection of power. First, Russia has shown it will savagely punish neighboring countries for even appearing to side with the West. This was seen in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Second, Russia uses its formidable media presence in the post-Soviet region to engage in massive propaganda campaigns. Third, Russia is leveraging current opportunities in the global media ecosystem, notably the lack of regulation of online and social media, to wage an aggressive propaganda campaign against a range of countries in the West. Its efforts in the information war against America are the focus of this book.

While Russia can wield military threats or other forms of power in its own region, the object of its propaganda in the West is much more about undermining the narratives of U.S. superpower dominance and the virtues of liberal democracy. While it is willing to invade other countries, Russia also finds it effective to manipulate American hearts and minds to get a useful outcome to support the Putin regime. This can take the form of sowing chaos in an enemy state or even managing to manipulate elections to get a candidate more sympathetic to the Russian viewpoint elected. In the case of Trump, Russia may have gained both in 2016.

### **The 2016 U.S. Elections: What the Russians Learned**

The Russian propaganda campaign in the 2016 U.S. elections must have exceeded the wildest expectations of its organizers. Although Americans were alarmed by the revelations that Russians had posed as Americans and bought political ads on social media, the evidence that the Russian-backed leak of Democrat emails may have influenced the U.S. news agenda at a critical time in the election is perhaps more worrying (Jamieson 2018). At the same time, Trump was much friendlier to Russia, apparently easier to



manipulate, and did not conform to the usual presidential caution in dealing with Russia (or indeed any foreign country). While it was unclear whether he didn't understand why he should be prudent with Russia or he just didn't care, it benefited Russia to have a rogue president with a clear affinity for authoritarian leaders.

Even the direct benefits of a Trump presidency, however, were not the greatest gains for Russia from the 2016 elections. With a relatively small investment in social media advertisement and a hack-and-dump operation that targeted the Democrats, the Russians were able to spook both American leaders and the public with an idea of a malevolent enemy with superior information-warfare skills. It didn't matter that evidence remains very much mixed as to the exact impact of the Russian social media campaign on the U.S. vote (Jamieson 2018; Eady et al. 2023). What matters is the specific fear that it inspired of Russia, which is inferior to the United States in both conventional military strength and global economic clout, as well as the idea that electoral democracy could be so easily subverted. To help get Trump elected over Clinton was a short-term win; to demonstrate that U.S. democracy is dangerously vulnerable is a far bigger victory.

But looking at social media messaging alone or a single operation targeting the Democrats is far too narrow a lens through which to view Russian propaganda. It is neither just a few messages on social media nor a vastly powerful influence engine. Rather, Russian propaganda is funneled into broad and diverse media systems in the United States, sometimes resonating with a story but mostly getting lost in the vast sea of media messages or overtaken by the next big moment in the news cycle. Although we often see Russian propaganda as attempting to influence specific opinions or events in the West, it's more productive to understand it from the Russian point of view. We need to view Russian propaganda as part of broader Russian strategic narratives that define and transmit the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives.

At the same time, it's critical to understand the nature of the current U.S. media system so we can see how foreign messages enter our information sphere, how they are spread, and whether they resonate effectively in American society. The traditional mass media, online media sites, and social media networks all play a role. While Russian narratives have not been particularly compelling over time for the U.S. audience, America's current political polarization offers Russian propaganda a promising vector into the

U.S. media ecosystem. Even foreign propaganda can be welcome if it supports your point of view. An asymmetric media situation between the West and Russia—one open with few restrictions, one much more controlled—also helps favor Russian information warfare over Western civil discourse.

Trump's approach to information control is closer to Russian tactics than to traditional American political messaging. Classic Russian propaganda tactics include obfuscating, denying facts, lying, attacking critics, defaming others, and illogically shifting blame to specific groups in society (such as immigrants or liberals, etc.). An additional central element of the Russian propaganda playbook is attacking the media and journalists. A quality that both Putin and Trump share is the ability to play on conservative fears and values, to promise that traditional values matter and will triumph over liberalism. Trump stood apart from previous U.S. presidents—many who did reprehensible things while in office—by fully embracing propaganda over reputable political communication.

### **Plan of the Book**

This book examines three critical parts of the foreign propaganda equation. On the one hand, we document the efforts by Russians to project their national needs and desires onto the U.S. media ecosystem through their international outlets such as RT and Sputnik. We analyze the stories the Russians wish to tell and the image they seek to construct about Russia, namely, a strong and resurgent nation that rejects Western models of governance. Even more importantly, we analyze the image that Russia constructs of the West as a weak, failing, and venal system that seeks to destroy the Russian motherland. These messages may penetrate the mainstream media agenda in the United States, although they are more likely to feed into anti-democratic echo chambers, such as those on the right.

We also need to consider the news environment into which these 'Russia First' and 'Evil America' messages are projected: a flawed and challenged American media system. The problems that have left democratic media systems particularly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns range from the collapse of the commercial model for traditional journalism to a lack of regulation of the online sphere to how social media algorithms reshape news distribution. In many ways, it's the perfect storm for propaganda, and just what

Russia needed to overcome decades of dislike and distrust from Western audiences.

Finally, we found through the course of writing this book that Trump's messaging and Russian propaganda often seem to be singing from the same hymn book. When our coders encountered difficulties trying to differentiate between Russian propaganda and U.S. media content, we had to consider what this meant for the content and motivations of different media organizations. A significant part of the U.S. media system, mostly anchored around Fox News, used what Yang and Bennett (2021) term "interactive propaganda" in which the news organization actively promoted Trump's disinformation. These tactics echoed Russian propaganda campaigns.

The active participation of U.S. media outlets in supporting propaganda is a chilling and dangerous moment in American democracy. That is not to say that U.S. news organizations have not rather blindly supported pro-American messages in the past—such as during world wars or after 9/11—but Fox News reached levels of collusion with the Trump administration that crossed the line from patriotism to propaganda. The Russians took note: By 2022, Russian domestic television was using clips from Fox News as propaganda to support its invasion of Ukraine (Thompson 2022). At the same time, the logics of U.S. media that promote balance and objectivity meant that outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* often echo Putin's talking points about the war in Ukraine.

This is not a "whodunnit" book that reveals how a particular Russian information operation led to specific voting patterns or protests in certain cities. There are studies that examine the influence of propaganda on this level, although it's difficult to prove its exact effects. Media messages are part of a complex phenomenon that can inspire people to action, ranging from reconsidering their beliefs to voting to even rioting. Instead, the research in this book establishes both how to identify foreign propaganda and the pathways that bring that propaganda into the news consumed by the American audience. This is about how to be a disinformation detective rather than solving a specific disinformation 'crime.'

To that end, this book will use a trio of powerful tools to more precisely define, track, and assess the spread and influence of Russian propaganda content and techniques: strategic narrative theory, content analysis, and computational analysis.

## Strategic Narrative: What's the Goal of a Message?

How does Russia define its propaganda goals for the West? In other words, what does Russia want Americans to believe about Russia? Russian propaganda is aimed at shaping attitudes toward Russia in a particular way while undermining faith in democracy itself (Pomerantsev 2014). Russia wishes to impose its version of world events and perceptions on a global audience through the promotion of strategic narratives. A strategic narrative is the intersection of communication and power: “tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values, and aspirations for international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment” (Miskimmon et al. 2017, preface). For Russia, strategic narratives have both reflected and justified their military incursions, including in Ukraine (Szostek 2017; Hinck et al. 2018).

The United States is a prime target for the propaganda created to support Russian strategic narratives, although Russia has active media-influence campaigns around the globe (Herd 2016; Helmus et al. 2018; Bradshaw and Howard 2019). Russian strategic narratives seek to define and project Russian power in specific ways, in particular by framing NATO as an opportunistic tool of American global ambitions; Ukraine as the rightful territory of the Russian state; and Russia as a resurgent power in the world.

If that's what Russia wants, did Trump and his allies want the same things? There were times during the Trump administration when it was hard to decode Trump's policy intent, although he was predictable about his messaging to his core constituency of right-wing voters as well as his overt admiration of authoritarian leaders. Trump also was reliable in the way he deployed disinformation consistently throughout his presidency, choosing to rely more heavily on lies as his term continued (Kessler et al. 2021). This was apparent from his first day in office when he broadcast disinformation about the size of his inauguration crowds in January 2017, and he reached a new level of obfuscation with a refusal to publicly condemn violent White supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia, seven months later. By the time he refused to accept his defeat in 2020, the pattern was familiar although his levels of disinformation increased until he was documented making 503 false or misleading claims in a single day on November 2, 2020 (Kessler et al. 2021).

Trump's strategic narratives came into even sharper focus in early 2020 due to the twin challenges of COVID and reelection. His approach to the COVID epidemic was to consistently downplay the crisis. A charitable interpretation

would be that he was concerned with the economic and social damage that widespread panic or shutdowns could cause. In an unprecedented health crisis, leaders around the globe were presented with massive challenges in a fast-moving and frightening situation.

A less generous explanation would be that Trump was unable to understand the magnitude of the problem or that he was more concerned with looking good—and re-electable—than he was with rational policy in a global emergency. At any rate, his narrative of dismissing the dangers of the epidemic led to several worrying tactics, including ignoring scientific evidence, denigrating his own health specialists, promoting false cures such as hydroxychloroquine, and fighting against public health measures such as masks and closures (Yang and Bennett 2021). Once it became clear that COVID could not be dismissed or downplayed, Trump began to warn against early voting and absentee ballots, falsely claiming these were not valid. This narrative set him up to challenge a narrow result, although it ultimately did not work. However, this narrative did play a large part in the Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021.

## Content Analysis

As media consumers, we observe the ebb and flow of news coverage. We come to expect and understand how certain stories get covered and why some stories get little or no attention (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013; Harcup and O'Neill 2017). As content analysis specialists, we are interested in measuring and analyzing this coverage to understand its underlying meanings. In particular, how are stories organized around specific themes or narratives, and how do these differ among various outlets and over time? Why do some stories endure and others fade? How and why do certain media narratives change over time?

In this book we use content analysis to explore these questions. Content analysis is the systematic evaluation of texts. At its most fundamental, content analysis can provide simple measures of the characteristics of texts, such as the number of words in an article, the publication in which the text appears, the date it appears, and even how many times a specific word or words are used. Content analysis of Russian state media sites in English such as RT and Sputnik allow us to analyze how Russia frames and articulates its central strategic narratives. In turn, content analysis of American news

allows us to see how these narratives resonate in the U.S. media. We look at a range of evidence, from specific keywords to actors who are quoted to what is cited to amplify their claims.

The authors of this book have, between us, more than forty years of experience in carrying out content analysis projects. The technique can be good at finding the signal in the noise, but it's complicated and time-consuming. It's complicated because you need to find a way to define and quantify media coverage, whether it is assessing the central topic in the story or establishing the tone of the coverage. It's time-consuming because unless you can automate the process, humans need to read, listen to, or watch all the content (usually more than once) to apply a coding frame.

If content analysis was complex before the internet, the rise of the digital age has created significantly more challenges. To be fair, there are more opportunities as well. The changes to traditional media content are not as profound, and, indeed, the online distribution of media content makes it easier for scholars to gather material. But understanding media content is no longer about merely knowing the nature of the text. It's now possible to study how the news is shared, commented upon, liked, re-appropriated, and so forth. Much of this distribution and commentary takes place on social media. Our study focuses on the content of news itself, although it is important to acknowledge the relevance of how news is both produced and distributed.

### Computational Analysis

As the last of the three central research elements of this book, computational analysis allows us to translate specific verbal patterns into digital codes, making it possible to tag and trace particular narratives as they move from the Russian sites into the U.S. media. In this way, we see the echoes (and sometimes the exact words) from Russian propaganda sources appear in American media. Through our research, we also found that U.S. news content is sometimes recycled into Russian English-language propaganda.

As discussed above, while it's not difficult to find what narratives Russians want to project—not least because they go to considerable efforts to broadcast these narratives via their international outlets—it's somewhat more challenging to find specific linguistic markers of Russian propaganda in the U.S. media. We want to see whether ideas rooted in Russian propaganda

make it into mainstream U.S. media discourse. During our research, we also came to see which U.S. messaging was incorporated into Russian strategic narratives. To measure these incursions (both into and out of Russian propaganda), we use computational methods combined with traditional media content analysis for this book.

This is where computational linguistics, which applies computer science to the analysis and synthesis of language and speech, can augment human content analysis. Computational linguists have developed ways of codifying text such as news stories and political messages that make it possible for a reliable link to be established between the original story and its retelling in other formats (Card et al. 2015). Leskovec et al. (2009) detailed how to use computational linguistics to isolate unique elements of statements and narratives, which they call verbal memes, so that these components can be tracked across social media platforms. For example, in the U.S. 2016 presidential campaign, one verbal meme was “nasty woman”—originally uttered by Trump during a debate to castigate Clinton but then picked up as a riposte by liberals. One of the most famous catchphrases from the election was “build a wall,” popularized by Trump as a hardline response to immigration issues.

The ability to visualize how specific narratives travel across a media system greatly enhances our capacity to use narrative to understand how stories spread. There is compelling and useful work that has measured the content of Russian propaganda, including Orttung and Nelson’s (2019) examination of online RT content, but it’s not feasible to conduct in-depth coding in real time or at the volume necessary to track Russian or other propaganda. This book offers a way forward in terms of understanding the nature and spread of propaganda by building on existing scholarship and carrying out the research with the help of automated tools.

### **Analyzing the Health of U.S. Media Discourse**

It’s important to point out that this research does not study the effect of Russian propaganda on individual Western *citizens*. Rather, this book is interested in identifying and isolating the effect of Russian propaganda on U.S. media *discourses*. How does Russian propaganda and disinformation seep into daily news content in the United States? This means our unit of measurement is the content itself—the stories as they are defined by linguistic

tools and how they fit into strategic narratives. We are focusing on the detection of propaganda because we want to know how vulnerable Western media systems are to foreign propaganda writ large. At issue here is not the hearts and minds of individuals but the overall health and resilience of democratic media systems.

This approach demonstrates that social media messages linked to Russian trolls are often at the end of a long chain of events that starts with the construction of Russian communication strategy at the highest levels. If we want to gauge the relevance and power of evidence such as the spread of a particular story, we need to start much closer to the origin of the propaganda and examine how Russians construct their global propaganda aims. At the same time, we need to follow the trail of propaganda breadcrumbs through the media ecosystem. Which stories with roots in Russian propaganda resonate in U.S. news? Which stories become part of a national news discourse? And which stories fail to gain any attention?

### **Understanding Russian Propaganda: What Do Russians Want?**

Every country works to project its image onto the world stage. Indeed, the study of national strategic communication, or “public diplomacy,” has become a field in its own right, linked to the broader concept of soft power (Nye 1990). In this sense, Russia is in no way unique in wishing to project a powerful and meaningful image globally. The difference with Russia—and some would say with world powers in general—is that this image projection is linked to military strategy. This is often referred to as “hybrid warfare,” in which traditional military measures go together with communication strategy (Hoffman 2007).

A Russian international image-branding campaign in the United States would seem to be an uphill battle. The one thing that most Americans know about Russia is that they don’t like it (Letterman 2018). While one might expect that to be the case in recent years after extensive reporting on Russian disinformation aimed at the United States, this dislike had been consistent over many decades. This antipathy made sense during the Cold War, which lasted from the end of World War II until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Dislike for Russia increased to record highs in 2022, with 92 percent of Americans reporting an unfavorable view of the country (Wike et al. 2022).



Given the distance Russia has traveled from its communist era and the Cold War, why would Russia still wish to carry out an information war with the West? The answer lies in combining a critical internal and external factor: rallying domestic support, and the need to reclaim its Soviet era influence in the world. Russia found itself in an existential crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Once a mighty state power perceived to be on par with the United States, post-Soviet Russia struggled with basic social services and internal chaos. Blaming the problems of the Russian state on the West, particularly the United States, is more politically useful to the Kremlin than acknowledging the weakness of its own policies and rampant corruption. For Russia, anti-Western rhetoric is a win-win: It increases domestic support for leaders and gives Russia a more powerful voice in the world as an avowed enemy of the United States, NATO, and the European Union.

The strategic narratives that Russia would like to project are that the West is out to destroy Russia, Russia is resurgent as a great nation, Russia will protect Russians outside its boundaries, and Western liberal democracy is corrupt and failing (Oates and Steiner 2018). These narratives overlap to a degree, weaving into a compelling and coherent story for the country. At the same time as Russia promotes its nationhood, it denigrates Western systems as corrupt and failing, a narrative that has been particularly resonant with Trump's election, political conflict in the United States, and the surprising 2016 vote by the United Kingdom to exit the European Union.

Where do Russian narratives originate? While this is discussed in more depth in Chapter 3, it's important to highlight the strong hand of the state in Russian media. While there are commercial media in Russia, all media outlets must be loyal to the Kremlin. Media outlets that challenge the Kremlin, ranging from the commercial television network NTV in the 1990s to the Dozhd (Rain) cable channel in 2011, find themselves subject to forced changes in ownership or even lose their ability to broadcast. The Kremlin sets regular "themes" to be covered on state-run television that specify what can be covered, how it can be covered, and what should be ignored. Full censorship and control, such as during Soviet times, is not necessary given the ability of the Kremlin to make examples of media outlets and journalists who do not toe the line. Tactics ranging from intimidation to violence to even murder of journalists remain relatively common in Russia (Committee to Protect Journalists n.d.). Control and censorship have been markedly more severe since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Thus, the Kremlin has formidable control of a large and lively media sphere in Russia, ranging from news to entertainment. This control is extended to Russian international media, notably RT and Sputnik News. But it's not as if Russian media outlets just have sections entitled "Why Russia Is Better Than Other Countries" or "How Democracy Is Failing." Much of the material on these sites is breaking news and feature stories. However, our analysis of the content shows a pervasive framing of events, ranging from discriminatory reporting of facts to highly selective quotes, that provide persistent support of the Russian key narratives: the West hates us, Russia is a resurgent power, we protect Russians worldwide, and democracy is failing. We will discuss the creation of Russian strategic narratives in more depth in Chapter 3.

By knowing the central narratives, the pieces of the media coverage puzzle fall into place for Russia's international propaganda. While stories are occasionally completely falsified or grossly misreported (as with Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 or the Russian military shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17), the strength of the international propaganda really lies on a consistent fidelity to telling stories in ways that support the central Russian strategic narratives.

### **Trump's Narrative**

If we can identify Russian strategic narratives, what were Trump's strategic narratives? It probably makes more sense to call them campaign narratives, as they were less focused on Trump's ambitions for America than his goal of getting reelected in 2020. As noted above, it was difficult to establish meaning from many of Trump's statements, which were often unclear and contradictory (Oates and Moe 2017). But through an analysis of his statements and news coverage during the COVID crisis, the 2020 campaign, and his insistence that the election was stolen despite no evidence, clear themes emerge.

Trump consistently blamed the "fake media" or "liberal media" for lying, whether this was his claims that they were telling untruths about him or exaggerating the COVID threat to undermine him. Throughout his presidency, he complained about "Russiagate" and "Russophobia," that the Democrats exaggerated the threat of Russia and its interference in the 2016 elections to challenge his legitimacy as president. He warned that the widespread protests that followed the police killing of Black victim George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 were leading to chaos on the U.S. streets. For this, he

blamed Black Lives Matter, Antifa, and “socialist Democrats,” and he talked of deploying the U.S. military and shooting protestors. He constantly said that Biden was too old and too corrupt to be president. He started to sound an alarm that mail-in ballots were not secure during the 2020 election campaign, a narrative that became dominant as soon as it was clear that he would lose the election once the mail-in ballots were tallied.

### **Playing Field or Battlefield? The U.S. Media Ecosystem**

What is the media system in which this conflict among narratives—whether from Russians or a U.S. president—is taking place, and what makes it such a fertile environment for propaganda? The digital age has brought great innovation to news, but it has come with the twin challenges of money and trust.

In terms of money, the online sphere has undermined the traditional financial model of the news. In the past, the more popular coverage of sports, weather, and entertainment would draw in readers, allowing media outlets to fund newsrooms big enough to publish the generally less popular reporting on political and economic affairs (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013). There was little concern about exactly what attracted people to buy a newspaper or watch a television news program—as long as there were enough readers or viewers to keep advertising dollars flowing, it wasn’t critical. However, as the media became more stratified with the expansion of cable television, major networks started to face serious competition.

If media outlets in the West were challenged by a broader choice in content by the 1980s, much deeper financial problems emerged with the rise of the internet (Pickard 2020). Newspapers relied on income from essentially local advertising monopolies for marketing everything from goods in classified ads to home sales to political campaigns. The online sphere, as a more effective and personalized way to deliver advertising to consumers, has captured much of the marketing revenue. At the same time as media were losing advertisers to the digital sphere, they were failing to maintain their (paying) audience as well. Not only did media outlets hemorrhage revenue and advertisers through declining subscription rates, but they also lost control of their content monopoly and even their brand as their work was distributed for free online (either by accident or design). Online advertising revenues are only a fraction of previous advertising dollars for traditional media outlets.

While losing control of the distribution network for their content, media outlets also struggle with trust and authority. When there were relatively few media outlets in the United States, trust in media was higher. As the market has fragmented, trust in the media has declined. From 2016 to 2022, trust in national news organizations fell from 76 percent of the population in the United States to just 61 percent (Liedke and Gottfried 2022). This is a very worrying development for a liberal democracy that relies on the free media to inform and mobilize citizens. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism reported that trust in the U.S. news overall was just 26 percent in 2022 (Newman et al. 2022). As will be discussed in Chapter 2, a particularly disturbing trend is a sharp gap in trust between Democrats and Republicans, with Republicans far less likely to trust the media.

As both money and trust dwindle, so do the number of professional journalists employed in the United States. The Pew Research Center reported that U.S. newsroom employment has fallen 25 percent since 2008, with the steepest decline at newspapers (Walker 2021). In just sixteen months between January 2017 and April 2018, a third of large U.S. newspapers laid off workers (Grieco et al. 2018). While most of U.S. media are experiencing financial pressure, the cuts at newspapers are particularly concerning as the print media traditionally has pursued more in-depth reporting than other news formats. Fewer reporters mean less investigative reporting, and, in many cases, the financial woes have led to the closure of media outlets altogether. This has created “news deserts” in many parts of the United States that no longer have any local media outlets (Bucay et al. 2017).

As the model of the traditional commercial news media collapsed in the United States, digital outlets entered the marketplace and further fragmented the audience. As a study by Benkler et al. (2018) found, different segments of the audience responded in varying ways to the new media environment. They analyzed millions of media stories and links shared on social media sites to find that a sizable minority of U.S. citizens have become enmeshed in information echo chambers. Citizens who opposed Trump were much more likely to have a varied media diet of reliable sources. However, Trump supporters were more likely to rely on right-leaning Fox News and far-right news outlets (Gottfried et al. 2017; Benkler et al. 2018).

Problems with the news are exacerbated by journalists acting as political mouthpieces rather than as professionals who strive to give balanced and impartial news to citizens. The research by Benkler et al. (2018) noted that politicized media outlets such as Fox News fail to live up to the standards of

objectivity or balance that is part of traditional U.S. journalism ethics. Many Americans now consume news that is designed to persuade rather than to inform (Gottfried et al. 2017). When news is transformed into persuasion campaigns, it is more likely that foreign propaganda will be used as a source, as long as it resonates with the political views of the outlet. This is particularly apparent on alt-right websites that label themselves as news but exist solely to propagandize a point of view.

These fissures in the American news media—the collapse of the viable newsroom, segmentation of the audience, the rise of commentary over news—all provide a nurturing environment for both foreign and domestic disinformation. In an atmosphere of increasing suspicion and distrust of the news media, it is easy to appeal to segments of the audience who are disenchanted with mainstream news narratives. As Starbird (2017) found, conspiracy theories have wide and enduring appeal, including conspiracies such as the 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School was staged by “crisis actors” and that Navy Seals were behind the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. With news values and trust at a low ebb, there is more appeal for outlets such as Breitbart and Infowars that cater to political extremes. For many, the distinction between quality journalism outlets and disinformation sites is blurred, making it easier for foreign propaganda such as RT and Sputnik to pose as news.

Arguably even more important than how the online sphere enables the publication of material is the way information is circulated via social media. As argued by Siva Vaidhyanathan in *Antisocial Media* (2018), the logic of social media undermines the logic of quality news consumption. Rather than being encouraged to consume professional journalism that attempts to present all sides of complex issues, social media typically funnels users, via recommendations and algorithmic prioritization, into consuming ever-narrower content that resonates with one’s own opinions and beliefs. More ominously, evidence from within Meta (parent company of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, among other platforms) has demonstrated how the company knows that divisive and dangerous content is more popular yet continues to allow it to spread virtually unchecked to foster growth on its platform (Horwitz 2021).

According to the Pew Research Center, two-thirds of Americans report that they get at least some of their news on social media (Shearer and Matsa 2018). As social media platforms encourage like-minded people to stay within information bubbles, disinformation can become

powerfully resonant within these relatively closed and trusted communication circles. In an environment in which people typically value information that matches their own convictions over informed debate, foreign disinformation can find acceptance and even popularity with the targeted audience.

### **Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail**

The 2016 U.S. presidential campaign rang a warning bell about problems with the American media system and the threat of foreign propaganda. By the 2020 campaign, these fissures had grown into a deep cleavage across the American media landscape, led by a president who routinely attacked specific outlets and journalists as well as denigrated the entire concept of a free press. The two sides of the political landscape are unequal, however, in terms of their orientation to the media. Trump supporters are far less likely to engage with journalism that strives toward unbiased and objective reporting. Truth becomes secondary to whether the information corresponds to an existing worldview, particularly on social media (Schradie 2019). This means that Trump supporters are routinely exposed to more disinformation. In a choice between using media that produce news and those that put ideological needs to the forefront, Trump supporters often choose the latter.

How did we wind up here? Journalists have long tended to focus on the “horse race” aspects of presidential elections, framing the contest as a race to be won rather than a time to inform the voters on critical issues (Patterson 1993, 2016). This has eroded the value and tradition of talking about policies and democratic ideals in an election. Barack Obama rose to the top of a crowded Democratic pack in 2008, beating out a formidable challenge from Hillary Clinton and showing superb control of the media message. Obama’s 2008 campaign demonstrated the asymmetric power of the media over political party traditions and institutional barriers. It was a lesson others were to learn.

The power of the media was particularly important in 2016 as both political parties were in relative disarray. The Republicans were still struggling with the legacy of the Tea Party movement, which moved some Republicans too far right for many centrists. The Democrats were involved in a bitter split of their own, between a left wing that supported Bernie Sanders and a more centrist wing that supported Clinton. There was also an unprecedented

amount of dislike in the race for both final candidates, and, by extension, discord and disillusion among the voters themselves.

While in the 2016 elections both parties had intensely competitive and antagonistic primaries, the 2020 election took place in an unprecedented era of distrust and dislike in modern times between the left and right in the United States. A 2019 survey shows the depth of divide, as more than 42 percent of those surveyed viewed the opposition as “downright evil” (Kalmoe and Mason 2019). Almost 20 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that their political opponents “lack the traits to be considered fully human—they behave like animals.” Slightly more Democrats (20 percent) than Republicans (16 percent) thought the United States would be better off if “large numbers of the opposing party in the public today just died.”

This divisiveness, indeed irrationality, fosters an excellent environment for disinformation as many people prefer partisanship over truth. Unlike in Soviet times, Russian propaganda no longer needs to convince Americans of the evils of capitalism and the benefits of communism. Soviet communism is long gone, but since democratic societies are experiencing new forms of social unrest and division, Russian propaganda can be used to help widen the divides. This should have the intended effect of weakening democracy and augmenting the power of authoritarian regimes such as Russia. The Russians are playing a zero-sum game: The worse things are in America, the better things will be for Russia. Viewed through this perspective, it is clear why recent American history has created the current promising environment for foreign propaganda.

## Chapter Summaries

We need to identify the overarching narrative that the Russians project, find specific messages in Russian propaganda aimed at the West, and then measure how these messages traveled in the U.S. media system. We are interested in key markers of foreign message penetration: Do U.S. media outlets echo Russian strategic narratives, particularly about the demise of democracy? We analyze Russian strategic narratives in four critical political events: the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, the Stop the Steal conspiracy, the Capitol insurrection, and the 2022 Ukrainian invasion.

Chapter 2 will explore in more depth the vulnerabilities of the American media system to propaganda through a discussion of national media norms,

laws, ownership, and journalistic standards. America has a virtually unique media system, in that there is almost no state funding of the mass media and relatively little regulation. As a result, the media remain particularly wedded to corporate structures and the attendant economic pressures. While this has been traditionally seen as healthy for American journalists by most analysts, newsmaking had been under significant financial pressure for decades before the digital revolution created an existential challenge to how news is produced, distributed, consumed, and even defined in the United States.

The chapter argues that several factors in the U.S. media environment, including shrinking newsrooms, the rise of populist media such as Fox News, and the increasingly personalized coverage of candidates, have created significant problems for the U.S. media. At the same time, fragmentation of the audience into separate filter bubbles—some of them deliberately disengaged from quality news—has led to a dangerously misinformed, but highly engaged, electorate. It is against this background that Russian propaganda has found an environment in which to flourish, especially as Trump spent much of his first term in office attacking the media as an institution as well as subverting trust in political reporting through constant falsehoods.

The goal of Chapter 3 is twofold: to discuss the concept of strategic narrative in more depth as well as explore more fully the key strategic narratives that Russia wishes to project onto the United States. Strategic narratives are how countries construct and project their preferred image and destiny on the world stage (Miskimmon et al. 2017). While there are echoes of Soviet propaganda in Russian strategic narratives, contemporary Russian strategic narratives are more dynamic and responsive to world events. The chapter explores the rationale behind these four narratives: Russia is resurgent as a great nation; Russia will protect Russia and Russians no matter where they live; the West is against Russia; and democracy is a corrupt and dying system. Within each of these narratives, one can identify stories in English-language propaganda sources such as RT and Sputnik. This specific text can then be coded to tag and trace these markers of central narratives as they are deployed in the U.S. media system.

In Chapter 4, we compare campaign news in the 2020 U.S. presidential election in Russian English-language sources such as RT and Sputnik with six U.S. news outlets. We analyze the campaign news through the lens of narratives that presented the acrimonious election in ways that promoted a particular view of the world. How did Russian outlets characterize the U.S. 2020 presidential campaign for its English-speaking audience? How did this converge with—or diverge from—how *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street*



*Journal*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, and Fox News presented important campaign issues and their implications to the American audience? The analysis finds a strong resonance between Fox News and Russian propaganda due in large part to a shared interest in attacking democracy, although Russian outlets were less enthusiastic about Trump than Fox News.

Chapter 5 presents an in-depth analysis that compares coverage of Stop the Steal and the Capitol insurrection on RT, Sputnik, Fox News, and the rightwing online outlet Newsmax. Unsurprisingly, electoral fraud and the resulting violence were of great interest as both news and propaganda showcased the alleged failures of American democracy. We found that Russian propaganda sites enthusiastically covered the election conspiracy narrative along with the violence, using a challenging moment in U.S. politics to bolster a significant Russian strategic narrative. This allowed the Russian outlets an unprecedented opportunity to build their propaganda.

In Chapter 6, we consider the nature and meaning in the shift of Russian strategic narratives by Putin from long-standing narratives to more mythic anti-Ukrainian conspiracies on the eve of the 2022 invasion. This demonstrates that tracking narratives can provide useful signals in understanding planned military actions from Russia. In addition, we demonstrate that Russian conspiracy stories about Nazism in Ukraine were reported by the mainstream media, but there appeared to be little serious engagement with this false assertion. Conversely, the Russian claim that NATO—as opposed to Russian aggression—was the cause of the 2022 invasion found more traction and engagement in a review of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. This raises questions about how a media system that strives for balance and objectivity can effectively deal with foreign disinformation.

Chapter 7 offers conclusions to the following questions addressed in the book: How effectively do Russian narratives penetrate the U.S. media ecosystem? Where and when are they evident? Who are the “fellow travelers” with the Russians in terms of narrative? What methods work for tagging and tracking Russian narratives in the U.S. news? What does this mean for American freedom and democracy?

## Why This Matters

The American media system is under attack. Much of the hostility has come from domestic partisan struggles, notably Trump and his allies, but Russia

is attempting to weaponize the U.S. media to undermine American democracy. We must know the nature, scope, and scale of those attacks that attempt to turn our political institutions against us. When you view the state of the American political communication system through this lens, it is unsurprising that Trump and his circle rarely criticized Russia and Putin. They are fellow travelers in disempowering the free media to reduce it from the watchdog of power to a lapdog who serves political elites.

Both research and investigative journalism have uncovered many incidents of Russian disinformation, especially as it was designed to aid the Trump campaign. But this is looking at the problem in the rearview mirror. We need a faster and better way to reliably track and understand just how much Russian disinformation shapes our media discourse on a daily basis. Disentangling the threads of Russian disinformation from American news is complicated—but possible. By defining Russian strategic narratives and deploying automated coding seeded by human insight, we can code and track how Russian messages migrate through Western media systems. This is a crucial step toward protecting media freedom in democratic nations.