



Russia in the Middle East: A New Front in the Information War?

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Summary

Russia uses its information warfare capability as a tactic, especially its *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* news services, to advance its foreign policy goals in the Middle East: become a great power in the region; reduce the role of the United States; prop up allies such as Bashir al- Assad in Syria, and fight terrorism. Evidence suggests that while Russian media narratives are disseminated broadly in the region by traditional means and online, outside of Syria its impact has been limited. The ability of regional authoritarian governments to control the information their societies receive, cross cutting political pressures, the lack of longstanding ethnic and cultural ties with Russia, and widespread doubts about Russian intentions will make it difficult for Moscow to use information operations as an effective tool should it decide to maintain an enhanced permanent presence in the region.

Introduction

Russian assessments of the international system make it clear that the Kremlin considers the country to be engaged in full-scale information warfare. This is reflected in Russia's latest military doctrine, approved December 2014, comments by public officials, and Moscow's aggressive use of influence operations.¹ The current Russian practice of information warfare combines a number of tried and tested tools of influence with a new embrace of modern technology and capabilities such as the Internet. Some underlying objectives, guiding principles and state activity are broadly recognizable as reinvigorated aspects of subversion campaigns from the Cold War era and earlier. But Russia also has invested hugely in updating the principles of subversion. These new investments cover three main areas: internally and externally focused media with a substantial online presence (*RT* and *Sputnik* are the best known); use of social media (especially online discussion boards and comment pages) as a force multiplier to ensure

Russian narratives achieve broad reach and penetration, and language skills in order to engage with target audiences on a wide front. The result is a presence in many countries acting in coordination with Moscow-backed media and the Kremlin itself.²

Western media organizations were entirely unprepared for a targeted and consistent hostile disinformation campaign organized and resourced at state level. The result was Western shock and awe at the initial Russian approach in the Crimea operation in 2014 and the initial stages of the war in eastern Ukraine. Reports from journalists on the ground there identifying Russian troops did not reach mainstream audiences because editors in their newsrooms were baffled by inexplicable Russian denials. Months later, Western media outlets were still faithfully reporting Russian disinformation as fact, but the realization that they had been subjected to a concerted campaign of subversion was beginning to filter into reporting.

In subsequent months, it became apparent that that the Kremlin was using information operations on a far broader front than just Ukraine. The Kremlin saw information warfare as but one weapon in a wide-ranging arsenal including energy, money, cultural ties, and the Russian Orthodox Church, to be used to serve its foreign policy objectives elsewhere, especially against the United States and its European allies.³ These goals included reducing the role of the United States on the continent, weakening NATO and the European Union, disrupting the political processes of the Western democracies, and strengthening Russia's influence in the states along its periphery, often by claiming a "responsibility to protect" ethnic Russians outside the Russian Federation. Although a coordinated strategy to push back has not emerged in the West—either through a multilateral response or by most individual states—there is broad agreement that Moscow's information campaign threatens to undermine open, democratic societies. Western governments and private think tanks have created impressive centers of expertise to examine Russian narratives, the networks by which they are spread, and their impact on target audiences.

Outside Europe and the United States, however, the Kremlin's use of information operations to achieve its foreign policy objectives—especially in Turkey and the Middle East—has scarcely been discussed. The questions such operations raise are vital: do such they resemble such activity elsewhere? What are the differences? What impact have the Kremlin's information activities had on the states in the region? Does Moscow's use of information operations in the Syria conflict resemble those in Ukraine? Relying primarily on extensive Russian- and Arabic-language sources, this paper will argue that Kremlin information activity has played a significant role in consolidating Russia's role as a major player in the region, especially in Syria, but that longstanding geopolitical, cultural and other factors have ensured that the impact of that activity is limited.

Russia's Strategy in the Middle East

In the two years since Moscow's intervention in Syria, the statements of Russian officials suggest the Kremlin intends to be a major player in the region for the foreseeable future. Russia does not appear to have a clear regional strategy, but Moscow's actions indicate it is constantly seeking to improve its short-term economic, military, and political advantages while reducing the short-term advantages of competitors, especially the United States. Nevertheless, the Middle East

is less important than Europe and Asia to the Kremlin's national security strategy, as stated in the 2013 and 2016 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Foreign Policy Concept Papers. In both versions, the Middle East is listed near the end of the section on "Regional Priorities," illustrating its relative lower priority in Moscow's worldview.⁴

While the longstanding drivers of Russian policy are constant—prestige, trade and stability—the Kremlin has broadened its interests in recent years. First, Russia promotes its ability to interact with many state and non-state actors in the Middle East.⁵ Second, Russia is making a concerted effort to reclaim its role as the arms supplier of choice for Arab governments. Third, the Kremlin seeks to stop the spread of international terrorism into Russia. A reported 3,200 Russian nationals have traveled to Syria or Iraq since 2014, and leaders in Moscow worry about foreign fighter returnees as well as Russians who may have been radicalized by Islamic State propaganda. Finally, Russia seeks to support existing state structures and governments against both external intervention and internal insurrection. Russia equates status quo preservation in the Middle East with reduced terrorist threats, increased transactional opportunities with autocratic states, and reduced US sociocultural influence across the region.⁶ Moscow blames the West for the current crisis in the region, a view that aligns with Russian leaders' concerns about "color revolutions" in former Soviet countries and Moscow's global reluctance to accept any potentially unfavorable changes to the status quo. In Syria, Russia has helped President Bashar al-Assad maintain his rule. Although Moscow's military intervention there was an exceptional post-Cold War escalation by Russia that goes against its traditional preference to avoid direct engagement, the intervention is consistent with Russian support for a long-standing ally and Russia's stance against regime change. It also reflects Russia's concern about international terrorism and the defense and expansion of its naval and air bases in Latakia and Tartus, which are the only significant Russian power projection facilities in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.⁷

Despite its successes in the region, several factors work to limit Russian influence, at least for the long term. First, Russia potentially lacks the economic and military power to sustain a long-term strategy. Its economic position also only worsened since the start of the Arab Spring.

In addition to the limitations on what Russia itself can achieve, the Middle East states have the greatest power and agency to determine the viability of any Russian strategy. Those states determine the depth of their relationship with Russia, either enabling or limiting Russian action. Finally, Russia's own contradictory behavior undermines its effectiveness in the region. Although it presents itself as a conservative power in the Middle East, in the near abroad, Russia is disruptive. It has intervened in Ukraine and seeks to destabilize other parts of Europe. These activities undermine the Kremlin's narrative about the importance of state sovereignty and nonintervention. Moscow also cooperate works with Iran, which has intervened across the region, and Russia is cultivating relations with opposition groups in Libya.⁸

Tools of Russian Information Warfare

In order to pursue these objectives, Russia makes extensive use of information operations. It has identified a rich source of material with which to criticize the West, while cultivating sympathetic regional audiences. As with many international broadcasters, the Kremlin

supplements news stories produced by a central news operation inside Russia with contributions of local journalists from target states. This programming is disseminated via television, radio and online. Social media's open approach to content—on YouTube and Facebook, for example—has enabled unreliable and highly partisan material to reach large audiences.⁹ Limited evidence suggests, however, that in contrast to information operations against the West, the number of attacks by Moscow's troll farms and Russia-sponsored bots in MENA are relatively small.

The Kremlin disseminates news to the Middle East through two prime channels: *RT Arabic* and the *Sputnik News Service*.

RT Arabic, formerly known as *Rusiya Al-Yaum* (Arabic: اليوم روسيا, meaning *Russia Today*, also called Россия сегодня *Rossiya segodnya* in Russian) is a Russian TV news channel broadcasting in Arabic and headquartered in Moscow. *RT Arabic* started broadcasting on May 4, 2007. It has steadily increased in importance to official Moscow since the Arab Spring and Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015. The channel covers a wide variety of events worldwide from the point of view of the Russian government. It features interviews, debates and stories about cultural life in Russia, as well as developments in the Arab world. At present, people from the Middle East, North Africa and Europe have open access to the satellite signal of the channel. The channel can also be watched on the Internet all over the world. As of November 2012, it also became available on myTV, a technology platform that streams Arabic-language TV channels to North/South America and Australia. *RT Arabic* has correspondents in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States.

RT Arabic Programs include:

- ***Panorama***, a weekly round-table discussion, where various topics are covered;
- ***Person***, a 26-minute prime-time program that features interesting people with unique knowledge, experience and qualifications in the political, cultural and other fields;
- ***Zoom***, a weekly edition covering current or unusual events, featuring public personalities or ordinary people in extraordinary situations;
- ***Weekly Report***—26-minute news and analysis program that covers main political events over the previous seven days;
- ***Press Review***—3-minute feature, four times a day, which introduces Arab viewers to interesting items in the Russian and foreign press, with special attention paid to Russian-Arab relations;
- ***Documentaries***, a selection of documentaries designed to open new horizons and bring viewers facts about Russia.
- ***RT Online***, a new interactive project that will provide live news to social networks users.¹⁰

The newer ***Sputnik Arabic News Service*** provides coverage of “the most important international events and opinions that many other media sources do not report,” by email, FTP-server and through its online news terminal. Sputnik's correspondent network includes over 80 journalists in more than 50 countries around the world. Its news-writers are native Arabic speakers. The newswire is operated from two locations—Moscow and Cairo. News coverage is 24 hours/day, 7 days/week. Content includes breaking news, analysis and interviews.¹¹

A War of Narrative

Russian narratives on these two media—in the Russian, Arabic and English languages—reflect Russia’s foreign policy line and use the full range of Moscow’s disinformation techniques (See **Appendix I**). They emphasize that the US and its European allies are responsible for the instability in the Middle East. Although the channel broadcasts statements by Russian officials who stress the need for cooperation with the US in countering the Islamic State, it also gives significant coverage to material critical of Washington, such as the Russian charge that the US is supporting terrorist organizations, including al-Nusra. Another frequent theme is the value of Russia’s regional partnerships with Turkey and Iran. Russian officials are prominently featured.

The war in Syria—at least the version offered by the Kremlin—is a major theme on both *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik*. Beginning with the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, propaganda and the Russian narratives have focused on the idea that all massacres are carried out by the “extremist” opposition, with no links made to the Syrian regime or Russian forces. Russian media have insisted on exaggerating and distorting false claims, rebroadcasting them in different formats on different sites loyal to Russian policy.¹²

This propaganda messaging was especially evident in coverage of the Khan Sheykhun massacre in April 2017 that killed at least 87 civilians, including 31 children, in a chemical weapons attack. On *RT* and *Sputnik*, there was no mention of the testimonies of survivors, nor reports about Abdul Hamid Youssef, the Syrian father who lost his twin babies and 20 members of his family. There was also no mention of the documented history of massacres, bombings, and chemical attacks by the Syrian regime, mentioned in international reports. After the event, Russian media, particularly *RT* and *Sputnik*, broadcast content almost daily that questioned the root of the massacre or attributed the killing to the armed opposition. For example, *RT* posted reports attributed to Russian military analysts claiming that images of the town did not feature evidence of the use of live bombs containing chemical materials.¹³ It also carried an analytical piece about the timing of the bombing, and why such a bombing does not benefit Bashar al-Assad.¹⁴ The actual identities of the “experts” cited were not given, nor did the reporting include the evidence upon which *RT* based its views. Similarly, *Sputnik* broadcast a report on one channel that claimed the bases of the Syrian regime targeted by US missile strikes did not contain chemical agents.¹⁵ Again, there was no mention of evidence, nor was credible analysis presented.

One alternative version of events presented by Russian media was a broadcast by *Sputnik* that claimed that the children who died in the Khan Shekhun massacre were not killed by chemical weapons launched by the Syrian regime, but rather were killed by the civil defense volunteers known as the White Helmets. The news was based on reports falsely attributed to Swedish doctors alleged to have said, according to a Russian site, that they “uncovered the deceit of the White Helmets.” Russian media, through *Sputnik* and *RT*, spread this fake news extensively across all social media outlets and other media sources backing the Syrian regime, from *Al-Alam* to *Al-Manar* to *Al-Maydan*. All described the chemical massacre as an “act” produced by the White Helmets who, according to the Russian narrative, “did not rescue Syrian children but

instead killed them in order to produce media images and videos that look more realistic.” Some sites that translated the news, such as the English site South Front are registered in Moscow.¹⁶

Russian media spread other disinformation on a daily basis:

- An op-ed on *Sputnik*, on September 28, 2017, argues that US forces are illegally deployed in Syria, maintain control of the oil fields east of the Euphrates River and continue to destabilize the liberated parts of Syria.¹⁷
- On September 29, *Sputnik* published an article with the title, “Guardian of the World,” claiming that, thanks to Russia, the course of the war has changed, “a ray of hope for the restoration of peaceful life in the republic is shining brighter than ever.”¹⁸
- An *RT* article on September 30, 2017, stated that the Trump administration had increased the risk of an armed conflict with Russia by its direct confrontation between US and Syrian government troops.¹⁹
- On September 30, *Sputnik* commemorated the second anniversary of the Russian intervention in Syria by attempting to delegitimize the efforts of the non-Russian allied international coalition to settle the Syrian civil war.²⁰

Broad Reach

Measuring who pays attention to these *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* narratives, however, is difficult.²¹ Although recent data on viewership of *RT Arabic* is not available, a February 2015 survey, seven months before the start of the Russian intervention in Syria, found that *RT Arabic* was among the top three most watched news channels in six Arabic countries. Anecdotal evidence suggests the rate today may be even higher. The channel had a bigger higher daily audience in six MENA countries than the UK’s *BBC Arabic* and *Sky News Arabia*, the US *Al Hurra* and China’s *CCTV* in Arabic. In Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE and Iraq, *RT Arabic* was watched by 6.7 million viewers every day.²²

- Eighteen percent of all residents in these six countries watched *RT* at least once, according to the poll, total of 18.2 million people.
- Approximately 11.5 million of those—11 percent—are estimated to have watched the channel during the previous month. This level puts *RT* ahead of *Deutsche Welle Arabic*, *CCTV Arabic*, *France 24 Arabic*, *Al Alam News* and *Sky News Arabia*.
- Among the surveyed countries, *RT* demonstrated the best performance in Iraq: its daily viewership there made up about 44 percent of the country’s population. There, *RT* was also ahead of *BBC Arabic*, *Sky News*, *France 24*, *Deutsche Welle*, *CCTV*, *Al Hurra* and *Al Alam News*.
- *RT*’s audience in Iraq is also the most loyal compared to all competing channels: 98 percent of weekly viewers watch the channel daily, vs. 93 percent for *Al Arabiya*, 85 percent for *Al Jazeera*, 66 percent for *Al Hurrah*. Remarkably, of all the Iraqis who have ever watched *RT*, 100 percent watched it over the past month.
- *RT* ranks number one in terms of viewer trust. Only 3 percent of those, who are aware of the channel, but do not watch it, cited mistrust of *RT*’s news reports as a reason for not

viewing the channel. This rate was 30 percent for *Al Jazeera*, 9 percent for *Al Arabiya*, 6 percent for the *BBC Arabic*, 8 percent for *Al Hurra*, and 6 percent for *Sky News Arabia*.

- According to the study, 30 percent of *RT Arabic*'s monthly audience in Egypt like the channel for its "relevant and reliable news reports," while 20 percent in the UAE and 14 percent in Saudi Arabia like it for its "alternative opinions," and being "distinct from other networks."
- Fifty-nine percent of *RT Arabic*'s audience watch it for more than an hour a day on weekdays, while 38 percent of its viewers watch the channel for more than an hour a day on weekends. *RT* is similarly ahead of all its competitors in the region by its daily-to-weekly viewership conversion ratio: 74 percent of *RT*'s weekly audience watched the channel in the previous day.²³

The study also showed a mostly white-collar audience. Fifty-seven percent of *RT*'s monthly audience in the six surveyed counties were either top managers, mid-level or junior executives, and other professionals and office workers. Here *RT* also led the competition. Those kinds of viewers made up 56 percent of the audience of *Sky News*, 54 percent of *Al Alam News* and 45 percent of *CCTV*. *RT* also boasted the largest share of audience between the ages of 25 and 34—30 percent.²⁴

Despite these impressive numbers, *RT* may be exaggerating size of its audience. A 2015 investigation by the *Daily Beast* found that the channel aggressively oversells its success in the West, writing that the site is "pretending that it has had a far bigger impact in the Western media sphere than it has, particularly online." (These findings were based on documents leaked by former employees at *RIA Novosti*, a separate and rival Russian state-funded media venture that was defunded in 2015.) The same investigation found that the channel lied in claiming its English-, Spanish- and Arabic-language broadcasts reached 630 million people worldwide. "In reality, that number is just the theoretical geographical scope of the audience," the *Daily Beast* wrote.²⁵

When *RT* does get attention—mostly through its viral video hits online—it is not for its political coverage. *RT*'s biggest hits are clips of bizarre patterns and people doing crazy things. Those videos, according to the *Daily Beast*, receive "far more traffic than any videos on Russian or Western politics or those featuring Vladimir Putin." As the *Daily Beast* writes:

Of the top 100 most watched over five years, 81 percent—344 million views—went to videos of natural disasters, accidents, crime and natural phenomena. *RT*'s political news videos, featuring the content by which it seeks to shape Western opinion and thus justify its existence, accounted for a mere 1 percent of its total YouTube exposure, with fewer than 4 million views. [...] *RT Documentary*, cited as one of the brand's least popular YouTube channels, got an average of 200 to 300 views per video in 2013. The *Daily Beast* found that now, only about 100 of *RT Documentary*'s videos have had more than 10,000 views. Many of the most-watched are part of a graphic birthing series called "newborn Russia."²⁶

Geographic Variation

RT Arabic satellite television is carried throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Europe is widely available because it is free. However, Russian-media consumption varies considerably by country. The perception of Russian influence and its media generally is driven by whether a government tilts toward Iran, a Russian partner in the region, or Saudi Arabia, a longtime adversary. Since an overwhelming amount of news in the Middle East is consumed through television, smart phones and radios, and since many of these outlets are controlled or restricted by the state, it is difficult for Russia to propagate narratives that the host government does not approve.²⁷

Utilizing the MEMRI project's TV database, we can access popular and state-broadcast TV programs that provide insight into how Russia is discussed, received or if disinformation is being broadcast in individual countries.²⁸ This data shows that Iran, al-Assad in Syria and Iraq generally are positive toward the Kremlin and its policies. Whereas, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait and Syrian opposition movements are openly critical of Putin and Russia's involvement in the region.²⁹

The media in **Saudi Arabia** is privately owned but heavily subsidized and regulated by the government; the media in the **UAE** is government-owned. *RT* and *Sputnik* stories do not appear in either Saudi/UAE newspapers or television, including Saudi-owned satellite television that is broadcast throughout the Middle East (*Rotana* and *Middle East Broadcasting Center*, based in Dubai), and *Orbit Showtime* (Bahrein). Since Saudi Arabia is well of aware of the threat to stability posed by Russian propaganda, it works to counter its influence.

- *Al Alam*, Iran's Arabic news channel, is broadcast throughout the Middle East and is available in Iraq without a satellite receiver. *Al Alam* regularly uses *RT* and *Sputnik* as the source for news articles.
- Qatari-owned *Al Jazeera* attempts to maintain neutrality, but is becoming increasingly pro-Iran and pro-Russia.

Perception of Russia appears to be improving in **Iraq**. In 2017, Iraqi member of parliament (MP) Kadhim Al-Sayadi stated on air that Iraq should cancel its "Strategic Framework Agreement" with the United States and instead join a coalition with Russia and Iran.³⁰ Al-Sayadi's opinions on Russia may not be unique: Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Units, shared in another interview that there is political cooperation occurring between Russia and the Iraqi government. He stated as well that should the government in Baghdad choose to work closer with Russia, he and his militias will as well.³¹

The media in **Jordan** maintains a very negative outlook on Russia, especially the state-run media. In 2017, the *Jordan Times* published a piece by former UK MP Robert Harvey warning against the security threat from Russia. The article explicitly claimed that under Putin, the country is reverting to Cold War tactics against domestic institutions and foreign targets, that Russia's elections are not free, that Russia it is conducting illegal land grabs in Europe, and that in 17 years Putin has shown himself to be a violent and venal leader who has benefited from oil booms to enrich himself and his friends. The article also mentions that it will only be a short time

before jihadist attention shifts from the West to focus on Russia following its destructive involvement in the region.³²

In **Lebanon**, the Russian ambassador, Alexander Zasytkin, is uniquely active on the media. Much of the footage available from the last two years is centered around Zasytkin defending Russian interests in Syria, especially Moscow's involvement in fighting terrorism and supporting al-Assad. Additionally, he makes several appearances in which he works to separate modern Russia from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and to paint Putin as a new kind of global leader. Zasytkin also supports the narrative that Russia is the savior for the Middle East.³³

In war-torn **Syria**, the Kremlin is making the most progress. There, Moscow is leveraging its military intervention to cement its influence, but using its information machine to talk directly to Syrians: Arabic-language broadcasting by *RT* and *Sputnik* appears to be securing a growing audience in government-held territory, helping Russia gain a powerful hold on Syrian hearts and minds. *RT* has been able to operate remarkably freely in a country that ranks lower on media freedom indexes even than Russia. The Syrian government helps *RT* reporters obtain swift access to frontline locations and other stories they want to cover.³⁴

This Syrian government's support has helped *RT's* Arabic channel vault ahead of the regional heavyweights, Qatar-funded *Al Jazeera* and Saudi-funded *Al Arabiya*, when it comes to reaching Syrian audiences, since Russian forces intervened in the civil war. As of 2016, it has been joined by *Sputnik*, which produces a daily, live one-hour show for *Sham FM*, one of Syria's most popular radio stations. Broadcast from Moscow each day at 6 p.m., the program features a mix of news and features and studio discussion, as well as a 20-minute "Military Monitor" segment, covering the latest frontline developments, with an emphasis on Russian actions. The aim of the show, according to a Syrian media report, is to translate the popular and official Russian position to the Syrian people and global public opinion." It is hard to find exact figures, but there is no doubt *Sham FM* reaches a wide audience in Syria, both on radio and via its Facebook page. Not all Syrians in government-controlled areas, however, are happy with Russia's intervention. Some raise questions about its legitimacy and the long-term price the country will have to pay for becoming so dependent on Moscow for its security.³⁵

Conclusion

The projection of Russian power into the Middle East in recent years has been accompanied by an impressive Kremlin information warfare effort intended to advance Moscow's foreign policy objectives. The media tactic is an important tool in Russia's arsenal. This campaign has been somewhat successful across the region, especially in Syria. But the effectiveness of that effort is undermined by several factors.

- First, government censorship in the Middle East is much more prevalent than in more open media areas such as Eastern Europe, where we have seen Kremlin disinformation campaigns be effective. This fact allows host governments to block Russian messaging they oppose.

- Second, Russia in general receives a mixed basket of popular praise and disapproval. Research by Pew finds that 35 percent of those polled in the Middle East see Russia as a threat; 35 percent have a favorable view of Russia. These findings, moreover, have been consistent over the last few years.
- Third, there are few cultural, linguistic, historical or other ties between Russia and the peoples of the Arab world. In no country are there ethnic-Russian communities large enough to be mobilized by Kremlin information activities.
- Finally, Russia is geographically distant from MENA, making its messaging harder to sustain.³⁶

Appendix I: The Kremlin’s Disinformation Techniques

Russia disinformation and new propaganda can take many forms—from the use of false visuals or misleading headlines, to social media techniques that create an impression that the “majority” understands an issue in a certain way. In the echo chamber of the modern information space, the spreading of disinformation is as easy as a “like,” “tweet” or a “share.” The following are some of the Kremlin’s most commonly used techniques for spreading false stories and disinformation:

Ping pong – The coordinated use of complementary websites to springboard a story into mainstream circulation.

Wolf cries wolf – The vilification of an individual or institution for something you also do.

Misleading title – Facts or statements in the article are correct, or mostly correct, but the title is misleading.

No proof – Facts or statements that are not backed up with proof or sources.

Card stacking – Facts or statements are partially true. This occurs when information is correct, but it is offered selectively, or key facts are omitted. The Kremlin typically uses this technique to guide audiences to a conclusion that fits into a pre-fabricated or false narrative.

False facts – Facts or statements are false. For example, an interview mentioned in an article that never took place, or an event or incident featured in a news story that did not actually occur.

False visuals – A variant of false facts, this technique employs the use of fake or manipulated provocative visual material. Its purpose is to lend extra credibility to a false fact or narrative.

Denying facts – A variant of “false facts,” this occurs when real facts are denied or wrongly undermined. The facts of an event might be reported, but an attempt is made to discredit their veracity. Alternatively, the facts may be re-interpreted to achieve the same effect: to establish doubt among an audience over the validity of a story or narrative.

Exaggeration and over-generalization – This method dramatizes, raises false alarms or uses a particular premise to shape a conclusion. A related technique is *totum pro parte*.

Totum pro parte – The “whole for a part.” An example: portraying the views of a single journalist or expert as the official view or position of a government.

Changing the quotation, source or context – Facts and statements are reported from other sources, but they are now different than the original or do not account for the latest editorial changes. For example, a quotation is correct, but the person to whom it is attributed has changed, or a quote’s context is altered so as to change its meaning or significance in the original story.

Loaded words or metaphors – Using expressions and metaphors to support a false narrative or hide a true one; for example, using a term like “mysterious death” instead of “poisoning” or “murder” to describe the facts of a story.

Ridiculing, discrediting, diminution – Marginalizing facts, statements or people through mockery, name-calling (i.e. *argumentum ad hominem*), or by undermining their authority. This includes using traditional and new media humor, in order to discredit on non-substantive merits.

Whataboutism – Using false comparisons to support a pre-fabricated narrative or justify deeds and policies; i.e., “We may be bad, but others are just as bad” or, “The annexation of Crimea was just like the invasion of Iraq.” This technique is often accompanied by an *ad hominem* attack.

Narrative laundering – Concealing and cleaning the provenance of a source or claim. When a so-called expert of dubious integrity presents false facts or narratives as the truth. Often, this happens when propaganda outlets mimic the format of mainstream media. A common technique is to feature a guest “expert” or “scholar” on a TV program whose false fact or narrative can then be repackaged for wider distribution. For example, “Austrian media writes that...” or “A well-known German political expert says that...”

Exploiting balance – This happens when otherwise mainstream media outlets try to “balance” their reporting by featuring professional propagandists or faux journalists and experts. The effect is to inject an otherwise legitimate news story or debate with false facts and narratives. This technique is common in televised formats, which feature point-counterpoint debates. Propagandists subsequently hijack a good-faith exchange of opposing views.

Presenting opinion as facts (and vice-versa) – An opinion is presented as a fact in order to advance or discredit a narrative.

Conspiracy theories – Employing rumors, myths or claims of conspiracy to distract or dismay an audience. Examples include: “NATO wants to invade Russia”; “The United States created the Zika virus”; “Secret Baltic agencies are infecting Russian computers with viruses”; or “Latvia wants to send its Russian population to concentration camps.” A variation of this technique is conspiracy in reverse—attempting to discredit a factual news story by labeling it a conspiracy.

Joining the bandwagon – Creating the impression that the “majority” prefers or understands an issue in a certain way. The majority’s presumed wisdom lends credence to a conclusion or false narrative: e.g., “People are asking..,” “People want...” or “People know best.”

False dilemma – Forcing audiences into a false binary choice, typically “us” vs. “them.”

Drowning facts with emotion – A form of the “appeal to emotion” fallacy, this is when a story is presented in such an emotional way that facts lose their importance. An example is the “Lisa case,” in which Muslim immigrants in Germany were falsely reported to have sexually assaulted a Russian girl. While the event was entirely fabricated, its appeal to emotion distracted audiences from the absence of facts. Common variants of this method evoke post-Soviet nostalgia across Central and Eastern Europe, or stoke public fear of nuclear war.

Creating a context – Most commonly found on broadcast news programs, it creates the context for a pre-fabricated narrative by preceding and following a news story in such a way that it changes the meaning of the news itself. For example, in order to send the message that recent terrorist attacks in Europe were the result of EU member states not working with Russia—which is helping to fight ISIS in Syria—commentary broadcast before the news on the March 2016 Brussels attacks described Russia’s success in Syria and its ability to fight ISIS effectively.

Source: Center for European Policy Analysis

<http://infowar.cepa.org/Techniques>

ENDNOTES

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