

Global Media Journal

German Edition

Essay

Propaganda on demand: Russia's media environment during the war in Ukraine

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Abstract: In this essay, I explore the nature of propaganda in a hybrid media environment through the example of Russian propaganda during the ongoing war in Ukraine. I start by briefly overviewing the Russian media system's development, focusing on the roots of cynical attitude toward journalism in the society. After analyzing propaganda strategies, I suggest the *propaganda on demand* concept, which describes the manipulation of public opinion by targeting different social milieus with specifically tailored narratives. In Russia's case, this approach is based on inconsistency and eclecticism. However, it seems well suited to the very logic of the digital realm, which helps the state deliver often-contradicting narratives to different target groups.

Keywords: propaganda, digital media, Russia-Ukraine war, Russian media

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Acknowledgement:

I thank Andrei Zavadski, Christoph Neuberger, and my colleagues at the Digitalization and Participation Chair of Freie Universität Berlin for their valuable feedback and inspiring talks that helped me improve this essay.

To cite this article: Litvinenko, Anna (2022). Propaganda on demand: Russia's media environment during the war in Ukraine. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 12(2), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22032/dbt.55518>

Introduction

The phrase, “You are far away. And the TV is just here.” (Gorbachev, 2022) comes from an interview with the musician Noize MC, who is critical of the Russian regime. The remark seems symptomatic of propaganda media’s effect on contemporary Russia. Noize MC quoted his grandmother, who preferred to believe television—rather than her own grandson—concerning the war in Ukraine. I have heard plenty of such stories since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022. A father in St. Petersburg did not believe his son when the son called the father from a cellar in Kyiv while hiding from Russian bombs. A mother from Russia tried to convince her daughter, who was fleeing Eastern Ukraine with two children, that her daughter actually had nothing to worry about. A documentary by Andrey Loshak (2022), fittingly titled “*Broken Ties*”, appeared several months after the war began. It depicted many such cases in which relatives—mothers and daughters, siblings, and a married couple—failed to understand each other, with one side condemning the war and the other repeating propagandistic narratives promoted by the Russian state.

These observations seem to contradict the established understanding of how a two-step flow of communication operates (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Katz and Lazarsfeld disproved the so-called hypodermic needle theory that had been popular during the 1930s, coined by Lasswell (1927) and based on a behavioristic assumption that media directly influenced people, like an injection by a needle or a “magic bullet” to their heads. The two-step-flow communication model suggested that the human factor was essential to mediated communication and that people would rather believe those whom they trust—so-called opinion leaders—than media directly. Numerous examples, such as the aforementioned cases from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, call for reconsidering this assumption. In certain contexts, might media directly affect audiences? Indeed, Russian propaganda seems to work like a magic bullet; when someone watches television, even if they say they do not trust the programming, they start to repeat state narratives. This impression, which many people from Russia experience, was vividly illustrated by a recent music video for the song “Burn” by the popular singer Monetochka (2022). The clip showed a person sitting alone in their apartment and watching television while a bullet from the television set targeted their head.

Another puzzling element of propaganda’s effects concerns the digital realm. Despite increasingly restrictive internet policies, Russian internet users can still access alternative information, mostly via Telegram, YouTube, and by using VPN services to circumvent censorship. However, this access seems not to mitigate propaganda’s effect. When confronted with facts that contradict pro-state narratives, many people simply condemn these facts as “fake news”.

How exactly does state propaganda work in the digital era, and what elements specifically characterize Russian propaganda during the war in Ukraine? The remainder of this essay starts with a brief overview of the Russian media environment’s

development, from the country's democratic aspirations at the beginning of the 1990s to the state-controlled media landscape of 2022. In my view, this historical perspective is essential for understanding propaganda mechanisms and their effects on audiences. Then, I define the main characteristics of Russian state propaganda and suggest that it be conceptualized as *propaganda on demand*. Finally, I reflect on possible antidotes to this propaganda and avenues for future research in this area.

State-controlled media: Slowly raising the temperature

To understand why so many Russian citizens seem to believe propaganda, an examination of the Russian media system's recent history is helpful. I remember being struck by a survey from the sociological center Monitoring.ru back in 2002. The all-Russia survey demonstrated that in 2002, 57% of Russians would have approved the introduction of media censorship (Panfilov, 2002). Seemingly, the citizens of a country that was then still considered to be undergoing a democratic transition process did not really value the key democratic principle of press freedom. How was that possible?

In my view, the answer lies in the Russian media system's development during the 1990s. After an initial phase of almost unregulated freedom, with highly politicized debates and a commercial media boom, the so-called oligarch era began. Experts cited the presidential elections of 1996 as a milestone in the public's perception of mass media (Perzev, 2022). In the battle between the unpopular Boris Yeltsin and relatively popular communists, a wide range of the so-called political technologies—a commonly used euphemism in former Soviet states for mechanisms of political and specifically election manipulation (Wilson, 2011)—was used to prevent the latter's rise to power. These technologies included instrumentalizing the media. Then, the tradition of the so-called *temniki*—weekly guidelines for editorial offices from a presidential administration—appeared, as the editor-in-chief of *Novaya Gazeta*, Dmitry Muratov, recalled in a recent interview (Dud, 2022). At the time, these guidelines were mere recommendations; in the more recent years of Putin's presidency, they have transformed into direct orders that the majority of the media dares not ignore (Dud, 2022).

During the second half of the 1990s, audiences observed oligarch battles and the flourishing of biased journalism with rising skepticism toward the idea of a free press. The baffling response to the aforementioned survey (Panfilov, 2002), in my view, can be interpreted as an expression of disappointment about how media functioned during the “oligarch era”. As Krastev and Holmes explained in their book *The Light that Failed* (2019), the imitation of democratic institutions by people who did not really believe in these institutions contributed to the failure of Russia's democratic transition.

The first decade of Putin's presidency became known as the "fat years" economically, mostly due to high oil prices (Guriev & Tsyvinski, 2010). Tired after the "rowdy nineties" and disappointed by political struggles in which they had no say, people were ready to give up their political rights for stability and welfare. This surrender did not happen overnight. It took place gradually, from one shock to another, such as the state takeover of the independent NTV channel in 2001 or the toughening of anti-extremist legislation in 2006. Meanwhile, the internet developed as a place for free discussion—a refuge for dissidents—and it remained relatively unregulated until protests "for fair elections" erupted in 2011–2012 (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019).

Unexpectedly for elites, the so-called "Facebook hamsters," as social network users were sometimes disparagingly called, took to the streets of big cities, demonstrating the internet's mobilizing power (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2013; Denisova, 2017). The state retaliated with both increasingly restrictive internet policies and the co-opting of digital media. More and more independent media were put under state control. Moreover, many journalists who had been critical of the regime were forced to leave their media organizations, such as Lenta.ru, after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. At the same time, the state paid bloggers and hired commenters, using anonymous Telegram channels and YouTube videos to promote its narratives (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a new wave of clamping down on dissent took place. After a harsh crackdown on protests in Moscow in 2019, political analysts wrote that the notorious "fight between the Kremlin towers"—that is, the elites' struggle—was, apparently, finally won by the *siloviki*, representatives of military and other coercive agencies whose main tools were fear and repression (Stanovaya, 2021). In December 2019, the law on foreign agents expanded the legal definition of a *foreign agent* to include media and individual journalists rather arbitrarily, and this definition has been applied increasingly (Salaru, 2022). This status, among other things, implies that a warning message must be included in any piece of content produced by a "foreign agent," including each comment on social networks. The *foreign agent* label undermines media business models, causing them to lose advertising revenue and be perceived as dangerous contacts for many information sources.

The trend toward further restrictions increased after the start of the pandemic. Anti-fake-news legal amendments in March 2020 criminalized the publication of unreliable information about the novel coronavirus and, among other things, were used to fight independent media (Litvinenko et al., 2022). The Kremlin regarded large-scale anti-government protests after the presidential election in Belarus in August 2020 as a warning of possible unrest in Russia, making elites intensify their repression even more (Fischer, 2021). Accordingly, in the past two years, more and more features of a "dictatorship of fear" appeared in Russia alongside the "spin dictatorship" of modern, competitive authoritarianism (Guriev & Treisman, 2022) that has been flourishing in the country over the previous decade.

The start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a turning point in the history of the Russian media system. A law against discrediting the Russian army, according to which only official data about the so-called *special military operation* (the Russian state's ongoing name for the war) made independent journalism de facto illegal in Russia. Even the major established media outlets that have served as pillars of the Russian media for the past 30 years, such as *Novaya Gazeta* and *Echo Moscow*, had to close. Journalists were forced either to comply with military censorship or leave Russia. The media field was cleansed from dissent, and the scant pieces of independent journalism that still appeared mostly came from exiles via Telegram or YouTube.

A metaphor describes a frog that would jump free if thrown into hot water; however, if the frog is placed in tepid water whose temperature is gradually raised, the frog will not sense its danger and will die. In Russia, this metaphor is often used to describe the country's slow destruction of press freedom in past decades. In this context, the state not only raised the temperature of its repression but has also kept increasing and developing its propaganda machine.

Propaganda: A distorting filter on reality

The term *propaganda* is often used interchangeably with *disinformation campaigns*. While disinformation is certainly part of propaganda efforts, propaganda—that is, intentional manipulation of public opinion (Zollmann, 2019)—uses a much broader array of tools, beyond disinformation. One of this process's key features is its long-term orientation. Propaganda can be compared to a filter that distorts reality. It interweaves narratives transmitted not only via the news but also through entertainment shows, films, books, and public events. As a result, people who encounter this filter become dismissive of any alternative information, which they tend to condemn as “fake news”.

How does propaganda work in a hybrid media environment, where traditional and digital media are intertwined (Chadwick, 2017)? In her report for the Institute for the Study of War, Snegovaya suggested that the key strategies of Soviet propaganda—to dismiss, distract, distort, and dismay—were translated into the new digital realm (Snegovaya, 2015). Soldatov and Brogan in their book *The Red Web* (2015), also highlighted the link between Soviet practices and Russia's current propaganda approaches. A key approach in this regard is fostering self-censorship, rather than trying to control all information flows.

Asmolov (2018) highlighted another important effect of propaganda on social media: the disruption of horizontal ties. He investigated the practice of “unfriending” on social networks as an effect of the Russian state's disinformation campaigns. This practice correlates with a phenomenon described by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins*

of *Totalitarianism* (2017): a repressive state sows mistrust among individuals, making them feel alone in a crowd and thus easier to manipulate.

Studies from other authoritarian countries have suggested some additional features of propaganda that are also characteristic of the Russian context: depoliticization (Uniacke, 2021), spreading fear, inundating audiences with distracting content (Roberts, 2018), and causing “resignation, cynicism, and a sense of disempowerment” (Tufekci, 2017). In their study of the so-called 50 Cent Party in China, King et al. (2017) found that the main goal of paid commentators was, apparently, not to fight critical voices but to distract people from problems and promote pro-regime messages.

Generally, Russian propaganda aims to promote pro-state narratives and, at the same time, suppress dissent. It stifles dissent by spreading fear and encouraging self-censorship, discrediting opponents, and depoliticizing and demobilizing people (citizens should believe that one cannot change anything anyway). The state’s promotion of propagandistic narratives warrants further attention, and I focus on this topic in the remainder of the current section.

Over the past decade, the Russian state has learned to co-opt digital media and use them alongside traditional media to disseminate narratives (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019). The multitude of tools that the state uses to put its filter over reality can be grouped into the following strategies: (1) the multichannel distribution of propagandistic content, (2) large volumes of information or flooding, (3) an eclectic set of messages. Below, I briefly describe each of these strategies and further explain how they are combined to shape a specific approach to propaganda in the hybrid media environment, which I conceptualize as *propaganda on demand*.

The *multichannel distribution of propaganda* describes different media channels’ use in targeting audiences. The messages are often tailored to a particular channel and its audience. Major narratives travel from channel to channel, amplifying their outreach and convincing power. Thus, for example, a person watches television news and then opens the Russian search engine Yandex to see the same news with the same wording highlighted on the homepage. Even if, afterward, they open a YouTube video featuring oppositional content, in the comment section, they will probably find that users are largely repeating the facts and opinions that the viewer in question has already heard on television. These users might be paid commenters who work full-time to undermine discussions on social networks (Howard et al., 2019). Often, however, distinguishing professional commenters from authentic users is difficult (Zerback & Toepfl, 2022). Ultimately, the media consumer is left with the impression that they have used and even cross-check different information channels that have only made the perspective presented on television even more convincing.

Flooding is intentionally confusing an audience by using large volumes of (distracting) information. For instance, a study on the coverage of the MH17 plane crash demonstrated that the Russian state had been spreading contradictory narratives about the event (Toler, 2018). The resulting narrative chaos, which is typical of the digital realm, often leads media consumers to conclude that the truth is impossible to find. This strategy correlates with the “post-truth” paradigm, which implies that different “truths” coexist and that perceived truth is subjective.

The flood of contradictory information tempts consumers to choose the truth that suits them best. In an authoritarian state, this truth is often a position that helps consumers cope with the status quo without endangering them as dissidents. In Russia, this “comfortable” position manifests in the phrase which became a meme, “Everything is not so clear-cut” (“*ne vse tak odnoznachno*”). Since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this phrase has become a kind of label for people who, at least to some extent, support the war. Admittedly, countering this argument is difficult since one cannot deny that political issues are usually complex and can be tackled from different perspectives. What is missing from this equation seems to be morality, the admission of universal values—such as human rights—that should not be debated. However, when one discusses such concerns with state supporters, one would probably hear stories about the “West” using (or misusing) human rights for its own political ends, followed by the same conclusion: “You see, everything is not so clear-cut.”

The use of an *eclectic set of messages* marks a major difference between the content of today’s Russian propaganda and the Soviet approach in that the former is not based on a coherent ideology. Many researchers have highlighted the current Russian propaganda’s lack of consistency (Guriev & Treisman, 2022; Paul & Matthews, 2016; Gessen, 2022). Combined with its lack of a commitment to objective reality (Paul & Matthews, 2016), this flexibility instills propaganda with the benefit of being rapidly responsive and adjustable to new situations. Guriev and Treisman speak about a “kaleidoscope of appeals” (Guriev & Treisman, 2022, p. 75). There seems to be no clear set of ideas that would unite citizens loyal to the state. Instead, some vague concepts—such as “traditional values” or opposition to an imagined “collective West”—can be arbitrarily filled with content according to political momentum. For instance, a favored propaganda tool is mirroring Western narratives by accusing adversaries of the same wrongdoings of which Western countries accuse Russia. A typical example would be the regime’s appropriation of postcolonial studies’ vocabulary for denouncing Western imperialism and justifying the war in Ukraine (French, 2022). In the absence of a coherent ideology, the only constant seems to be unconditional loyalty to the authoritarian leader. At the same time, a “feedback loop” effect (Gessen, 2022) implies that Putin and his cohort are consuming the same media that they manipulate, thus fostering their worldview and furthering the propaganda spiral.

The fluid nature of inconsistent propaganda makes it harder to counter. A vivid example is RT Russia's COVID-19 coverage compared to the German version of the same outlet, RT Deutsch. As an investigation by Andrei Kovalev (2021) from Meduza demonstrated, the broadcaster presented polar-opposite views on vaccination at home and abroad. In Russia, RT supported the state policy promoting vaccination and called vaccination deniers "COVID idiots," while in Germany, it incited COVID skeptics (Kovalev, 2021).

These propaganda strategies reinforce and complement each other. Multichannel distribution, flooding, and content eclecticism might seem to cause chaos that would be hard to control. However, they do not. Eclectic narratives, combined with the digital media logic, create a framework in which propaganda easily targets different audiences through various channels with specific narratives. Users can choose from narratives and channels on this menu. I suggest conceptualizing this approach as *propaganda on demand*.

Narrative marketing and propaganda on demand: To each their own

I understand propaganda on demand as a kind of cynical political marketing in which narratives that trigger or comfort certain social groups are purposefully used to manipulate public opinion. The digital realm gives authoritarian elites an opportunity to create a seemingly diverse field of competing narratives that ultimately contributes to the regime's stability. The multi-channel dissemination of information supports message delivery on demand. Flooding these channels with large volumes of information allows consumers to choose their own narrative, whether consciously or not.

Florian Toepfl (2020) called the process of targeting different social audience segments in authoritarian regimes the "gardening of publics". This approach builds on Schedler's (2009) concept of gardening authoritarian institutions, and it describes how so-called information autocracies use different types of covert and overt measures to balance risks and benefits that come with tolerating some critical publics. Toepfl (2020) argued that such publics can contribute to the regime's resilience by serving as feedback mechanisms and by giving people a possibility for letting off steam. The analysis of Russian media shows that the state "gardens" publics, among other things, by offering them different narratives.

Andrei Zavadski and I researched coverage of the 1917 revolution's centenary in Russia (Litvinenko & Zavadski, 2020), and we found that the commemoration of the revolution differed significantly across state media, commercial state-loyal media, and oppositional media. Contradictory narratives about the revolution co-existed in the media landscape, forming what we called "memories on demand", through which each societal group could find in the media a narrative that suited them best. Simultaneously, no dialogue was shared between members of such different camps.

As a result, we observed a syncretic picture of contradictory narratives that ultimately satisfied different types of publics without endangering the regime.

I argue that this “narratives-on-demand” logic is a key feature of the current Russian propaganda. These narratives co-exist in the media sphere and can be selected by consumers, depending on their backgrounds and value systems. As a result, for instance, war supporters’ arguments might differ significantly (Erpyleva & Savelyeva, 2022). This type of propaganda does not require citizens to harbor uniform beliefs—as it was the case in the Soviet Union — only that they do not question the regime’s legitimacy.

Why do people choose to overlook evident inconsistencies in the state’s media communication, such as changing the goals of the so-called special operation in Ukraine (Gessen, 2022)? Studies in social psychology have demonstrated that people tend to believe evidence that correlates with their previous attitudes (Ecker et al., 2014). As a former state television employer said, “Russian propaganda does not give a person anything that they would not initially want, which would not be their deepest desire” (Sidorov, 2022). Meduza journalist Bolotov (2022), in his investigation of propagandists, added that propaganda only inflames emotions and trauma that are already present. This observation fits into the notion of propaganda on demand, which derives from the concept of the digital “on-demand culture” (Tryon, 2013). The concept implies not only that the digital realm has created novel opportunities to target audiences but also that today’s audience behavior is led by the on-demand logic. Users can create their own media diets and eliminate undesired information. Propaganda on demand offers them comforting perspectives and helps them find arguments with which they can ignore alternative information as fake news.

In the recent decade, Russia’s audience has been highly fragmented (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2015). Journalists discuss the Russia of Facebook and the Russia of VK, delineating the gap between liberal, pro-West intellectuals and the majority of the population (Dud, 2022). The economist Natalia Zubarevich (2011) provided a more nuanced look, suggesting the distinction between “four Russias.” The first is the Russia of a well-traveled, urban population that tends to value progress over stability. The second is the Russia of large, industrial cities with an outspoken post-Soviet identity. The third is the provincial, de-politicized Russia of small towns and villages. Finally, the fourth Russia is several national republics with patriarchal societal structures. Political analyst Kirill Rogov (2018) used this approach to show how the Kremlin manipulates elections by mobilizing its loyal electorate from the second, third, and fourth Russias while making critical voters in the first Russia boycott elections.

In a recent interview, Zubarevich (Gordeeva, 2022) reflected on the current state of these social strata in Russia: “The state corresponds to the requirements of the Russian periphery. And the urban educated advanced [part of Russian society] has outstripped this state.” She added that she had once believed the state could catch up

and develop to the level of urban Russia; however, this hope proved illusory. Since February 24, 2022, state propaganda has forced critical citizens to leave the country. As a result, the first Russia has been shrinking and losing relevance. Propaganda defames and mocks emigrants as “traitors”; by contrast, it celebrates regime supporters as a “*glubinnyy narod*” (deep folk) and “the true Russia” (Vasilchenko & Efimov, 2022).

In-depth interviews with war supporters from February 27 to June 2022 by the Laboratory for Public Social Research revealed three major groups of narratives among supporters (Erpileva & Savelyeva, 2022):

1. “It is a war against the West/NATO”
2. The “responsibility to protect” (i.e., protecting people in Ukraine from alleged neo-Nazis)
3. “The government knows better” (conformists).

Researchers have noted that members of the second and third groups do not support the war per se and seem more flexible in their views compared to the members of the first group, who operate on the premise that the war was inevitable. All these groups of narratives are infused with different conspiracy theories, which have become an integral part of Russia’s policy (Yablokov, 2022). Adjusted to the current “*temniki*” guidelines, these narratives appear in propaganda channels and are selected by users according to their own beliefs and value systems.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have analyzed how Russian state propaganda has adapted to the digital media environment and how the features of online communication—which the state had initially perceived as a threat—were co-opted to increase propaganda’s persuasive effects.

Although Russian state propaganda might seem, from the outside, to be a perfectly working, centralized machine, it is rather chaotic. This inconsistent approach, which could be interpreted as a weakness, has proven rather effective in that the very nature of today’s ever-changing, segmented communication environment suits its goals. For instance, Russia’s propaganda abroad targets different fringe communities on both the right and left of the political spectrum with often contradictory narratives (Howard et al., 2019). One of the main effects of this strategy is “muddling the water” (Gessen, 2022) and spreading doubt. The notorious slogan “everything is not so clear-cut” might serve to both undermine trust in a political system in the case of foreign influence and stabilize the regime in the case of domestic communication.

How does this approach not backfire? Why are propaganda consumers unlikely to realize that, if “everything is not so clear-cut,” then state television could be lying? Do they choose to believe propaganda? In the Russian context, I liken propaganda not to a “magic bullet” but, rather, to a pill that promises pain relief from the people’s traumata. It might indeed serve as a temporary painkiller, yet it does not cure this problem. Moreover, it deepens wounds and results in addiction and a dangerous detachment from reality. One of the major “painkillers” offered by propaganda during Russia’s war in Ukraine can be described as a call to return to the past. Propaganda glorifies Soviet history, staging the current invasion as a continuation of World War II with a sure victory in sight, and it promises to compensate for the wounds and grievances caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the post-Soviet context, propaganda on demand, which offers sets of chameleon-like narratives for appropriation by different social milieus, seems particularly effective. On the one hand, it fits perfectly into the fragmented digital realm. On the other hand, it matches citizens’ cynical attitude to media and journalism, which is deeply rooted in the failures of the region’s democratic transit.

In this essay, I have not touched upon the roles of online platforms and their algorithms in disseminating propaganda, which remains under-researched in communication studies. Several investigations during the past year have revealed how tech companies’ policies and algorithms have influenced the dissemination of disinformation during the war (Kaplan, 2022; ISD, 2022).

More research on audiences under propaganda’s influence is needed to better explain how these mechanisms of manipulation work and how exactly propaganda can be debunked. Experimental studies on media literacy’s effects would help improve media-literacy education, which offers an important antidote to propaganda by strengthening epistemic autonomy and building individual defense mechanisms through critical media consumption.

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