

**Communication is Everywhere:  
The War Between Russia and Ukraine**

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PRL 376

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April 4, 2022

The Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration (PARCC) at Maxwell held a panel discussion about The War in Ukraine in terms of historical influences, regional democratization, security and economic sanctions. Inspired by this conversation in conflict studies, I will analyze how communication currently navigates public opinion and information content in this global issue. Since Russian President Putin's declaration of war on Ukraine on Feb. 24, there has been massive media coverage and ongoing discussion from different countries and social communities about the conflict. In this case, communication takes a predominant role in this critical topic, insofar as aspects of mediated features such as the ubiquitous fragmented information about warfare, news media's advocacy of public engagement and strong visual impacts of political propaganda.

### **Ubiquitous fragmented information**

First, the universal permeation of digital platforms and mobile applications leads to the unevenness of information to the public. The appearance of social media has ushered in a myriad of giant discussion forums online that contain miscellaneous information so that every person can all follow and know what current events are happening in the world. Based on Li & Bernoff's Ladder of Engagement(2011), people have become creators, critics, collectors, joiners and spectators to engage in online activities. There are only rare inactive Internet users who are may not frequently access up-to-date digital platforms for some reasons. While this interactive initiative fosters different voices and diverse perspectives, the information that people access is decentralized and fragmented without processing concretely. Therefore, it may engender bias and disbelief. The application of algorithms brings convenience to have more opportunities to get what we need, whereas the prevalent use of algorithms indeed causes problematic issues about disinformation. Our thoughts may be shaped by the media and we may unconsciously be trapped

in the biased “web” because the algorithm constantly caters to the content that we usually favor. For example, NewsGuard, a tool and service combating with misinformation, has investigated that a new TikTok account user will be shown misleading content about the Ukraine War after a few minutes of the account’s first set up (Hern 2022). As a result, users may receive inaccurate information that engenders falsehood and prejudices.

### **News media’s advocacy of public engagement**

Also, since people gradually realize this problem, they are prone to be guarded in what public figures and officials said to the public via social media, which becomes a major phenomenon in public life. In the article, “Why can’t we agree more on what’s true anymore,” the sociologist Davies brought up the concept of public life. “Once doubt descends on public life, people become increasingly dependent on their own experiences and their own beliefs about how the world really works. One effect of this is that facts no longer seem to matter (the phenomenon misleadingly dubbed “post-truth”).” (Davies 2019). For example, when Ukraine President Zelenskyy declared his demands and plea toward the conflict several times via social media, are there many people really relate to what he stated on social platforms? Probably not. Because people would think about whether or not there is an extra motive related to political interests or financial profits within public figures’ discourse. The prevailing culture of Individualism also deepens this disbelief, doubting the authenticity of the “official” story. Davies emphasized that the crisis of democracy is a real problem nowadays.

Next, news media are situated in the larger field of power to influence social actions. Enterprises, organizations and brands weigh up all the decision-making processes toward global events. They tend to demonstrate humanitarian perspectives and their participation in global affairs to gain public support. For example, a lot of brands such as Netflix, Unilever, Starbucks,

DHL, etc have expressed their serious concerns about Ukraine's situation and stopped their business in Russia under the demands of investors and pressures of consumers. It indicates their pro-Ukraine stances are upheld by Western stakeholders. In this case, the mainstream news media coverage takes an important role in impelling these brands to have a chain effect on each other to withdraw operations in Russia. These actions may put themselves at risk but brands have to actively respond to communities' needs and beliefs to demonstrate their participation in global affairs. In this way, these companies are able to consolidate their values and visions to the public. A famous author Sarah Banet-Weiser in her book "Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture," utilizes the concept of "consumer citizenship" to explain "the ways in which human subjects' senses of national and community belonging increasingly are constructed through participation in brand cultures." (Sturken et al 2018). Their decision-making will directly reflect how they manage this "intersecting relationship between marketing, a product, and consumers."

From a PR perspective, decision-makers could not only make good on the promises of their companies' values, purposes and commitments but also optimize the Triple Bottom Line framework in terms of profit, people and the planet. However, there are multinational companies like McDonald's, PepsiCo and Shell, that had over decades of business relationships with Russia. This dramatically downsized employment "were faced with untangling complicated deals" (The New York Times 2022). In other words, companies ought to hold themselves accountable to deal with ethical dilemmas when they are under the pressure of budgets and measurable outcomes, as well as fairly treating their internal employees at the same time.

### **Visual impacts of political propaganda**

Third, visuals play an efficient role in promoting political propaganda based on its stance and symbolization. Modes of visual culture have influenced people's understandings to shape their own ideological expression. And videos have become one of the main outlets to effectively encapsulate concrete information and easily convey these messages to people in terms of visual cues so that people easily understand meanings. For example, the U.S. Majority of media in the U.S. starkly unveiled Ukraine's miserable situation via a lot of warfare videos like funnels of smoke rising from bombed areas in Ukraine, residents in Ukraine panicking on the street and having a hard time finding shelters that provide accommodation. People will directly feel the cruelty of warfare through the videos that are captured in real-time and posted on visual-driven social media such as TikTok, Instagram, etc. And what Russia was portrayed in media as an intruder, and initiator magnifies the contrast. These direct visual impacts easily elicit people to have a strong compassion for victims and make them choose to stand side with Ukraine because people wish to strive for a more connected world with peace and prosperity. According to Rodney Benson in his book "Field Theory in Comparative Context: A New Paradigm for Media Studies," he emphasizes the historical contexts and position change pursued by the field paradigm, which is known as the society in which we are situated. It has an obvious political spectrum, and actively intervenes in issues concerning social public interest and also reflects strong humanitarian concern (Benson 1999). That is a reason why sometimes we feel related to what the media world presents to us.

Nevertheless, based on personal observation, the focus of media coverage on Ukraine's warfare is different between China and western countries. Chinese media, generally controlled by its government with censoring management, also curated various video content about warfare. Historically, China has been maintaining a fairly solid diplomatic relationship with Russia since

China built allies with the Soviet Union to coordinate economic and political moves during the 20th century. Besides live broadcasts updated about the war, some Chinese media posted commentary videos illustrating reasonably why Russia can not stand Ukraine to join NATO and what kind of social ramifications the warfare elicits toward China. This historical context of the political communication with Russia and the U.S. enmeshes China in a more ambiguous situation. Even though China is one of the countries that stays neutral in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, messages mediated are still likely to shape polarized perspectives and even deteriorate diplomatic relationships within countries that have contradicted opinions on the Ukraine war. Visuals have a strong emotional appeal to activate people's sympathetic reactions but once national interests infiltrate in this circumstance, things become more complicated.

Therefore, some people have a hard time picking a stance because they are disoriented and overwhelmed to express their thoughts and truly believe the visual information they are reaching out to. I found that divergence of views about warfare astonishingly exists in a relationship that is in close proximity such as among friends and family. A person may strongly contradict the values or beliefs the other person had even if these two people are close. Also, the theory spiral of silence in political communication indicates that people are more willing to share their perspectives if they thought their viewers agree with them. Otherwise, they preferred to not say their opinions out loud on social media, especially when it comes to sensitive political issues. Because those who did not necessarily stand with Ukraine or those who stayed neutral may be arbitrarily categorized as proponents of the Russian team when the global mainstream media favors Ukraine.

In summary, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is in the spotlight through digital media and ubiquitous online discussion. By analyzing strategies and applications used in the war

in Ukraine, I learn that communication manipulates people's actions in responding to the current global issue. It is significant to know how communication could provide us with historical, social and political contexts of information, which have features in terms of uneven information distribution, the higher role of news media and the implications of propaganda.

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