

Internet memes as a tool for the propagation of fake news on Twitter

A STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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The author summarizes the results of a study that examined how Internet memes are being used to spread fake news on Twitter in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine.

Fake news, misinformation, and disinformation are problems in every country, especially during war. The war between Russia and Ukraine witnessed an increased scope and impact of such fake images shared on Twitter to instigate the war. The current war has been associated with a lot of fake news of negative attributes to create potential panic, fear, and violence, among others. The negative outcomes of fake news on social media, especially Twitter, on the Russia and Ukraine war call for serious action to address the issue of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation globally. The fight against fake news has become a global trend; as a result, many technology companies like Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, Google, etc. need to involve in the global fight against fake news.

Fake news is not exclusively an issue in the field of journalism but also across other professions. The *Washington Post* was said to have over 7,600 articles that contained fake news and images as of 2 years ago (Kurfi et al., 2021). It remains one of the disturbing challenges in the 21st century in the media. The former US President Donald Trump brought the term to global notice during his electioneering campaign and administration, and his tweets continued to increase its us-

age. Trump often used the term "fake news" within the context of offensive phrases against his critics and other media conglomerates while flooding communication networks with slander, evasions, and misinformation himself. Fake news is information that is deliberately calculated to mislead, or meant to be wholly false in content. The motivation for creating fake content is to cause harm and unrest. However, when it is mild, it is usually used as a prank. According to *BBC News* (2018), lack of credibility of information in some cases has created a wide range of rumors. The media need to verify and disseminate information based on credibility, which should be based on truthfulness, competence, relevance, and dynamism.

Russia and Ukraine like any other country in the world are proliferated with a high level of fake news. This is evident on Twitter in the recent prevalence of fake images in the context of the war. Some of these images shared are not connected to the recent developments in the 2 countries. This indicates that fake news does not exist only in text. Images are often accompanied by fake text to enhance their believability. The anonymity of the online space has created the habit of the internet to contribute to the escalation of fake news. Furthermore, fake news, misinformation, and disinformation circulating on social media serve as a "looming danger" capable of destabilizing the collective peaceful coexistence of people.

THE STUDY

There is an existing gap in the literature on the use of images to propagate fake news on Twitter in the Russia and Ukraine war. Based on the propensity of fake news on Twitter that foments trouble in Russia and Ukraine recently, the need to examine internet memes on the propagation of fake news on Twitter becomes apparent. The objectives of this study are to (1) find out if fake internet memes on Twitter are used as an attack tool in the information warfare, (2) study internet memes on Twitter as a platform for sharing fake news, (3) investigate if internet memes are used on Twitter as a pull prank¹, (4) ascertain whether internet memes on Twitter are used to derail the crisis.^{2,3}

1. Fake internet memes used on Twitter as an attack tool in the information warfare

Fake internet memes were used on Twitter during the Russia and Ukraine war as an attack tool to focus attention on the war on social media. The first step to any war is to get the attention of people by the kind of images or footage that are created, to manipulate and achieve sovereignty of interpretation. A fake digital image under this category is an image shared on Twitter with the caption: "The U.S. imperial prophecy has finally come true, and

Putin the Great (Russia) has still attacked Ukraine.” Based on the findings by BBC fact-checkers (2022) and researchers, this is a fake image that has nothing to do with the Russia and Ukraine war. The image is that of an explosion in Beirut in 2020 (Ill. 1). Based on the image, it is safe to argue that misleading imagery inevitably appears on social media. It was shared on Twitter by those who believe that the images found there are genuine without fact-checking. Social media users can limit the spread of fake news by fact-checking from genuine sources they trust. Some news organizations go to great lengths to verify such images by checking with multiple trusted sources before sharing them.

In the context of the Ukraine war, fake images were created so that people can form a supposed picture of the situation. The fake image in Ill. 2, for example, was created and shared on Twitter on the first day of the Ukraine war. Based on the available literature, it was impossible to verify the truth behind this post that went viral on social media. Within the context of the image, there is a missile being fired toward a residential area in Kyiv by one of the low-flying jets. The image was viewed more than 2 million times on Twitter. Because of the poor quality of the image it was very difficult to identify the aircraft and

the country’s air force that the plane belongs to. Another issue is whether the residential area was targeted deliberately or if the missile was fired in the wrong direction. There are many conflicting claims about the identity

and the target of the aircraft stated by authorities. Based on the image, it is clear that during conflict or war misleading imagery does appear on social media that often misinform people to believe such images.

2. Internet memes on Twitter as a platform for sharing fake news

The microblogging service Twitter was used by users to disseminate fake news during the Russian and Ukraine war. For instance, the image of several aircrafts (Ill. 3) went viral on Twitter with the information that it showed a scene from the current Ukraine war. However, a check by the BBC (2022) found that the image was a preparation for a military parade from the year 2020. Thus, due to a lack of digital literacy, people often share fake images on Twitter to describe a scenario from the Ukraine war. In Kenya, India and Nigeria, too, a lack of digital literacy leads to rapid increase in spread of fake news (Pate, 2021) and meanwhile people consume legitimate and fake news equally. Fake news on terrorism and politics were especially prominent in the 2 African countries as a result of the low level of digital literacy. There was another fake image with different captions on Twitter like “Russian Fighter jet shot down by #Ukraine #WWIII #RussiaUkraineConflict #Russia #UkraineRussia” (Ill. 4). Based on BBC fact-checking (2022) and researchers, the image was from Libya and is over 10 years old. Some of the BBC journalists had seen the image before Russia and Ukraine’s current war. Based on the fact-checking, the report shows that it is a Libyan government aircraft being shot down by rebels over Benghazi in 2011. The report also revealed that some of the imagery does not show combat operations within the context of the war at all.

Therefore, the progression in internet memes on social media permits the manipulation of pictures, audios, or even videos. The guarantee of the au-



Ill. 1: A supposed Twitter image from the Ukraine war shows the explosion disaster in Beirut from the year 2020



Ill. 2: The origin of the fighter jet on this picture cannot be verified due to the poor image quality



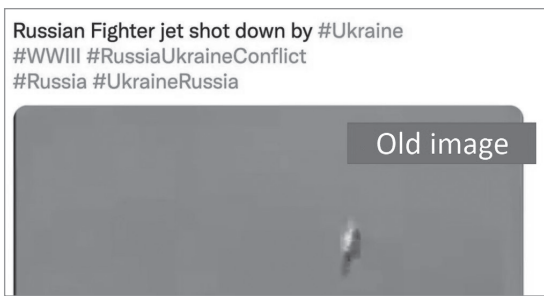
Ill. 3: On Twitter, preparations for an air parade were declared as a scene from the Ukrainian war

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thenticity of such images in the public domain is no longer visible. The false contextualization of photos has opened up a new dimension, which poses major challenges to social networks in terms of trust in them and their credibility. Photos and stories that are published all over the world face the challenge of authenticity. It is difficult to check the credibility of such stories and photos. The issue of fake news in image presentation has also posed a challenge to national development. The manifestations of these fake images on social media have a negative influence on the audience. To support this argument, a study carried out by the BBC in 2018 found that a significant amount of fake stories are being shared online, and most of them are not written text, but images and memes because people prefer images over words (Abu Arqoub et al., 2022).

3. Internet memes used on Twitter as a pull prank

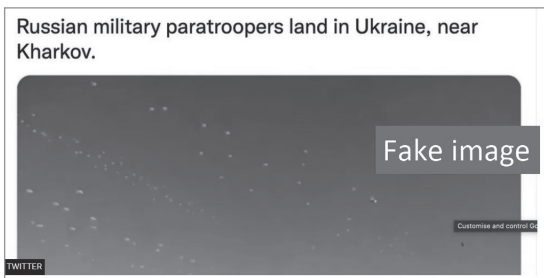
Fake internet memes were used with a mildly mischievous or malicious activity during the Ukraine war. Some of the fake images were shared on Twitter with the desire to cause more harm to the situation. For example, a tag on Twitter with the caption “Russian troops hoisting a flag on a public building in Kharkiv, Ukraine” (Ill. 5) was depicted in an image. Based on the fact-checking report by the BBC (2022) and other researchers, the image is from 2014. The caption is correct, but the image does not show Russians hoisting the flag on that building in Kharkiv in 2022. The revised image search tools showed that the event happened in 2014 during the period of unrest.



Ill. 4: A 10-year-old picture from Libya was attributed to the Ukraine war on Twitter



Ill. 5: Intentional misclassification: An authentic image was provided with an incorrect caption



Ill. 6: The image of the landing of paratroopers from the year 2016 is supposed to show a scene from the current Ukraine war

The findings support the theoretical postulation of the Visual Rhetoric Theory (Kurfi et al., 2017), which describes an art of effective communication through images, typography, and texts. Visual rhetoric encompasses the skill of visual literacy, and the ability to analyse images for their form and meaning.

Another image used on Twitter as a pull prank is that of Russian military paratroopers' landing in Ukraine near Kharkiv (Ill. 6). The BBC fact-checking report (2022) revealed that these troops were not filmed parachuting into Ukraine. The findings also show that the image which was viewed hundreds of thousands of times on Twitter first appeared on the Russian-language internet in 2016. The image was accompanied by a short narrative on Twitter: “Russian military paratroopers land in Ukraine, near Kharkov”. As such, the current digital environment often characterized by the proliferation of fake news on social media has redefined the traditional notion of news as the account of an unusual event.

4. Internet memes on Twitter used to derail the war

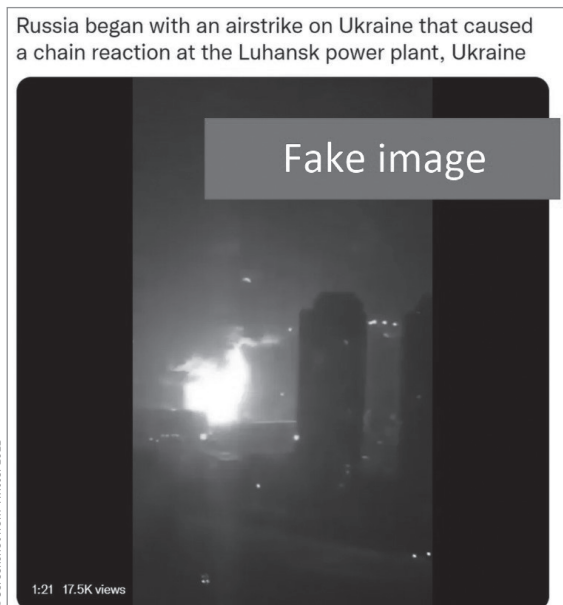
One of the images in this category was the image of an aircraft taking part in Victory Day celebrations over Moscow (Ill. 7) that was shared on Twitter in the context of the Ukraine war. The image with the caption “Russian invasion in Ukraine” has a misleading photograph. According to BBC News (2018), lack of credibility of information in some cases has created a wide range of rumours. Most of the images shared on Twitter are related to previous conflicts in Ukraine or elsewhere in the world, and they are images of troops on exercises. Based on the report, social media platforms like Twitter take a proactive role in sharing fake images identified by fact-checkers and researchers.



Ill. 7: On Twitter, images of military exercises and parades were linked to current war events

The phantom jets (Ill. 7) in the opening of the conflict were shared on Twitter to show how the Russian air force operated over Ukraine. The image went viral on social media with an accompanying caption which implies it was filmed in the current Ukraine war.

Another digital image that was used to derail the war was one with the caption “Russia began with an airstrike on Ukraine that caused a chain reaction at the Luhansk power plant, Ukraine” (Ill. 8). This post shows the deadly Tianjin explosion disaster but was uploaded in the context of the Ukraine war and was viewed by thousands of people. The image shows the explosion disaster of August 12, 2015 in Tianjin,



Ill. 8: An image of the explosion disaster in Tianjin is said to show Russian air strikes on Ukraine

on social media (Twitter). This indicates that fake images were used on social media to derail the war. Therefore, fake news, misinformation, and disinformation circulating on social media serve as a “looming danger” capable of destabilizing the collective peace and coexistence and people’s confidence in governments.

CONCLUSION

This study examined internet memes on the propagation of fake news on Twitter in the context of the Ukraine war. Based on the findings, the study discovered that fake internet memes on Twitter were used as an attack tool in the information warfare and that Twitter serves as a platform for sharing fake news. The study also found that internet memes are used on Twitter as a pull prank. Similarly, the findings of the study revealed that internet memes on Twitter are used to derail the Ukraine war within the period of the study. Within the context of the findings, the study concludes that with regard to fake internet memes the use

of social media in times of war should not be relied on as it will create more damage to such a war. Fact-checking and cross-checking such images to authenticate their credibility during the war is fundamental in order to not become a victim of the information warfare.

NOTES

- ¹ In the context of the study, “pull prank” means sharing memes on the information war on Ukraine and Russia that deceptively depicted some of the events.
- ² The study was conducted in 2022 at the beginning of the Ukraine war.
- ³ In the context of this study, “derail a topic” connotes sharing memes in the information war on Ukraine and Russia that showcase which country is succeeding or more active in the fight.

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