

Media Literacy and its Role in Countering Hybrid Warfare (the Case of Ukraine)

Isabela de Andrade Gama

Ph.D., Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro
(Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)
E-mail: isabela_a_g@hotmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0394-2752>

Wiktor Możgin

Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Kraków, Poland)
E-mail: wiktor.mozgin@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5744-8103>

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The vast majority of contemporary conflicts between states are of a hybrid nature. This is due to the complexity of processes taking place in the international arena. One aspect of the hybrid nature of conflicts is the issue of information warfare. The Ukrainian-Russian conflict, which has lasted since 2014, contains all the attributes of a hybrid conflict. Understanding and a thorough analysis of the relations between these countries require the atomization of the scope of the concept of hybrid war and its individual fragments. The authors of this article focus on the issue of information warfare carried out by the Russian Federation in relation to Ukraine and the issue of media literacy in the educational sphere as a tool aimed at counteracting this type of destructive policy by the Kremlin.

Keywords: hybrid war, information warfare, Russian propaganda, media literacy, information education strategies

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Introduction

Contemporary conflicts arising in the international arena are primarily conflicts over people's minds. Military power, which used to be a determinant of the state's position, today is only a background for relations between states. This is due to the apparent desire to maintain balance in the international arena, which is to be guaranteed by international institutions that keep order in relations between states. However, the situation is much different because countries that had superpower ambitions still have them. What is more, a group of states has emerged. The processes taking place in the international arena related to the crisis of liberal democracy and the Western model of statehood has also manifested a desire to dominate for several years. When conducting a thorough analysis of the space of international relations, it is reasonable to take into account both the first and the second group of countries.

Nevertheless, this article deals only with a narrow segment of the sphere of international relations. It refers to the issue of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict in the context of one of the aspects of hybrid war, which is information warfare and propaganda. Today's Russian Federation is implementing a neo-imperial plan to rebuild its former power, is waging a permanent information war with its opponents. Ukraine, which is within the scope of Russia's strategic goals, has been struggling with the problem of destructive Russian propaganda for several years. It concerns not only the media sphere but also the cultural and educational space. Therefore, this article aims to present the strategy of media literacy in Ukraine in the context of the fight against the Russian information war. First of all, attention will be focused on the education process, which is of fundamental importance for the Ukrainian state.

Understanding the processes related to the issue of information warfare between Russia and Ukraine requires defining the concepts of hybrid war and hybridism and the scope of the concept of media literacy. This need results from the complexity and multifaceted nature of these concepts. Nevertheless, the legitimacy also results from the dynamics of the processes taking place because despite recognizing the phenomenon of hybrid war by the interested community of researchers, the understanding of this concept is constantly changing. Therefore, the next part of the article is theoretical in nature, presenting the conceptual scope of hybrid war.

Hybrid Warfare: A Broad Definition

Hybrid warfare has been largely explored at the academic level and by the military and governments, raising many debates around it. It's essential to bring up some definitions. According to A Multinational Capability Development Campaign Project (2016-2017), the definition of hybrid warfare is "clear": "The international consensus on 'hybrid warfare' is clear: no one understands it, but everyone, including NATO and the European Union, agrees it is a problem. This report takes the view that in order to solve a problem, one must first understand it" (Cullen & Wegge, 2019: 5-7).

This definition says a lot, but the authors try to create some understanding about hybrid warfare in the same document as follows: "It describes hybrid warfare as the synchronized use of multiple instruments of power tailored to specific vulnerabilities across the full spectrum of societal functions to achieve synergistic effects. The relative novelty of hybrid warfare lays in the ability of an actor to synchronize multiple instruments of power simultaneously and intentionally exploit creativity, ambiguity, non-linearity and the cognitive elements of warfare. Hybrid warfare — conducted by state or non-state actors — are typically tailored to remain

below obvious detection and response thresholds, and often rely on the speed, volume and ubiquity of digital technology that characterizes the present information age. It concludes that hybrid warfare is already prevalent and widespread, is used by state and non-state actors, and is likely to grow as a challenge, justifying new efforts by nations to understand the threat it presents” (Cullen & Wegge, 2019: 11-15).

Although the term “hybrid warfare” has a definition(s), it still seems a blurred topic to deal with. Usually, this term is used as something “new”, a “new” type of warfare. Mainly because it involves communication tools, in the contemporary world, it seems new given the speed information can be spread throughout the internet, communication apps, and social media. By definition brought here hybrid warfare can be almost everything. It would be a non-traditional war; however, it can be present in a traditional war too. It encompasses many elements at the same time. The novelty is basically the use of digital technology to create threats less visible, less tangible.

Mostly, the literature on hybrid warfare tends to focus on the cyberwar aspect. Elinor C. Sloan puts that cyberwar is still in its infancy. For this author, this type of war under development is raising debates more than answers, governments for example, still don’t know exactly how to use this tool. Is it better to use it as an offensive weapon or for defense purposes? Difficult to answer, but for her, the events of 9/11 “helped” develop part of the answer; it’s necessary to build offensive cyber capabilities (Sloan, 2012: 37-41).

The literature on hybrid wars brings news such as Cyber War breaks with the paradigm of traditional wars that used only human resources, air force, maritime force, land force. There’s no clear target at the moment we live. Contemporarily with cyber forces acting, it is difficult to identify the target and its use. There are no more barriers, limits, borders that cyberwar cannot overcome. Still, with Sloan, information warfare which is the main focus here, is just a small part of the so-called “hybrid warfare” (Sloan, 2012: 41-43).

From the moment that it is established here that within the scope as wide as that of hybrid war literature, the article will deal more specifically with informational warfare, contemporary technologies, advertising, something more focused on the cyber warfare aspect. It is essential to carry out this delimitation. After all, the hybridity of war can be traced back to very remote times, considering that the “definition” of hybrid war is broad and encompasses great variables for unconventional forms of conflicts. Informational war is also not new. The use of information and disinformation to psychologically affect targets has also been carried out in the past. A great example of this (in a not so remote past) is the Cold War. However, the way that advertising spreads has taken on a new dimension with the so-called web 2.0 (Aslam, 2020: 1294-1296).

According to James Wither, hybrid war has been gaining more attention since the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, as this was a clear case of the multiple forms that the “hybridity” of a conflict could take shape (Wither, 2020: 7-8). It is said that the annexation of the peninsula took place through guerrilla routes, that is, the use of undercover personnel so that they would not be identified as Russians, just as the annexation took place through cyber ways, which would be a means of using the population’s (dis) information and manipulating it. And this would be a great contemporary feat of hybrid war. It’s almost impossible to distinguish between war and peace times.

Amid hybrid war, informational warfare plays a crucial role. However, even in the light of public international law, the use of information dissemination via mass media, social media, and applications for communication and automatic shots, for example, is still in a gray area

(Kleczkowska, 2019: 76-78). For, in certain situations, it is difficult to prove that specific actions are being carried out to destabilize an opponent. No wonder States have been using hackers for this type of action, turning even more challenging to know where the attacks are coming from (Stancu, 2019: 23-27).

In the case of Ukraine and Crimea, Russia was repeatedly condemned internationally to use “malicious” information to manipulate public opinion, primarily through the creation of pro-Russian narratives and cyber-attacks from even within Ukraine (Iasiello, 2017: 53-55). In addition to using traditional media such as newspapers for manipulating Ukrainian identities. But Russia is not the only state to use these types of tactics to achieve a differentiated battlefield. After all, this is a “war by other means”, perhaps less costly.

As mentioned earlier, this gray area still lacks standards more adapted to this new battlefield because of international public laws. However, as soon as the states took charge of finding a way to deal with hybrid wars, they called them war, threats, securitizing the issue that entered the topic of international security.

Securitizing the issue is a way of addressing this issue, but it is not the only one, and it may not be the most efficient. Bearing in mind that access to the internet, computers, smartphones, and social media is growing, dealing with information warfare is also inserted in the civil sphere, in the scope of individuals, making the control of (dis) information more complicated.

Much research has been done in this context. Noteworthy is, among others, those carried out in Pakistan and other countries in the region that are exposed to hybrid combat. According to Shahbaz Aslam (2020), media is so important that his research shows the relevance in educating people for the use of this “new media”. He mainly uses the example of higher education students, which makes it valuable for the next part of this analysis. The followings are the key objectives of this study. To study the use of social media among university students. To investigate the students’ exposure towards misinformation regarding the security forces of Pakistan. To measure the awareness of students about critical and creative social media content about security forces. To explore the role of digital media skills in encountering propaganda against security forces. Research questions (RQ1): To what extent are university students aware of social media usage? (RQ2): To what extent students critically evaluate the social media messages? (RQ3): To what extent students participate in encountering social media propaganda against security forces? [...] The study indicates that university students are being exposed to propaganda messages. The study reveals that university students are active in the functional use of social media. Therefore, this alarming situation demands the enhancement of digital media skills among higher education students through proper training and learning. Moreover, students’ critical and creative abilities are less compared to students’ functional abilities in consuming social media or the internet. Critical and creative skills are to be enhanced for countering compete the hybrid warfare on social media (Aslam, 2020: 1295-1297).

Hybridity of the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict

Today, hybridity is becoming a characteristic feature of most conflicts. This is because it is done through a continuous redefinition of the basic principles and means of fighting. According to Frank Hoffman, the hybrid nature of conflicts today means using various methods, including the use of conventional and unconventional potential, manifested primarily through the use of information and psychological warfare (Hoffman, 2007: 14-16). Nevertheless, hybridization

is a much more complex phenomenon. This is due to, for example, the concept of blurring the earlier clear divisions between the ways of waging war and, following the considerations of Herfried Münkler, the loss of the monopoly on the use of violence by the state (Hoffman, 2009: 36-38). Besides, a characteristic of a hybrid conflict is the concept of a network structure, created by entities involved in the conflict and outdating the existing hierarchical system, which allowed for a reasonably easy way to learn about decision-making centers (Evans, 2007: 5-6). Hybridity is also related to the concept of evolving complexity and disaggregation of the operating environment.

All the aforementioned features of hybridization can be seen today in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The Russian Federation, implementing its “proprietary” formula of a hybrid war, supports the separatist movement in Donbas and refers to various forms of conflict, their coordination on the battlefield, and synergy to increase the effectiveness of actions (Pietras, 2017: 27). A characteristic feature of the Russian hybrid war in eastern Ukraine is, first of all, the façade of the legality of the actions taken. Despite evidence of a violation of international law and taking into account the annexation of the Crimean peninsula and military interference in the territory of the independent Ukrainian state, the international community cannot effectively oppose Russia. This is due to the divergent interests of individual actors in the international arena. Influencing Russia’s behavior towards Ukraine requires joint action, which is a *conditio sine qua non* for the international community, and in particular for the countries of the Central and Eastern Europe region, which, in line with the American security concept, constitute a buffer zone between the strategic interests of the broadly understood West and the interests of the Russian Federation. An aspect that also distinguishes the Russian hybrid war in eastern Ukraine is the use of unmarked military units, which is intended to make it challenging to identify the militant side.

Moreover, Russia uses local paramilitary structures, providing military and logistical support, thus building the myth of the civil war in the Donbas (Lanoszka, 2016: 177-178). Nevertheless, a factor that has played and continues to play a decisive role in this context is the intensification of Russia’s activities in the field of propaganda targeting Ukrainian society. This is a direct reference to the prototype of the Russian formula of hybrid war, which is rebel war, which was conceptualized in the 1960s by the Russian military strategist Yevgeny Messner. The assumption of a rebellious war is, first of all, influencing the psychological sphere of the local population. The result of such action should be the approval expressed by the inhabitants of a given territory towards the conduct of another party (Messner, 2004: 23-27). The most straightforward tool for this is to use the information trap of propaganda. It allows creating appropriate attitudes within the society that is the direct target of the attack. The contemporary conflict in eastern Ukraine has just such an intentional basis because the Russian language and Russian culture within Ukrainian society have become the destructive factor that facilitated the destabilization of the Ukrainian state from within.

As a result, the issue of information security has become one of the priority areas of the state authorities in Ukraine. This aspect also found interest among many Ukrainian researchers and analysts, including, among others, Olga Belova, Volodymyr Horbulin, Dmytro Dubov, Yuriï Opalka, Heorhi Pocheptsov, and Mykola Ozhewan. In their works, they present an analysis of Russian propaganda in Ukraine from the perspective of, first of all, media coverage on television, in the press, and on Internet portals. However, it is worth noting that several target groups to which the anti-Ukrainian message of Russian media propaganda centers are directed. It is primarily the population of the Russian Federation, the citizens of temporarily occupied

territories located directly in the war zone and the inhabitants of the annexed Crimean Peninsula, as well as the population of Ukraine living in the rest of the country's territory. What's more, the recipient of the Russian message is also the community of third countries. Above all, European countries' population occurs via channels such as Sputnik, Russia Today, Ria-Novosti, LifeNews, or Komsomolskaya Pravda (Boyd-Barrett, 2015: 1018-1021).

It is vital to understand the mechanisms and intentions of the Russian Federation's actions in this context. If, in the case of European countries, the Russian propaganda message is intended to quasi legitimize Russia's actions, then in the case of a country such as Ukraine, it is a destructive component which is also one of the basic mechanisms of the fight against the Ukrainian state. It is also essential to recognize that the massive information attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine did not start in 2014 with the intensification of military activities in the east of the country. The Russian propaganda message has been present in the information space of Ukraine practically since the establishment of the independent Ukrainian state in 1991. Due to the low level of professional journalism in Ukraine and the lack of precise legal and institutional regulations, the Russian message easily reached Ukrainian audiences. The situation changed dramatically after 2014 when radical measures were taken to combat Russian propaganda in the state's information space. Legal acts were adopted to regulate the limits of the Russian language in the broadcast media content, and activities monitoring the presence of the Russian message on the Ukraine territory were institutionalized. The fight against the Russian propaganda message after 2014 has therefore become a priority task for the Ukrainian state.

Higher education is a strategically important sphere in this context. Applying in a metaphorical way the statement of the contemporary French writer Michel Houellebecq, included in his work *Soumission*, that the control of the country, and with it power over it, takes place through the appropriate education of the young generation and the imposition of cultural patterns that are to shape attitudes towards a foreign group. Within the society of this country. Therefore, an essential aspect in the fight against Russian propaganda should be the appropriate education of young Ukrainians. This article takes into account the higher level of academic teaching. This is because the authors' assumption was to investigate the strategy of the functioning of higher education in the conditions of hybrid war. Students are an exciting research subject because they are young people who, on the one hand, already have full civil rights, including the opportunity to participate in elections, and on the other hand, they are a social group that only shapes their views and attitudes indefinitely a more conscious way. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the methods used by the Ukrainian state in higher education to counteract Russian propaganda. Compared to other countries in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, Ukraine is implementing an extensive program of information warfare. This is correlated with the development of higher education strategies and cultural education diplomacy, which is becoming an increasingly important element in the context of information warfare (Svyrydenko, 2018: 140-142). That is why the next section will present ways of counteracting Russian propaganda, one of the mechanisms of hybrid war, at higher education in the Ukrainian state.

Strategies for Countering Russian Propaganda in Ukrainian Universities

The Ukrainian higher education system has been transforming the context of information policy since 2014. This process is highly complex, and it is necessary to present the conceptual scope that constitutes the theoretical basis for the discussion on this topic to understand it.

First of all, the notion of media literacy is noteworthy, as it has been successfully implemented in the Ukrainian information system and is gaining popularity year by year (Svyrydenko & Terapyshchyi, 2020). Robert Kubey believed that media literacy is the ability to use, analyze, evaluate and transport information presented in various ways through various channels of communication (Kubey, 2001: 31-33). However, media literacy can also be understood as the process of destroying artificially created information structures that harm society. In this regard, it is crucial to know the principles (rules) and the intentions for which this information was created. Media literacy is also understood in this context as the ability to interpret information based on a person's experience and personal attitudes while taking into account the mental and cultural conditions of a specific community (Potter, 2015: 24-26). It is also worth noting that the Ukrainian legislator has interpreted the notion of literary media. The authors of the Concept of Media Literacy Implementation in Ukraine defined this concept as an element of media culture, which refers to the ability to use information and communication technologies and the ability to express one's opinion through media channels; the effective acquisition of information on specific topics and the critical evaluation of this information based on the knowledge already acquired; in the context of online media, media literacy is the ability to separate real from virtual issues, that is understanding the truth of specific phenomena and events; moreover, it is the ability to create tools and mechanisms controlling the flow of information, taking into account the source from which this information comes (Naidonova & Sliusarevskyi, 2016).

An analysis of the implementation of media literacy into the Ukrainian higher education system shows that this process is based on an interdisciplinary approach. Several theories of media literacy were combined, which allowed for comprehensive coverage of the whole issue. Basically, the approach followed for the Ukrainian education system is based on the protectionist theory. It is one of the oldest approaches to media literacy, as it dates back to the 1930s. The premise of the protectionist concept is that the media harm society (Leavis & Thompson, 1942: XI-XIV). This is because the media has shaken the current order of cultural development, cutting itself off from ancient classical culture or the Renaissance culture, and has replaced it with a visual-sound form transmitted via television, radio, and nowadays more and more often via online platforms. In this respect, there has been a departure from the original or real sources of information, which has disturbed the ability to think critically and analyze the incoming information. The ease of obtaining information overshadowed the need to verify it. From the perspective of the Ukrainian strategy of media literacy in higher education, this theory is critical. It presents the methodological scope of educating the young generation in the skills of critical thinking and verification of information sources.

Ethical theory is another concept used in the process of creating the Ukrainian model of media literacy. It refers to the issue that the media shape certain attitudes and views. Therefore it is vital to control the flow of information. In the context of the fight against Russian propaganda, this is an essential element that helps avoid undesirable content in the education process at Ukrainian universities, which has a destructive psychological and ethical impact on the young generation (Johnson, 2001: 46-48).

Another theory that was used in the preparation of the Ukrainian model of media literacy is the concept of critical thinking. It correlates with the protectionist theory but deals more specifically with the codes by which information is transmitted. The theory of critical thinking is to introduce the skills of analyzing, assessing, and explaining specific processes and phenomena in the curricula. It was also assumed that it was necessary to develop an attitude

in young people that would negate certain phenomena, which would result in an individual willingness to check information and compare it with the current state. In fact, it is the inclination to self-reliance and the willingness to check the information that is the fundamental postulate of this concept (Tillman-Kelly et al., 2015: 380-382).

Finally, the last theory that has been taken into account is the socio-cultural concept. It refers to the legitimacy of using the media in the modern world. This theory is, in a way, a contradiction of the protectionist theory, but only where there is talk of a departure from classical culture. The socio-cultural concept can be treated as an evolutionary consequence of the theoretical considerations to date. The assumption is to treat the media, particularly the so-called media 2.0, as an indispensable element of the present day. This is because today's world is a world of information. Due to the globalization processes and the nomadic way of life, electronic tools help and facilitate human life. This issue, namely the issue of utility, is essential in the context of the media literacy model implemented in higher education in Ukraine.

These theoretical assumptions are the basis of the Concept of Media Literacy in Ukraine. Its main task is to increase the media awareness of the young generation, which is responsible for the future of their country. In this area, many projects have been launched in Ukraine in recent years, such as the Remote Teaching Media Literacy Course for Citizens by IREX and the Academy of Ukrainian Press, or the Stop Fake project, which helps to identify the discrepancies between the real state and the one presented by the media and one more is the OSINT Academy project, the creator of which is the Institute of Post-Information Society, which also inspire higher education on the one hand, and are part of the fight against the Russian propaganda message on the other. Nevertheless, it is essential to indicate that the Ukrainian concept of media literacy is currently effectively used by individual universities. Of course, it is worth noting that not all universities use this program, as there are many logistical obstacles. It is comforting, however, that in Ukraine, which is involved in a hybrid conflict with the Russian Federation, tools are being developed to counteract one of the elements of this struggle, that is, disinformation and propaganda by the enemy

The universities that have joined the Ukrainian media literacy program include the Vinnytsia State Pedagogical University and the V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University. Media literacy courses at these universities are based on four primary modules:

1. Knowledge and understanding of contemporary media content.
2. Analysis and evaluation of media sources.
3. A critical approach to obtained information and its verification.
4. Contemporary mass media as effective tools for human functioning.

These assumptions are at the initial stage of their development. Therefore the challenge for the state is to continue and properly coordinate this process. Looking from the perspective of the effects of implementing the media literacy program at Ukrainian universities may bring in a hybrid fight against the aggressor, extending these solutions to other universities is necessary.

Education of a responsible and informed citizen should be a priority for every state. It is possible through the implementation of appropriate socialization programs, one of which is literary media. Implementing its assumptions in the higher education system in Ukraine is undoubtedly a step forward in the competition for the young generation, which determines the future of your country. Therefore, the expansion and involvement of larger forces in implementing the media literacy program at Ukrainian universities should be a priority for the

government. Increasing financial and logistic resources should go hand in hand with increasing human potential, as the implementation of media literacy requires appropriate knowledge and experience. Today, this project is under development, but its potential may have far-reaching significance, especially in the fight against the Russian aggressor.

Conclusions

Summarizing the above considerations, the authors tend to conclude that the Ukrainian model of media literacy should constitute an integral part of the educational process, starting from the youngest. The process of media socialization should include both the intra-Ukrainian and international contexts. This postulate is justified because literary media can be considered today on two levels — internal and external. Ukraine should draw experience from, among others, specialized UNESCO units or institutions such as the Aspen Media Literacy Institute. Nevertheless, it is vital in this context that the Russian Federation uses the “proprietary” model of information warfare, which in Ukrainian conditions requires drawing on its own experience. The matter of Russian propaganda has a characteristic shape that dates back to the Soviet era. Ukrainian institutions controlling the Russian message to the public in Ukraine are unable to verify the entire content. That is why the ability of Ukrainians to think critically and verify the content is so important. The more the authors draw attention to the fact that the Ukrainian state should ensure the implementation of the strictly Ukrainian model of media literacy because within the state, it is possible to verify the truthfulness of certain information. However, this requires more efficient actions on the part of the central government, but above all on the part of the local government, as the first verification of information takes place at the local level. Ukraine has all the necessary prerogatives to control Russian broadcasts, which it has shown by blocking access to Russian TV channels and social networking sites. However, these steps did not fully solve the problem. That is why it is necessary to implement media literacy through educational processes because a conscious society can build a strong state, which in the present conditions is required for the Ukrainian state.

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