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Tuters, M.D.; Noordenbos, B.

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Author accepted manuscript

Published in

Media and the War in Ukraine

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Citation for published version (APA):

Tuters, M. D., & Noordenbos, B. (in press). Faking Sense of War: OSINT as pro-Kremlin Propaganda . In M. Mortensen, & M. Pantti (Eds.), *Media and the War in Ukraine* Peter Lang.

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Faking Sense of War: OSINT as Pro-Kremlin Propaganda¹

Marc Tuters and Boris Noordenbos

WarFakes or War on Fakes ('Voina s feikami', hereafter WF) is the name for a cluster of mainly Russian-language channels on the social media platform Telegram, as well as a multilingual website, devoted to debunking fake news on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.²

These channels and the website present themselves as reputable fact-checking resources, in the mode of Snopes or Politifact, whose purpose is to verify false news that misleadingly tries to pass itself off as neutral and ideologically unbiased. WF's main channel produces an average of two dozen posts per day that are intended to expose supposed 'fakes' in war coverage by Western and Ukrainian outlets, as well as critical Russian platforms. In the posts, identified 'fakes' are followed by explanations of the 'truth', which consistently echo and reinforce the Kremlin's official narratives about the war. These posts are participatory, allowing visitors to add their own comments and to click on one of nine pre-set 'emoticons', which express a range of attitudes, from support to concern. The core WF Telegram channel appeared on 24 February 2022, the first day of the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine, followed by a suite of localised clone channels in the subsequent days and weeks. These local spin-offs included channels for, among other regions, Rostov, Belgorod, annexed Crimea, and the Republic of Kalmykia. They reposted content from the core Telegram channel, while targeting a more local audience.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, an analysis of WF's messaging on the Russian war against Ukraine deepens insight into the role currently played by digital technologies in the Russian propaganda strategy. Emblematic of Russia's twenty-first-century persuasion campaigns

has been the state-sponsored channel RT, which has garnered a substantial audience outside Russia via social media platforms like YouTube. Through its clever use of digital communication, RT has obfuscated its origins in the Russian political establishment and reinforced its brand identity as an ‘alternative’ to a Western-dominated ecosystem of mainstream media (Yablokov and Chatterjee-Doody 2022: 13). Analysing WF’s reporting, this chapter considers recent developments in the Kremlin’s mobilisation of the anti-establishment potential of social media, demonstrating how online platforms are co-opted to manufacture support for the narratives and policies of the Russian authorities.

Second, and more specifically, the chapter analyses how WF hijacks practices of online verification associated with open-source intelligence (OSINT) to create the illusion of crowdsourced knowledge production. Even though WF’s funding and ownership are unknown, the project can be conclusively tied to the Kremlin through a pattern of promoting the site’s content via official state channels, as revealed by our earlier research (Tuters and Lazaruk 2022). What necessitates deeper investigation is how WF (mis-)uses fact-checking and OSINT to feed into the fantasy – common amongst contemporary conspiracy theorists, as well as those eager to disprove them – that participatory media empower ‘independent thinkers’ to become ‘arbiters of the truth’ (Jane and Fleming 2014: 84). In our analysis, WF channels this impetus to expose the ‘lies’ of the authorities and the powerful, which the WF moderators locate in Ukraine, and ultimately in ‘the West’.

Weaponising OSINT

Analysing the WF platform as representing recent innovations in the Russian propaganda strategy, we zero in on the channel’s messaging around the mass killing of Ukrainian civilians by the Russian Armed Forces in the Ukrainian city of Bucha, near Kyiv. While the Bucha massacre

of spring 2022 triggered a wave of international outrage, the Russian authorities sought to portray it as a Western-backed Ukrainian false flag operation. Our analysis of WF's reporting on the affair shows that the platform introduces novel dimensions both to the Kremlin's persuasion strategies and to the wider participatory dynamics of contemporary online propaganda. This innovation pivots on a set of investigative and interpretative practices, from which WF derives its grassroots appeal, while building what amounts to a fake crowdsourced verification resource.

A substantial proportion of WF's posts adhere to a particular house style that exploits the rhetorical and aesthetic authority of open-source intelligence to engage in detail-oriented debunking of usually Western news reporting on the Ukraine invasion. An example of this house style is the frequent OSINT-inspired use of red circles to draw attention to alleged manipulation techniques (see [Figure 5.1](#)). Such posts promote the idea that media representations of the war cannot be trusted since they are easily subjected to manipulation. The only way to guard against this malleability of mediated representation, then, is to apply critical media literacy and question everything. WF promotes such scepticism by (mis)using OSINT techniques, inviting audiences into lengthy deconstructions of Ukrainian and Western narratives, while the moderators' conclusions more often than not closely align with those of the Kremlin.

Figure 5.1. Here

Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman describe OSINT as an 'anti-hegemonic' practice whose objective is 'to produce facts that contest statements' out of [s]craps of information [that] are then compiled into systems, including narrative structures' (2021: 5). OSINT has become a prominent genre in conflict reporting in which networks of amateur sleuths collaborate in piecing together evidence – by repurposing publicly available datasets and tools. The first high-profile demonstration of OSINT came in 2014, when a network of researchers affiliated with Bellingcat applied these techniques to the case of the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 disaster, which was

downed over the contested Donbas region of Ukraine killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew on board.³ Although the Russian government denied involvement in the shooting down of the airplane, the network of Bellingcat investigators used a combination of geolocation and image analysis to provide convincing evidence that the plane was shot down with a surface-to-air missile system that belonged to the Russian Federation. Eight years later, three men were found guilty following a trial in absentia in the Netherlands, which drew on OSINT research ([Rankin 2022](#)). In the current war in Ukraine, a decentralised network of researchers – coordinated through the Twitter hashtag #OSINT – consistently apply these methods to all military actions and claims emerging from both sides in the conflict.

Mimicking the work of OSINT collectives like Bellingcat, WF co-opts its tactics to support the channel's central premise: that the truth about the war in Ukraine can only be determined through a collective effort of piecing together data from different sources and registers of information. In general, what WF appropriates from OSINT is its epistemic authority to manufacture intelligence in a grassroots manner, through the reappropriation of various digital devices available to anyone with a computer and adequate expertise. In conceptualising WF as 'weaponizing OSINT', we draw on Fuller and Weizman's conception of OSINT as a form of 'investigative aesthetics', which involves both detailed 'sensing' and a reworking of diverse sensory data into modes of 'collective sense-making' ([2021](#): 4). Thus, they theorise this double practice as pivoting on a component of aesthetics, which they define as the capacity to experience, detect, and register perceptively, that is, 'a state of ... alertness' (*ibid.*: 37) to matter, whether with a human body, with technology, or through environmental entities. Satellite photography is in this definition an aesthetic practice of sensing, yet a sunflower, too, is a 'sensor' in that it is 'aestheticized to light' (*ibid.*: 47). The central argument by Fuller and

Weizman is that ‘investigative aesthetics’ take first-order sensing to new levels. As a collective undertaking, it adjudicates relations between different registers of perception, and integrates scraps of sensory data from multiple directions into narrative and interpretive patterns: ‘If aesthetics is about sensing and making sense, its pairing with investigation is a demand for a reworking and heightening of the aesthetic sensorium’ (ibid.: 108).

As the Bucha massacre case study will demonstrate, this collective and eclectic practice of close-up sensing and sense-making undergirds WF’s innovation of participatory propaganda. WF’s mimicry of OSINT at once promises its users investigative and interpretive agency and simultaneously limits it to pro-Kremlin consensus and activism as the only viable outcome. The (apparent) role of social media users as participants in a collective truth-finding operation acquires additional weight through a persistent framing of foreign reporting as involved in an aggressive (information) war against Russia. In this context, ideological alignment with the channel, and by extension the Kremlin, appears as the way ‘vy uberezhëte sebia i svoikh blizkikh ot strashnogo oruzhiia desinformatsii i propagandy’ [you will protect yourself and your loved ones from the terrible weapon of disinformation and propaganda], as the moderators put it (War on Fakes 2022a).⁴ By this same process, media literacy, which is generally considered as a common good, is weaponised, too. As such, WF may also be understood as representative of a more general set of concerns in the field of media studies. This has led some scholars to question the promotion of media literacy on its own, without dealing with the broader normalisation of systemic narratives of distrust – a phenomenon which extends well beyond the Russian context (boyd 2018).

Participatory propaganda

WF's attempt to involve the public in a fake grassroots' form of propaganda is not entirely new. In fact, it perpetuates propagandistic strategies developed by the Putin-government ever since the 2010s, while further tailoring them to the affordances of the social media ecosystem. Dina Sharafutdinova's (2020) socio-psychological analysis has recently shown that the Putin administration increasingly focuses its persuasive strategies on the engagement of the apolitical sections of society through the incitement and exploitation of affect. The major political news- and talk shows of Russia's television-dominated offline media sphere pivot on a genre of 'agitation' (Tolz and Teper 2018), which whips up feelings of fear, anti-Western hatred and post-Soviet national humiliation, while harnessing these emotions for the consolidation of pro-Kremlin unanimity (Sharafutdinova 2020). The media institution that best represents this strategy in the international arena is RT, whose motto is 'Question More'. It has been argued that this RT invitation to 'question more' is 'not about finding answers, but fomenting confusion, chaos, and distrust. They spin up their audience to chase myths, believe in fantasies, and listen to faux [...] "experts" until the audience simply tunes out' (Armstrong 2015).

While this participatory approach is taken to a new level on Telegram, the technique of identifying material as fake that is (usually) not misinformation is not unique or especially new in Putin's Russia. Indeed, the labelling of major American and European news outlets as biased is a routine strategy on prime-time political talk shows such as *60 Minutes*, broadcast on the state-owned channel Russia-1 (Noordenbos 2023), as well as the popular Russian state TV programme *Antifake*, which falsely claimed that the Bucha massacre was a hoax (Mackey 2022). Although WF's alignment with the Russian establishment is hard to miss, it distinguishes itself from other Kremlin propaganda broadcast channels by presenting itself as a grassroots initiative,

in line with the participatory imperative and alternative identity of the newest social media environments. Not only does WF pretend to be independent of the Kremlin, it also claims to operate outside of politics altogether, motivated by benevolent humanitarian principles. This is stated in the English-language mission statement on WF's website:

Welcome to the 'War on Fakes' project. We are the owners and administrators of several Russian non-political telegram channels. We don't do politics. But we consider it important to provide unbiased information about what is happening in Ukraine and on the territories of Donbas because we see signs of an information war launched against Russia. Our mission is to make sure that there are only objective publications in the information space. We do not want ordinary people to feel anxious and panicked because of information wars. We are going to look into every fake and give links to the real refutations. Be safe, be at peace, be with us. (War on [Fakes 2022b](#))

In the guise of this ethical call to use fact-checking to cut through the fog of war, WF enrolls the public as partisans in the information battlefield. What makes this approach powerful is the degree of agency that it seems to offer the audience, propelled by the specific affordances of social media platforms. By their very definition, affordances cannot be determinative of users' actions, rather they constitute a 'multifaceted relational structure' between a technological object and its intended use, which functions to constrain as well as to enable choice along certain more or less desirable paths of action ([Faraj and Azad 2013](#)). Part of WF's participatory propaganda strategy is its nudging of the audience towards particular uses of social media technologies, meanwhile inculcating a set of behaviours, emotions, and assumptions. All of these pivot on WF's (partly implicit) metaphor of the information sphere as a battlefield, and of the amateur

internet user as an enlisted defender of the nation under siege. The moderators not only encourage users to submit potential fake news (which they say they will meticulously vet), they also ask them to disseminate the channel's findings across platforms, and beyond Russia's borders. A brutal irony here is that this crowdsourced information warfare model appears initially to have been developed some years earlier, in Kyiv, as part of an effort to combat Russian misinformation entitled StopFakes (Khaldarova and Pantti 2016: 892).

WF's strategy of enrolling the public as partisans in the Kremlin's information war reflects wider, global shifts in online disinformation campaigns. Recent scholarship on propaganda and disinformation has drawn attention to new forms of persuasion, which co-opt and cultivate grassroots messaging, thus defying traditional top-down models of propaganda. Starbird, Arif and Wilson (2019) suggest the term 'collaborative work' for strategic operations that allot a central role to common users as the (sometimes unwitting) co-creators and disseminators of manipulative information. René DiResta (2021: np) has coined the term 'ampliganda' for such projects, highlighting how they involve the audience as 'an active participant in creating and selectively amplifying narratives that shape reality'. Most useful for our purpose here, however, is the notion of 'participatory propaganda', proposed by Alicia Wanless and Michael Berk (2020), a term that describes 'the deliberate, and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour of a target audience while seeking to co-opt its members to actively engage in the spread of persuasive communications' (2020: 6). Such participatory strategies constitute a more invasive form of propaganda than the one-to-many model, blurring neat distinctions between propaganda's production and consumption, and between organic and coordinated online messaging.

Pro-Kremlin messaging on Telegram and beyond

Efforts to debunk Western reporting on the war in Ukraine are widely present in the pro-war Russian Telegram sphere. Other notable examples include *rlz_the_kraken*, with about 200K subscribers ([Silverman and Kao 2022](#)). Channels like this routinely discredit and ridicule Western and Ukrainian journalists and politicians, but not all of them make fact-checking a central and explicit part of their identity, as does WF. Another, but related, genre of pro-Kremlin Telegram accounts includes channels run by self-proclaimed military bloggers, correspondents and analysts. Most notable among them are Wargonzo (1.3 million subscribers) and Rybar (1.1 million subscribers), which focus on military-strategic matters and report on the combat situation. The latter has been the most high-profile non-governmental channel on the war in Ukraine. Rybar publishes daily OSINT-driven updates on the military situation, especially on the positions of Ukrainian troops and material. These reports are typically accompanied by detailed maps and are based on intelligence provided by (pro-)Russian informants on the ground. Its posts have been frequently cited by major global news media like *CNN* and *Bloomberg* ([Pankratova 2022a](#)). While decidedly patriotic in tone, Rybar has occasionally criticised the Kremlin's strategic decisions, especially in the wake of the chaotic partial Russian mobilisation. The government's efforts to tighten control over this and similar channels culminated in late December 2022, when Rybar's founder Mikhail Zvinchuk (a former employee of the press service of the Ministry of Defence) was enlisted in a task force, established by President Putin, to coordinate the government's mobilisation campaign with the social media reporting by military bloggers ([Kremlin 2022](#)). At the time of analysis WF, while showing similarities with these other patriotic, war-focused outlets, remained as the largest Telegram channel with anonymous moderators and an explicit fact-checking profile, its core channel having around 800.000 subscribers.

Telegram's user base is larger than that of Twitter and the platform has the reputation of an encrypted platform. Although it does allow for secret chats, the data that we are looking at is not private. Telegram's size makes it hard to generalise, but overall the platform has a softer touch when it comes to censoring content than for instance Twitter. For this reason, it has attracted 'extreme' communities and figures that have been banned from other social media platforms and has been referred to as a 'dark corner' of the internet (Rogers 2020).

As Telegram has now banned Russian state media from the platform, following pressure from Europe (Scott 2022b), WF is arguably a significant outlet for promoting the Kremlin's narrative. Due to Telegram's design, it is difficult to determine who is responsible for creating the content of the WF cluster. An investigation of the source code of the WF website, however, shows that it is maintained by nine user accounts including one labelled as 'administrator' (Romero 2022). Beyond this, we do not definitively know who is responsible for the collection and production of the project's content. We can, however, identify the platform as a channel of state-sponsored propaganda, based on how its content is promoted via social media. In what appears as a clear strategy to weaponise Russian diplomacy (Scott 2022a), the website has been shared thousands of times on the Facebook pages of Russian embassies and official 'houses of culture', the world over (Tuters and Lazaruk 2022).

Using the Facebook research tool Crowdtangle we found in a previous analysis that the main promoters of WF content on Facebook were indeed Russian embassies and Russian houses of culture, both of which are under the jurisdiction of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Each of their Facebook pages had on average about 10K subscribers with an average engagement rate of about 700 per post – which is a measure of participation with the content. Additionally, that same research found that Maria Zakharova, the director of the Information and Press

Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation twice reposted WF's content from her own Telegram channel, which has a verified status intended to indicate that the content is authentic and of general public interest (Tuters and Lazaruk 2022).

A qualitative analysis of the sample of the most engaged with content from the first month of the war also revealed a thematic pattern across posts, the single most popular of which was the denial of Russian culpability for war atrocities. Among the most prolific examples of the latter are WF's efforts at debunking reporting on the massacre in Bucha. Indicative of the reach of this new kind of pro-Kremlin messaging, this research also observed that the single most engaged with Facebook reposting of WF content (outnumbering even the repostings by Russian embassies and houses of culture) was a post by the American filmmaker Oliver Stone, pointing to what he calls some 'Sherlock Holmes clues to what's really going on in Bucha'.⁵ Yet, as we will see in the case below, WF does not provide real detective work, instead, like RT it foments confusion, chaos, and distrust. Yet unlike RT, rather than making the audience tune out, WF encourages them to participate.

Case study: What's really going on in Bucha, according to WarFakes

The research presented here builds on a previous empirical study of WFs, conducted by one of the authors together with a group of students shortly after the Russian military invasion of Ukraine and developed in collaboration with the Ukrainian data designer Karina Lazaruk, who in previous research has combined qualitative and quantitative methods to map WFs network and analyse a sample of the Telegram channel's content (Tuters and Lazaruk 2022). The present chapter, by contrast, seeks to drill down into a specific case study, applying a close reading method to posts on the WF channel and website pertaining to 'what's really going on in Bucha'. Indeed, a deeper understanding of WF's participatory propaganda requires close-up analysis of

its investigative and interpretative work. What are the specific forms of OSINT performed by WF? Or, in Weizman and Fuller's (2021) terms, what are the modes of sensing and sense-making the channel encourages? How, in its relation to the audience, does WF inculcate heightened attention to different registers of data, and what are its methods for inferring interpretive patterns across them? Finally, how does the channel's investigative aesthetics relate to a participatory mode of propaganda?

After the retreat of Russian soldiers from Bucha in late March 2022, photographs and videos began to circulate on social media of killed Ukrainian civilians laying in the streets of this Ukrainian city. Footage recorded by the Ukrainian police and the Territorial Defence Forces, and later by *CNN*, *BBC* and *AFP*, showed dozens of murdered civilians, some of whom had their hands tied behind their backs and were shot in the back of the head. Testimonial evidence by Bucha residents further incriminated Russian soldiers, and Russian responsibility for the crimes was confirmed by an extensive investigation by Human Rights Watch, whose report linked Russian forces to summary executions of civilians in the city (Human Rights Watch 2022). As with practically all the events in the current war, teams of OSINT investigators also participated in 'the hunt for the butchers of Bucha' (Wise 2022).

Bucha is a relevant focal point for analysing WF's 'investigative aesthetics', due to the momentous international attention the event attracted, and the Russian government's high stakes in the case. News about Russian atrocities against civilians threatened the state-sanctioned framing of the war as a 'special military operation' with the goal to liberate the (Russian-speaking) population of Ukraine from the militant neo-Nazis and fascists purportedly ruling them. Previous research has drawn attention to the ubiquity in Russian reporting on Ukraine, ever since the Maidan protests, of a recycled late-Soviet propaganda paradigm regarding the

Great Patriotic War. These repurposed the Second World War tropes typically associate Western-European fascism – including its alleged US-sponsored remanifestation in Ukraine – with atrocities against the civilian population ([Gaufman 2015](#); [Khaldarova 2021](#)). Unsurprisingly then, the Russian government was quick to deny Russian involvement in the killings of civilians in Bucha. On their Telegram channel, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs posted a statement in English by the Russian Ministry of Defence, which contended that ‘the photos and video footage from Bucha are another hoax, a staged production and provocation by the Kiev regime for the Western media, as was the case in Mariupol with the maternity hospital, as well as in other cities’ ([Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022](#)).

The Ministry’s argumentation focused on three points. First, during the Russian occupation, Ukrainian troops had allegedly shelled Bucha continuously, which explained the civilian casualties. Second, directly after the Russian withdrawal on 30 and 31 March, Bucha mayor Anatolii Fedoruk had declared the liberation of the city in a video message, but, the Defence Ministry emphasised, ‘did not even mention any locals shot in the streets with their hands tied’ (*ibid.*). Evidence had, according to the ministry’s statement, only started to emerge days later, which was additional proof that the killings would have been staged. Third, the photographed bodies did not show the ‘typical cadaver stains’ that were to be expected if they had been in Bucha’s streets since March (*ibid.*). The arguments’ incongruity was however left unaddressed: If the dead civilians had been victims of Ukrainian shelling during the Russian occupation, the purported lack of ‘cadaver stains’ remained unexplained. In the days that followed, more incriminating evidence against Russian soldiers continued to emerge. It is against this context of the Kremlin’s official messaging on Bucha that we can observe how WF closed the gap between maintaining its grassroots pose and ‘investigative’ practice, while at the same

time backing up the Kremlin's inconsistent and increasingly unsustainable 'staged provocation' narrative. Indeed, in observing the messaging on Bucha, the central tension in WF's participatory propaganda – between obfuscated pro-state conformism and a pose of unbiased investigative rigour – vividly comes to the fore.

In the first week after the Ministry's statement (between 3 April and 10 April), WF published 30 posts on Bucha on its Russian-language core Telegram channel, as well as three 'long-reads' on their website. While these echoed the Kremlin's conspiracy theory of Bucha as an orchestrated attempt to incriminate Russia, *none* of the posts on the core channel directly referenced the Ministry of Defence. Instead, to refute Ukrainian and Western accounts, WF relied on a diverse assortment of data and interpretations largely taken from non-governmental social media accounts, including selectively picked content from Russian news platforms such as the Latvian-based *Meduza* agency, known for its opposition to the Kremlin. In the one case that WF *did* reference the Ministry's interpretation, in one of their 'long-reads' on Bucha, they did so only by way of conclusion, noticing how their own investigative insights also appeared to align with the Kremlin's account of events (War on [Fakes 2022a](#)).

Not all 30 Telegram posts on Bucha focused directly on the massacre itself. Some drew attention to the lack of consensus about Bucha in the UN Security Council. Others situated the Bucha killings in a wider historical context of Western-staged provocations or encouraged the audience to spread WF's conclusions beyond Russia's borders. Nearly a third of the Bucha posts involved investigative aesthetics. Replicating OSINT practices, they juxtaposed digitally available data (press photos, drone images, social media video clips, citizen testimonies, etc.) and subjected them to heightened forms of watching and reading, as well as efforts at sense-making. The interpretive work drew on three, often overlapping, modes of OSINT-style analysis: the

dating and geo-positioning of visual material, the identification of incongruities in the explanations of the enemy, and the detection of characteristic patterns in the behaviour of Ukrainian soldiers and their supposed Western sponsors.

Illustrative of the latter is a post of 4 April that commented on a much-discussed video presumably showing the execution of hand-bound Russian POWs by the Georgian Legion, who fight on the Ukrainian side (War on [Fakes 2022c](#)). This post drew attention to the material used to tie the Russian captives' wrists and compared it to photographs of Bucha victims in which the same material and wrist-tying technique could allegedly be seen. According to WF, this was a 'kharakternyi priznak deistvii natsionalisticheskikh batal'onov, kotoryi oni «na avtomatizme» primeniaiut vezde' [characteristic sign of the activities of nationalist [Ukrainian] battalions, [a method] they 'automatically' apply anywhere] (ibid.). In other cases, WF's sense-making was even more speculative. A post of the same day, for instance (see [Figure 5.1](#)), focused on incongruities in foreign presentations of evidence in Bucha. It showed a grid in which multiple press photos of the Bucha victims were juxtaposed. With red circles, users' attention was directed to the slightly different positions of the bodies in each of them. The same circles were used to spotlight the movement of 'rekvizit' [props], specifically a red bank card and a handbag, apparently personal belongings of the victims: 'Riadam s telom vidna krasnaia bankovskaia kartochka (priamo vozle loktia). Na drugoi fotografii eë tozhe net. Na foto Reuters eta kartochka lezhit s tremia drugimi kartochkami uzhe sil'no dal'she' [Next to the body a red bank card is visible (directly next to the elbow). In the other photograph it is absent. In the photo by Reuters the card lies with three other cards significantly further removed]. The post did not spell out its conclusion, but the close-up 'sensing' across sources, in combination with the repeated word 'props', was clearly meant to suggest that the displacement of bodies and items pointed to the

massacre's staging. This interpretative frame was already announced in the post's opening, albeit through a double negative: 'Feik: Trupy na ulitse Buche ne byli "razlozheny" spetsial'no' [Fake: The bodies in the street in Bucha were not 'spread out' [there] deliberately] (War on [Fakes 2022d](#)).

Finally, the dating and geolocating of data were the central stake of WF's efforts to debunk incriminating research published by the New York Times ([Browne et al. 2022](#)). The original NYT publication of 4 April had itself used OSINT methods to rebut claims by the Russian Defence Ministry that the killings were 'staged' after Russian soldiers withdrew from Bucha. The newspaper's Visual Investigations team matched satellite imagery from the company Maxar, with photographs and videos taken on the ground. Triangulating individual bodies in Bucha's Yablunska street, they dated their appearance between 9 and 11 March, during the Russian occupation. WF responded with a virulent campaign that effectively sought to *fight OSINT with OSINT*. Between 5 and 10 April, seven posts were devoted to the NYT evidence, as well as one multilingual long-read on their website.

The latter piece, titled 'Are the satellite images from Maxar's to be trusted?' – featured material from the pro-war Telegram channel Rybar, which specialises in OSINT and GEOSINT investigations. Rybar had published screenshots of the freely accessible part of Maxar's satellite logbook, which purportedly showed that there were no satellites crossing over Bucha on the specific dates mentioned by NYT. The Rybar investigators concluded that Maxar's recording had been 'sdelana 31 marta ili pozzhe' [made on or after March 31st] (War on [Fakes 2022e](#)). Using SunCalc for an astronomical analysis of shadows in Maxar's recordings, they concluded that the earliest possible satellite imagery of the bodies was from 1 April, 11 am GMT, when Ukrainian troops already controlled Bucha. WF combined this investigation with other data,

packaging it in a conspiracy story about the provocation in Bucha, which allegedly fitted a long-standing pattern of Western-orchestrated staging of (visual) evidence.

These and other posts spotlight two characteristic features of WF's investigative aesthetics, the first of which is its self-presentation as 'anti-hegemonic investigation' (Fuller and Weizman 2021: 21). The implicit problem at the centre of WF's reporting on Bucha was not (only) that the truth was (supposedly) unknown, but that powerful enemies (Western organisations and journalists) had purportedly usurped and misrepresented it through trickery. Besides the anti-hegemonic work of sowing doubt, discrediting, and debunking 'mainstream' reports, WFs coverage of Bucha showed a second, related characteristic tactic, which sought to heighten the audience's sensing and sense-making. Apart from presenting the public with ready-made proof and conclusions, the channel inculcated detail-focused OSINT-style practices of reading, viewing and patterning. Thus, the moderators addressed users not as the passive consumers of a conspiracy-based alternative explanation, but as active co-investigators. Even though the fake vs truth format typically conveyed a predetermined conclusion, the promotion of close-reading across diverse materials suggested that truth-finding was processual and required *work* to be performed by the audience.

In WF's coverage on Bucha, this 'work' pivoted on meticulous attention to visual and textual detail, as well as connections across torrents of heterogeneous data. As the moderators explained in the announcement of one of their long-reads: 'V usloviakh informatsionnoi voyny kraine vazhno razbrat'sia v mel'chaishikh detaliakh provokatsii, kotorye gotoviat ukrainskie tekhnologi' [In a situation of information warfare it is of the highest importance to figure out the most minute details that the Ukrainian [information] technologists prepare [for us]] (War on

Fakes 2022f). Users were further instructed on how to modify the material to enhance the perception of such significant minutiae:

zdes' na 12 sekunde «trup» sprava dvigaet rukoi. Na 30 sekunde v zerkale zadnego vida «trup» saditsia. Tela na video budto by spetsial'no razlozhili radi sozdaniia bolee dramatichnoi kartinki. Eto khorosho vidno, esli vosproizvodit' video so skorost'iu 0,25 ot normal'noi.

[here in the 12th second [of the clip], the 'corpse' on the right moves its hand. In the 30th second one can see in the rear view mirror a "corpse" sit up. The bodies in the video are apparently spread out [over the area] on purpose to create a more dramatic picture. This is clearly visible when the video is played at 25% of the normal speed]. (War on Fakes 2022g)

Wedding anti-hegemonic, conspiracy-based debunking to practices of investigative aesthetics, WF's coverage of Bucha thus appealed simultaneously to its users' suspicion and gullibility, while framing the audience's meticulous watching and reading 'between the lines' as a crucial contribution to the nation's information war.

Conclusion

WF's coverage of Bucha shows how easily the authority of investigative aesthetics can be turned against itself. Mimicking the NYT investigation, Rybar and WF pretended to (critically) extend the August newspaper's investigative report with a flood of swiftly produced and hard-to-check data that may have confused users, instead of rationally convincing them. In this respect, WF's content on Bucha seemed to purposefully erode rather than solidify the basis for truth-finding. At the same time, the fact-checking format, and the professed war against 'fakes', served to enlist

activist publics critical of Western-dominated mainstream ‘media bias’ – just as RT had once sought to do with programmes like ‘How to Watch the News with Slavoj Žižek’.⁶ Through this tactic, WF portrays itself akin to the anarchist Indymedia network from the period immediately before the growth of social media platforms (Atton 2004). In its opposition to traditional news organisations, the ‘radical media’ in the period of Indymedia was generally presumed to be against the state. WF, by contrast, mobilises the critical potential of radical media precisely in the service of the state. While the project presents itself as independent and even apolitical, WF’s content is consistently shared by Russian embassies across the world.

At the same time, the Bucha case demonstrates how WF’s investigative aesthetics are adapted to the contemporary dynamics of the sharing economy of social media, in ways that are different from an earlier era of ‘radical media’. This dynamic reaches beyond the audience’s engagement with, and commenting on, WF’s posts and includes encouragement to disseminate the platform’s research in users’ networks, thus giving online crowds a participatory role not only in sensing and sense-making, but also in the circulation of propaganda. Indeed, in the Bucha case, the moderators pointedly appealed to users to forward the channel’s investigations to English-speaking acquaintances, friends and relatives. As one of the bilingual posts put it, this might be ‘the only way they will be able to see an alternative and objective view of the events and find out what is really happening’ (War on Fakes 2022h).

Ultimately, WF’s participatory ethos extended to the very sources of the channel’s propagandistic content. In the reporting on Bucha, the channel frequently curated, and borrowed from, investigative work published by multiple other (apparently) non-governmental social media accounts. As seen above, WF leaned heavily on the OSINT work presented on Rybar. Even before Rybar’s official inclusion in Vladimir Putin’s task force on the Russian mobilisation

campaign, the independent Russian news platform The Bell published material indicating that Rybar received funding from the oligarch and Putin confidant Yevgenii Progozhin, and that the project may be connected with the Russian Federal Security Service ([Pankratova 2022a](#); [2022b](#)). Nevertheless, throughout 2022, Rybar strove to maintain its pose of objectivity. At the end of that year, the ‘support the project’ button on the channel still linked users to a text characterising the Rybar project in terms similar to WF’s grassroots self-description: ‘Rybar is a non-commercial project that exists on the naked enthusiasm of the owners and on the [Russian] population’s efforts’ ([Rybar 2022](#)). Via WF, content from platforms like Rybar entered the official information channels of the Russian state. The Russian embassy in Slovakia, for instance, reposted WF’s Maxar long-read (in Slovakian translation) on its Facebook page.⁷ This closely aligns with the concept of ‘ampliganda’ ([DiResta 2021](#)) and underlines the multi-directional, cross-platform dynamics through which it tends to operate.

On all these various levels – the encouragement of users’ heightened attention to visual minutiae, the speculative suggestion of patterns to be cognitively completed by the users themselves, the channel’s mining of non-governmental social media accounts for useful material, and the request to share its content widely – WF’s propaganda hinges on the online public’s participation. It is hard to find a clearer example of the state’s co-optation of the affordances of social media, both their sharing economy and their radical aesthetics – which are today embodied by OSINT – than the WF project. Yet, this combination of state co-optation and the ethos of grassroots participation frequently left WF in an awkward position, as illustrated by the advice that occasionally accompanied the reporting on Bucha:



Vsegda neobkhodimo vnimatel'no, vzveshenno i vdumchivo sledit' za situatsiei, pereprover'iat' postupaiushchuiu informatsiu i zhdat' ofitsial'nykh podtverzhenii ili oproverzhenii. Tak vy uberezhëte sebïa i svoikh blizkikh ot strashnogo oruzhiïa desinformatsii i propagandy.

[It is always necessary to follow the situation attentively, carefully, and thoughtfully, to double-check the incoming information and wait for official confirmation or denial. That way you will protect yourself and your loved ones from the terrible weapon of disinformation and propaganda].

(War on [Fakes 2022a](#))

Retaining the ethos of a critical fact-checking platform, by and for citizen-investigators, the passage simultaneously advocates patient alignment with ‘official confirmations and denials’, referring to those coming from the Kremlin. This irreconcilable mix of criticism and conformism goes to the heart of WF’s participatory propaganda and its consistent support of the Kremlin’s denial of Russian responsibility for the atrocities in Ukraine.

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Figure 5.1: WF’s (mis)use of OSINT.

Source: War on Fakes (2022d)

¹ This article is developed from empirical research initially conducted with Karyna Lazaruk, Borka Balogh, Marta Ceccarelli, Emillie de Keulenaar, Kiara Khorram, Devin Mitter, Son Nguyen, Stijn Peeters, Emilie Schwantzer, Cemal Tahir, Alexander Teggin, Yana Mashkova and Anton Mishchuk.

² <https://t.me/s/warfakes> and <https://waronfakes.com>.

³ <https://www.bellingcat.com/tag/mh17/>.

⁴ All translations from Russian are our own unless otherwise noted.

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/100044201750919/posts/537980271018693>, accessed 24 January 2023.

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