Economics of Persuasion in Peace and War
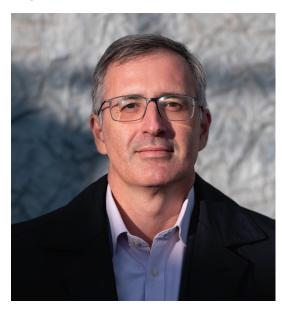
The rise of mobile broadband and advances in social media are reshaping how war is fought

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RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST Ukraine is the first major interstate war of the smartphone era. New information and communication technologies are reshaping how the war is fought. The Russian government is fighting on three fronts: a kinetic war in Ukraine; a war within Russia, where antiwar protesters want to force Russian President Vladimir Putin to withdraw from Ukraine; and a war for global public opinion.

On all three, information technology matters. Within Ukraine, smartphones record both war crimes and movements of Russian troops. Within Russia, remaining social networks help organize protests and coordinate sending lawyers to support the detained. In the global information battleground, videos from both sides try to persuade third countries to accelerate or decelerate the delivery of weapons and to introduce (or help circumvent) unprecedented economic sanctions.

The idea that information and the lack of it matter in war is not new. In his posthumously published treatise *On War*, the famous military theorist Carl von Clausewitz emphasized the importance of the "fog of war." War disrupts normal media reporting, greatly increasing uncertainty; thus, information that reduces—or augments—this uncertainty may substantially affect a war's outcome.

While the importance of information for war has always been understood, the recent dramatic rise of mobile broadband internet and advances in social media have radically transformed how information is collected and disseminated. According to the International Telecommunications Union, in 2007 the world had only 0.04 active mobile broadband subscriptions per capita. In 2021, there were 0.83, 20 times more. This growth took place in both developed and developing economies. Developing economy rates were 0.006 in 2007 and 0.73 in 2021. In Russia, the figure today is more than 1, meaning just about everyone is connected. Mobile broadband crowded out fixed broadband as the main source of access to high-speed internet. Fixed broadband subscriptions in the world only grew from 0.05 per capita in 2007 to 0.17 in 2021.

The third and fourth generations of mobile broadband technology, known as 3G and 4G, made a qualitative leap over earlier generations by enabling users to take photos, record videos, and immediately distribute them globally. The spread of 3G and 4G consequently became a key driver in the growth of social networks. Today the world has almost 3 billion people on Facebook, 2.5 billion on YouTube, and 1.5 billion on Instagram. The vast majority of social media use takes place on mobile devices.

As Martin Gurri argues in his prophetic book *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium*, this technological shift has major political implications. The self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010 triggered the Arab Spring as it was recorded on a smartphone and went viral. A similar self-immolation by another street vendor,

Abdesslem Trimech, took place a few months earlier but was not recorded and went largely unnoticed. The Arab Spring demonstrated the dramatic change in the way media reporting works. Most coverage of the Arab Spring by Qatar-based broadcaster Al Jazeera came from cell phone videos disseminated on social media, not from professional camera operators.

The same is true of today's war in Ukraine, the first major conflict in this era of radical transparency. Civilians and soldiers alike hold smartphones, take photos, record videos, and post them on social media. And yet this has not cleared the fog of war. The problem is not a lack of information; the challenge is an excess of information—much of it not fact-checked. Broadband internet and social media lend themselves well to dissemination of exciting and outrageous content, not necessarily true information. In the past decade, we have already seen the skillful use of social media by populist politicians. In our paper "3G Internet and Confidence in Government," Nikita Melnikov, Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, and I show that the spread of mobile broadband explains about half of the recent rise of populism in Europe.

But social media is not a favorite only of populists. It is also the tool of choice for a new generation of nondemoncratic leaders—Daniel Treisman and I call them "spin dictators." In our new book of the same name, we argue that most of today's nondemocracies no longer rely on fear and mass repression. Instead, they manipulate information. They deceive the public into believing that they are competent leaders. They pretend to be democratically elected. While admitting imperfections of their electoral procedures, they claim that these imperfections are no different from those in the West.

For such so-called spin dictators, social media provide a great platform. Not surprisingly, Putin, one of the main inspirations for our book, has invested heavily in internet-based informational warfare over the past 10 years. Troll factories, social media bots, anonymous Telegram channels, and Facebook advertising campaigns have all played a key role in his political strategy at home and abroad. Now he is applying these tools to the war with Ukraine. This time around, his job is much harder: as we see firsthand evidence of war crimes in Ukraine, he is definitely losing the information war in the West. But this only raises the stakes for him at home. He must convince at least a substantial part of the Russian public that he is waging a just war. This is why just a week after starting the war he closed down all remaining independent media, blocked most Western social media, and introduced military censorship. Public statements contradicting the official version of events are now punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

Has this worked? Yes and no. The polls registered rapid growth in Putin's approval ratings, from 60 percent to 80 percent. On the other hand, given the dramatic increase in repression, the polls are no longer reliable. First, there was a huge drop in response rates. Second, list experiments—a special technique used by political scientists to infer average level of support without asking people direct questions—suggest that many Russians went back to the Soviet practice of "preference falsification." Yet even in list experiments, 53 percent of Russians support the war, according to Philipp Chapkovski

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and Max Schaub in their paper "Do Russians Tell the Truth when They Say They Support the War in Ukraine? Evidence from a List Experiment." Russian government propaganda works.

In addition to supporting the Ukrainian army with weapons and imposing further sanctions on Russia, the West should accordingly commit more resources to the information battle for Russians' minds. This is not impossible. Russia is not China, and there is no Great Firewall. Some social media—most important, YouTube and Telegram—are not blocked. VPNs are not outlawed. Relative to Cold War times, when the West used Russian-language radio programming by Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, the BBC, and Deutsche Welle, today there are many more opportunities to reach the Russian audience, providing facts about the war and fact-checking of Russian propaganda. Winning the information war within Russia will help win it on other fronts—and prevent future invasions by Putin's regime. **FD**

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