Europeans are killing other Europeans in a theater of war for the first time in 30 years. It's been over 80 years since a conflict on the continent poses the threat of widening into a global conflagration. Furthermore, the specter of a thermonuclear holocaust has appeared, rivaling the frenzied dread of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Though these events are connected by their proximity to Russian geopolitical ambitions, none occurred during the fractured age of post-truth and trans-media saturation. More than 30 years after the legal dissolution of the Soviet Union, the World Wide Web has reached its dystopian fruition, wherein "the most tone-deaf, self-serving, or bizarre take on a situation that has not materially affected them."[1] Worse still, the digital realm sees rumor, innuendo and suggestion outpace and sometimes replace fact and historical truth.

Though, as Chris Stokel-Walker reminds us, social media coverage of the conflict isn't new, the war in Ukraine through marks both a quantitative and qualitative shift in our mediatized understanding of conflict. Russia's invasion was met with an unprecedented swarm of media influencers and commentators alike, using this historical trauma for self-aggrandizing or amateur reporting. This conflict "is playing out in the age of social media, with memes, misinformation campaigns, and scams all adding to the growing maelstrom of information, which can confuse, contort, and cloud."[2] Though social media's intersectional and convergent nature obscures a precise rendering of the war's digital signature, millions of followers on the most popular apps digest hundreds of thousands of posts per day.[3]

The violence unfolds on the panoply of social media apps every minute, yet two apps center the global digital discourse, emerging as the primary gatekeepers to the flow of online information. TikTok, already an immensely popular social media application, saw a rapid surge in content at the outset of the. In the conflict's first week, "views on videos tagged with #ukraine jumped from 6.4 billion to 17.1 billion—a rate of 1.3 billion views a day, or 928,000 views a minute."[4] Facebook likewise became an unequivocal leader in social media representation of the war. Meta stands firmly at the middle, "of the social media information flow within the conflict zone, with around 70 million users in Russia, and 24 million in Ukraine, approximately half of the total population of each respective nation."[5] More traditional news agencies offer online updates and analysis of the fighting every minute, and news feeds previously populated by the lascivious whisperings of the rich and famous now focus on the daily impact of war and its quotidian horrors. Even notorious gossip agency TMZ portrays the conflict as part of the West's resistance narrative against Russian hegemony.[6]

Ukraine presentation

Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents one of the most shocking events in recent history. Vladimir Putin's brazen violation of its neighbor's sovereignty evinces echoes of global war and nuclear annihilation.

War in modern times is a media event. From the early battleground photos of the American Civil War, to Ernie Pyle's correspondences from the front lines of World War 2, media has played both roles of witness and interpreter to conflagration.

START

The conflict in Ukraine provides a focal point for deconstructing media flows and their intersection with how we perceive history. This event evinces both quantitative and qualitative shifts in the processing of information. By delineating the contested space between mass media and social media, a broader narrative evolves on the increasing relevance of mass-personal communication as both witness and author of history.

How did we get here?

The breakup of the Soviet Union was a convoluted process which left acrimony and distrust in its wake. After 1991, the USSR broke into 15 separate nations, with many border conflicts arising from simmering tensions long suppressed under the Communist government. Today, these areas represent festering ethnic and de jure contests which sometimes turn deadly.

Many former Soviet states maintain corrupt, autocracies. They are often caught between the choices of globalization and Russia, who are constantly wary of the West's economic and social influences on her neighbors.

Ukraine lies at the crossroads of history. Like Poland, the nation represents a fulcrum point between cultures and competing geo-political systems.

2015 marked a shift in Ukrainian sentiment, turning decisively to the West. The revolution acted as a plebiscite, ratifying a future allied to the EU and the protection of NATO.

CONTEXT COLLAPSE

Context collapse is one problem facing researchers.

Another issue stems from the nature of images themselves. War reporting through visual content lacks a fundamental indexical nature. What do we mean by this? Unlike a passport ID, images of burned vehicles, fighter jets in combat, and artifacts of the quotidian resist indexicality. They do not convey an entire story in themselves. Online, images speak a thousand words, and those words have many meanings.

The problem of indexicality, along with context collapse, can obfuscate the flow of events and sustain conspiracy, disinformation and other artifacts of Propaganda.

"In networks that we see out "in the wild," there will be certain individuals who are more centrally located with many connections. There will also be those individuals who have fewer connections…some people who have ties into many groups, although they may only be fringe members…the Internet has no written rules or behavior."
Media Richness Theory provides a framework showing the strong influence of the virtual space on truth-shaping real events.

UKRAINE IS INDICATIVE OF RUPTURES BETWEEN VIRTUAL AND REAL SPACES/REALMS

Ironically, traditional media or mass media channels, which resist social media as both a competitive force and a realm detached from, or at least threatening established regimes of truth and order, now mirror their structure.
Social media flows along 3 qualitative distinctions:
(" Social network scholars Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler (2009) suggest several ways")

1. Scope
2. Specificity

3. Virtuality

News agencies like the BBC, main broadcasters such as MSNBC and FOX now employ presentations to

1. Reterritorialize or contain information/limit of scope

2. Parse information in particular packets for diverse audiences

3. Address the significance of the widening virtual realm

[1] Jennings, Rebecca. "War TikTok is a Mess: Social Media Platforms are Amplifying Misinformation on the Russian Invasion of Ukraine". Vox Media. March 1, 2022.

[2] Hutchinson, Andrew. "How Social Platforms Are Responding to the Crisis in Ukraine." Social Media Today, February 27, 2022. https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/how-social-platforms-are-responding-to-the-crisis-in-ukraine/619497/.

[3] Lothian-McLean, Moya. "The Desperate People of Ukraine Need Help, Not Self-Satisfied Social Media Posts." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, March 8, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/08/ukraine-help-social-media-posts-russia-war

[4] Stokel-Walker, Chris. "TikTok Was Designed for War." Wired. Conde Nast, March 1, 2022. https://www.wired.com/story/ukraine-russia-war-tiktok/.)

[5] Hutchinson, Andrew. "How Social Platforms Are Responding to the Crisis in Ukraine." Social Media Today, February 27, 2022. https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/how-social-platforms-are-responding-to-the-crisis-in-ukraine/619497/.)

[6] Staff, TMZ. "Ukraine's Viral Violinist Vera Lytovchenko Says Student Inspired Bomb Shelter Performance." TMZ. TMZ, March 17, 2022. https://www.tmz.com/2022/03/17/violin-vera-lytovchenko-viral-video-horror-ukraine-russian-invasion/.