Scientific
Research
Publishing

# Tools of Explicit Propaganda: Cognitive Underpinnings

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## Abstract

The article aims to account for the impact of explicit political propaganda by way of divulging the cognitive mechanisms of its main tools. This is a case study of 600 fake news narratives about the political and military crisis in and around Ukraine in 2015-2018 enlisted and analyzed as such on the website *EU versus Disinfo*. In the analysis, I depart from the basic principles of cognitive linguistics and consider the tools of explicit propaganda divided accordingly. The rationale of the first and the second groups of tools is a balance of the logical (like joint attention) and the emotional in human perception. The third group of tools explores the pivotal role of language (in particular, its lexical units and conceptual structures as their underpinning) in construing the world. Considering the third group of tools, I also pinpoint various semiotic codes (verbal and visual) in their combination as a factor that has a great potential for influencing human cognition.

## Keywords

Conceptual Structure, Construing the World, Explicit Propaganda, Fake News, Joint Attention

## 1. Introduction

The era of post-truth politics (Biesecker, 2018), boosted the use of all possible means of manipulating audience's opinions and behavior. Deploying propaganda as its main and efficient device, post-truth politics explores the regulative potential of mass media. In their various communicative formats ranging from footage to simple rumors, they tend to render lapidary messages that media provide as commonly acknowledged facts (truth) or first-hand evidence. In spite of recurrent attempts to register, enlist and disclose them as fakes, these messages still sustain. This obviously suggests that such messages have a powerful impact

on people's mental processes and conditions the necessity to concentrate on cognitive mechanisms of propaganda that demonstrate high regulative potential. Divulging this regulative potential may provide the audience with means of defending against the impact of fake news. They tend to boost a distorted vision of reality and, therefore, coerce people into inadequate and (self-)harmful behavior that, among others, includes communicative practices.

By regulative power of propaganda, I mean its ability to control people's world cognition and behavior (Bernays, 1928; Donovan et al., 1993). It is capable of distorting the view of the state of things that further entails deviations in people's behavioral patterns and coerces them into counterproductive actions, like, for example, involvement in a military conflict.

This scholarship is the case study of propaganda messages that nurture information warfare around Ukraine in the world during 2014-2019. This warfare aims to tarnish the international image of Ukraine by way of distorting its history, current home policy and underpinnings of the conflict in Donbass. Significantly, these messages have not or scarcely transformed during this period, more than that, with their obvious absurdity, they stay pivotal in current arguments between the sides of the conflict. This may be accounted for by the fact that these messages have deep cognitive roots inherent in the tools of propaganda. Like any hate speech, exposed as such, they tend to lose their power (Denton, 2000: p. 89). Therefore, divulging their mechanism is vital for the mitigation of their effect.

## 2. Methods and Data

### 2.1. Methods

The first principal cognitive underpinning of my research is the theory of the construal of the world that following Taylor (1995: 3) views this construal as the result of world perception (cognition) conditioned by all sensual and intellectual abilities of the human, a kind of image of the world portrayed and conceptualized by human cognition (Bondarenko, 2019: p. 295). Its main interrelated functions are interpretative (that enables accounting for all phenomena of the world) and regulative (that coerces the human into acting in exact accordance with his interpretation of reality and otherwise (Postovalova, 1988: p. 25). The regulative potential of the world construal is pivotal for manipulations with conscience, as underhand furthering agenda is a process that firstly entails imposing ideas and secondly coercion into acting accordingly. This may be accounted for by the fact that one rarely acts against one's beliefs.

In many respects, this theory is collateral with the postulates of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Both articulate the role of language and discourse in structuring (political) reality and influencing people's attitudes to it (van Dijk, 1993, 2009; Fairclough, 2003, 2006; Wodak, 2013). Departing from CDA principles, I consider political communication (and therefore, political discourse) as inherently manipulative, since its ultimate aim is gaining power over its addressees (Wodak, 1989). Achieving this goal accords mainly with the interests of the

addresser leaving those of the addressee beyond the scope of political actors (Chomsky, 2002; Auerbach, 2015). In this respect, especially in cases of information warfare (Ventre, 2016; Waltz, 1998) as a component of hybrid war (Hoffman & Mattis, 2005), propaganda takes the short cut to the minds of the audience.

In this research, I will use the definition of propaganda provided by Bruce Smith as:

Information that is <u>not objective</u> and is used primarily <u>to influence an audience</u> and <u>further an agenda</u>, often by <u>presenting facts selectively to encourage a particular synthesis or perception</u>, or <u>using loaded language to produce an emotional rather than a rational response to the information</u> that is presented (Smith, 2016) (emphasis added).

This definition is significant for my research in terms of four following corollaries.

The first corollary is that the information provided by propaganda is not objective. In other words, it creates a distorted image of reality. In terms of cognitive linguistics, this image may be modeled as the construal of the world (Taylor, 1995) or a construal of alternative reality. Secondly, this definition identifies the way of presenting facts. "*Selective* ways encouraging a *particular synthesis or perception*" in cognitive linguistics, stands for a cognitive operation of construing the situation or reality (world). Thirdly, the priority of the emotional over the rational accounts for a special mechanism of perception that entails conceptual entrenchment in memory and therefore, provides a long-lasting effect. The fourth corollary concerns linguistic aspect of propaganda that deploys "loaded language", that is special, usually stylistically marked, vocabulary to formulate lapidary statements. Such statements serve a kind of triggers for the concepts entrenched in cultural memory.

These four corollaries are pivotal for the analysis of the explicit type of propaganda. Distinguishing this type from its implicit one, I depart from the thesis that propaganda is inherently manipulative as it is one of the main tools of achieving power in political manipulative discourse (Auerbach, 2015: p. 2). Explicitness or implicitness of propaganda is a feature that is identified in terms of its manipulative nature, which means that staying *sine qa none* of propaganda (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1999: p. 6), it ranges from its explicit type to the implicit one (Östman, 2005: p. 200). Therefore, explicit propaganda is a way of rendering biased information with more or less *straightforwardly announced* purposes of political communication. Conversely, implicit propaganda is a way of rendering political messages that practices *underhand means* of controlling people's political opinions. Considering four mentioned factors of identifying propaganda, I will group and further feature separately the means of its explicit type, following their nomenclature by Zykin (2007) and Pocheptsov (2012).

To preview my bottom line, they are the following.

The first group makes the tools that transform individual construal of the

world into the distorted collective one. These tools encompass *argumentum ad verecundiam* or *reference to authority* and so-called *support group*. These tools are meant for creating an illusion of the individual's involvement into the group or circles of people identified by the opinions, ideas, and concerns (the construal of the world) initially not inherent in or natural for the individual.

The rationale of the second group of tools is a complex of cognitive mechanisms triggered by emotional perceptive factors (Robinson, Watkins, & Harmon-Jones, 2013). These tools explore the regulative potential of the construal of the world. They encompass *appealing to love*, *hate*, *fears* (*threat*), *sense of guilt*, etc.

The third group includes the means of rendering information that provide "particular synthesis or perception" to the advantage of its author. They fall into two subgroups identified according to different criteria. The first criterion is the nature of structuring information or fallacy, and the second criterion is the semiotic code of the fake. Accordingly, the first subgroup encompasses *false analogies*, *re-scaling* and *local absence of alternative* and the second one includes *fake footage* and *words-triggers*. These means will be analyzed as cognitive operations that transform the individual world construal into the collective one due to the effect of substitution of anchor in terms of non-classic Joint Attention Theory (Turner, 2017). In terms of this theory, I will divulge the mechanism of distorting the construal of reality by way of changing the aspect, scale, or mode of the information that is considered as the anchor of attention for the collective audience.

## 2.2. Corpus and Its Analysis

In the research, I will use the corpus of 600 explicit propaganda narratives that render fake news about Ukraine registered and enlisted by the web site *EU versus Disinfo* within the period of 2015-2018. Run by the European External Action Service East Stratcom Task Force, as its ultimate aim, this site claims compiling and debunking fake news. This site being "the only publicly accessible, international database of disinformation cases" (EU versus Disinfo, 2019) is the rationale behind my choice of the source.

The fake news reviewed by this site may be considered as explicit propaganda, since they directly indicate at the purpose of the information. In this research, the information aims to provide the evidence of the open hostility of the parties. The procedure of the analysis includes the following three stages. At the first stage, I group the news of the corpus according to the type of the means of explicit propaganda. Secondly, I identify the cognitive underpinning, i.e. a possible mechanism that makes this means efficient. At the third stage, I pinpoint a possible consequence of deploying this means in terms of the relevant cognitive theory.

To feature the procedure, in Figure 1 (see Figure 1), I provide a screenshot of the fake news debunked. In the original, it renders the *Facebook* post of the Deputy Dean of the Department of Journalism in Lviv National University. He

expressed his personal negative opinion concerning the students, who still prefer Russian social networks *VKontakte* and *Odnoclassniki*, allegedly threatening them with failure at the exams.
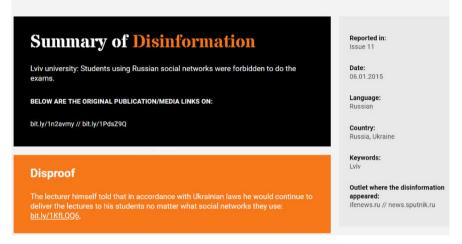


**Figure 1.** The screenshot of the fake news registered on *EU versus Disinfo* site.

Firstly, the analysis of the news presupposes pinpointing the means of manipulation. The news in Figure 1 features *re-scaling*, as the private opinion of one lecturer is manifested as a tendency in the whole educational establishment.

Secondly, I consider this information in terms of non-classic Joint Attention Theory and identify an anchor. As an anchor, this news has an issue of long-lasting repressions towards the users of Russian social networks.

This step leads to the third one, in terms of which I model possible outcomes of using such anchor for transforming the individual world construal into a collective one. It presupposes a transfer of individually neutral attitude to West Ukrainian academic establishments to the collective hostility towards them. Hostility is triggered by allegedly aggressive stance adopted by the lecturer against a Russian speaking Internet service.

## 3. Cognitive Modeling of the Means of Explicit Propaganda

### 3.1. The First Group of the Means of Explicit Propaganda

The first group of the means includes *reference to authority* and *support group*. Cognitively, they explore transformations of the individual construal of the world into the collective one by way of substituting some or all its elements.

#### 3.1.1. Argumentum ad Verecundiam or Reference to Authority

The first group of the means of explicit propaganda includes reference to authority. It is quite popular in political warfare due to its obvious efficiency. Inherited from political rhetoric as fallacy (Goodwin, 1998), it follows the principle that

any argument, however implausible it may be, looks probable when supported by an authoritative opinion. In the corpus of this research, this means splits into three subtypes.

1) The first subtype is the *reference to the internal authority*, i.e. one distinguished as such by the subject of the news (its author). The choice of authoritative personalities is usually conditioned by their position in the hierarchy of the state, from the President to the "source from the government".

To feature this subtype, there is the news about possible freezing or abolishing visa-free regime for Ukrainians in Europe (**Figure 2**).
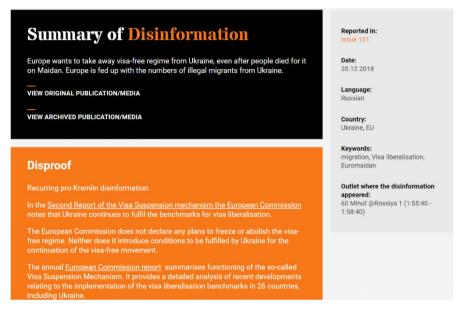


**Figure 2.** The screenshot of the fake news featuring reference to internal authority.

Cognitively, it is underpinned by the individual construal of the world created by the President of Russia. His interview cited during the talk show is presented as an authority possessing some extra knowledge from reliable sources. So, in the initial construal of the world, its element, the concept ASSOCIATION (WITH EUROPE) attributed to Ukraine is substituted by the concept ISOLATION (FROM EUROPE) in the collective construal.

2) Another subtype is the reference to external authority as the source of general truth, such as, e.g. a Greek or Latin philosopher as an author of a truism, a Nobel prize winner, or some respectable historical personality. In the warfare against Ukraine, the personality of Empress Catherine (the Great) (1729-1796) is rather popular. Her personality is deployed for creating a transformed historical world construal where Crimea has been the Russian territory for 235 years due to the Manifesto issued by her (see **Figure 3**).

In terms of cognitive structuring, this type of the reference to authority entails using a well-known historical personality, whose words or actions are considered the vantage point (MacLaury, 2003) for categorizing modern political events as justifiable or not.

## For 235 years, Crimea is Russia's

**Summary of Disinformation**

For 235 years, Crimea is Ours [Russia's]. On April 19, 1783 Empress Catherine the Great issued a Manifesto on Crimea's accession to the Russian Empire.

BELOW ARE THE ORIGINAL PUBLICATION/MEDIA LINKS ON:

newsland.com/community/5101/content/235-let-krym-nash/6305808,
www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3178301

**Disproof**

Crimea is part of Ukraine. In 1783 Catherine II (the Great) annexed Crimean peninsula. After that, rivalry between the Russians and the Turks persisted, and in the Crimean War (1853–56) it expanded into a broader European conflict.

When the Revolution of 1917 led to the collapse of the Russian Empire, the remaining Crimean Tatars declared Crimea to be an independent democratic republic. The peninsula was reorganized as the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in

Reported in:
Issue 105

Date:
19.04.2018

Language:
Russian

Country:
Russia, Ukraine

Keywords:
Crimea

Outlet where the disinformation appeared:
http://newsland.com/community/5101/content/235-let-krym-nash/6305808
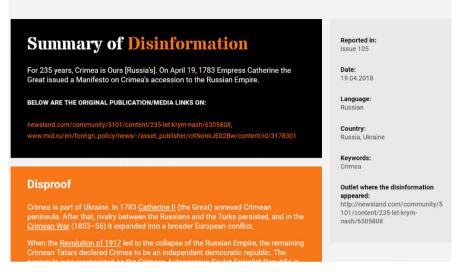
**Figure 3.** The screenshot of the fake news featuring *reference to external authority*.

3) The third subtype of the reference is faked. The personalities, who allegedly passed their opinion, are either overt delegates of the opposite party or the people, who are ascribed the opinion they have never voiced. This type of reference features the least explicit type of propaganda. It creates an illusion of truth by way of culling the most plausible details of the situation that is not immediately relevant to the fact. To feature this type of reference, there is the fake news about the threat of punitive operation against Donbas and Crimea allegedly ascribed to Ukraine's Military General Staff Colonel Yuriy Bobrov. In fact, he did hold the briefing in Kyiv but never mentioned this issue (Figure 4).

## Ukraine's Military command announces punitive Donbas campaign and Crimea offensive

**Summary of Disinformation**

Ukraine's military command announced a punitive campaign aimed at cleaning up Russian occupied Donbas and an offensive against Crimea.

VIEW ORIGINAL PUBLICATION/MEDIA

**Disproof**

The source for this fake story cited by all media who disseminated it is an officer from Ukraine's Military General Staff Colonel Yuriy Bobrov who held a briefing in Kyiv on March 6 to discuss Ukraine's new law on reintegration of the Donbas and de-occupation of Crimea, Ukraine's peninsula that Russia annexed in 2014. Not at any time during the briefing did Bobrov speak about a campaign or an offensive.

Reported in:
Issue 102

Date:
06.03.2018

Language:
Russian

Country:
Ukraine

Keywords:
Military, War in Ukraine, Donbas, Crimea

Outlet where the disinformation appeared:
Regnum

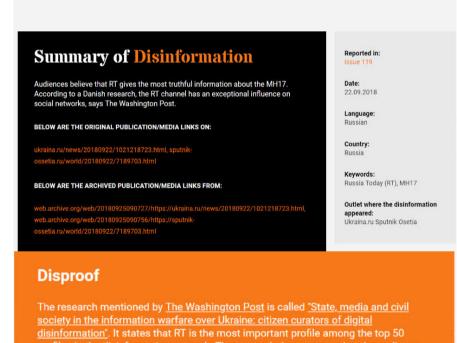**Figure 4.** The screenshot of the fake news featuring *reference to faked authority*.

Cognitively, it is comparable with the other subtypes but one distinct fac-

tor. The source is faked. However, its opinion completely concurs in the opinion of the news author. Therefore, it renders the structure of the construal of the world inherent in the author's one to be further foisted on the collective one.

### 3.1.2. Support Group

Another means of explicit propaganda is a so-called support group. It also widely explores transformations from individual to the collective construal of the world. This means aims to imitate public opinion that is allegedly widely supported by the community. Psychologists account for its efficiency by the fact that people tend to adjust their individual vision if reality to that of the community they belong (Zelinskiy, 2008). In case one's individual idea does not concur with that of the majority, one hesitates about its rightness or objectivity. As an example, there is a screenshot of the fake news standing that global TV audiences trust to RT Channel that is allegedly the most objective in rendering the results of current investigation of MH17 plane crash (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** The screenshot of the fake news featuring *support group*.

Cognitively, this means functions as an interpretative factor of the construal of the world that transforms into the regulative one. The means coerces an individual into supporting the common opinion, though initially, he might have an opposite vision of the situation.

## 3.2. The Second Group of the Means of Explicit Propaganda

This group encompasses the means with another cognitive underpinning. They widely explore regulative function of the construal of the world. Using this mechanism entails affecting emotional perceptive sphere of the human. Explicit propaganda inherently has a great impact on human basic emotions, fear, hate, etc. These means, among many others, encompass *appealing to fear* (*threat*), *compassion*, *love*, *hate*, *sense of guilt*, etc.

### 3.2.1. Appealing to Fear or Threat

Appealing to fear or threat is one of the most efficient means in propaganda. It explores the instinctive regulative factors (e.g. mood) that affect human perception (Forgas & Koch, 2013). In terms of political propaganda, it ranges from most primitive forms of intimidation that triggers fears for one's personal security, to socially significant forms. I will specially concentrate on the latter, since they involve entrenched cultural categories and concepts.

In terms of the information warfare against Ukraine, three most obvious concepts attributed to it are FASCISM, NAZISM and RUSSOPHOBIA. These concepts are deeply entrenched in Slavic historical memory as the most negative and repelling, since almost every family in the former Soviet Union lost some or all its next of kin during WWII.

As an illustration, there is a screenshot of the fake news that Nazi soldiers of WWII of Ukrainian descent will be acclaimed national heroes (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** The screenshot of the fake news featuring *appealing to fear* or *threat*.
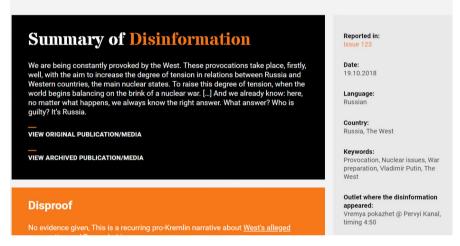
Cognitively, this means provides recurring reference of Ukraine to negatively entrenched concepts, which entails predictable perceptive reaction of the audience. Ukraine therefore, is associated to the potential threat.

### 3.2.2. Appealing to Compassion

This means of propaganda is regularly practised to arouse compassion to the source of information and repulsion towards the opposite party. Here, entrenched concepts like RUSSOPHOBIA, entail furthering agenda of the nation encircled by enemies. This, besides the affective reaction, coerces into consolidation that actuates the regulative function of the construal of the world.

Featuring this means, in Figure 7, I provide the screenshot of the fake news concerning allegedly aggressive stance of the West:



**Figure 7.** The screenshot of the fake news featuring *appealing to compassion*.

The cognitive underpinning of this means is collateral to that of the previous one. In terms of the regulative function of the construal of the world, it triggers emotional reactions that immediately regulate emotional feedback of the audience.

The means of appealing to compassion is also explored in so-called 'first-hand evidence' when a fake victim of some events or their witnesses provide the facts that coerce the audience into feeling compassion.

Featuring this type of means, there is the screenshot that renders the facts published during the press-conference of the spokesperson of Donetsk People Republic (see Figure 8). One of such facts is that Ukrainian army allegedly licenses man-hunting of pro-Russian Donbas citizens by rich customers/hunters from the West.

The verisimilitude of the news is provided by the fake eye-witnesses, who readily confirm every fact. Cognitively, this means aims to affect emotional sphere of the audience, since the evidence of "average" people tends to be perceived as the truth (Honig & Reichard, 2018).

**Figure 8.** The screenshot of the fake news featuring *appealing to compassion deploying witnesses*.

The means featured in this subchapter explore the regulative potential of the construal of the world. This potential is exploited by way of deploying direct affective triggers of mainly negative emotions: hate, repulsion, anger, fear etc. to manipulate the behavioral patterns of the audience.

## 3.3. The Third Group of the Means of Explicit Propaganda

The rationale of the third group of means is distorting the construal of reality that entails transforming the aspect, scale, modality, or general logic in the information. Cognitively, they transform the individual construal of the world into the collective one by way of substituting the anchor of joint attention (Tomasello, 1995). Following its non-classic type, that is the theory of attending a shared object, I divulge the mechanism of so-called "red herring", a tool of propaganda claiming to validate the argument that is obviously irrelevant to it.

This way of validating the argument furnishes particular synthesis of information. Though it is problematic to identify the means *neto*, as they tend to occur in combinations, I single out the means 1) by structuring the logic of information, and 2) by their semiotic coding.

### 3.3.1. The Means of Explicit Propaganda Restructuring Information Logic

In terms of the criterion of structuring the logic of information, I identify such logical fallacies as *false analogy*, *re-scaling* and *local absence of alternative*.

1) *False analogy*

This means of false analogy is adopted when the target phenomenon or some of its features pivotal for propaganda is not familiar to the audience or cannot be easily identified. In this case, they select a collateral phenomenon that is obviously notorious. As an example, Crimean tartar political movements in Crimea

are not familiar to the global audience. Their most articulate feature is Islamic political biases. The first most widely known substitute for any Islamist political organization is ISIS. Therefore, Crimean tartars are directly correlated with ISIS and its terrorist threats in the following rendering (**Figure 9**).

**Kyiv is moving from a civil war to a terrorist war, Crimea was used by ISIS members as a hub**
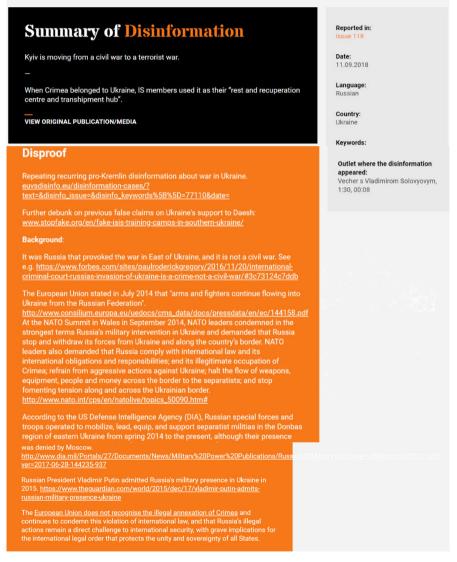
**Summary of Disinformation**

Kyiv is moving from a civil war to a terrorist war.

—

When Crimea belonged to Ukraine, IS members used it as their "rest and recuperation centre and transhipment hub".

—

VIEW ORIGINAL PUBLICATION/MEDIA

Reported in:
Issue 118

Date:
11.09.2018

Language:
Russian

Country:
Ukraine

Keywords:

Outlet where the disinformation appeared:
Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovym, 1:30, 00:08

**Disproof**

Repeating recurring pro-Kremlin disinformation about war in Ukraine.
euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=&disinfo_issue=&disinfo_keywords%5B%5D=77110&date=

Further debunk on previous false claims on Ukraine's support to Daesh:
www.stopfake.org/en/fake-isis-training-camps-in-southern-ukraine/

**Background**:

It was Russia that provoked the war in East of Ukraine, and it is not a civil war. See e.g. https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulroderickgregory/2016/11/20/international-criminal-court-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-is-a-crime-not-a-civil-war/#3c73124c7ddb

The European Union stated in July 2014 that "arms and fighters continue flowing into Ukraine from the Russian Federation".
http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/144158.pdf
At the NATO Summit in Wales in September 2014, NATO leaders condemned in the strongest terms Russia's military intervention in Ukraine and demanded that Russia stop and withdraw its forces from Ukraine and along the country's border. NATO leaders also demanded that Russia comply with international law and its international obligations and responsibilities; end its illegitimate occupation of Crimea; refrain from aggressive actions against Ukraine; halt the flow of weapons, equipment, people and money across the border to the separatists; and stop fomenting tension along and across the Ukrainian border.
http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50090.htm#

According to the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Russian special forces and troops operated to mobilize, lead, equip, and support separatist militias in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine from spring 2014 to the present, although their presence was denied by Moscow.
http://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf?ver=2017-06-28-144235-937

Russian President Vladimir Putin admitted Russia's military presence in Ukraine in 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/17/vladimir-putin-admits-russian-military-presence-ukraine

The European Union does not recognise the illegal annexation of Crimea and continues to condemn this violation of international law, and that Russia's illegal actions remain a direct challenge to international security, with grave implications for the international legal order that protects the unity and sovereignty of all States.

**Figure 9.** The screenshot of the fake news featuring *false analogy*.

The motivation for deploying this means is the absence of general public idea of the Crimean tartars. Cognitively, the anchor of joint attention (Crimean tartars) is substituted by another one (ISIS terrorists) to yield the intended feedback.

2) *Re-scaling*

Re-scaling is a device of propaganda that presupposes purposeful shifts in

the value of the event, phenomena or person to present it as more or less significant than it is. I have reviewed this means of fallacy in part 2. However, its cognitive underpinning needs further elaboration. As an example, there is rendering of the news about Ukraine nearing the top of IMF indebted countries (Figure 10).



**Figure 10.** The screenshot of the fake news featuring *re-scaling.*

In the debunking piece, they stand that Ukraine *is* an IMF indebted country, however, its debt does not reach the critical sum (70.5 percent of GDP) that comparatively, reaches over 200 per cent in some other countries. Therefore, the scale of this event is intentionally exaggerated.

The cognitive mechanism of this means may be schemed the following way. Firstly, they select the anchor of joint attention that usually renders the real fact. In this case, it is the fact that Ukraine is indebted to IMF. As the second step, to further agenda, they transform the size, significance of this real fact or the role of a person in it. Figure 10 renders intentional exaggeration of the situation when Ukraine is placed among the greatest debtors in the world.

Re-scaling is also practiced as overgeneralizing, that is featuring a single event as an overall inherent tendency. This way of manipulating the audience is reviewed in 2.2 (see Figure 1).

The third way is otherwise, undervaluing the event or a person whose role is not to the advantage of propaganda facilitators. This way of re-scaling is featured in the case with a recurring propaganda message that Ukraine is a failing state, since it lacks the key factors that a nation is supposed to possess inherently (see Figure 11).

As featured in Figure 11, an obvious existence of the state is questioned as it allegedly *cannot* exist considering the enumerated conditions. Cognitively, the anchor of joint attention (here, Ukraine as a state) sustains *de jure*, however, its status *de facto* is questioned by way of undervaluing.

3) *Local absence of alternative*

This fallacy device in propaganda functions as a way of creating an illusion

**Figure 11.** The screenshot of the fake news featuring *undervaluing in re-scaling*.

that the idea or an opinion is immanently correct, whereas the alternatives are inherently erroneous, absurd or missing. This illusion is local, since the audience may be limited in terms of sources or range of alternative information.

As an illustration of the local absence of alternative, there rendered the message that the arguing against the current legal status of Crimea is allegedly counter-productive as common sense suggests the opposite (Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** The screenshot of the fake news featuring *local absence of alternative*.

Initially, the status of Crimea is considered disputable. In the process of transformation, this dispute is presented as absurd, since it is a federal subject of Russia.

Cognitively, this means transforms the anchor that rendered a questionable thesis into the unequivocal one by way of re-organizing its conceptual structure. In this argument, I depart from the supposition that the anchor stands for an entrenched category or a concept. This concept viewed as its lexical type by Evans (2006), may be modeled as a trigger to a certain domain. Therefore, Crimea triggering the domain DISPUTABLE TERRITORY is transformed into a trigger of the domain RUSSIAN TERRITORY.

As an intermediate bottom line, the means featured in this subclause, present the explicit propaganda tools that transform the nature of the anchor of joint attention by way of suggesting false analogy with it, re-scaling the value of events rendered by the anchor, or creating the illusion of local absence of alternative featuring the anchor as an ultimate solution of the problem.

### 3.3.2. The Means of Explicit Propaganda in Terms of Their Semiotic Coding

Modality is the underpinning for distinguishing among *fake footage* and *words-triggers*.

In this research, I tag them as the means of explicit propaganda *exclusively* in terms of their content. These means are also easily accessible and effectively deployed by its implicit type. However, explicit propaganda suggests exploring the influential potential of these means extensively, since their perceptive value is augmented by the combination of cognitive factors that I will elaborate in the following subclause.

1) *Fake footage*

The perceptive potential of this means is conditioned by the fact that besides verbal message, fake footage renders the information visually. Cognitively, video messages accompanied by appropriate comments possess a great suggestive power due to the extrapolation of verbal and visual semiotic codes. Following Barthes (1977: pp. 38-39), verbal and visual semiotic systems may either augment each other that stands for the *relaying* function of the former. Otherwise, the verbal code may answer the question *What is it?* that enforces its function of *anchorage*. In case with fake footage, relaying tends to prevail, since explicit propaganda suggests rather obvious visual images.

To illustrate, I consider rendering the fake footage of former supporters of Maidan sharing their testimony of disappointment by its political and economic outcomes five years later (Figure 13).

As they state, its authors themselves admitted to the fakery. The footage was produced in Belarus and performed by the hired journalists.

In cognitive aspect, besides relaying combination of visual and verbal components, there is also the case of structuring a virtual construal of the world, where situations and people account for (in terms of the interpretative function of the
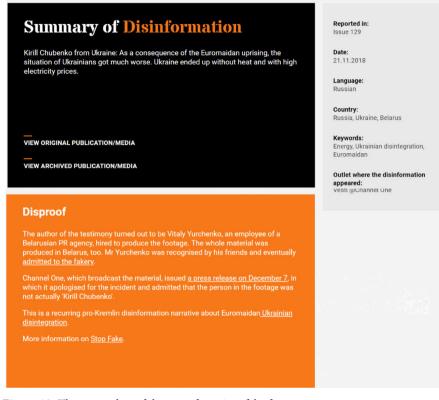
**Figure 13.** The screenshot of the news featuring *fake footage*.

construal) and behave (in terms of its regulative function) to further agenda.

2) *Words-triggers*

Words are monomodal semiotic structures, however, their potential power to trigger the mental images (categories and concepts) of different phenomena of reality is beyond any doubt.

In analyzing the cognitive value of words-triggers, I depart from the thesis that in explicit propaganda, the principle of simplicity is rooted in the search for this feature as fundamental perceptual organization (Chater, 1996). Slogans that inherently appeal to the emotional sphere have a specific structure that revolves around one word, phrase or a lapidary statement that I consider as a trigger. Following Evans' (2006) Theory of Lexical Concepts and Cognitive Models (LCCM), these verbal units render a category or concept entrenched in the memory of the nation or an individual. In my research, this thesis has been elaborated considering appeals to emotions (see 3.2.1). However, this approach is also relevant for analyzing the words-triggers that provide an access to a wide range of cultural domains. These domains constitute the macrostructure of the political construal of the world as a target for transforming by propaganda. However, the transformations themselves occur either 1) in terms of relationships among these elements or 2) in the conceptual complex verbalized by a separate lexical unit

(phrase).

Therefore, the cognitive analysis of words-triggers is to be performed in three stages. The first one presupposes identifying the cultural domains in macrostructure manifest by sematic groups of key words in propaganda messages. Secondly, in terms of the relationships of these domains structured as frame (Fillmore, 1982), I pinpoint the links among them and single out potential realms of propaganda transformations. Thirdly, I analyze transformations in the conceptual structure of particular words-triggers. It is viewed as a system of elements that is subject to alteration or substitution.

So, firstly, with the web online device *Voyant Tools*, I identified the most frequently deployed lexical units on the site *EU versus Disinfo*. Besides inherently most frequent units *Ukraine* (*Ukrainian*) and *Russia* (*Russian*), the word frequency rate in fake news summaries is the following (Figure 14).

| | | | Term | Count |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Voyant Tools |
| | | | Terms | |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 1 | donbas | 40 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 2 | mh17 | 38 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 3 | war | 37 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 4 | crimea | 36 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 5 | west | 24 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 6 | eu | 23 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 7 | kyiv | 23 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 8 | provocation | 19 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 9 | sanctions | 19 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 10 | military | 16 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 11 | poroshenko | 15 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 12 | people | 14 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 13 | world | 14 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 14 | army | 13 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 15 | nato | 13 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 16 | nazi | 13 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 17 | crimean | 12 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 18 | church | 11 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 19 | forces | 11 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 20 | orthodox | 11 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 21 | preparing | 11 |
| ⊞ | ☐ | 22 | western | 11 |

1,308

**Figure 14.** The frequency chart of words used in the summaries of fake news on the site *EU versus Disinfo*.

As it is evident from the chart, the list of 20 most frequent lexical units may be classified in terms of several semantic groups. These are the following: toponyms *Donbas* and *Crimea*; politically glossed toponyms *West*, *EU* and *Kyiv*; names of social institutions and establishments: *army*, *NATO*, *Nazi*, (*orthodox*) *church*; nominatives referring to different resonant personalities, actions or events in the political realm: *Poroshenko*, *MH*17, *war*, *provocation*, *sanctions*.

These semantic groups manifest the main domains that form Ukraine-centered fake news construal of the world. They are the following: HOT SPOTS (*Donbas* and *Crimea*); CONFLICT SIDES ([*Ukraine* (*Kyiv*), *Russia*, *West*, and *EU*]; INSTITUTIONS (*army*, *NATO*, *Nazi*, (*orthodox*) *church*); and RESONANT EVENTS (*MH*17, *war*, *provocation*, *sanctions*).

Secondly, *Voyant Tools* structured the relationship of the most significant concepts verbalized in word-triggers as the following frame (Figure 15).



**Figure 15.** The frame structure of Ukraine-centered fake news rendered by the site *EU versus Disinfo* (generated by *Voyant tools*).

As the scheme reveals, there are three main conceptual interconnected terminals that link the main concepts/domains in the fake news construal. They are: WAR, DONBAS, and MH17. In their turn, each of the terminals is identified with their own slots.

The domain WAR is correlated with another domain DONBAS and has the following relevant subdomains (Figure 16).



**Figure 16.** The frame structure of the concept WAR (generated by *Voyant tools*).

The relevant subdomains are CRIMEA, POROSHENKO, and REVISION that condition the main trends in relevant messages. They are Poroshenko's alleged guilt for war in Donbas, Ukraine's revision of WWII results with Nazi biases, and Crimea reunification with Russia.

The second domain, DONBAS, is linked with war and has the following relevant subdomains (Figure 17).



**Figure 17.** The frame structure of the concept DONBAS (generated by *Voyant tools*).

This structure demonstrates the alleged relevance of NATO to the military conflict in Donbas.

The structure of the third frame is the following (Figure 18).



**Figure 18.** The frame structure of the concept MH17 (generated by *Voyant tools*).

The crash of (the shot at) the plane MH17 is referred to allegations versus evidence, Joint Investigation Team (JIT), and the crucial problem of the exact spot of dislocation and the affiliation of the missile complex.

At the third stage, I will feature the transformations of some of the most frequent words-triggers used in the fake news.

The semantic system of these words may be viewed as a cluster of meaning components. They, on the one hand, activate certain domains in the construal of the world. On the other hand, conceptual structures activated by these words may be viewed as that subject to transformations in the pursuit of propaganda goals.

I consider semantic structure of a lexical unit as means of verbalizing a concept. Its structure may be modeled as a domain matrix (Langacker, 1987: p. 52; Clausner & Croft, 1999: p. 7), since the concept is supposed to have different aspects. The "aspects of the concept [are] specified in a variety of different domains" (Clausner & Croft, 1999: p. 7). For example, the concept COLOR is specified in the domains HUE, BRIGHTNESS and SATURATION (Ibid.)

Following Evans, in different contexts, different components of the conceptual structure become salient. In other words, out of the whole range of components (or semantic potential of the lexical unit by Evans (2006: p. 493) only specific ones are activated.

To feature this process in propaganda, I will analyze the conceptual structure triggered by the lexical unit *Donbas* (*Donets Basin*). Initially, it is a toponymic unit with a stable meaning fixed in the dictionary. By Encyclopaedia Britannica, it is a "large mining and industrial region of southeastern Europe, notable for its large coal reserves. The coalfield lies in southeastern Ukraine and in the adjoining region of southwestern Russia" (Encyclopædia Britannica). The conceptual structure verbalized by the word *Donbas*, therefore, includes the following domains: SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE, UKRAINE, RUSSIA, INDUSTRY, COAL, MINING.

However, in the discourse of propaganda, this lexical unit verbalizes a volatile conceptual structure depending on tagging the conflict by its sides.

As it is featured on the site *EU versus Disinfo*, the corpus of Donbas-related fake news activates the structure that includes the following interrelated domains: DONBAS, UKRAINE and UKRAINIAN (see Figure 19).

In a nutshell, the scheme renders the following predicative potential of the concept: Donbas is a location of military conflict and offensive acts of Ukrainian authorities and armed forces against its own people (civil war) as a backlash of Crimea.

To compare, the corpus of debunking fake news concerning Donbas during the same period renders the following frame structure (Figure 20).

According to these schemes, the predicative potential of the concept DONBAS rendered in the frame is the following: Donbas is the location of international (Ukrainian-Russian) armed conflict (war). It began when Russian Federation
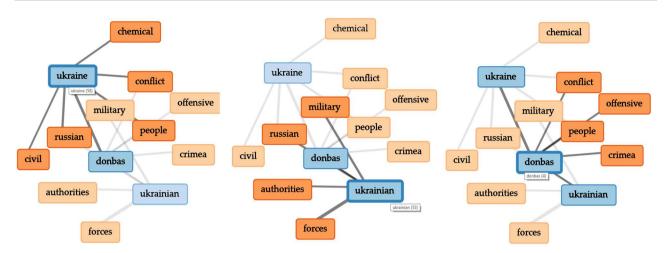
**Figure 19.** The frame structure of the concept DONBAS (generated by *Voyant tools*) in the corpus of Donbas-related fake news on *EU versus Disinfo*.
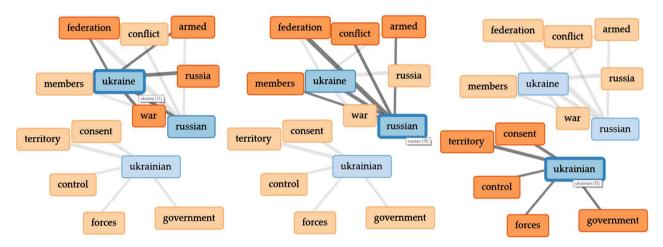


**Figure 20.** The frame structure of the concept DONBAS (generated by *Voyant tools*) in the corpus of debunking Donbas-related fake news on *EU versus Disinfo*.

deployed members of its armed forces to gain control over parts of the Ukrainian territory without the consent of the Ukrainian government. As comparison manifests, the frames in **Figure 19** and **Figure 20** have similar elements. However, at the same time, the predicative potential of the concept that is manifest in the links of the frame is variable. I consider this phenomenon of the *concept structural volatility* as a cognitive underpinning of words-triggers.

On the other hand, words-triggers are deployed when the similar conceptual structure has different verbal manifestations. This is observed when one and the same event or personal role is tagged differently by the opposing sides of the conflict.

As an example, I will feature the concept COMBATANT as the military irregular fighter of self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk "people's republics" ("LNR" and "DNR"). The following chart features the divergence in terminology that serves the indicator of political biases in the media (see **Figure 21**).

As the chart demonstrates, the concept possesses volatile structure that

**Figure 21.** Comparative chart of labels (words-triggers) verbalizing the concept combatant in the media of different states (http://euromaidanpress.com/2019/06/04/war-on-terms-whos-fighting-against-ukraine-in-donbas-terrorists-rebels-insurgents/).

highlights its different elements. Ukrainian press terminology focuses on such elements as 'involvement in acts of terror' in terrorists, 'irregulars' in militants and fighters, 'Russian military interference' in members of Russia's armed formations and mercenaries, and 'self-proclaimed states' in separatists. Conversely, in Russian press, the word-trigger militiamen highlights the element 'civilians', the word rebels focuses on 'opposition or armed resistance against an established government'. The word insurgent is limited in occurrence as it historically tags the members of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), a World War II national-liberation guerrilla movement.

Therefore, to further their agenda, explicit propaganda deploys words-triggers. These means explore volatile conceptual structures of these verbal means that stands for the variable salience of the elements of their conceptual complexes or domain matrices. On the other hand, one and the same lexical unit may activate different conceptual structures, whereas different lexical units may verbalize similar conceptual structures.

## 4. Conclusion

In this research, I divulge cognitive underpinnings of the means of explicit propaganda as a case study of the reviews of fake news revolving around Ukraine of 2015-2018 on the site *EU vs. Disinfo*.

I consider this news as means of explicit propaganda since they evidently render

the message of confrontation between the sides of the conflict.

The rationale behind the analysis of the news is a big range of cognitive linguistics postulates that include Taylor's theory of the construal of the world, non-classic elaboration of Turner's Joint Attention Theory (JAT), Fillmore's frame modeling and Evan's Theory of Lexical Concepts and Cognitive Models (LCCM).

In my research, I elaborate Taylor's theory of the construal of the world. I depart from the principle that the human (in individual or collective sense) interprets the reality according to the system of evolutionary developing systems of ideas, beliefs and prejudices. They continually transform and regulate one's behavioral pattern. This immediate relevance between interpretative and regulative function of the construal of the world is the engine of manipulations by human consciousness in politics and beyond.

Conditioned by the subject of the construal, there is the distinction between its individual and collective types. In politics, the ultimate aim of propaganda is to adjust the initial individual construal of the world into the different collective one to further agenda and coerce into the actions that may be non-constructive.

This principle is the underpinning of the first group of means of explicit propaganda. They entail exploring *argumentum ad verecundiam* or *reference to authority* and so-called *support group*. *Reference to authority* coerces a person into adjusting his own idea of a certain fact or a personality to someone else's authoritative vision. In case with the *support group*, the opinions of the illusive majority make the vantage point for the transformed view of reality.

Complex cognitive mechanisms triggered by emotional perceptive factors regulate the second group of means that include *appealing to love*, *hate*, *fears* (*threat*), *sense of guilt*, etc. Significantly, propaganda as any manipulative technology primarily addresses human emotional sphere. Exploring these means entails influencing the prime human natural instincts and socially conditioned reactions.

The third group includes the most diverse means. In their terms, the information is rendered to provide a particular way of perception to the advantage of its author. These means were considered as two subgroups that fulfil different criteria.

The first criterion is the nature of structuring information or fallacy. This subgroup encompasses *false analogies*, *re-scaling* and *local absence of alternative*. The cognitive underpinning of these means is non-classic elaboration of Joint Attention Theory (JAT). In its terms, I featured the ways the anchor of joint attention is substituted in the collective construal of the world. Analysis of my corpus allowed identifying three types of substitutions. Firstly, in *false analogies* it is fulfilled by suggesting the irrelevant comparison. Otherwise, the anchor is rescaled by overestimating the value of a separate event (personality) or, conversely, undervaluing the tendency. The third approach to restructuring information logic is attracting public attention to the anchor that is rendered as an ultimate alternative. In this case, I consider the anchor as a concept with transformed structure.

The second criterion to unite means of explicit propaganda is semiotic. This

subgroup encompasses *fake footage* and *words-triggers*. *Fake footage* is analyzed in terms of multimodality. Following Barthe's idea of the interface between verbal and visual information, *fake footage* is viewed as complex information where different semiotic codes are complementary. I divulge the cognitive mechanism of *words-triggers* in terms of Fillmore's frame structuring and Evan's conceptual modeling of lexical concepts. The building of the concepts is subject to transformations (demonstrate structural volatility) to pursue the aims of propaganda. This transformation either concerns elements of the conceptual structure or the choice of lexical units that verbalize the same concept.

Practically, the results of this research may be implemented in a wide range of social spheres. On the one hand, the methods suggested are relevant for the analysis of the impact of other types of political discourse, such as referendum or electoral one. On the other hand, the manipulative influence of commercial advertisement, with appropriate reservations, may also be divulged in terms of the universal regularities of human cognition featured in this article.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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