



European Committee
of the Regions



CoR DIGITAL MASTERCLASSES

Social media in times of war - Online battlefield of
Russia's war against Ukraine
Takeaway document



1 Background

For the first webinar of the second edition of the ‘CoR Digital Masterclasses’, the European Committee of the Regions invited experts and specialists in communication, human rights, and social media to discuss the war in Ukraine. This high-level talk focused on the role of social media in the conflict.

143 participants signed up for the webinar, of whom 64 followed the session live.

A recording of the session is [available on YouTube](#).

Overview	
Title of the webinar:	Social media in times of war - Online battlefield of Russia's war against Ukraine
Date:	Monday 25 April 2022
Time:	16:00-17:00 CEST
Organiser:	European Committee of the Regions (CoR)
Audience:	Local and regional representatives, CoR members, European regional associations, regional offices, EU staff.
Speakers:	<p>Andrew Stroehlein</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>European Media Director, Human Rights Watch.</i> • LinkedIn profile • <i>TW: @astroehlein</i> <p>Martyna Bildziukiewicz</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Head of East Stratcom Task Force, European External Action Service.</i> • LinkedIn profile • <i>TW: @MBildziukiewicz</i>
Moderator	<p>Fabrizio Colimberti</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cross-sector media content and outreach expert, Unit D3 Digital communication and IT strategy, CoR.</i> • LinkedIn profile
Welcome and introductory remarks	<p>Betty Tkadlcikova</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Social Media Officer at the CoR.</i> • LinkedIn profile

1.2 Purpose of the webinar

The scope of this Masterclass was to highlight the importance of social media communication during a global crisis, focusing on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Members of the European Committee of the Regions received an overview of best practices to follow on social media in response to the current situation. The session included practical guidelines, insightful tips, and high-level advice on how to use social media to communicate issues about the war to the target audience.

The masterclass covered topics such as the fight against disinformation, the importance of user-generated content, the role of governments and local authorities to convey the right message, and future scenarios.

2. Key Takeaways

The webinar started with a brief introduction by Fabrizio Colimberti and was followed by a round of presentations by each speaker.

Andrew Stroehlein, European Media Director at Human Rights Watch, went through the increasing role digital platforms are playing in crises, conflicts, and war. He underlined the way governments, international organisations, NGOs, and individuals use platforms to document human rights abuses in conflicts, condemn atrocities, appeal to the international community for action and crowdsource relief and assistance. In particular, he touched upon the following crucial points:

- *What have we learned about social media during conflicts after 2 months of war? In reality, no new lessons have been provided. As Europeans, we are much engaged with this war than others (e.g. Syria, Ethiopia, Yemen, Afghanistan, etc.) because it is next door, and therefore seems much more dangerous.*
- *Trends can be seen on three levels: individual users, actions by social media platforms and government efforts.*
- *Individual users: Due to the democratisation of disinformation, everybody acts as a kind of reporter or journalist now, but lacks the skills of a media professional. .. On social media, people make basic mistakes when sharing news and facts (e.g., not verifying information before sharing and incorrectly using anonymous sources).*
- *Social media platforms are improving in regulating content, but too slowly. Platforms are adopting new functionalities and strategies to stop fake news and abuses, but these efforts should be maximised. For example, users can now report abuses themselves, which is a good improvement. Social media platforms should continue to implement their strategies to stop misinformation, block the spreading of fake news and help users avoid trolls and haters' attacks.*
- *Projects funded by governments to counter disinformation are getting it wrong too often. In some cases, these initiatives inadvertently propagate propaganda while attempting to debunk it. This is a basic mistake in social media communication which is also made by individual users.*
- *We should understand that it is not possible to compete with the scale of disinformation on social media platforms. We need to think of users as mini-media outlets rather than passive consumers*

of information. The population should be educated to deal with the social media environment, particularly during a crisis like Ukraine.

Question from the moderator: *Have you noticed some changes in people's behaviour on social media towards human rights and human rights organisations during this crisis?*

Human Rights Watch has a particular role in these situations, which is to investigate abuses, in this case during international conflicts, and develop support for people affected by war crimes and violence. In all conflicts, people want to jump on a bandwagon with one side or the other, and get upset with us when we point out abuses by both sides. Always investigate all abuses and crimes, whoever they are committed by. At the beginning of a conflict, people are very engaged and tend not to leverage critical thinking about problems on both sides. We didn't see any significant change in people behaviours towards our organisations.

Martyna Bildziukiewicz, Head of East StratCom Task Force (ESTF) at the European External Action Service, shared her experience as a crisis communication expert. She gave an overview of the situation in Ukraine and the social media implications during this conflict. She explained how to fight against disinformation in war using social media and digital communication.

- *We are navigating a very polluted information environment. We are up against a disinformation machine that speaks in many languages, uses various platforms and is financed by hundreds of millions of euros yearly from Russia's state budget to reach us and manipulate and push the Kremlin's agenda.*
- *Ukraine has been the main target of Russia's disinformation for years, and the EU and the West have also been targeted for a long time. The attacks have intensified in the run-up to the war, with two main narratives of genocide and Nazism being the most prominent.*
- *ESTF has been dealing with and raising awareness about Russia's disinformation since 2014. Our work concentrates on two strands:*
- *Proactive communications: an effort to come across with our own message; in the context of Russia's aggression, recent examples include the #ARTvsWAR and "Faces of Ukraine" campaigns;*
- *Direct reaction to disinformation via the [public channel EUvsDisinfo](#) and its [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#) accounts. This approach is controversial, but we should keep trying to reach people who seek reliable information.*
- *Thanks to EUvsDisinfo's flagship product – the database of disinformation cases updated every week – we are able to show patterns of disinformation and prove that, in fact, the narratives employed in the current situation are made up of recycled lies. We have seen it all before.*
- *At the same time, the techniques, tactics, procedures and channels used to push those narratives change and evolve constantly. Recent examples include networks of inauthentic accounts on Facebook, using the comments sections in renowned information websites, and Russia's diplomatic accounts on Twitter imitating the work of fact-checkers.*
- *We also work on policy responses, with the recent notable examples of enacting sanctions on Russia Today and Sputnik, as well as on individual purveyors of disinformation.*
- *The current situation is going to get worse and become more complicated. Even though we are getting better at detecting and debunking disinformation, the basic tools that we have to use to*

defend ourselves are in our own heads: critical thinking, the ability to verify information and the capacity to fight the reflex of immediately sharing content simply because it looks attractive. This is what media literacy is basically about and exactly what needs to be invested in on local and regional level, also taking into account local, regional and national vulnerabilities.

Communication recommendations:

- *Be quick (and sometimes dirty). We need to react fast.*
- *Be personal, telling stories about people.*
- *Search for information from the ground.*
- *Work with others to amplify each other's voice.*
- *Know your audience and its vulnerabilities.*
- *Think before you share.*

3. Questions from the audience

- *Did the Russian narrative, in particular about Nazis, influence coverage in the West? It seems that the media is now looking closer at the Azov battalion or other topics and reporting differently than before. Were the reports heavily influenced by Russian propaganda before the 24th of February?*

Martyna: There are no ways of measuring whether the media were influenced more or less by Russian propaganda before the war. Some of these narratives were already in the information space of Western countries and now media are paying more attention to these themes. There is also more news verification. The most important thing is to check and share the most accurate picture possible with people.

Andrew: We have seen some high-quality reports produced by the media over the last 2 months. The most relevant point here is to recognise quality journalism and share it. We encourage people to publish content that is relevant and reliable.

- *What can we do as a local government, apart from alerting people to disinformation? Any recommendations?*

Martyna: Raising awareness about disinformation is important, indeed. We are getting better at detecting and understanding disinformation. Nevertheless, disinformation tactics are also evolving. What we can do at a local level is to develop skills like critical thinking and media literacy. This can help to engage with local fact-checkers and the public.

Andrew: Two points are crucial here. First, people should be able to evaluate information and understand disinformation. Second, we as national or local governments, NGOs, international organisations, etc., need to recognise their active role in the propagation of information. Every single person is a publisher. Everybody is a potential breakpoint.

- *When discussing Russian narrative and disinformation, some people may say “We as Westerners do the same”. How would you reply to that? Sometimes it is like discussing with someone who doesn’t want to listen.*

Martyna: During the pandemic, we published a document with some guidelines you can use when talking to someone with a different opinion than yours. This includes basic tips like staying calm, trying to connect with this person, etc. It can be useful in the current context of the war. What is important is to acknowledge that this is not black and white. The war and the world are much more complicated than black and white. It is also one of the main tactics the Kremlin is using right now by creating this counterpoint. But that is not true: the truth is not in the middle; the truth is exactly where it should be. We need to help our interlocutors to accept this assumption.

Andrew: Even in this case, the best approach is to understand the context and recognise what is worth doing or not. For instance, there is no reason to argue against trolls, people who populate social media just to distract you, annoy you, and fight against you and your opinions. Most of them get paid to do that. Other accounts are close to governments or part of extremist groups. Twitter allows people to block other users, and this capability should be used without wasting time. The debate on social media is different than in real life. We must understand that to prevent the spread of fake news or trolls.

- *Is there a risk of inadvertently creating our own disinformation to combat Russian disinformation?*

Martyna: Yes, there is such a risk. In particular, because people are always in a rush and the span of attention is very low on social media. We all tend to publish content as fast as possible and avoid verifying the news. This makes our job really complex.

Andrew: There is a danger here, but the bigger danger is propagating the narrative you are trying to debunk if you are getting the debunking wrong.

About the Speakers Andrew Strohlein

European Media Director, Human Rights Watch



Andrew Strohlein is European Media Director of Human Rights Watch. Based in Brussels, he oversees media outreach and strategy in Europe, Central Asia and West Africa, and advises on public advocacy via social media across the organisation.

He previously worked as Communications Director of the International Crisis Group from 2003 to 2013, addressing peace and security issues around the world with a particular focus on leveraging media coverage for concerted action to prevent and resolve deadly conflicts. In this position, his previous role at the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, and as a journalist, he has written about violent conflict, post-conflict situations, authoritarian regimes, and post-authoritarian transitions, as well as the role of the media in all of

these. Mr. Stroehlein has reported from Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Kenya, Nigeria, Colombia, Indonesia, and elsewhere, and his commentary articles have appeared in most major newspapers in Europe and North America, and many in Asia and Africa as well.

[@astroehlein](#)

- **Martyna Bildziukiewicz**

Head of East StratCom Task Force, European External Action Service



Martyna Bildziukiewicz is a strategic communications and disinformation expert. She holds a PhD in political science. Joining the East Stratcom Task Force in 2018, of which she became its head in May 2021. The task force, based in the European External Action Service, runs the EUvsDisinfo project – the European Union’s flagship initiative that monitors, responds to and raises public awareness about pro-Kremlin disinformation. Martyna Bildziukiewicz is also engaged in EU strategic communications in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Before she started to explore the dark side of words and messages, she

was a career diplomat, spokesperson of the Polish Permanent Representation to the EU, journalist, and analyst.

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