WARTOK: NETWORKED SOUNDSCAPES OF MEMETIC WARFARE

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This panel investigates the networked soundscapes of memetic warfare on TikTok, a platform crucial in mediating the ongoing war in Ukraine since February 2022. Introduced to the public as a unique form of war programming during the first week of Russia's full-scale military invasion (Mobilio 2022), WarTok—a portmanteau of 'TikTok' and 'war'—signifies "the war of super-empowered individuals armed only with smartphones" (Friedmann 2022). Producing headlines such as "TikTok's Amazing Russian-Ukraine War Videos," (Figure 1) the term necessitates critical and ethical scrutiny, not only for its sensationalist stance but also for the collapse of contexts it entails. Integrated into a platform that thrives on remixing, WarTok seamlessly intertwines on-the-ground war reporting with war propaganda—an aspect explored across all panel contributions through the lens of music.
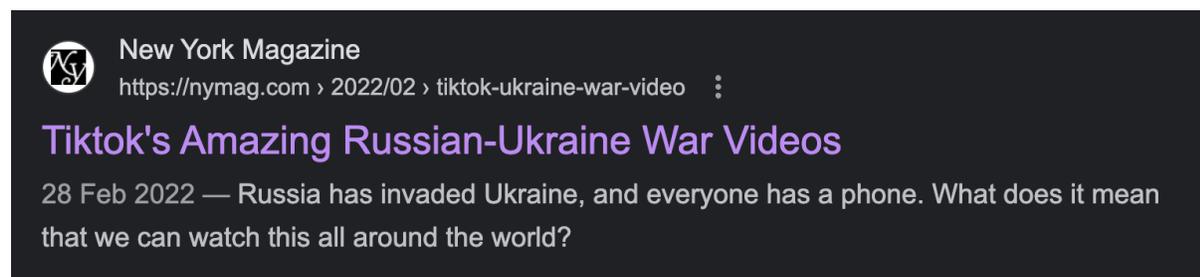

Figure 1: *A screenshot of Google Search recommendation for the term "WarTok".*

Networked Soundscapes

The choice for sound as the primary step in our exploration not only derives from the platform's logic of content creation, it also acknowledges music's affective impact and its historical role in propaganda (Thompson & Biddle 2013). Music on TikTok serves as both an affective mediator and a highly templatable networker. Recent studies highlight the templatability of TikTok sounds, offering insights into content creators' attention-grabbing techniques (Abidin & Kaye 2021), logics of trend dilution (Bainotti et al., 2022), issue-specific remix cultures (Primig et al. 2023), and infrastructural meme collection (Rogers & Giorgi 2023).

Aural linkages between templates can intersect with other platform-native modalities of expression, producing networked soundscapes. A soundscape, as we approach it by leaning into TikTok's logic of indexing "listed" and "original" sounds, foregrounds audio as the main memetic stratifier, opening up different paths for navigating content (Geboers et al., forthcoming). Hashtags and sounds, for example, can turn into a source of mutual amplification or may remain disengaged even when united through technical means (Pilipets 2023). Feeding into contested attentional dynamics of digital media (Boler & Davis 2021), propaganda by means of TikTok sharing takes on a new dimension in a highly contested space, which is said to "raise memes to the level of infrastructure" (Zulli & Zulli 2021).

Memetic Warfare

Often driven by a cynical hunt for eyeballs, memetic warfare on social media taps into humor and mockery, inviting playful participation (Divon 2022), channeling disinformation (Bösch 2023), and using agitainment to captivate publics beyond the explicitly political (Tuters and Noordenbos forthcoming). In the context of war propaganda, memes become central agents of partisan bonding through recognizable templates and inscribed in-group cues (Arkenbout & Scherz 2022). TikTok music expands the toolbox of crafting memes, opening up new venues of boundary work and populist instrumentalization (Boichak & Hoskins 2022).

TikTok is renowned for its ability to implant short video earworms, perceived as stickier than complete songs (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin 2022). Some attribute this phenomenon to the cognitive principle that human memory retains unfinished tasks more effectively than completed ones, generating affective tension (Carson 2022). Walter J. Ong's "secondary orality", a concept revived by Venturini (2022), is one way to address this tension in online spaces where written words often become spoken words and where evanescence is ingrained into the logic of engagement. Foregrounding the memetic function of TikTok, the panel sets out to explore how the ultra-nationalist landscape of Russian WarTok and the tactics of pro-Ukrainian hijacking intertwine in a complex ecology of imitation and attention hijacking.

The first paper inquires into memetic tactics of disinformation carried through sound, applying the typology of information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017) to the notion of computational propaganda understood as the "use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute false information over social media networks" (Woolley & Howard 2019: 3).

The second paper discusses the appropriations of Ukrainian popular music for purposes of Russian propaganda by focusing on two TikTok sounds: "Доброго вечора Where Are You From" by the Ukrainian duo ProBass and Hardi, also known as "Good evening, we are from Ukraine" and its pro-Russian adaptation "Good morning, we are from Russia".

The third paper explores the affective entanglements of warped time within the soundscape of "Священная Война" ("The Sacred War")—one of the most famous Soviet songs of the Second World War that has been variously reenacted during the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The fourth paper assesses the networked templatability of "Катюша" ("Katyusha")—a Soviet folk-based military march, which became a popular TikTok techno-remix shared by the so-called Russian war influencers along with a set of characteristic memetic features such as effects and stickers.

The fifth paper interrogates ambiguous stance-taking and oppositional sound publics on Douyin with particular attention to how public sentiment about the war in Ukraine takes shape through links between hashtags and sounds.

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THE SOUND OF DISINFORMATION: TIKTOK, COMPUTATIONAL PROPAGANDA AND THE INVASION OF UKRAINE

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Introduction

TikTok has become a focal point for spreading misinformation and disinformation about the ongoing war in Ukraine in 2022/23. Videos with the hashtag #Ukraine were viewed 36.9 billion times in the first three months of the war (TikTok 2022), and the short-form video platform, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, served as the harbinger of war while communicating high volumes of videos containing fragments of misinformation and disinformation. This spread of false information represents a burgeoning issue within societies governed by platforms that provide unfettered access to individuals for the purpose of creating, sharing, and distributing fallacious information to a worldwide audience (Jeangène Vilmer et al. 2018).

Besides more traditional strategies to distribute false information on the platform via images, text, and video, novel ways occurred during the war in Ukraine when creators innovatively used the popular sound feature as a means of disseminating both misinformation and disinformation. Considered as the "backbone of the app" (Richards 2022), sound accompanies nearly all visual content on the platform. Besides choosing existing music from TikTok's library, audio is an interactive experience on the platform where users can add voice overs, effects, or multiple audio layers to their videos, automatically linking the sound to an overview page that lists all videos using this sound

("sound page"). Furthermore, creators apply sound as a visibility strategy by adopting trending songs, rewarding their videos with wider discoverability by the algorithmic recommendations, serving to shape users' experiences (Bhandari & Bimo 2022).

Theory

To understand the manifestation of mis- and disinformation carried through sound on TikTok, we contextualize our observations with a Computational Propaganda lens, described as the "use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information" (Woolley & Howard 2019: 3) where misleading information is understood as mis- and disinformation (the latter with an intention to deceive) (Wardle & Derakshan 2017). The features of computational propaganda are (1) Automation: allowing propaganda to scale up, (2) Scalability: allowing colossal and instant reach within content distribution, and (3) Anonymity: allowing the perpetrator to remain unknown. Sound-based computational propaganda has not yet been extensively researched, as previous focus was on textual forms of mis- and disinformation (Dan et al. 2021).

In our paper, we unwrap computational propaganda strategies to spread false information. As our study focuses on TikTok's audio-meme, we apply a typology of mis- and disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017) creating a map of diverse memetic sound-based videos carrying false information. This typology ranges from low (satire and parody content) to high volume (fabricated content). While fabricated content is not neatly demarcated (it potentially overlaps with the other categories in the typology) Wardle (2020) utilizes intention 'to deceive and do harm' to single out high volume disinformation.

To date, this typology has not yet been applied to sound-based false information. By connecting these findings to the computational propaganda features and applying them to sound, we offer a unique level of insights, asking: (Q1) Automation - How is sound used to spread false information on TikTok? And which role does automation play? (Q2) Scalability - How successful is the usage of sound concerning performance and reach (views, likes, interactions)? (Q3): Anonymity - How can sound-based disinformation be traced back to its perpetrators?

Method

To explore computational elements in war-related TikTok content, we adopted an exploratory user-centric approach utilizing the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) from the perspective of a TikTok user using an analytical eye. The walkthrough method engages with an app's interface to understand its technology and cultural references, revealing its user guidance. To reduce bias, we established a research-oriented account with varied SIM cards but the same geolocation (outside Ukraine). After a month of scrolling, we amassed a collection of 300 videos featured on our war-trained "for you" page. All videos contained auditory elements, utilizing songs, audio clips, human speech, sound effects, and audio mashups. We used purposive sampling (Sandelowski,

1995) to select information-rich cases and identified eight sound-based examples that aligned with Wardle and Derakshan's (2017) framework of mis- and disinformation, further categorized by the intensity of information disorders, ranging from (1) low volume with satire and parody content to (3) high volume with manipulated and fabricated content. Finally, we conducted multimodal content analysis (Zeng et al., 2021) for each sound, revealing how auditory elements influenced videos and shed light on computational propaganda dimensions on the platform.

Preliminary findings

So far, our findings show an entangled landscape of dis- and misinformation narratives distributed by audio memes. Mapping of 24 significant sounds using Wardle's and Derakshan's (2017) grid captures three levels of false information. First, low-volume mis- and disinformation videos utilizing sound included parody videos of a soldier dancing to Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal" posted by the Ukrainian soldier Alex Hook (@alexhook2303). The viral video accumulated 88M views had the "potential to fool" (Wardle & Derakshan 2017) as it signaled unjustified optimism by disguising the strength ratio of both military forces and implying a narrative of future Ukrainian victory demonstrating the scope of scalability on the platform.

Second, middle-volume mis-and disinformation videos utilizing sound include the "Russian warship go fuck yourself meme" that qualifies as "misleading use of information to frame an issue" (Wardle & Derakshan 2017). Ukrainian users recontextualized the radio message "Russian warship, go fuck yourself" by a Ukrainian border guard during the Russian attack on Snake Island on February 24, in which 13 Ukrainian soldiers were detained by Russian force. Users turned the radio message into an audio-meme attracting 64.6M views while falsely claiming the soldiers had died as heroes in the battle for the island, showing generic imagery of "death" soldiers, and infusing the sound with patriotic commemorative sentiments.

Third, high-volume mis- and disinformation videos utilizing sound include several examples of fabricated content being "100% false" (Wardle & Derakshan 2017). We identified a sound including gunshots and screams ("оригинальный звук"; English: original sound) with Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian users filming out of their windows with shaky hands showing a potential war situation with them being attacked by allegedly Russian forces. The original sound could be traced back to a source video recorded in a football stadium with firecrackers being lit and fans shouting. The top five videos using this sound have a combined view count of 24.7M.

Discussion

Our paper suggests that audio memes work as a contagious force being utilized as an automated mechanism of computational propaganda on TikTok and play a crucial role amidst the invasion of Ukraine. Our examination of sound-based videos spreading false information shows that features of automation, scalability and anonymity are verifiable. (Q1) Automation strategies include audio memes and pre-scripted texts for fast

distribution that are (Q2) scaled up to 88 million views per video with (Q3) coordinated campaigns that can be traced back to Russian and Ukrainian origin with perpetrators disguising their intent by applying strategies like deleting the TikTok video with the original sound. By better understanding the features of computational propaganda on a platform that accommodates more than 1 billion monthly active users (TikTok 27 September 2021), we hope to have a part in countering the spread of false information concerning those events and providing users with future literacy about the platform's distribution system.

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"ДОБРОГО ВЕЧОРА WHERE ARE YOU FROM": MEMETIC REVERSAL, CULTURAL APPROPRIATION, AND SOUND HIJACKING

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Sound memeification, platform-specificities & performing national identity

WarTok's content has boosted morale among Ukrainian troops and civilians, who use the platform to connect with others and share their experiences (Lowery 2022). Alongside, serving as a means to cope, share on-the-ground information, and diversify perspectives (Chayka 2022), decades-old practices of cultural reappropriation driven by colonialist incentives, unfortunately, take root on the platform. This paper sheds light on the ways in which TikTok affords the continuation of theft and reappropriation of Ukrainian music by Russian actors. TikTok's sound infrastructure is instrumentalized for the purpose of erasing Ukrainian identity through sound memeification that, in turn, invites platform-specific tactical practices of propagation or pushbacks. In the context of national identity boundary-work, the platform specificity of TikTok materializes via particular user practices that the platform adds to the typical practices of 'viewing, interacting, creating, and disseminating' (Jenkins et al. 2015). Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin (2022: 903) argue that TikTok's "use this sound" feature adds particular in-group values that include signaling belonging to a certain country, language, and music style: "The TikToker does not merely partake in a popular trend, but also participates, self-expresses, and identifies with a network of like-minded others who share their multiple interest affiliations."

Music tethered to Ukrainian cultural heritage is of paramount importance to Russian propagandist actors as it can be flexibly 'bended' culminating into counterimitative modes of engagement and identity performance. In the words of Abidin and Kaye (2021) these can turn into 'dark innuendos', producing malicious and cynical forms of appropriation. Within the realm of Russian propaganda on TikTok, such innuendos emerge via thefts of Ukrainian music and hijacks of its cultural associations and historical meanings. In the context of online culture wars and memetic warfare (Nagle 2017), these acts of appropriation feed into broader ecologies of war propaganda shaping public opinion about the course of the conflict. Russian state-backed media and social media accounts have used memes to spread disinformation, sow division, and promote their preferred narrative of events in Ukraine. Meanwhile, Ukrainian memes have become part of modern folklore used (along with songs and poetry) to counter Russian propaganda in simple metaphorical language (Antoniuk 2022).

Soviet rule and the rhetoric of assimilation

Historically, Russian colonialism had a profound impact on Ukrainian culture. Ukraine was long under Soviet rule, and Ukrainian language was systematically suppressed. The Soviets appropriated Ukrainian (among other) cultures, claiming their heritage as their own and erasing their origins (Velychenko, 2002). The colonial repressive

mechanism aims to create the illusion of a homogenous space in which language, cultural norms, and traditions are unified. Everything that was once imposed upon the periphery becomes familiar and assimilated (Velychenko, 2004).

As the periphery becomes part of the center, the erasure of local cultural characteristics becomes associated with 'emancipation' through the boundary work of "authenticating narratives" (Reddi et al. 2021) that on TikTok, of course, is presented with cynicism. The hijacking of Ukrainian songs on TikTok by Russian TikTokers is not just a matter of cultural appropriation, but rather an important tactic in a war of forms and senses, in which attention is weaponized by means of memetic reversal. In this context, sounds and images attuned to (the preservation of) Ukrainian culture and identity become a vulnerable target for Russian imperialism and Kremlin-propagandist actors. The cultural frontline is just as important as the war frontline— and by stealing Ukrainian songs and using them to humiliate and degrade Ukrainians, Russian TikTokers are perpetuating this ongoing cultural war. This paper investigates how such cultural wars are fought out on TikTok and how the material affordances of the platform shape its tactical practices.

The hijacking of *Good Evening we are from Ukraine*

The sampling methodology utilized in this study partly relies on Gerbaudo's recommendations for snowball sampling (Gerbaudo 2016). Romele and Furia (2020) built on this work to encompass digital hermeneutics in which following digital traces is the leading rationale: "Whereas the notion of data presumes a particular architecture, the notion of trace is more minimal, positing merely the detection of a thing or movement and the recording of this" (Marres 2017: 54). Tracing selected sounds that were relevant during particular time frames of significance, we abided by what Gerbaudo (2016) labels 'zoom-in sampling'. TikTok's sound indexing infrastructure allows for searching the platform via song titles. We could identify additional songs that were used under another title but that would pertain to the same song. The first case study relates to the original song "Good evening, we are from Ukraine!"—a famous phrase during the war, as well as a track by PROBASS ∆ HARDI, released in October 2021. Although it was initially used on TikTok with videos displaying various contexts, quickly after the invasion of the country, it evolved into an unofficial military salute in Ukraine. The head of the Mykolaiv Regional Administration Vitaly Kim, as well as the Minister of Defense Reznikov, and journalists begin their video addresses with the main lyrics of the song.

A Russian modulated/remix version appeared on TikTok mid-March, and has about 10,000 videos with this sound at the time of writing. There are three main versions of this sound: 1) The first uses the same music, but the lyrics go "Good morning, we are from Russia" (*Dobroe utro, my iz Rossii*). 2) The second version starts the same as the Ukrainian one but interrupts in the middle with a sound from "Masha and the Bear", quoting "No-no-no, I can make it tastier," and then we hear "Good morning, we are from Russia" (*Dobroe utro, my iz Rossii*). 3) The third sound is the least popular but still worth mentioning, it starts with "Good morning, we are from DNR" (Donetsk People Republic), and then we hear a mutilated sound from the original version.

Discussion

The case of Good Evening Ukraine/Good Morning Russia is a clear example of a hijack where the only speech remix is the replacement of the main lyric of the song, keeping intact the recognition value by way of simple reversal. Ironically, this way of retaining elements of an audio meme propagates pro-Russian sentiment as much as it works to underpin Ukrainian ownership of the original. From reading speech patterns in texts overlaid on top of the videos, it is clear that this case study effectively fits better what Reddi et al. (2021) conceptualize as boundary work through 'authenticating narratives' revolving around national identities.

The key predictors of memetic success on TikTok—visibility, editability, and association (see Treem & Leonardi 2012; Hautea et al. 2021) are all present: recognizable and easily replicable, the hijacking of Good Evening Ukraine exemplifies how audio memes can, in their replicability, not only go viral but also serve the tactical purposes of cultural appropriation and attention hijacking. By tactically making use of pro-Ukrainian hashtags such as #путинхуйло (translated freely to Putin is a dickhead) and the queer flag emoji usually not associated with Kremlin propaganda, pro-Russian creators of the Good Morning remix plugged their spinoff in pro-Ukrainian audiences, serving the aims of assimilation of the 'periphery' to a Russian center.

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AMBIENT PROPAGANDA: THE DARK REFRAIN OF WARTOK

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TikTok is an unusual platform, and to make sense of its role in political communication we need somewhat unconventional ideas. Analyzing a corpus of pro-Kremlin videos that all use the same Stalin-era marching song, this paper sets out to rethink the spread of propaganda in a decentralized media environment through the conceptual lens of 'ambience'. The classic definitions of propaganda all have one thing in common, the idea of an intentional agent with the objective to manipulate. Yet intention is a slippery concept when discussing contemporary, networked forms of power. In order to address this, we argue for replacing a model of propaganda premised on the linear transmission of communication with a decentralized model of ambience and attunement, where boundaries "dissolve" between "subject and object, human and nonhuman, and information and matter" (Ricket 2013: 1).

Our theoretical premise is that conceptual metaphors theorizing information flows in terms of content, storage, or transportation fail to recognize that (successful) contemporary propaganda defies the clear-cut hierarchies, linearities, and distinctions of top-down twentieth-century communication Recent scholarship acknowledges that social media networks have revolutionized propagandistic communication, making it function by "other means" (Boler & Davis 2021), and specifically in ways that are more "participatory" (Wanless & Berk 2020), "computational" (Woolley & Howard 2016), and "collaborative" (Starbird, Arif & Wilson 2019). Today, common users of social media, enhanced by algorithms and forms of automation, have an active role in the creation, curation, "amplification" (DiResta 2021), and distribution of propaganda.

What remains undertheorized, however, are the (affective, embodied, mimetic) mechanisms through which such new interactions with propagandistic content take shape Whereas the classic "transportation theory" of communication holds that the content of a communication is that which it contains, what is called the "resonance theory" studies how media messages activate reservoirs of ideas (Schwartz 1974; Paasonen 2019). On TikTok, such resonance initially occurs on the level of affect, for example through viral videos, which reverberate with and set ideas and ideologies in motion (cf Buchanan 2020: 34).

In order to explore this theory, the paper looks at how TikTok's affordances –the videos' shortness; looping repetitions of sounds; 'hashtag stuffing'– are at once used to distinguish content and users while at the same time creating imbrications across different (social, ideological) axes and temporalities. These dynamics create unique attentional environments, characterized by 'fluidity', embodied synchronization,

memefication, and the 'viral' propagation of disinformation. Making sense of their disruptive effects has posed significant challenges to communications scholars (Bennett et al. 2018). It is against this background that the paper introduces its theoretical frame, proposing that the analyzed sound meme pivots on forms of bodily, sonic and ideological attunement with the "ambience" of pro-Kremlin "WarTok."The paper's perspective subscribes to the "participatory propaganda" model in recognizing the pivotal involvement of online crowds in persuasive and manipulative communication. Yet our conception of ambience breaks with this model by spotlighting not the (intentional) agency of participants (nor that of state actors), but the material agency of memetic online environments themselves. Taking inspiration from updated models of Althusserian interpellation, we conceive of participants, amplifiers and orchestrators of propaganda as situating themselves in, and "ambiently" attuning themselves to, these environments. Through their interpellating force social media ecologies co-shape agency (Chun 2016: 59), while simultaneously implicating subjects in ways that blur distinctions between subject and interface.

The paper explores this theoretical framework through a case study of pro-Kremlin WarToks, looking in particular at content organized around variations of the patriotic World War II march "Священная война" (The Sacred War). Combining quantitative and qualitative methods, we set out to analyze the unlikely, viral resonance that this pathos-laden war song has recently acquired. We first collect a corpus of 2,344 videos that use this sound and then analyze their content. We discuss how these TikTok videos create affective, aural and visual resonance between the 2020s and the (mythologized) 1940s, as well as earlier historical periods. Our analysis shows how, in these videos, persuasiveness is anchored not in the content itself, but in the ritualized, affective gesture of its repetition, as well as in the aural and visual resonances suggested between seemingly incommensurable contexts and positions. As such, this paper offers a participatory and media ecological update on a mass media concept (propaganda), which suggests—at both the level of form and of content—that we are not yet done with the enduring legacies of the violent 20th century.

We situate the videos in the context of a Putin-era World War II cult that pivots on "the performative denial of temporal distance," and that tends to "leave[...] out all traces of historical, political, or, for instance, ideological incommensurability" (Oushakine 2013: 273). What we add to these insights, however, is an analysis of how TikTok's material affordances allow for specific temporal montages that erase distinction and generate the resonances on which ambient propaganda relies. The characteristic non-linearity of these clips is exacerbated by their looping repetitions which make historically disparate markers resonate, rather than cohere in a linear narrative sequence. Covering episodes as far apart as Alexander Nevsky's 13th-century crusades, to the Russian imperial resistance against Napoleon's invasion, and the Soviet battle against German Nazism, the clips invoke a timeless Russian victory. The wished-for imminent defeat over the Fascist enemy, articulated in the original song's lyric, as well as its looping, metric beat on TikTok, suggest that time marches on, inevitably toward a new installment of the same Russian triumph.

As a case study we focus on a subgenre of the video in which 21st-century young Russian women transform themselves into uniformed Soviet soldiers from World War II while lip-synching to "The Sacred War". We focus on how these content producers, through their videos, attune their bodies to the affordances of the platform. In comparing these specific TikToks with the rest of their output on the platform, we speculate on how they may likely have been interpellated as propagandists through their 'For You Page'. We conclude by considering how ambient propaganda reproduces itself in part algorithmically, through decentralized processes that may not be orchestrated by the Kremlin, which, however, certainly benefits from it.

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WHAT IF THEY ATTACK? КАТЮША AND THE COUNTERMOBILIZATION OF SOUND

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Introduction

In their conceptualization of the 'aural turn', Abidin and Kaye (2021) underline the ambiguous role that sounds play in the processes of meme circulation on TikTok. By repurposing the engaging infrastructure of sound-linking (Pilipets 2023), our research upholds sensitivity to how this infrastructure gives rise to what Boler and Davis (2021) call 'propaganda by other means'. Contingent on participation, propaganda by means of TikTok sharing encompasses multi-modal video performances circulating in a decentralized fashion. Musical sound as the amplifier of affect (Hennion 2015) here also serves as the main networker, allowing us to approach TikTok content in terms of its capacity "to propagate, move and be moved" (Kahn, 2009, p. 26).

Our case study pertains to a networked template that is tied together by a techno remix of the famous Soviet folk song *Катюша* (*Katyusha*) and emerges within a 'soundscape' of original sounds frequently appearing together with pro-Russian hashtags including #россияʀᴜ (Russia), #мненестыдно ("I'm not ashamed"), and #zанаших ("For our boys"). The composition of co-hashtags and audio remix—as well as other networked components—such as effects and stickers—will be at the center of our analysis, allowing for a critical exploration of the affective affordances (see Geboers 2020; Hautea et al. 2021) that propel engagement within the nationalist sphere of Russian WarTok.

Exploring heterogeneous forms of audiovisual reenactment as the main driving force of memetic warfare, our paper engages with characteristic organizing principles of

templatability (Leaver et al. 2020) that on TikTok are said to emerge through replication "at the platform level" (Zulli & Zulli 2021). By discussing how TikTok affordances of the "effects tab" and "use this sound" button facilitate affective loops of imitation and counterimitation (Boler & Davis 2018), it offers a quali-quantitative analysis of a subset of 1938 videos published with a popular "original sound" variation of *Катюша.* Since many videos were removed from public view due to the content restrictions of the "splinternet" (Kerby 2022), our data are partial in capturing the templates then in circulation. Nevertheless, the song provides a valuable entry point into the study of highly contested Russian war influencer ecologies (Shadijanova 2022).

Methodological constellation

Our methodology acknowledges the sound infrastructure of the platform in which listed sounds from the TikTok-embedded sound library are densely intertwined with tweaks, reworkings, and spin-offs also known as "original sounds". In the context of Russian propaganda, such practices of audio remix are instrumentalized for political purposes such as the hijacking of songs to subvert their meanings. Resulting audio artifacts therefore may contain traces of 'disguised' sound templates, which are not easily accessible through keywords and require qualitative platform walkthroughs (Light et al. 2018) sensitive to the contextual nuance of associated platform features.

As Leaver et al. (2020: 44-45) point out: "Interpreting other people's engagement with social image-sharing is aided by surrounding contextual information, be it captions, hashtags, profile information, comments, or other annotations." Intertwining in the streams of user-generated and platform-distributed content (Niederer, 2016), these features, essential for meme detection, also generate metadata, which we collected using the Digital Methods Initiative's browser tool 'Zeeschuimer' (Peeters 2022) and explored with particular attention to visual patterns.

By tracing patterns and variations in the composition of memetic content, we propose a methodological approach attuned to TikTok's multi-modal layers of engagement. For this paper, we tested several research techniques aiming not only at the recognition of audiovisual similarity in *Катюша* video templates but also at further contextualization of these templates through composite images (Colombo 2018). As we demonstrate below, such analytical devices offer a means of simultaneous close-looking and cross-reading. They are 'metapictures' framed in a manner of display that enables critical reflection on them (Rogers 2021; Mitchell 1994).

Preliminary findings

A sample of video frames presented in Figure 1 exemplifies how networked templatability amounts to a 'skeletal masterplot' (Mäkelä et al. 2021) that sets up a theatrical mode of situation and suspense (Wang & Suthers 2022). Situation is established by TikTok performances, it is a flexible setting, which can be demarcated by hashtags, sounds, and emojis in video captions. Suspense builds up as a continuation of the situation.

In the memetic setting of *Катюша* videos, a sticker text stating in Russian "*I am afraid: What if they attack?*" demarcates the situation that extends into suspense through the embodied gesture of folding hands in a prayer-like fashion. When the video shows a flashy effect, allowing for the magical appearance of Putin, Kadyrov, and Lukashenko, suspense dissolves and the accompanying sticker text reads: "*They will not attack*". The resulting composition combines two propaganda temporalities: one of anxiety and one of affirmation. The first scene represents the anxious present and the next adds an imaginary twist to this present in which staged fear becomes obsolete.
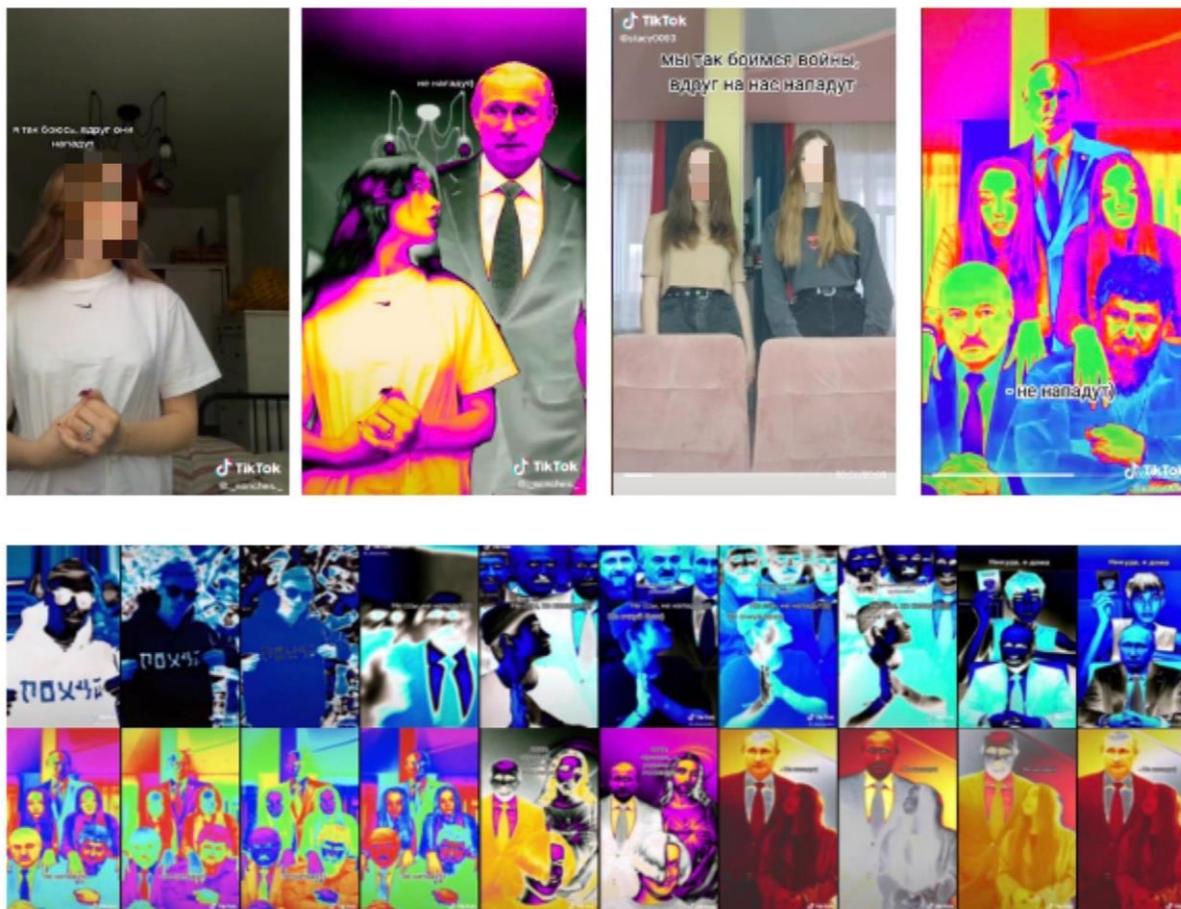

Figure 2: Two examples of memetic juxtaposition in the "What if they attack—they will not' Катюша template. Below: Grouping frames extracted from a selection of videos adapting the same template by visual similarity in a montage.

A parallel can be drawn to an inverted logic of "predictive projection", which Finnin and Roozenbek (2022) have described as a characteristic reflection of the Kremlin's own intentions based on what it says others will do first. Unpacked through the video background effect "на фоне видео", the sticker text, and pro-Russian hashtags, the template transports the message that Putin's government has been propagating since the beginning of the war. Exploiting the imagination of a Western threat, the message

asserts: 'We' must attack first in order to prevent 'them' from even trying.

Discussion

Networked propaganda on TikTok draws its force from the combinations of expressive features. Multimodal intersections of sounds, hashtags, video effects, and stickers reinforce engaging potential by design. Creating an atmosphere of anxious anticipation, Катюша videos derive their impact from the affect-laden folklore song and a suspense-driven masterplot that both encourage imitation. At the same time, TikTok performances not only consolidate the affective consensus of the like-minded others, but often hand a loaded gun to the hands of the opponents, as one-sided positionings are easy to turn around (Mäkelä et al. 2021). One of such pushbacks is the use of the same template in pro-Ukrainian videos, featuring Jesus and Zelensky.

In addition to audiovisual analysis focusing on such tactics of countermobilization, the affective dimension of imitation publics can be explored through a focused analysis of "sticky words" (Ahmed 2004) extracted from the videos' comments. For Sara Ahmed, stickiness takes "a form of relationality, or a 'withness', in which the elements that are 'with' get bound together" (ibid.: 91). Videos networked via aural linkages become even more sticky through combinations of modalities, such as those seen in Катюша posts, where both the song as well as the sticker texts constitute the template. While room is left open for performance, the propagandist messages perpetuated by these templates are meant to be (almost identically) repeated. Aiming to dampen possible interventions, Катюша videos, are designed to strengthen the bonds between certain audiences—a strategy that extends into commenting practices reiterating the same or similar message.

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THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR IN CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA: CROSS-NATIONAL AMPLIFICATION ON WEIBO AND THE NATIONALIZED SELF ON DOUYIN

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Studying the Russia-Ukraine war discourse in Chinese social media

This study is a cross-platform analysis of the discourses surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war in Chinese social media. Making use of both computational as well as manual classification of posts about the war, we found most significantly the mass amplification of Russian state positions on Weibo and the reframing of the war as being in the Chinese national self-interest on Douyin.

We situate what we call 'cross-national amplification' as well as the 'nationalized self' among other notions that seek to capture the discursive power of the state including 'digital nationalism', 'soft propaganda' and 'playful patriotism'. We also emphasize the importance of a cross-platform analysis (rather than a single platform analysis) when seeking to capture public sentiment on social media and the type of state discursive power on display.

Ever since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, information and viewpoints about the conflict have spread widely across various Chinese social media platforms, much of it taking a pro-Russian stance, mixed with framings concerning Chinese national interests. Despite China's official stance of neutrality, a recent survey by the Carter Center gauging Chinese public opinion on the Russia-Ukraine War indeed found that 75% of respondents believed that siding with Russia would be beneficial to China's national interests (US-China Perception Monitor, 2022).

One predominant strand of policy as well as academic work discusses nationalist sentiment on Chinese social media as state 'discourse power' (Atlantic Council, 2020). One is the result of top-down propaganda, intended to "control narratives around key public issues and assert the Chinese Communist Party's discourse power" through official media channels and accounts (Zhang et al., 2021: 2). This 'digital nationalism' (Schneider, 2018) is complemented by 'softer', more bottom-up strategies, where seemingly everyday users adopt the same viewpoints and amplify the discourse (Creemers, 2016; Hyun et al., 2014; Zou, 2021). Once referred to as 50c party posts (King et al., 2017), these contributions appear to be from genuine users. A more recent characterisation of how state-organized discourse forms on social media has been dubbed 'playful patriotism', where the use of hashtags such as #positiveenergy are encouraged, particularly on Douyin (Chen et al., 2021). Videos tagged with #positiveenergy have been found to promote the "Chinese state's political agenda" (Chen et al., 2020: 97) through "consensus-building" for the sake of "national unity and cohesion" (Fung and Hu, 2022).

The research question guiding this study is, how is public discourse about the war being shaped on Chinese social media? Is it primarily through the mechanisms of 'digital nationalism', 'soft propaganda', 'playful patriotism', or are there other orchestrations at work?

Methodology: A cross-platform approach with AI-assisted labeling

The aim here is to contribute to the study of state-sponsored discourse online by examining the origins and substance of the narratives surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war on Chinese social media. It focuses on two of the three most prominent social media platforms in China, Weibo and Douyin (WeChat being the other). We situate our research within the broader literature on how the state shapes discourse on social media in China, as mentioned above. We begin with a brief overview of the characteristics of Weibo and Douyin. Weibo and Douyin possess distinctive cultures and features. Weibo is typically thought of as an 'older, more mainstream' platform, while Douyin is a more 'youth-oriented space' (Meng and Literat, 2023). In terms of content format (and the structure of the data, as we come to), Weibo primarily features text-based posts occasionally accompanied by pictures and videos. Douyin contains primarily short-form videos, with trending sounds and filters, and they aim to entertain. In terms of their recommendation algorithms, Weibo is more centralised, and their users tend to actively search for information. In contrast, Douyin filters content based on individuals' previous consumption, tailoring user experience to specific interests, leading to a more passive mode of information reception.

We describe our approach as a cross-platform analysis, distinctive from a single-platform analysis (Rogers, 2018), with the benefit of finding discursive and source commonalities across platforms while still taking into account platform specificity, given each platform's affordances and vernacular culture. We examine posts on Weibo and Douyin about the Russia-Ukraine War from February 2022 to July 2023. First, for collecting data on Weibo and Douyin we employed a query design that fits with our analytical strategy of locating the war discourses from the platforms' particularities. For

Douyin, we undertook hashtag-based querying, whereas for Weibo we made keyword queries.

In the analysis, we also take advantage of recent developments in computational methods, particularly the effectiveness of large language models (LLMs) for classification tasks (Törnberg, 2023). Utilizing these tools, and checking them against manual classification, we map out the most significant war-related talking points and larger narratives on Weibo and Douyin, discussing their origins through engagement analysis. Empirically, the combination of the computational analysis with the qualitative examination allows us to make observations about the power and limitations of language models in zero-shot and more elaborate classification tasks and clustering. The LLMs produced rather broad, seemingly apolitical narratives, we found, while the manual investigation picked out more specifically the Russian talking points and some larger narratives that could have been overlooked if relying solely on automated classification.

Findings: Cross-national amplification on Weibo and the nationalized self on Douyin

Our findings provide compelling evidence of the amplification of Russian state narratives by Chinese state sponsored accounts as well as political influencers on Weibo, with a relative absence of nationalist Chinese content though with the notable exception of multipolarity and U.S. hegemony which could be considered a narrative that 'overlaps' with the Russian state interests. On Douyin we note the nationalization of the war discourse, where national self-interests are predominant. We dub the discourse as the 'nationalized self', where the war becomes a prism through which (and opportunity) to discuss its benefits for China, such as the potential for the 'return of Vladivostok' (Baptista, 2020). Unlike on Weibo, on Douyin the Russian state narratives are not prominent, nor are Chinese state sponsored accounts.

These findings not only point up the importance of cross-platform analysis (rather than a single-platform approach) to the study of discourse on Chinese social media. They also demonstrate how additional forms of 'discourse power' on top of 'digital nationalism', 'soft propaganda' as well as 'playful patriotism' may be present. Our analysis found what we term 'cross-national amplification' of Russian talking points and narratives as well as the reframing of the war discourse in the self-interest, or what we refer to as the 'nationalized self'.

A secondary set of findings concern the comparison between automated cluster labeling and narrative discovery and manual classification by experts. The automated labeling seems to confirm what one could call a 'neutrality bias' on the part of the LLMs, together with a rather muted tonality, compared to the manual labeling. As a case in point, the same cluster was labeled 'anti-war sentiment' by the computational technique, where the manual classification had 'peace instead of American hegemony'.

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