

Information Warfare: Russia, Ukraine and unprecedented threats

Miguel Filipe Palma, Portugal

YATA Nato Week Contest, 2015

The term Information Warfare was primarily used by the United States Military to describe the concept involving the use and management of information and communication technology in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent. Information warfare may involve collection of tactical information, assurance(s) that one's own information is valid, spreading of propaganda or disinformation to demoralize or manipulate the enemy and the public, undermining the quality of opposing force information and denial of information-collection opportunities to opposing forces, being several times closely linked to psychological warfare.

Offensive information warfare is not a “new” way of attacking one’s adversary. To be sure, some of the current tools and technologies in this area are novel, but the goals of offensive information warfare today bear striking resemblance to those of the “military deception” campaigns of wars past. In short, while the means for offensive information warfare have changed, the ends have remained similar to those of yesterday. Broadly speaking, the goals of an offensive information-warfare campaign are to deny, corrupt, degrade, or destroy the enemy’s sources of information on the battlefield. Doing so successfully, while maintaining the operational security of your own information sources, is the key to achieving “information superiority”—that is, the ability to see the battlefield while your opponent cannot

Despite the fact that information-warfare campaigns have occurred before, it is now possible to say with confidence that information warfare campaigns are a relatively more important part of conventional wars than they have been in the past. And the current situation in Ukraine is the perfect example of that.

It is becoming clear that certain authoritarian models of government are capable of matching and, in some respects, even exceeding the accomplishments of their democratic counterparts. Whether Russia, with its dependence on energy exports and otherwise undiversified economy, should be counted among them is debatable, but there is one area in which the Russian state has so far demonstrated a clear mastery over its Western opponents: its propaganda or, to use the public relations term, its messaging.

But impressive as the information component of Russia's current "hybrid war" over Ukraine has been, its success arguably owes less to its ingenuity than to ingrained flaws

in Western democratic culture for which there is no simple solution. The effectiveness of Russia's spin is difficult to deny. Ironically, Russian messaging has worked by exploiting vulnerabilities in precisely those mechanisms of self-criticism and scepticism which are considered so essential to the functioning of a democratic society.

Russian messaging counts on the fact that a certain percentage of Westerners, aware of past distortions by their governments, will inevitably give credence to Russian denials, however implausible they may be. Once again, the feeling that the United States has betrayed the world's trust in recent years has contributed to this situation.

A terrible assumption everyone has these days is that general conflict in Europe is an impossibility. Peace has reigned for so long in the major countries of Europe that its interruption seems as inconceivable as an aliens invasion, as World War II begins to fade from memory. Russian messaging has had no difficulty persuading people that calls for military preparedness are nothing more than militarism and fear-mongering.

In conclusion, and to be fair, the effectiveness of Russia's propaganda, both at home and abroad, has declined as the visible gap between word and deed in Ukraine has widened. But the ease with which disinformation has piggybacked on deeply held dogmas of the Western liberal order should serve as a reminder that even the most stable democracies are more fragile and vulnerable than they appear.