Inconsistency between Salience and the Dynamics of Changes:
The Information War on Wikipedia
(Research Proposal)

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Abstract

Informational wars are not new phenomena. However, nowadays, with the increasing role of the Internet and the growth of networked sources that rely on collective intelligence, manipulation of the information online, especially in supposedly trustworthy sources, becomes of a special interest. Indeed, biased information that is uncritically believed may shift the individual incentives and let those who are responsible for the manipulation virtually affect the flow of the history. This proposal is for a paper that intends to investigate the conflicts and changes in the Wikipedia articles before their topic became salient as a result of a certain political event. The paper proposes that such changes may be suspected to be a part of the preparation of the public for the event.

Background

Informational wars are intended to manipulate information and communication among individuals in favor of one side of a conflict, with the aim to affect public opinion, both domestically and abroad. Informational wars on the country level are not a new phenomenon: all major conflicts in modern history, including those before WWII, were accompanied by informational wars (Streich and Levy (2014)). Nowadays, they mostly happen implicitly: each side of a conflict insists on their rightness and often wants to persuade not just their own population, but the international community as well, that their position is correct. My proposed project examines informational wars on online collaborative information sources.

Predictably, outside opinions affect people's behavior. If this is the case, then propaganda actually works. Consequently, observing instances related to the manifestations of the pro-state biased information, it may be difficult to disentangle cases resulting explicitly from the state's secret projects, for instance, such as comments coming from paid state-hired employees, so-called state trolls, and comments from unpaid brainwashed state supporters. One of the possible ways to separate these two types is based on the timeline: if a certain online activity starts to occur before a certain topic becomes salient, then this activity may be suspect as part of the ideological preparation of the public. Hence, this may provide proof that an unexpected event was actually anticipated, and that certain ideological preparatory steps were taken by the state, which may be denied later.

For a government involved in an informational war, this war has (at least, potentially) a substantial number of fronts: social networks, ranked in terms of their popularity; independent opposition news and analytical sources, both domestic and foreign; their own, i.e. pro-state, media sources that must pretend to be independent and look trustworthy. The front this work intends to look at is one of the most independent and credible instances of collaborative independent information source - Wikipedia. Given these features, tracking the signs of its inclusion into a sphere of an informational war becomes extremely compelling. Wikipedia is a completely open-source project where all changes are open for external analysis that makes this analysis feasible.

Wikipedia: Methodology

Despite the fact that any user can modify information on Wikipedia, all updates are moderated by administrators to a certain extent. Their roles are especially important in cases of vandalism or informational conflicts. Supposedly unbiased administrators are elected by the Wikipedia

community by request (Wikipedia (2015)). As Das et al. (2013) claim, Wikipedia administrators might manipulate the information and mold public opinion. In their article, the authors gave an example of the Israeli-Palestine debate when, according to certain evidence, a political advocacy group had plans to make certain administrators were elected to influence the debate.

Furthermore, there have also been prominent scandals involving "administrators for hire", who offer "edit for money". Hence, it is predictable that actors of an information war will attempt to act through administrators. Another option is when modifications to create an information bias are simply overlooked by trustworthy administrators because they do not possess enough expertise on a topic. This might be the case, when such modifications occur before the topic becomes salient. In this case these modifications are likely to be linked to the forces that are aware of upcoming, supposedly unexpected, events.

Importantly, as said before, all of the data on modifications, conflicts, and affiliations of administrators is available and can be extracted. Furthermore, extraction might be restricted topic-wise and time-wise. The method for the analysis of the hypothesis that a high activity for a given topic in Wikipedia is likely to be *a part of an information war is as follows*:

1. Create a timeline of the political events related to a given information war;
2. Narrow the set of salient topics for these events;
3. Create a timeline of an expected salience of the topic, i.e when a topic is dormant, when is it slightly salient, when is it extremely salient, etc;
4. Express these topics in terms of the Wikipedia articles available;
5. Set up the programmed filter and extract the data on Wikipedia activity in terms of the changes and attempts to modify information within this set of articles;

This hypothesis is supported if a topic's activity on Wikipedia is significantly higher than usual before this topic becomes salient, based on the timeline of political events.

Case Study: Ukrainian-Russian conflict, 2014-2015
I would like to start my analysis of informational wars on the Internet by looking at the case of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict in 2014-2015. The Ukrainian side claims that the core reason for the conflict was unexpected Russian aggression, starting with the annexation of Crimea on March 1, 2014, and, then, continuing with a hybrid (undeclared)
war in the Eastern Ukraine (Miller and Wert (2015), Lazar (2014)). Despite extensive proofs of the presence of Russian forces, Russian officials have denied any Russian

military presence. Meanwhile, from the very beginning of the situation, the Russian state-television had been emphasizing the danger for "the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine" coming from the new Ukrainian government that attained power after the Ukrainian revolution of 2015. This might have affected the primarily pro-Russian population of the Eastern Ukraine, preparing the grounds for the appearance of the military separatist regimes, Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DPR).

For the proposed study, the most crucial part of this situation concerning the former brother-nations is the informational. Indeed, according to a substantial number of professional and journalist experts, the war situation in the Eastern Ukraine could not have been sustained for so long was it not accompanied by Russia's extensive informational support.

The aim of this study is to relate the timeline of the Ukrainian crisis 2013-2015 and the dynamics of the conflicts, and the general activity on Wikipedia on topics concerning common Russian-Ukrainian history and the Crimea Peninsula. To test the validity of the hypothesis that "rewriting history" in Wikipedia might have been of the Russian propaganda, an excessive activity on the relevant wikipages must be observed prior to the annexation of Crimea.

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