Bias, Misinformation: Manifest Message of Bias in Dominant Russian State News

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Undergraduate audience find the manifest message of state-run Russia news to lack credibility, according to a recent survey. The survey also found that the latent message below the surface of the news article is a mix of extremely biased news, according to students in an Eastern European university where all classes are taught in English

The LCC International University curriculum features courses in propaganda and the qualities of high-quality news gathering and reporting. Students tend to be more vocal about the credibility of news in general and Russian state news specifically. The research question for this initial survey attempted to systematically probe students on their personal opinions about news following the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine Feb. 24, 2022.

In an open-ended response survey of students at LCC International University, Klaipėda, Lithuania, sophomores, juniors and seniors found news sources such as BBC, the *New York Times,* Telegram news, also known as the *Independent*; LRT, a Lithuanian news source; WION news site, Twitter, and, in general, English-speaking sources to be reliable, but all 80 respondents rejected news from Russian outlets as biased.

For the majority of the students, most of whom are in Contemporary Communication majors, bias meant one-sided reporting in addition to opinionated reporting. The students used phrases such at "showing favor," "sticking to one side," "one perspective," "not reliable" "not real" and "not impartial."

The survey served as a kind of beta test for a longer, more in-depth survey that colleague Robert Fortner of Palm Beach Atlantic University and I hope to conduct in September 2022 using sample responses from the 780-student LCC campus and up to three other campuses, in Europe and the United States. The study will probe LCC students and others about the key terms that they use in understanding bias news.

LCC International University is marking its 30th anniversary this year. It borders Russian-dominated Belarus to the South, Poland to the west and Latvia and Estonia to the North. Oddly enough, Kaliningrad, a Russian province, is attached to the tip of Lithuania on the Baltic Sea. Klaipeda is a desirable warm-water port. Lithuanians are feverishly counting on NATO to prevent Russia, who once occupied Lithuania, from returning.

The 82-student sample taken April 8 to April 28, 2022, included 29 sophomores, 18 juniors and 33 seniors, or total of 80 students, participated out of 82 students. All the respondents said they were familiar with the content of Russian news. Freshman weren't part of the survey, mainly because none were in the classes polled. Among the participants, 2 students were Russian, 12 were Ukrainian, 17 were Lithuania, and 3 were Belarusian. The students who responded shared their insights about biased news and fake news

in one part of the survey; a follow-up survey then used open-ended answer survey on preferred news sources.

The students responded to a questionnaire that asked for their rank and home country and the following questions:

1. The war in Ukraine is constantly in the news. In your opinion, what news source is the best? Please explain in a short sentence.
2. Which one is the worst? Please explain in a short sentence.
3. What is your opinion of Russian-based news regarding the war?
4. What is your home country?

The Russian students found news from Russia unreliable with one student calling it "total dark propaganda." LCC attracts students from 60 countries and Ukraine represents 25% of the student population.

Over and over all the students cited Russia's news reports as fake based on "false facts," "disinformation," and "lies."

In a similar survey in 2018 at the faith-based Lee University, Cleveland, Tenn., 62% of the 114 students surveyed identified themselves as Republican. The majority of students cited LinkedIn as the most accurate social media news source and NPR as the most accurate legacy news source. The least accurate news site: MSNBC.

The survey asked students if they found statements fake, real or I don't know, such as this statement: *NFL attendance and ratings are way down. Boring games yes, but many stay away because they love their country." (Donald Trump, Sept. 24, 2017)*

Forty-three percent considered the statement false, 33 percent said it was real and 22 percent responded, "I don't know."

The survey used questions that originated with PolitiFact, which is a fact-checking website that rates the accuracy of claims by elected officials and others who speak up in American politics.

The proposed study for fall 2022 will differ from credibility studies in the United States because this proposed study will explore the opinions of Europeans, particularly students studying journalism and communication.

A 2020 study by Gallup and Knight Foundation founds a widening gap between what Americans expect from the news media and what they think they are getting. The study, "American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy," surveyed 20,000 Americans and explored Americans' relationship with the news.

The report is available at kf.org/usviews20. Among the findings: "Nearly half (46%) of all Americans think the media is very biased."

The working hypothesis for the fall 2022 study says students, regardless of year in their academic program, consider Russian state news to be suspect, but news in general is only modestly more reliable. For now, it clear that students from the Baltic States have firm ideas about biased news.

The following are examples of responses by seniors in a Communication Ethics course, LCC's Department of Contemporary Communication on the April survey's question: "What is your opinion of Russian-based news regarding the war?

- A student from Ukraine said of Russia, "The state media is lying constantly."
- Another student noted, "I am a Ukrainian and have seen many fake news told by Ukrainian reporters themselves. I am not sure about the reason behind them but probably to induce hate towards Russians."
- News from Russia "is not true at all," a student from Belarus said, adding she relied on a source in her home country. "I could say that the best source of the news is independent one. I am reading Belarusian independent news source called TUT.BY," she said.
- An Armenian student doesn't trust news in general, saying, "I get information from several sources but in my opinion, all the sources are biased in their own way. I am trying to avoid Russian or Ukrainian sources, and I get information from international sources."
- Another Armenian student had a similar opinion. "I read both-Russian and international sources but, in my opinion, all the sources are biased at this point so you need to be really picky. I am trying to compare and understand which of them is more reliable and so far, it is best to read international news and avoid Russian news."
- A Russian student who says he was born in Lithuania praised the BBC and Twitter feeds from independent sources but added, "A lot of Russian-based sources misrepresent, misinform and further mislead their readers/viewers in this media propaganda war – they should not be trusted and any news originating from Russia should be evaluated carefully," he said.
- However, a student from Russian, countered,

"I trust either Ukrainian sources or a few independent Russians ones that have proven themselves worthy to me in recent years." She added, the worst source for news: "The ones that portray Russians as victims."

- Another Russian student said, "It is propaganda and consists of lies. (Because of this characteristic) I never check Russian news."
- A student from Ukraine dressed all in black said the TV news in Russia is absurd. "I speak Russian and watch their propaganda sometimes. Since the start of the war, Russian news has changed their narrative dozens of times."
- "Appalling lies," said the Ukrainian editor of LCC's student press. "In fact, bad lies that don't match up with each other."
- A student from Israel called the Russian news narratives ridiculous. "It's even funny to watch the nonsense they narrate."

It is rare in any survey research to have such overwhelming and somewhat monolithic opinions on a topic. Typically research reveals some diversity in opinion. For the next survey in the fall, the proposed questionnaire will explore the intensity of the negative opinions of the students. In addition, we will add another layer in the demographics to explore the variable of faith. LCC is a Christian-based university and we will code Christian, Muslim, Jewish and other faiths as we seek to understand the opinions of university students to Russian news and other types of news.

Among the glaring questions that this proposed research will explore the response of student audiences to Russia news. In addition, the research will examine the dominance of state news, its suspect reception and possible answers on reasons authoritarian governments persist in disseminating news—some form of propaganda—that audiences find questionable. In addition, the proposed survey will work to determine what respondents mean by fake and bias news and will explore remedies for consistent, credible news.

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