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Cat Stepan and Other Snippets of War: Performing Conflict on TikTok's Frontlines

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This article addresses the affective politics of social media platforms, focusing on the rise of TikTok's popularity as a significant platform for self-presentations since the start of the Russian invasion in 2022. While the platform provided an unprecedented opportunity for ordinary citizens and pet owners to reach a global community and share their experiences of war in real time, it has also exposed its vulnerability to manipulation. The neutrality and objectivity of war reporting came under scrutiny since the media and social platforms became highly weaponised in the current conflict. Furthermore, social media entered the political discourse of 'truth', contesting official state narratives. In this respect, the crucial role of images is explored through press reviews, which highlight TikTok's significance in motivating political action by evoking emotions and effects. The question of affective intermediality is further explored through the redistribution of sensibility by acknowledging the image as an agent, possessing a life of its own (Eder and Klonk, 2017). Obviously, the Russo-Ukrainian War is not the first war watched online, but it is the first war perceived and interpreted through the popular cultural tropes of the TikTok app. In the age of instant digital communication, war is no longer distant. It unfolds in real time, streamed, shared, performed, and consumed. The internet often reduces images to disembodied simulacra, stripped of the nuances and complexity that once gave them meaning. We do not just observe war but actively participate by reposting and commenting. The viewer becomes involved in the spectacle, helping to spread images of suffering and destruction, unknowingly turning conflict into easily consumed content. We like to believe that exposing atrocities will deter oppressors. But does it?

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Introduction

TikTok, a video platform developed by the Chinese tech giant ByteDance, has for the first time secured a substantial global market outside China. Since its launch in 2016, the app's rapid proliferation has sparked considerable debate about its political ramifications, potential security vulnerabilities, data governance practices, and the broader sociocultural implications of integrating a Chinese-developed platform into everyday life. Primarily popular among teenagers and millennials, TikTok is a platform for creating and sharing short videos, typically lasting 15 seconds or less. A distinguishing feature of the app is its integration of music with a mighty algorithm. TikTok is unique in placing its algorithm at the centre of the social experience, learning more quickly than any other platform what content users prefer to see. Consequently, the algorithm shapes the types of videos users encounter, which in turn constitute the majority of their engagement on the platform. This content appears on the For You Page, where the algorithm predicts what users might enjoy based on their prior interactions. The exact page also displays content that the algorithm deems likely to go viral. The short clip length enables TikTok's algorithms to compile large datasets rapidly.

On the other hand, AI also helps content creators craft viral videos. The app simplifies video editing and recommends trending or popular music, hashtags, filters, and other features for specific-purpose categories. Consequently, users can choose from an extensive library of songs, filters, and lip-sync video clips. In essence, TikTok's widespread appeal is closely tied to its integration with the music industry, making it a preeminent platform for music discovery. In this context, it is essential to note that TikTok's design decentralises the traditionally 'social' aspects of the platform: users do not need to follow or directly engage with other creators to access their content. Instead, interaction with the *For You* algorithm over time allows it to 'learn' users' preferences and personalities, enabling the delivery of personalised and engaging content. In effect, the algorithm performs the function typically associated with following on other platforms, but with greater efficiency and accuracy. The AI-generated personalised 'For You' feed for each user has been identified as a significant contributor to TikTok addiction (Bujph, 2021).

TikTok has attracted a vast global audience by providing simple, user-friendly creation tools that encourage engagement within the realm of 'pure affect.' Moreover, the platform itself functions as a personalisation algorithm, with a minimal interface and limited navigational sections that facilitate entry into a state of 'flow.' Users' reactions to AI-curated content shape subsequent recommendations, thereby 'facilitating a continuous cycle that starts from the first use and becomes increasingly accurate with repeated engagement' (Bujph, 2021a). TikTok uses AI in two primary ways. First, on the consumer side, its algorithms rapidly learn individual preferences

by tracking not only users' 'likes' and comments but also the time spent watching each video. From a Deleuzian perspective, the focus is on expression rather than communication, replacing representation with 'sensation'. It often begins from a position of playfulness, disorientation, craftiness, or musicality, rather than serious intent. In a study by Vaterlaus and Winter (2021), participants described TikTok content as 'cringey,' 'cringe,' or 'cringe-worthy,' indicating that they perceived it as 'embarrassing,' 'lame,' 'immature,' or 'stupid.' Nevertheless, this raises a compelling question: how did an ostensibly unpolitical video-sharing platform become so effective in countering Putin's war?

The First TikTok War?

'This is the first war that will be covered on TikTok by super-empowered individuals armed only with smartphones,' observed *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman in February 2022 (Friedman, 2022). Numerous publications, including *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian*, *Wired*, *Newsweek*, and *The Atlantic*, began referring to the Russian invasion as 'the first TikTok war.' TikTok's emphasis on emotionally charged, popular content and its use of affective remediation have facilitated unprecedented global support for Ukraine among its users.

Let us begin by introducing Stepan (**Figure 1**), the most famous Ukrainian cat. Stepan, an Instagram-famous feline with 1.3 million followers, is best known for his amusing photographs.

Figure 1: The screenshot of the TikTok page of Ukrainian influencer Cat Stepan. The image that made him popular shows a cat sitting in a chair by a glass of wine (TikTok@annaolala, 2022).

His global popularity began even before the war, when pop icon Britney Spears reposted one of his Instagram posts. Other celebrities, including actress Diane Kruger and model Hailey Bieber, have also shared his photos and videos. The Italian fashion house Valentino has even bought advertising through the Ukrainian influencer. As his owner, Hanna, told the media: 'Stepan loves to sit in that chair and often falls asleep there. When I shoot it, it comes out funny – all I need is to keep changing the glasses' (Yarova, 2021). Following the outbreak of the war, fans grew concerned when Stepan and Hanna's Instagram account went inactive. After a two-week silence, Hanna reassured followers that she and Stepan were safe, having found refuge in Europe after leaving Ukraine (Steinbuch, 2022). Since relocating to France, the Ukrainian cat has gone viral on TikTok, raising £7,000 for charities supporting animals affected by the conflict. The cat-blogger has also become an ambassador for the 'Save Ukrainian Culture' project (**Figure 2**), which aims to restore and preserve Ukraine's cultural heritage, as announced by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine. The initiative aims to raise awareness of the destruction of more than 552 Ukrainian cultural and architectural monuments by Russian forces, which seek to erase Ukrainian culture and identity (We Are Ukraine, 2022).

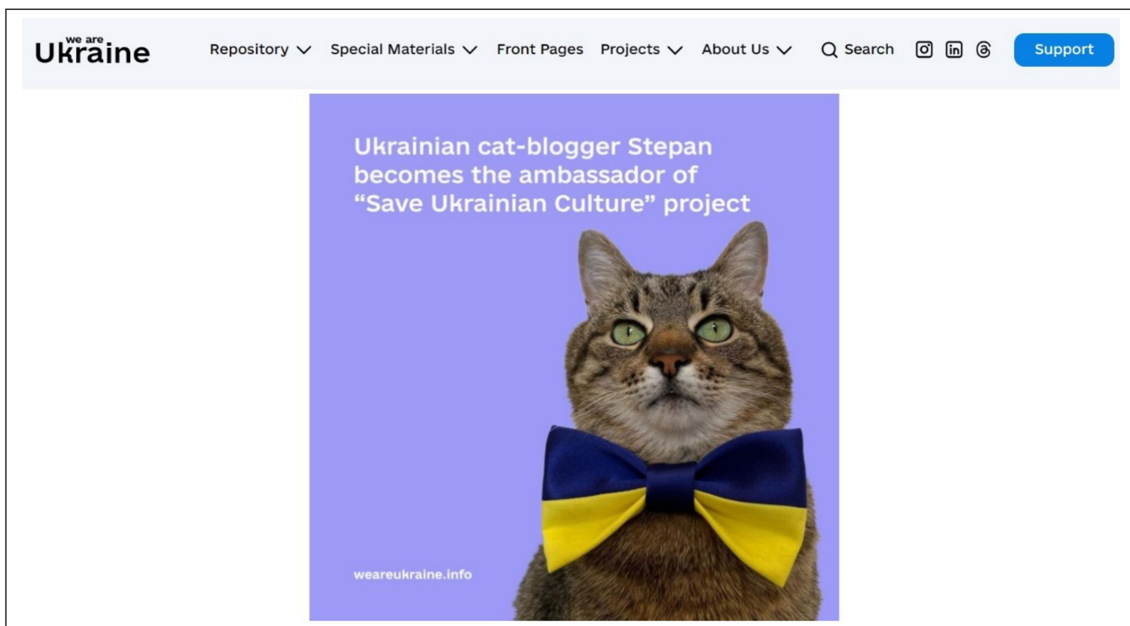

Figure 2: Since the Russian invasion in 2022, the cat-blogger has served as an ambassador for the 'Save Ukrainian Culture' project, which aims to restore and preserve objects of Ukraine's cultural heritage (We Are Ukraine, 2022).

Experts argue that it is time to take seriously the short-video platform, once known primarily for lip-syncs and dance challenges. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought this social media space into the spotlight as a powerful political tool. As Joan

Donovan, research director at the Shorenstein Centre on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, notes, ‘This is a huge moment in internet history where we are starting to see the power of these tech companies play out against the power of the state’ (Engelhaupt, 2022). Evidently, this is not the first war the world has seen on TikTok. However, what makes this event unique is that it is the first conflict to be viewed and interpreted through the app’s own culture and rhythms, utilising the same popular-culture tropes that characterise its everyday content (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3: The video by popular Ukrainian TikTok blogger @valerisssh, ‘My typical day in a shelter now’ (@valerisssh 2022).

TikTok's rise can be attributed to its highly intuitive algorithm and in-app editing tools, which make capturing and sharing the world around us effortless. Unlike Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube, which often require additional equipment and post-production time, TikTok is quick, raw, and immediate — a platform well suited to shaping perceptions of conflict as it unfolds in real time. Ukraine-related content on TikTok has surged since the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, with videos tagged #Ukraine surpassing 30.5 billion views by 17 March 2022. A report from The New York Times found that, proportionally, Ukraine-related videos on TikTok outpaced content on platforms more than twice its size. As Kyle Chayka observes in The New Yorker:

> On TikTok, Ukrainians appear to viewers less as distant victims than as fellow Web denizens who know the same references, listen to the same music, and use the same social networks as they do. The content of the clips and the digital spaces in which they are consumed create a sense of intimacy that photojournalism, with its tinge of voyeurism, sometimes lacks.
>
> (Chayka, 2022)

#Wartok[1]

Using Rancière's terms, we might consider how this new aesthetic both distributes and redistributes the sensible order. In her article 'The Myth of the First TikTok War, published in The Atlantic, Kaitlyn Tiffany argues as follows:

> To the extent that TikTok does affect perceptions of the war, it does so in a more confusing manner than YouTube or Twitter. TikTok is a remix app, in which users cut together audio and video pulled from anywhere, and during this conflict, they have already done so to create misleading content that is difficult for the average viewer to pick apart.
>
> (Tiffany, 2022)

The digital episteme, which shapes the cultural imagination of war, is primarily manifested in its fluidity across media, genres, time, and space. In other words, the apparently separate media, phenomena, and categories operate simultaneously and are productively interrelated. This brings into focus the impact of media technologies on the production and distribution of diffused war. The term diffused war, introduced by Hoskins and O'Loughlin in *War and Media* (2010), is defined as:

> An emerging paradigm of war in which […] the mediatisation of war […] makes possible more diffuse causal relations between action and effect, […] creating greater uncertainties for policymakers in the conduct of war.
>
> (2010: 4)

As Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) argue, the increased availability of communication technologies to news media, citizen media and to militaries themselves creates the conditions in which media becomes part of the practices of warfare, to the point that the conduct of war cannot be understood without a careful account of the role of media in it. The crux of the matter lies in the absolute interpenetration of media and warfare, which has produced 'an emergent set of far more immediate and unpredictable relationships between the trinity of government, military, and public' (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010, 6). In the case of the ongoing information warfare between Russia and Ukraine, the latter has managed to hold its ground despite Russia's vast investment in disinformation campaigns and propaganda. The Russian propaganda machine has struggled to construct a compelling narrative. At the same time, 'Ukraine already has the underdog sympathy, and they have been very good at capitalising on it. They show their battlefield successes and highlight atrocities committed by Russians' (Engelhaupt, 2022).

Preceding Rancière's discussion of the redistribution of the sensible, Foucault's discursive methodology holds that knowledge and power are inextricably intertwined. He begins from the premise that all knowledge is discursive and that every discourse is permeated by power. Moreover, Foucault suggests that the dominance of certain discourses arises not merely from their embedding within socially powerful institutions, but also from their claim to absolute truth. In this sense, the 'battle for truth' is not a struggle to uncover a universal or objective truth. Still, rather a contest over 'the rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true,' as well as over 'the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays' (Foucault in Rabinow, 1991). This suggests that the most powerful discourses, those most productive in shaping social realities, rely on assumptions and claims to truth. Social media platforms have become active participants in the political discourse on 'truth,' as global leaders increasingly address their users directly. The Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, emerged as one of the most effective communicators, appealing to 'TikTokers' in a video message to help end the war. Similarly, U.S. President Joe Biden spoke to dozens of top TikTok creators in a first-of-its-kind briefing on the conflict in Ukraine and the U.S. response (Kari, 2022). For the first time, political leaders explicitly harnessed

the communicative power of influencers. One influencer, an 18-year-old TikTok star with more than 10.5 million followers, told the Washington Post she sees herself as 'a White House correspondent for Gen Z' who is there to 'relay the information in a more digestible manner' (ibid).

A.B. Burns-Tucker, 34, was among the creators who have joined White House briefings. She posts on TikTok under the username @iamlegallyhype and has over 700,000 followers. She mentioned that her account gained popularity after she created a well-known explainer video about the Russia-Ukraine war, which colloquially referred to world leaders as 'Big Daddy Biden' and 'Big Bad P' (Maheshwari, 2023). From a Foucauldian perspective, this mobilisation of influencers exemplifies how power flows through new discursive networks rather than being confined to traditional institutions of governance or the media. TikTok creators, as nodes in this network, become agents in producing and reproducing what counts as 'truth' in the digital sphere. Their affective immediacy, accessibility, and capacity to translate geopolitical narratives into viral content amplify certain truths while obscuring others. In Rancière's terms, this phenomenon marks a redistribution of the sensible: a reconfiguration of what is visible, sayable, and emotionally intelligible in times of war.

Overall, pro-Ukrainian profiles have dominated the discourse on TikTok so far (**Figure 4**).

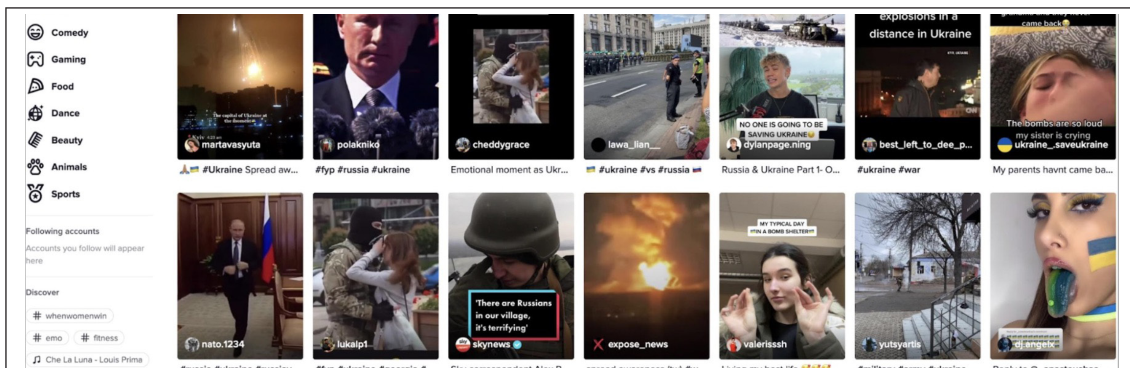

Figure 4: After the Russian invasion, videos on TikTok featuring the hashtag '#ukraine' had collectively amassed more than 26.8 billion views (March 2022).

However, 'Social media is definitely being weaponised,' warns Flores-Saviaga from Northeastern University. This includes disinformation or misinformation, designed either to intimidate or to profit from the enormous appetite for war content. Furthermore, it is here that TikTok is struggling to keep pace (Stokel-Chris, 2022). Most

importantly, the TikTok prime feature is precisely this: remixing media, allowing users to upload videos and sound clips without attributing their origins, which makes it difficult to contextualise and fact-check videos (**Figure 5**). This has created a digital atmosphere in which 'it is difficult – even for seasoned journalists and researchers – to discern truth from rumour, parody and fabrication', as a Guardian article notes (Kari, 2022). The most striking illustration of the affective intermediality operation in redistributing the sensible was the headline of the Wired magazine article: 'TikTok Was Designed for War. As Russia's invasion of Ukraine unfolds online, the platform's design and algorithm demonstrate their suitability for the chaos of war—yet they also pose a nightmare for the truth' (Stokel-Wallker, 2022).

Figure 5: A clip from the video game D.C.S. World was circulated on TikTok as real-life footage from Ukraine (#ghostofkyiv).

Furthermore, research published in New Scientist has shown that fake news spreads six times faster than legitimate information on social media — mainly because it can evoke a strong emotional response. TikTok's design functions effectively, monopolising users' attention by immersing them in an endless stream of quick, engaging content (Stokel-Wallker, 2022a). As events escalated dramatically, so did the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Numerous videos of unrelated explosions were reposted and circulated as if they depicted scenes from Ukraine. In contrast, clips from video games were frequently presented as authentic footage of real-life combat.

For instance, a video clip labelled the 'Ghost of Kyiv' appears to show a fighter pilot shooting down Russian jets and has attracted millions of views in various iterations on TikTok. The clip actually came from a video game called D.C.S. World, whose grainy, faltering graphics are easy to mistake for authentic footage. The fact that the video was fake did not stop people from sharing it or other similarly mislabelled clips (#ghostofkyiv). Another viral video from 2016, showing Russian paratroopers (**Figure 6**), was claimed to be real-time footage of a Russian full-scale invasion. (@romanadler123 2022).

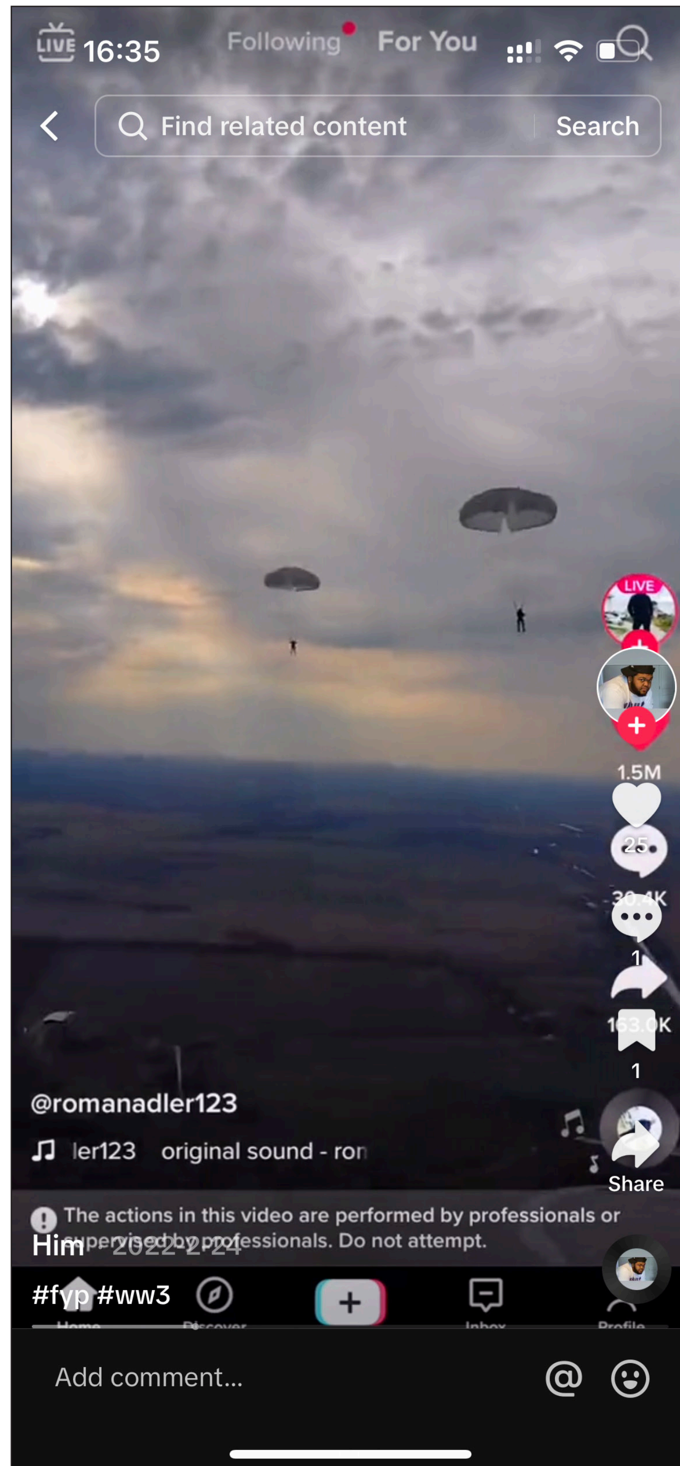

Figure 6: The video, from 2016, showing Russian paratroopers, was presented as real-time footage from Ukraine in 2022 on TikTok (@romanadler123, 2022).

It requires knowledge and effort to determine whether a post is from an actual Ukrainian resident or from a 'war-page' aggregation account seeking to gain followers and likes. Experts discuss the dangers posed by the massive influence of platforms with minimal accountability, calling for urgent legislation and public accountability. During times of crisis, TikTok became a primary platform for finding and sharing information faster than the mainstream press can verify and publish it. Nevertheless, in the rush to fill the data void amid

the overperformance of the mainstream media and to stay relevant, influencers often post videos about crises using popular but unrelated hashtags and keywords. Therefore, we should exercise caution when reporting on the war on TikTok. The incentive to enter the media discourse about the current crisis can make users consciously manipulative, as these posts can boost users' profiles, and even a viral video can popularise an entire account. The affective intermediality of WarTok complicates the problem because the content of war is highly emotional. The algorithm ensures that very popular (emotional) videos receive coverage across platforms. Since an algorithm can be manipulated, it is only necessary to send the right signals to spread information or propaganda, for example. Not to mention that, from an ethical point of view, the videos balance on the edge between Internet jokes and deadly serious documents. The Russian authorities have placed popular blogger Nikolai Lebedev, better known by his TikTok handle Nekoglai, on their wanted person list. Lebedev, who has over 10 million followers on TikTok, was arrested in Moscow shortly after posting a parody clip mocking a viral video that showed real-time drone footage of a Russian soldier (**Figure 7**) in a trench nonchalantly throwing away grenades dropped on him by a Ukrainian drone.

Figure 7: Real-time drone footage showing grenades being dropped on a Russian soldier (@thorsleftbaw 2023).

Lebedev, also known as @nekoglai, posted a clip of himself in a wig with devil horns, mimicking the movements of a soldier to the popular tune of Boney M.'s 'Rasputin' (**Figure 8**).

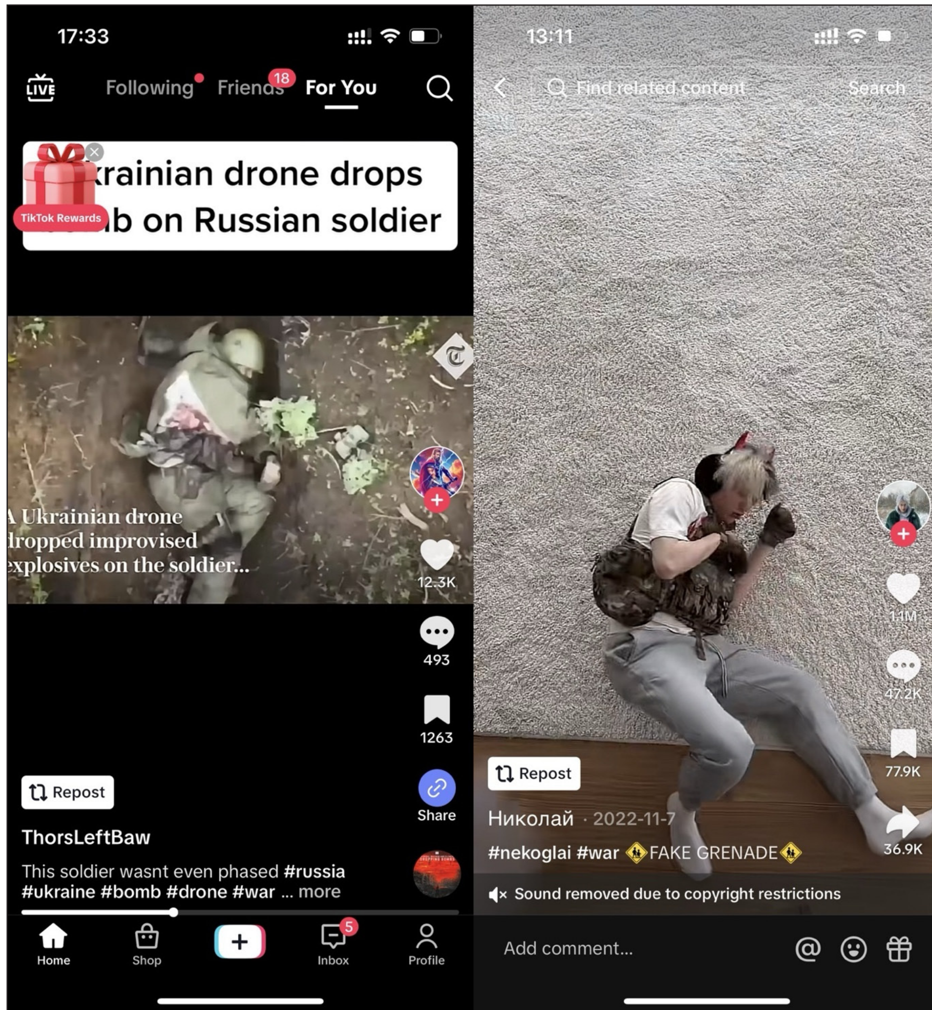

Figure 8: A parody clip by the popular blogger Nikolai Lebedev mimicking the movements of a Russian soldier (@nekoglai, 2022).

The blogger, a Moldovan citizen, was subsequently charged with violating Russian migration law and deported to Moldova. Lebedev later revealed that he had been subjected to torture and sexualised violence by Russian law enforcement while detained. He also said that he had been forced to record a video apologising for his parodies.[2]

Image operation

When discussing affective intermediality, it is crucial to recognise that image operations are not confined to points of production or reception. Broadly speaking, image operations are not confined to 'operations on images, with images, and through images, but also operations by images' (Eder and Klonk, 2017, 13). We might consider images as agents, possessing a life of their own and serving as both instruments and agents.

I propose to discuss the role of TikTok as a platform in conflicts, particularly the ways images motivate political action by evoking emotion and exerting influence. Using conceptual tools proposed by Eder, we can distinguish between cold and hot image operations. While cold images are those processed by machines, such as missile guidance or footage used in military reports, the operation of hot images relies on the affective power of images. In the context of informational warfare, images can be embedded on social media platforms to elicit specific effects among the population and influence public opinion. For instance, Russia invests heavily in disinformation campaigns by using social media platforms and manipulating video content to make Ukrainians look bad. Recent scholarship in political sociology emphasises the central role of emotion in understanding the social and political world. Moreover, political-affective interactions are deeply intertwined with visual communication, which helps explain the effectiveness of image-oriented platforms such as TikTok in shaping patterns of conflict and emotion. When conflicting parties confront each other, they are driven by emotions such as hate, fear, contempt, and anger; empathy with the opposing side is blocked, and sympathetic emotions intensify group bonding. ‘Conflicting actions evoke rage, euphoria and the admiration of ‘heroes’ or condemnation of ‘traitors, writes Eder (Eder and Klonk, 2017, 66). Russia’s attempts to justify the invasion could not evoke any emotional support because of its brutality and lack of moral ground. The victims’ and witnesses’ rage, along with that of the media and the audience, solidifies the struggle and evokes feelings of triumph. Despite the political impact of image manipulation in warfare, it raises ethical concerns. In the current context, cold images are often used as passionate propaganda, making us witnesses to the real deaths and destruction of the enemy almost every day, fuelling social emotions of success versus despair and shame for the defeated. In turn, the hot images influence the cold military operations on the ground, fuelling soldiers’ rage and anger, leaving both sides traumatised by experiences of grief and guilt. The disturbing trend of involving the citizenry in collusion with the military through image operations has become more prominent in contemporary warfare on both sides. The merging of the virtual and the real marks the culmination of this trend, in which commanding the actual battle with real consequences feels like playing a video game for drone operating units and footage consumers. ‘As the military multiplies points of mediation to allow human operators to utilise the power of network-centric warfare and cyber-conflict fully, the relationship between cause and effect, virtual and actual blurs’ (Eder and Klonk, 2017, 98).

In 2014, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) defined Military Information Operations (MIO) as:

> The integrated employment of electronic warfare (EW), computer network operations (CNO), psychological operations (PSYOP), military deception (MILDEC), and operations security (OPSEC)...to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own.
>
> (Eder and Klonk, 2017, 12)

Conclusion

Every new technology is often hailed as a potential saviour. The notion that social media could serve as a 'liberation technology,' enabling people to speak truth to power, has proved overly optimistic. However, social media is undeniably transforming how wars are experienced and fought today. TikTok, in particular, has emerged as a prominent platform that enables the world to witness the Russian invasion of Ukraine in real time through the eyes of ordinary citizens, rather than through official state channels. Social media has played a significant role in countering the Russian propaganda machine, which largely succeeds only in controlling traditional state-run media. Global citizens continue to monitor the ongoing conflict, with many relying solely on social media for news. TikTok, in particular, exemplifies affective intermediality—a powerful platform supporting the Ukrainian cause. Massively open platforms provide considerable societal benefits during times of war, but they also carry inherent risks. The pressing question for technologists and researchers is how to design these platforms to maximise their benefits while reducing potential harms.

Notes

1. New Yorker Magazine coined the blendword ‘WarTok’ (Mobilio, 2022). ‘WarTok’ is a portmanteau of the word ‘War’ and the name of the social media short-video app TikTok. The term ‘WarTok’ describes the fact that personal, professional, journalistic, and state war reporting takes place via TikTok in the form of short videos.
2. @nekogxrw.2022. ‘I feel like a beast’. TikTok post. TikTok, 11/11/2022. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGefVvfkK/.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Biography

Dr. Olga Danylyuk is a British Academy Researcher at Risk Fellow at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD), University of London. She is a researcher, curator, and theatre director specialising in performance, conflict, and intermediality. Her fieldwork in Eastern Ukraine included frontline documentation, humanitarian aid, and devising theatre projects with young people affected by war. She has directed large-scale performances such as *Letters to an Unknown Friend from New York* and *Contact Line*, and leads I-DO Lab, curating and producing interdisciplinary arts projects. Her recent documentary performance, *A Visit to the Minotaur*, was presented at the Voila Europe Festival, London (2022), followed by street performances *Evacuation 2022* in Prague, Brussels, and Paris (2023), and *EMETA*: *The Legend of Golem* at the International Theatre Festival Golden Lion in Lviv (2023). Her publications include ‘Combat at Gamer’s Pace: No Pause nor Reset Button’ (Body, Space & Technology, 2025), ‘Ukrainian Theatre’ in the Routledge Companion to Contemporary European Theatre and Performance (2023), and ‘Empire Strikes Back: The 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine: Postmodern Spectatorship, and the Battle of Perception in the Public Sphere’ in *Intermedial Performance and Politics in the Public Sphere* (2019).

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