The complex web in memetic warfare:

A comprehensive analysis of societal dynamics, interactions and impact

Dr Tine Munk
Dr Ian Mahoney
Dr Khrystyna Monastyrska
Dr Birgitte Beck Pristed

Nottingham Trent University

AARHUS UNIVERSITY

Executive summary

1. This research project investigated the strategic use of memes as instruments of civic resistance, resilience, and information warfare during the Russia-Ukraine war. The central aim was to understand how grassroots actors, particularly the North Atlantic Fella Organisation (NAFO), use digital content to counter information disorder, mobilise international support, and shape public narratives. The project focused on the evolving role of memetic warfare and its impact on digital and offline civic engagement.

2. The project had three core aims. First, it sought to identify and understand the perception, reach, and impact of pro-Ukrainian memetic warfare, using NAFO as a case study. Second, it aimed to examine the motivations and mechanisms that drive online civil users to engage in memetic warfare. Third, the project explored the reach and impact of pro-Ukrainian memetic warfare.

3. To fulfil these aims, the team worked to: analyse the role of memes in civic resistance and counterpropaganda; understand how memes are perceived and what impact they have among NAFO members and Ukrainians more broadly; and examine how memes are created and distributed in relation to significant events.

4. The team employed a mixed-methods approach, mainly involving primary research.

First, we collected a dataset of memes and analysed it for visual themes to be used in interviews as examples of political messaging. We distributed a global survey to NAFO members and affiliated social media users to gather insights into their motivations, perceived impact and strategies, gathering 255 completed responses. Third, we conducted in-depth interviews with 18 NAFO members and supporters, plus a further 21 Ukrainian civilians affected by, or displaced as a result of, the war. This gave us a multi-layered understanding of memetic participation across cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical contexts.

5. Findings show that memes are used not just for humour or critique but also as effective tools for information resilience and civic mobilisation. The community they create is key to keeping people involved in supporting Ukraine and carrying out defensive actions against Russian and pro-Russian accounts and posts. NAFO members help build emotional solidarity, challenge enemy propaganda, and humanise the Ukrainian struggle. The organisation is critical in shaping online discourse, exposing and mocking Russian efforts, and encouraging grassroots donations to support Ukraine's defence. Participants have various reasons for being involved in 'digital volunteering'. Their engagement in various activities and the sense of community blur the lines between activism, advocacy, and online subculture.

6. The project highlights the significance of memetic warfare as a modern form of soft power: a format deeply embedded in digital culture yet with real-world consequences. Memes are not simply fleeting cultural artefacts; they are political tools used to resist oppression, fact-check, reclaim narratives, support, and foster community during a war that has kept the actors engaged since May 2022. These insights are highly relevant for developing new frameworks in media literacy, cybersecurity policy, and civic engagement, particularly in the context of hybrid warfare and information disorder. The findings have shown that we have only scratched the surface of this phenomenon, and further research is needed into defensive memetic warfare.

7. Findings also highlight the impact of graphic memetic warfare and the moral and ethical decision-making processes undertaken by online activists. The current information space is akin to an online Wild West, with a lack of effective enforcement or filtering by social media companies who are currently prioritising engagement over user mental health. As has been identified elsewhere, this has led to extensive exposure to graphic images of war and atrocities, which can have significant negative mental and physical health implications for those exposed to them, especially over prolonged periods.

Recommendations

1. To better understand the role and impact of memes and memetic warfare, researchers and governments should explore the feasibility of developing effective meme tracing tools and technologies. This could help us understand how memes spread and the circumstances in which they influence people's views, attitudes and opinions.

2. Support further research into the nature and effectiveness of defensive memetic warfare. Explore the use of memes as tools of digital activism that foster global engagement and deepen understanding of on-the-ground realities in war and conflict, particularly in the face of information disorder.

3. NAFO has highlighted the positive effects of active engagement in fostering support for, and engagement with, democratic principles and self-determination. Governments should learn from this to better engage people in national and international political debates and narratives and reduce political apathy.

4. Memes are a powerful communication tool widely used to highlight political and social issues. As government actors also engage in this space, there is a need for clear guidance on best practices, ethical considerations, and safe communication. With the rise of generative AI making it harder to distinguish real from AI-generated content, it is crucial to foster public understanding of how memes can be used responsibly and effectively, especially in an age of increasing information disorder.

5. Promote the development and use of defensive meme strategies, such as those employed by NAFO, to counter information disorder, strengthen public morale, and encourage critical engagement with online content. In war, conflict and crisis settings where information is easily manipulated, such tactics can help users distinguish real from false content.

6. There remains a pressing need for effective media literacy training. Effective training packages and toolkits aimed at all levels of civil society should be developed and disseminated rapidly and effectively.

7. Online information disorder requires consistent, rigorous fact-checking. Despite NAFO's effective efforts in countering false narratives, they cannot do it alone. Many misleading posts remain unchallenged and continue to circulate freely. We recommend reinstating professional moderation alongside AI tools and user reporting systems to support media literacy and active engagement. Platforms should also adopt shared norms on acceptable content, ensuring consistent enforcement and helping users better identify and respond to misinformation.

8. Social media companies should revise content moderation and sharing policies by disabling autoplay by default and enabling content blurring or labelling to give users control over engagement. AI tools should automatically detect and flag graphic content, particularly images depicting death, pain, or suffering. Given the volume of such content during war and conflicts, graphic content filters must be reassessed and strengthened.

> Memes are a powerful communication tool widely used to highlight political and social issues.

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Introduction

Hours before Russia's full-scale invasion, President Zelenskyy delivered a televised address to the Russian people, initiating Ukraine's strategic use of direct online communication (FP, 2022; Sonne, 2022). This continued with his iconic video from Kyiv, declaring: "We are still here" and urging resistance (Braithwaite, 2022; Reuters, 2022).

The message quickly resonated, with live footage, images and communications about the Ukrainian resistance, such as the images of unarmed Ukrainian citizens blocking Russian tanks, circulating online (CNN, 2022). Zelenskyy has since sustained this approach through daily online speeches, mobilising both national and international support and sparking widespread global solidarity campaigns, both online and offline, in response to Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine (Munk, 2024b; Munk & Ahmad, 2022; President of Ukraine, 2025).

This report presents the findings from the research project 'The Complex Web in Memetic Warfare: A Comprehensive Analysis of Societal Dynamics, Interactions and Impact', funded by the BA / Leverhulme Small Research Grants scheme (2024-25). The study explores how digital communities use memes as tools of civic resistance and information defence in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, focusing on the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO).

NAFO memes serve as a hard hitting reminder of the civilian impacts of indisrciminate Russian bombing campaigns.

@NAFOVoyager

NAFO emerged in May 2022 as a global, decentralised grassroots movement supporting Ukraine (NAFO, 2025c). Operating primarily online, it is a voluntary and flexible grassroots network where anyone can participate, contributing as time allows. NAFO combines humour with civic resistance, using memes as tools to counter Russian information disorder, support Ukraine, and build international solidarity. Its strength lies in its accessible structure, focus on Ukraine, and strong online community.

Unlike prior research focused on the offensive use of memes by far-right extremist groups or populist political parties and individuals, this project explores NAFO's civic and defensive application of memes. It investigates how the movement mobilises support through satire, information sharing, and collective action. This report introduces the first dataset centred on a single digital resistance group, offering insights into NAFO's motivations, tactics, and impact. These insights contribute to academic, policy, and practitioner understandings of digital activism and information resilience in wartime.

The project has sought to achieve the following aims and objectives:

- Aim 1: To identify and understand the perception, reach and impact of pro-Ukrainian memetic warfare using NAFO as a case study.

- Aim 2: To understand the motivations and mechanisms behind civil online users' engagement with memetic warfare.

- Aim 3: To explore and understand the reach and impact of pro-Ukrainian memetic warfare.

To do this, we adopted a mixed-methods approach:

- An online survey distributed via social media platforms that NAFO 'fellas' are known to actively engage with.

- A follow-up semi-structured interview with a sample of survey respondents to explore some of these themes in more detail.

- Surveys with Ukrainian citizens in Ukraine and abroad to explore their understanding of memetic warfare, its goals, effectiveness and impact.

This report presents the key findings and related recommendations, underpinned by the data that has been collected. This report is relevant to scholars, policymakers, civil society actors, and cybersecurity professionals working on digital conflict, information warfare, and civic resistance.

The report includes four core areas of research:

- The role of memes in shaping pro-Ukrainian narratives and countering disinformation.

- The civic and cultural impact of NAFO's meme-centric activism.

- The motivations of individuals engaged in meme creation and digital resistance.

- The broader implications of memetic warfare for conflict / war communication, policy, and information resilience.

Unlike prior research focused on the offensive use of memes by far-right extremist groups or populist political parties and individuals, this project explores NAFO's civic and defensive application of memes.

NAFO regularly highlight the indiscriminate Russian targeting of Ukrainian communities.

RECOGNIZING THAT RUSSIA IS A TERRORIST STATE

Background and literature review

Information disorder

Information disorder (also known as inference operations or information pollution) refers to the spread of false, misleading or deceptive content intended to confuse the public, often for political, ideological, or financial gain. It includes disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation, and goes beyond simple lies by creating doubt, distorting facts, and undermining trust in people, public institutions and democratic processes. Information disorder thrives in polarised, personalised online environments, reinforcing existing biases and weakening democratic discourse (UNDP, 2022a; UNDP, 2022b; Lynch, 2019; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Common tactics include fake news, propaganda, and false political advertisements.

Example of a NAFO meme drawing attention to Vladimir Putin as a war criminal.

Information disorder and influence operations have long been integral to military and intelligence strategies. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union used aktivnye meropriyatiya (active measures): covert political influence tactics involving front groups, support for allied movements, inciting unrest, and spreading disinformation through rumours, forged documents, and leaks to serve strategic goals (More, 2019; Galeotti, 2016). Culturally, Ukraine and other former Soviet republics remain susceptible to Russian influence due to shared histories and large Russian-speaking populations, providing openings for propaganda (Orenstein, 2024).

Russia's information campaigns against Ukraine follow a well-documented '4D' strategy – dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay (Snegovaya, 2015; Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017; Erlich & Garner, 2021). These efforts promote Russia, discredit the West, and destabilise Ukraine through repeated falsehoods. Examples include claims about the 2014 MH17 crash, the illegal occupation of Donbas, the annexation of Crimea, and the use of unmarked Russian troops – all of which were later debunked by Ukrainian authorities (StratComCoe, 2015; Erlich & Garner, 2021; Munk, 2024b).

Information disorder and influence operations have long been integral to military and intelligence strategies.

Information warfare

Contemporary influence operations differ from Cold War era tactics due to the digital information landscape. Technology now enables state and non-state actors to combine military actions with cyberattacks and online propaganda, using 'hybrid methods' to spread information disorder and undermine global institutions (Bradshaw, 2020; Munk, 2022; Svetoka, 2016). Unlike those in the past, today's campaigns are fast, cheap, and data driven. Social media algorithms prioritise viral content over truth, while anonymous trolls and bots spread information disorder, harass dissenters, and silence key voices. The design of these platforms accelerates the reach and impact of such operations, posing new international security risks (Bradshaw, 2020).

Many of these activities were guided by the Maskirovka strategy (to mask or masquerade), which uses deception, imitation, and disruption to manipulate public perception (Fuchs, 2024; Munk, 2025b; Ahmad & Munk, 2025; Moore, 2019). In contrast, Ukraine has shown significant resilience in the information domain since 2014, resisting Russian disinformation alongside its military defence. However, Ukraine's success does not guarantee similar resistance elsewhere, as Russian influence continues to threaten public opinion and may erode Western support (Kalenský, 2023).

Influence operations

An influence operation is a deliberate effort by an actor to interfere with how individuals or groups outside its legal control interpret events and form opinions, such as a state or terrorist group. Using publicly accessible social media platforms, the goal is to shape perceptions in a way that benefits the actor and / or harms its opponents (Bergh, 2020).

There is no clear consensus on the definitions of key terms related to power in the information domain. Concepts such as information warfare, psychological operations, influence operations, strategic communications, computer network operations, and military deception are often used inconsistently across contexts, leading to confusion (Bragetto & Veenendaal, 2016). The primary goal of influence operations is to exert power by shaping the behaviour of a target audience. Essentially, for actor A to persuade actor B to do something B would not otherwise choose to do (Bragetto & Veenendaal, 2016; Dahl, 1957). The US Department of Defence define the area as:

> "The integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operations to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting [its] own"
>
> (DoD, 2013; Bragetto & Veenendaal, 2016)

The use of influence campaigns goes two ways in the war. Ukrainian actors have successfully leveraged events on the ground (kinetic warfare) and in the online environment to destabilise the Russian narrative and influence, as well as promote, a particular Ukrainian narrative online. This has debunked some of Russia's influence operations.

Examples of NAFO memes.

Memetic war

Blending pop culture, politics and participation, memes function as a unique genre and capture key aspects of contemporary digital life. Widely shared and remixed across platforms, they have become central to participatory digital culture. Memes have been defined as both "defining events of the twenty-first century" (Shifman, 2014, p. 4; Klumbytė & Yeremieieva, 2022) and "remixed, iterated messages" used for satire, parody, critique, or commentary (Wiggins, 2019; Mozolevska, 2024; Munk, 2025b; Milner, 2012).

While memes have traditionally been used for humour or sarcasm, they also serve as a means of conveying serious messages, such as using humour to reflect opinions or critiquing social and political issues. This combination of comedy and commentary makes memes a powerful and adaptable form of digital expression (Rogers & Giorgi, 2023; Zannettou, et al., 2018; Heiskanen, 2017; Mina, 2019; Milner, 2013).

Memes are quickly created, shared, and consumed, but just as quickly forgotten. In the personalised, filter-driven environment of social media, they often centre on current, sensational, or controversial topics. Their short-lived, recognisable, and humorous nature allows them to both politicise and depoliticise conflict, drawing attention to or away from key issues (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021; Bayerl & Stoynov, 2016; Neumayer & Struthers, 2019).

Meme theory has shifted from viewing memes as isolated units to seeing them as interconnected, socially governed forms shaped by shared content and cultural practices. However, this view can overlook the influence of specific platforms on how memes are created, circulated and reused (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018; Rogers & Giorgi, 2023; Shifman, 2014). A meme can be understood through three interrelated components: manifestation, behaviour, and ideal. The 'manifestation' is the visible, physical form of the meme, such as an image or video shared online. The 'behaviour' refers to the actions involved in creating or spreading the meme. The 'ideal' is the underlying concept or message that inspires the behaviour and ultimately results in the meme's manifestation (Davidson, 2012).

Example of a NAFO meme depicting Ukraine as a shield against wider Russian ambitions in Europe.

Example of a NAFO meme expressing solidarity with Ukraine.

Weaponising memes

Visuals have long been central to conflict / war propaganda, used not only to inform but to mobilise support and shape ideological narratives. With digital media, visual content from war zones has exploded in volume and reach (Mortensen, 2017; Mozolevska, 2024). The Russian-Ukrainian War is especially visual, flooding online platforms with both documentary and artistic content. Creative, participatory use of memes has led some to label it a meme war, with Ukrainians dubbed "a meme nation" (Adams, 2022; Hoskins & Shchelin, 2023; Mozolevska, 2024).

Munk (2025) has defined memetic warfare as "a form of information warfare conducted online through memes and other tactics to achieve political, strategic, or ideological objectives. It involves the offensive or defensive circulation of content to influence public opinion, disrupt discourse, and advance the interests of those engaged in the campaign" (Munk, 2025b, p. 3).

Offensive memetic warfare

Offensive memes can be defined as "strategically crafted visual or textual content designed to spread information pollution, manipulate narratives, and target individuals or groups with ridicule and harassment. They aim to polarise audiences, distort facts, and promote biased agendas by using humour, sarcasm, and provocation to incite conflict and confusion" (Munk, 2025b, p. 5).

These spaces amplify hostile narratives and erode meaningful discourse. Russia has effectively weaponised offensive memetic warfare, integrating it into broader disinformation campaigns through troll farms, state media and AI-generated content to manipulate and confuse public perception. (Munk, 2025a; Munk, 2024b; Munk, 2025b).

Traditional news media now struggle to compete with the dynamics of digital environments and shifting online behaviours. In contemporary warfare, offensive memetic warfare becomes easier, thanks to numerous platforms and the use of fake identities and avatars. Malicious actors increasingly use generative AI to create fake images, stories, audio, and video, reaching broad audiences through manipulative tactics to push their narratives (Culloty & Suiter, 2021; Munk, 2025a; Munk, 2025b).

Example of a NAFO meme highlighting Ukrainian strength and innovation.
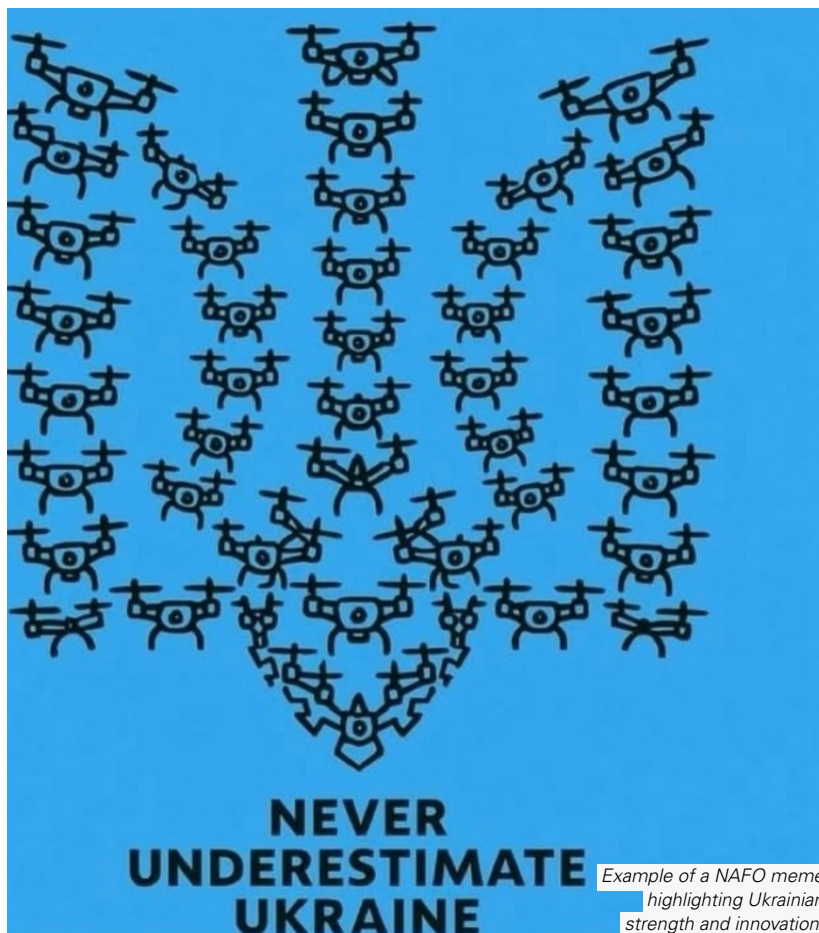
Defensive memetic warfare

Defensive memes are "visual and / or textual content designed to stop falsehoods, promote factual accuracy, boost the morale of those under attack, and foster critical thinking by using humour and simple messaging" (Munk, 2025b). Collaboration in memetic warfare often unfolds in informal, unstructured spaces where authorities, online groups, and individuals engage in loosely coordinated actions. These efforts are driven by practical responses, such as sharing content and countering Russian narratives. Memes often reflect key wartime events, such as the Kursk incursion (2024) and Operation Spiderweb (Drone attacks in Russia, 2025). These memes serve to celebrate victories, mock the enemy, and function as both propaganda and counter-propaganda (Mozolevska, 2024; Munk, 2024b; Mazhulin, et al., 2025; Terajima, 2025).

Humour and satire quickly evolved into effective soft power tools, adopted not only by grassroots communities but also by Ukrainian officials. These tactics targeted Russia's imperialist narratives, exposing their absurdity and undermining their credibility, and satirical content ridiculed what was once called "the second strongest army in the world", rebranding it online as "the second strongest in Ukraine" (Tokariuk, 2023).

Humour is widely used in Ukraine by the government, civil society, and influencers to counter Russian propaganda for three key reasons: it captures broader audiences, boosts public morale, and undermines the credibility of Russian information. By ridiculing propagandists, Ukrainians limit their influence and damage the reputation of Russian media and governmental communications (Kalenský & Osadchuk, 2024; Munk, 2024b; Munk, 2025b).

Fact-checking and media literacy

Fact-checking organisations emerged in Ukraine in 2014 in response to the Russian invasion and the surge of disinformation. StopFake quickly became a key player, initially targeting Ukrainian audiences before expanding into multiple languages and inspiring similar initiatives across the EU, amid rising concerns about Kremlin propaganda. Alongside these efforts, Ukrainian media and social media users adopted humour, memes, and satirical TV to engage wider audiences and expose disinformation in more relatable ways (Tokariuk, 2023; StopFake, 2025).

While fact-checkers use verified evidence to debunk falsehoods, satire highlights absurdities and prompts critical reflection, often blending truth and exaggeration to support or challenge political positions. Both approaches encourage scepticism and serve corrective functions. Memetic warfare adds a humorous, indirect dimension, using concise text and imagery to ridicule propaganda and undermine its credibility without needing detailed rebuttals (Boukes & Hameleers, 2023; Fox, et al., 2007; Giles, 2023; Meddaugh, 2010).

Media literacy is both a concept and a practical tool that empowers citizens to navigate an increasingly complex and saturated media environment. It involves understanding media content and structures while recognising the democratic role individuals play in sharing and shaping information (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Park, et al., 2023). As fake news and information disorder spread more rapidly on social media than through traditional outlets, media literacy becomes essential. At its core, it encompasses the ability to access, analyse, and create media messages (Caplan, et al., 2018; Silverman & Alexander, 2016; Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Aufderheide, 1997).

> While fact-checkers use verified evidence to debunk falsehoods, satire highlights absurdities and prompts critical reflection

Examples of NAFO memes.

Civic resistance

Civic resistance refers to the sustained, collective use of nonviolent methods by civilians to confront oppression, injustice, or authoritarian rule. It is typically employed in asymmetrical conflicts where powerful actors, such as the state or occupying forces, rely on violence to maintain control, while the resisting group chooses nonviolence as a strategic form of struggle (Schock, 2013; Arapura, 1997; Ackerman & Rodal, 2008). A key strength is its capacity to mobilise wide participation, presenting lower moral, physical, and informational barriers than violent resistance (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). This inclusivity enables movements to draw support from across society, including marginalised groups, and to organise more openly, facilitating communication and growth (Rid, 2012/2013; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Schock, 2013; Munk, 2024b; Munk, 2025b).

Civic resistance is fundamentally driven by ordinary people rather than elites or external forces. It works by delegitimising unjust systems and redistributing power across society, rather than concentrating it in the hands of a few. Its forms are diverse and interconnected, often blurring the line between public defiance and private discontent (Butz & Ripmeester, 1999; Malmvig, 2016; Lilja, 2022; Ackerman & Rodal, 2008). This reflects a shift in academic thinking, where power and resistance are seen not as opposites, but as entangled and mutually influential (Chandra, 2015, p. 564; Haynes & Prakash, 1992; Lilja, 2022).

Ukraine exemplifies the strength of civic resistance, with a vibrant and creative civil society defending the information space even before

government action and continuing to engage key audiences (Kalenský & Osadchuk, 2024). Using social media and memetic warfare, the Ukrainian government bypasses traditional media, directly shaping narratives through simple tools like video clips, posts, and memes. These tools counter propaganda, maintain global visibility, and sustain international support even after mainstream media coverage fades (Siapera, 2018; Newman, et al., 2014; Munk & Ahmad, 2022).

Dubbed the first citizen social media war, the 2022 invasion saw personal stories and real-time updates flood platforms like X, Instagram and

Example of a NAFO meme referencing popular culture (i.e. The Mandalorian).

TikTok, placing memes at the centre of digital resistance (Bracciale & Aglioti Colombini, 2023; Ciuriak, 2022). From Zelenskyy's global outreach to grassroots meme campaigns, Ukraine has effectively utilised social media to combat disinformation and garner support. Memes have become a key component of its communication strategy, valued for their accessibility and viral reach (Munk, 2024b).

Ukrainian leaders and citizens have increasingly used memes for political expression, morale-building, and digital resistance. President Zelenskyy's messages, frontline imagery,

and key events have been transformed into viral memes, while figures like General Zaluzhnyi have used pop culture, such as a Baby Grogu badge, to inspire unity (Munk, 2024b; Munk & Ahmad, 2022; Chen, et al., 2023). Symbols like Zelenskyy in camouflage, the Ghost of Kyiv, and the phrase 'Russian warship, go f*** yourself' have become powerful icons of Ukrainian resistance. Alongside these, visual motifs like sunflowers, watermelons, the national flag, and the greeting Slava Ukraini reinforce national identity and foster international solidarity (Horbyk & Orlova, 2023; The Kyiv Independent, 2024; Munk, 2025b; Tokariuk, 2023; Klumbytė & Yeremieieva, 2022; Chen, et al., 2023).

While military operations like the Kursk offensive may not bring down the Kremlin, symbolic acts, such as the sinking of the warship Moskva, the raising of a Ukrainian flag in Russian- held territory (2024), drone-packed containers in Operation Spiderweb (2025), and repeated attacks on the Kerch Bridge (2022, 2025) achieve a lasting impact by undermining Russia's legitimacy (Holynska, 2024; Mazhulin, et al., 2025; Melkozerova, 2025; Brown, 2023; BBC News, 2022).

Ukraine's political agency has evolved alongside societal transformation and digital innovation. During the 2022 siege of Kyiv, civilians not engaged in combat turned to cyber activism, using social media to express national identity, coordinate resistance, and rally international support. This digital resistance soon extended globally, engaging supporters far beyond Ukraine and creating a strong sense of networked solidarity (Antoniuk, 2022; Asmolov, 2022; Bang Carlsen, et al., 2024; Canevez, et al., 2024; Munk, 2025b; Kozachenko, 2018).

North Atlantic
Fella Organization

The North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO) is named in jest after NATO and has evolved into a powerful grassroots tool for combating information disorder, fundraising, and maintaining global attention on Ukraine (The Economist, 2022; York, 2022). NAFO is a decentralised, volunteer-led movement with no central leadership. Its strength lies in its grassroots culture and its ability to react swiftly and collectively in the online space. It is primarily known for its use of Shiba Inu 'fella' avatars and memes to mock and counter Russian propaganda during the war in Ukraine (Munk, 2024b; Kasianenko & Boichak, 2024).

The movement began when a Polish Twitter user, @Kama_Kamilia, offered custom Shiba Inu avatars in exchange for donations to a volunteer unit fighting in Ukraine. To join, supporters donate to a Ukraine-related charity or buy from a store that contributes profits to Ukraine, such as NAFO, Wild Hornets, United24, LIFT99, NAFO 69th Sniffing Brigade (NAFO, 2025b; Munk, 2024b; Munk, 2025; Smalley, 2022; Drummond, 2023; HELP99, 2025; Liberty Ukraine, 2025; United24, 2025a; Wild Hornet, 2025).

At its core, NAFO exists to satirise and discredit Russian propaganda. While NAFO members are active on multiple platforms (including Reddit, Discord, Telegram and Bluesky), X remains its central hub of activity (Kasianenko & Boichak, 2024). By mocking falsehoods, sowing doubt around Russian narratives, and countering coordinated attacks by trolls (often referred to as 'braindead dogs'), NAFO weakens the credibility of Kremlin-aligned messaging. NAFO effectively disrupts disinformation while fostering a powerful sense of international solidarity (Dougherty, 2023; Propastop, 2024; Munk, 2024).

NAFO's memetic storytelling operates on two fronts. Internally, it fosters solidarity among the community; externally, it targets the international public, especially NATO countries, to rally support for Ukraine and attract new members (Johais & Meis, 2024). Weekly initiatives, such as 'See a Fella – Follow a Fella', further expand reach and maintain strong follower networks, which are crucial for amplifying coordinated messaging and action.

NAFO often mocks the flawed English found in Russian propaganda, turning linguistic mistakes into memes and community in-jokes. Phrases like 'What air defence doing?' have become symbols of satire and criticism of Russian failures (McInnis et al., 2022; Giles, 2023). Slogans such as 'You pronounced this nonsense, not me', stemming from a viral exchange with Russian Ambassador Ulyanov, appear widely on NAFO merchandise. The phrase 'NAFO expansion is non-negotiable' links humour to NATO's exclusion of Ukraine (Drummond, 2023; BBC News, 2025; Munk, 2024b; Kirichenko, 2023a). Russian claims that NAFO is a CIA operation are ridiculed with the meme 'There is no CIA', often paired with Ukrainian flags. To avoid content moderation, NAFO uses coded terms: 'Vatniks', 'Rashists', and 'Orcs' refer to Russian actors; 'Bavovna' to explosions; 'Bonking' to targeting hostile posts; and 'Tractor troops' to Ukrainian farmers seizing Russian tanks (Taylor, 2022; Politico, 2022; Tokariuk, 2023; Johais & Meis, 2024).

In 2023 and 2024, NAFO received multiple honours for its support of Ukraine. President Zelenskyy and United24 awarded the group with a plaque for the fellas' hard work and dedication. At the 2023 NAFO Summit in Vilnius, the group was presented with the Lithuanian Star of Diplomacy. In 2025, the group received the Polish Polityka Passport Award for Digital Culture (NAFO, 2025c; NV, 2023). Senior Ukrainian and international figures have also openly supported the group (Kirichenko, 2023c; Smalley, 2022; Munk, 2024; Koshelenko, 2024; NV, 2023; Taylor, 2022; Dougherty, 2023; NAFO, 2025c).

Examples of NAFO memes.

Methodology

Research aims and objectives

Aims

- To identify and understand the perception, reach and impact of pro-Ukrainian memetic warfare, using NAFO as a case study.

- To understand the motivations and mechanisms behind civil online users' engagement in memetic warfare.

- To explore and understand the reach and impact of pro-Ukrainian memetic warfare.

Objectives

- To analyse the role of memes in civic resistance and counterpropaganda.

- To understand the perception and impact of memes among NAFO members and Ukrainians.

- To examine the distribution and creation of memes related to key events.

Primary data collection for this project was underpinned by a mixed-methods approach intended to collect both breadth and depth of data, experience and reflections. To achieve this we:

- Disseminated a 30-question online survey, comprising a combination of multiple-choice, scalar and open questions, via social media channels where NAFO fellas are known to be most active (X, Reddit and Telegram). We did not engage with Bluesky because it did not see a large or significant fella population at the time.

- Conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of 18 survey respondents to obtain a greater depth of understanding around motivations for engagement with NAFO and memetic warfare more widely.

- Conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 Ukrainian citizens in Ukraine and abroad to explore their understanding of memetic warfare, its goals, effectiveness and impact.

Example of a NAFO meme parodying the idea that Ukraine should cede territory to Russia in return for peace.

Survey data

Surveys were selected for the first phase of data collection due to their accessibility and cost-effectiveness in data collection from specific populations (Das, et al., 2018; Scholau & Couper , 2017). Topics covered included participant demographics, including location (at a country level); motivations for engaging with NAFO and memetic warfare; the nature of activities undertaken; and the perceived role and impact of memetic warfare, both within the Russian-Ukrainian war and more broadly. Surveys were made available in both English, where it is a widely accepted lingua franca online (Pineda & Bosso, 2023), and Ukrainian. The surveys were administered through Qualtrics, and all tracking data was turned off to preserve the anonymity of participants. To be included, participants had to be:

1) over the age of 18

2) supporters of NAFO and Ukraine.

Given the nature of the research and the wider context surrounding Russian disinformation campaigns – as well as the extensive, well-documented use of bot farms (Smart, et al., 2022) targeted at Ukraine and its supporters in the West – we are aware of the potential for alias fraud through automated bot engagement (Goodrich, et al., 2023; Sherman, et al., 2024). For this reason, we asked users to complete a ReCAPTCHA authentication. Incomplete responses were removed to further improve the accuracy of the data, leaving us with a completed sample of 255 responses.

NAFO interviews

Survey respondents were asked if they would be willing to engage in a follow-up interview and provide an email address for us to make contact. This was stored separately to survey data. Of the 99 participants who showed an interest in follow-up surveys, we contacted 81, aiming for a global spread of participants. Of this sample 18 participants, 15 male and 3 female, completed follow-up interviews within the timescale of the project. These participants were living in ten different countries around the world: Australia (n=1), Canada (n=2), Denmark (n=1), Germany (n=2), Poland (n=1), Romania (n=1), Switzerland (n=1), Ukraine (n=2), the United Kingdom (n=2), and the United States (n=4).

Interviews ranged in length from 32 to 77 minutes. Participants were offered the opportunity to be interviewed in English, Danish or Ukrainian based on a combination of their preference and the language proficiencies of the research team. All but two chose to be interviewed in English.

Ukrainian interviews

Ukrainian citizens were recruited via snowball sampling. We carried out initial interviews with existing Ukrainian contacts in Ukraine and Denmark, and they then provided access to other Ukrainian participants. In total we completed 21 interviews with Ukrainian citizens at home and abroad, with interviews conducted in English or Ukrainian depending on the participant's preference. Interviews ranged from 16 to 68 minutes. Of the participants, 13 were female and 8 were male. The gender profile for existing networks – particularly for Ukrainians abroad – was influenced by the fact that women and children formed the majority of those seeking refuge from the war, while many men were called up for military service.

Example of a NAFO meme portraying NAFO as NATOs flamboyant relative.

Data analysis

We began by cleaning survey data to remove incomplete responses. This reduced the original dataset from 537 entries to 255 completed responses. Of these, five were in Ukrainian, with the remainder in English. However, some Ukrainian respondents may have been more comfortable responding in English. Surveys were analysed using the 'analyse data' function in Microsoft Excel. Data was sorted and filtered to generate clear tables and figures for numerical and scalar data. Open-ended responses were manually grouped and categorised into key themes. These were then counted and organised using the 'analyse tab' function. This enabled us to highlight participants' motivations, engagement patterns, and views on NAFO's role in countering disinformation.

Following transcription and anonymisation, interview responses were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and coded in NVivo 14. This allowed us to quickly identify key themes and trends in the qualitative data and code it to relevant nodes. Findings from both NAFO and Ukrainian interviews were coded into the same dataset, meaning we could compare and contrast findings and identify patterns and areas of disagreement within the data.

Data was sorted and filtered to generate clear tables and figures for numerical and scalar data.

Research ethics

The project received full ethical scrutiny through the Business, Law and Social Science ethical review committee at Nottingham Trent University, receiving approval on 24 July 2024. Data was collected between August 2024 and December 2024. All survey and interview participants received a full participant information sheet and gave informed consent before providing data, and were aware of their rights to withdraw. No personal identifying information was collected in the survey, beyond email addresses for participants interested in engaging with the follow-up survey. These were held separately and securely in NTU's secure data repository.

Ahead of interviews, participants were encouraged to use pseudonyms, with many using their NAFO fella name or X handle. They were also advised that they were not expected to turn their camera on for the duration of the interview. Despite this, some remained happy to reveal their faces and turned them on. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. In line with our ethical protocols, all raw data was subsequently destroyed, while transcribed data was anonymised to protect the identities of our participants.

Example of a NAFO meme ridiculing Vladimir Putin.

Findings

Demographics

Mirroring trends in wider digital literacy and engagement (Eurostat, 2023), the majority of participants (n=189) are under the age of 44. However, a not-insignificant proportion (n=66) are aged 45 and over. The age profile of respondents speaks to the broad demographic appeal of NAFO and challenges the idea that digital activism is something primarily undertaken by young people (Monstyrska et al, forthcoming).

Age range	Survey respondents	Ukrainian citizens
18-24	66 (26%)	6 (29%)
35-34	63 (25%)	4 (19%)
35-44	60 (24%)	9 (43%)
45-54	36 (14%)	0
55-64	21 (8%)	2 (9%)
65-74	6 (2%)	0
Prefer not to answer	3 (1%)	0
TOTAL	**255**	**21**

Figure 1: To protect participant information and identities, data on age ranges was not made available in the NAFO interviews . However, this sample was drawn from within the pool of wider NAFO survey respondents.

Gender

The responses to interviews are gendered, with 83% (n=212) of survey respondents identifying as male. However, our ongoing observations of the field suggest considerably greater female engagement than we see here. This indicates that a gender bias within those who engaged with the survey appears to have filtered through to the interviews, with 78% (n=14) of respondents to the NAFO interviews also being male. There may be several reasons for this. For example, women and non-binary populations engaged in online civic resistance may be reluctant to participate in research due to greater privacy concerns, particularly in light of ongoing confrontations between NAFO and pro-Russian users who are known to engage in aggressive trolling (Munk, 2025; Munk, 2024b).

Gender	Survey	NAFO interviewees	Ukrainian interviewees
Female	26	4	13
Male	212	14	8
Non-binary / third gender	10	0	0
Prefer not to say	4	0	0
Prefer to self-describe	3	0	0
TOTAL	**255**	**18**	**21**

Figure 2: Self-described gender of participants.

Location of participants

Figure 3: Stated locations of survey respondents.

Count

72

1
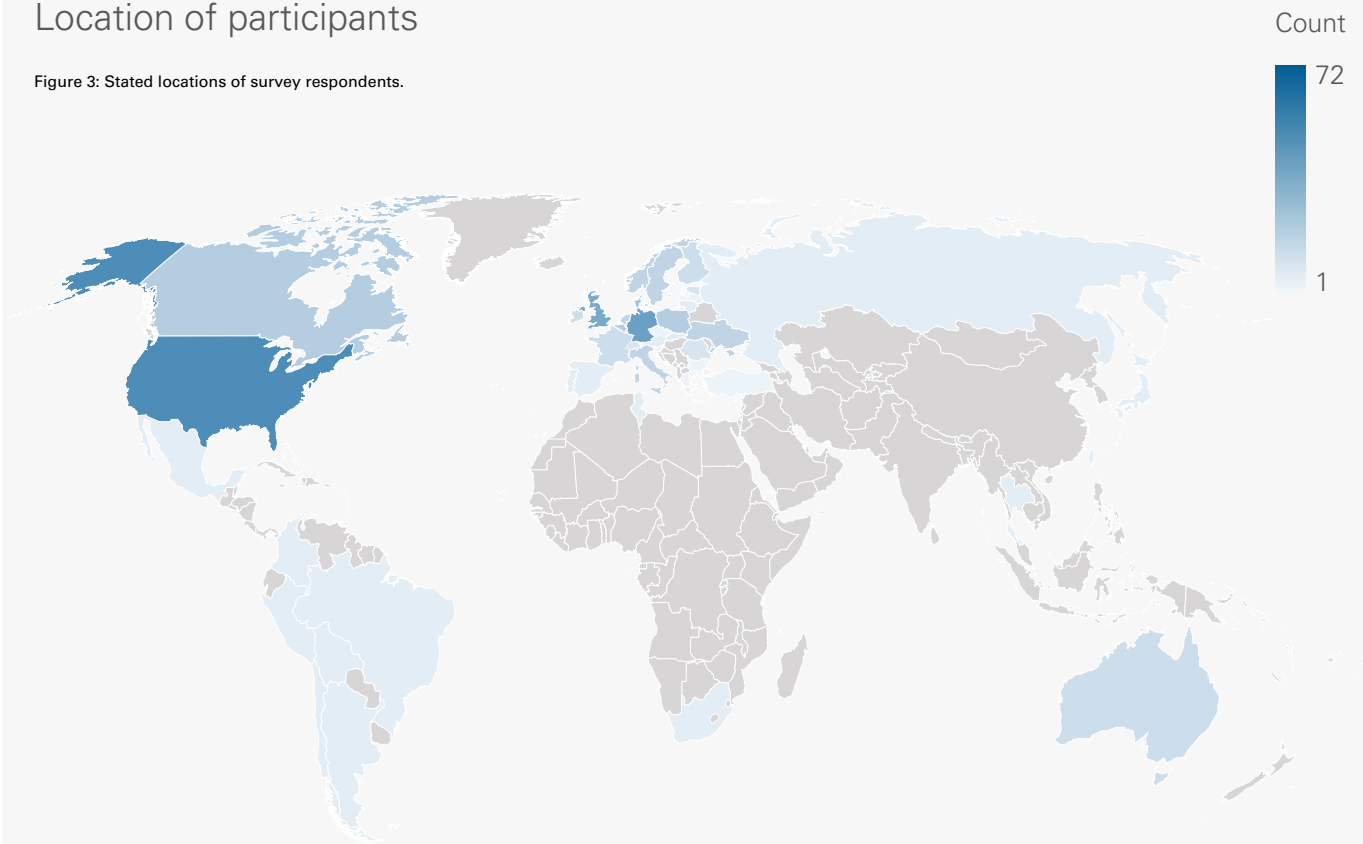
Survey responses confirm that NAFO is a global alliance. This speaks to the way in which, in today's digital age and facilitated by social media, activism increasingly transcends national borders when they are united behind a common cause. Our findings show that NAFO's appeal extends beyond conventional and political national identities.

When asked why they affiliate with NAFO, survey respondents included the following among their motivations:

"Supporting Ukraine in one of the few ways I can, also defending democracy and democratic values."

(Survey respondent 158)

"[To] help support Ukraine and democracy."

(Survey respondent 191

Findings show that memes are used not just for humour or critique but also as effective tools for information resilience and civic mobilisation, and the community is key to keeping people involved in supporting Ukraine and carrying out defensive actions against Russian and pro-Russian accounts and posts. The members help build emotional solidarity, challenge enemy propaganda, and humanise the Ukrainian struggle. NAFO is critical in shaping online discourse, exposing and mocking Russian efforts, and encouraging grassroots donations to support Ukraine's defence. Participants have various reasons for being involved in 'digital volunteering'. Their engagement in several different activities and the community feeling blur the lines between activism, advocacy, and online subculture.

Example of a NAFO meme expressing solidarity between NAFO and the Ukrainian armed forces.

"A country has attacked an independent, sovereign nation, and I think many people find that unjust. I think that's what unites people. And also, if we're talking about Europe and NAFO members in Europe, it's because there's a feeling that Ukraine is close to us – it's closer to Europe."

(NAFO interviewee 17)

Elsewhere it has been found that many NAFO fellas are driven by transnational solidarity and an ethical commitment to fighting authoritarianism (Munk, 2024b; Munk, 2023b; Munk, 2025b; Kirichenko, 2023c; Kirichenko, 2023a). As President Zelenskyy stated in 2023, "Attention equals help". In this context, NAFO's actions online are important beyond fighting a defensive memetic warfare against Russia. NAFO's digital efforts are instrumental in maintaining global attention and, by extension, ensuring a consistent material support for Ukraine (Kirichenko, 2023; Kyiv Independent, 2023).

Example of a NAFO meme challenging people who uncritically engage with and repeat Russian falsehoods.

NAFO engagement and digital literacy

Not only are participants drawn from a global audience, but they also engage widely with a variety of different forms of social media (Figure 4). This highlights the digital literacy of NAFO 'fellas' and their engagement across multiple platforms. They need to engage with different skill sets and be aware of different systems, understanding how to search for and verify information, as well as how sharing, engagement and reporting practices work across the different platforms (Manca, et al., 2021; Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022).
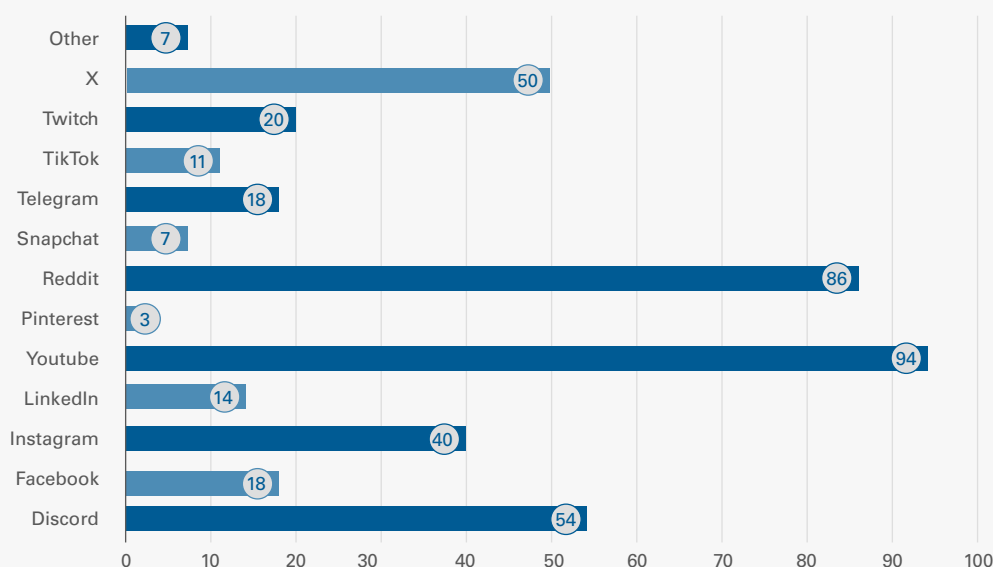
Counts

Figure 4: Social media platforms used by NAFO fellas (n.b. participants engage across multiple platforms, so tallies add up to more than the 255 respondents)

This becomes particularly important when considering issues around information disorder and people's ability to differentiate between truth and fiction online.

> "I've heard my friends like parrot Russian talking points without… knowing it. Meanwhile, they don't even know how many branches of government there are in our government... There seems to be a severe disconnect between I guess what you would consider like the memetic politics or yeah like memeable politics, or just pop politics in general versus like the real politics of somebody's like physical location or country."
>
> (NAFO interviewee 5)

Across both sets of interviewees, participants noted that wider digital literacy is weak and in need of development:

When asked whether enough is being done to educate Ukrainian citizens on digital literacy and digital hygiene:

> "More [needs to be done]. Definitely. I can see from my mother, who is 72 years old, and three years ago she had no idea what a Telegram was, what a tablet was, what an alarm card was, what Facebook was. And there are a lot of people like my mother, at least among my elderly friends. We still need to learn a bit more. We need to learn a lot more, because not everyone understands that you can't take pictures, send any information about the movement, or location of our armed forces."
>
> (Ukrainian interviewee 14)

This aligns with wider policy and practice concerns around the challenges that information disorder campaigns, including those led by malign state actors, can play in shaping attitudes and opinions. For example, in the UK, the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee in 2019 noted that there is "strong evidence that points to hostile state actors influencing democratic processes" (House of Commons Digital, 2019, p. 70). We have already seen this in elections in Europe and the US, in particularly in 2024 and 2025, i.e. Moldova, Georgia, Romania, Germany, the UK and the US.

Crucially, NAFO fellas noted that levels of information disorder vary by location. News media in the US, for example, was noted as being particularly partisan, with participants relying on news sources outside the US for alternative coverage:

> "US news has gotten really, really terrible. Especially that way… I'll jump over to… the Euronews channel, I'll try to get on that at least three times a week. I'll jump on over for the BBC and The Guardian newspaper and things like that, just trying to trying to get a wider range and not have it American filtered... one thing I've noticed is our news is incredibly filtered."
>
> (NAFO participant 8)

Examples of NAFO memes.

Social media's ambiguity around user identity and content context enables information disorder campaigns to spread easily. Pseudonymous users can pose as experts or use fake accounts to amplify false claims, while content is often reframed through sarcasm or selective editing to support influence campaigns (Bergh, 2020).

Microtargeting techniques, long used in marketing, are now exploited by malicious actors to deliver tailored disinformation based on users' traits and behaviours, increasing the likelihood of its spread (Culloty & Suiter, 2021). Malicious actors use fake accounts, personas, and websites to spread influence online, often boosting their visibility through ads, fake followers, and coordinated social media sharing. While they aim to stay anonymous, many operations have ties to military or government entities. These inauthentic accounts, especially from abroad, seek to polarise society, distort public debate, and undermine democracy (Draper & Ali, 2022). Our findings underline the pressing need for greater media literacy and disinformation training to be developed and delivered across all levels of civil society.

Fostering critical engagement with online environments is one way of achieving this. Our findings indicate that engagement with NAFO-aligned activities has helped to improve participants' digital literacy skills, particularly around identifying the differences between truth and misinformation online:

> "[A]fter the full-scale war started, I've become more sceptical about the information I see, and it's easier, it's better for me to double-check the information that I see on the internet than to, like, blindly believe everything I see. And it's actually, it's way better than what was before, because sometimes we forget that social media is a great tool for manipulating people, and just checking what you see online, if you're not sure about what you see, is a thing that everyone should learn to do."
>
> (NAFO interviewee 8)

"Because before I couldn't argue that much. I didn't know, I knew that they were saying wrong things, lies, propaganda and such, and I didn't know how to counter it. Since I was, looking into it… I could see myself improve in arguing and to show my political view to the opposition. It did help definitely."

(NAFO interviewee 13)

Crucially, NAFO fellas have sought to actively educate themselves in the most appropriate ways of identifying, challenging and reporting instances of information disorder, while also seeking to support others in their online and offline connections to do the same:

"[I]t's quite good, especially on the platform Reddit I'm active on, to actually inform myself about actual narratives and how they are misinformation."

(NAFO interviewee 14)

"There was definitely a learning curve for me because I'm part Ukrainian… I'd done some background research and I'd say I was relatively cognizant of, you know, Russia and how it's been operating following stuff in the news… So when people started saying, oh these people are Nazis' or whatever, I do have the benefit. I'm on often on a laptop. So I've got 150 tabs open and I'm going OK what is this? Somebody says something and I'm fact checking it and I'm looking stuff up and I'm looking for studies. I'm looking for articles so very quickly… and I read very quickly as well, so, faster than a lot of people I was able to fact check things and go okay, now wait a minute!"

(NAFO interviewee 16)

Malign actors, from grassroots groups to state-sponsored entities, recognise how difficult it is to counter information disorder. Influence operations rely on the strategic delivery of content, manually or via automation, on platforms suited to their target audience, similar to the delivery phase in a cyberattack (Bergh, 2020; Tsikerdekis, 2012).

Each social media platform offers different affordances, shaping how messages are spread and amplified. Smaller influencers, often unnoticed by monitoring tools, can circulate disinformation undetected. While AI-driven disinformation garners attention, influencers pose a more immediate threat by offering direct, largely unregulated channels to spread false narratives (Rinderknecht, 2024; Munk, 2025c). Elsewhere wider information disorder campaigns became more sophisticated. For example, the Russian Doppelgänger campaign used replications of genuine 'trusted' news and organisations, including the Washington Post (US) and The Guardian (UK), to spread false narratives (Alaphilippe, et al., 2022; Munk, 2025b). These online tactics pose significant enforcement challenges.

The findings here are important for showcasing the need for increased digital literacy. This represents an important area of consideration for policymakers and practitioners, where our data indicates gaps which leave civilian populations vulnerable to being swayed by deliberately false and misleading information. However, it is neither fair nor realistic to expect all members of civil society to take it upon themselves to meet these educational needs. Therefore, educational initiatives and toolkits need to be developed and delivered to foster stronger critical engagement with online mediated environments.

When asked why they engage with NAFO, respondents gave several core reasons. Overwhelmingly, support for Ukraine was a driving force behind becoming an active NAFO fella, with fighting Russia and countering Russian disinformation campaigns and narratives following this. Qualitative responses to interviews and surveys provide greater context around this:

Total

Figure 5: Motivations for engaging with NAFO-aligned activism.
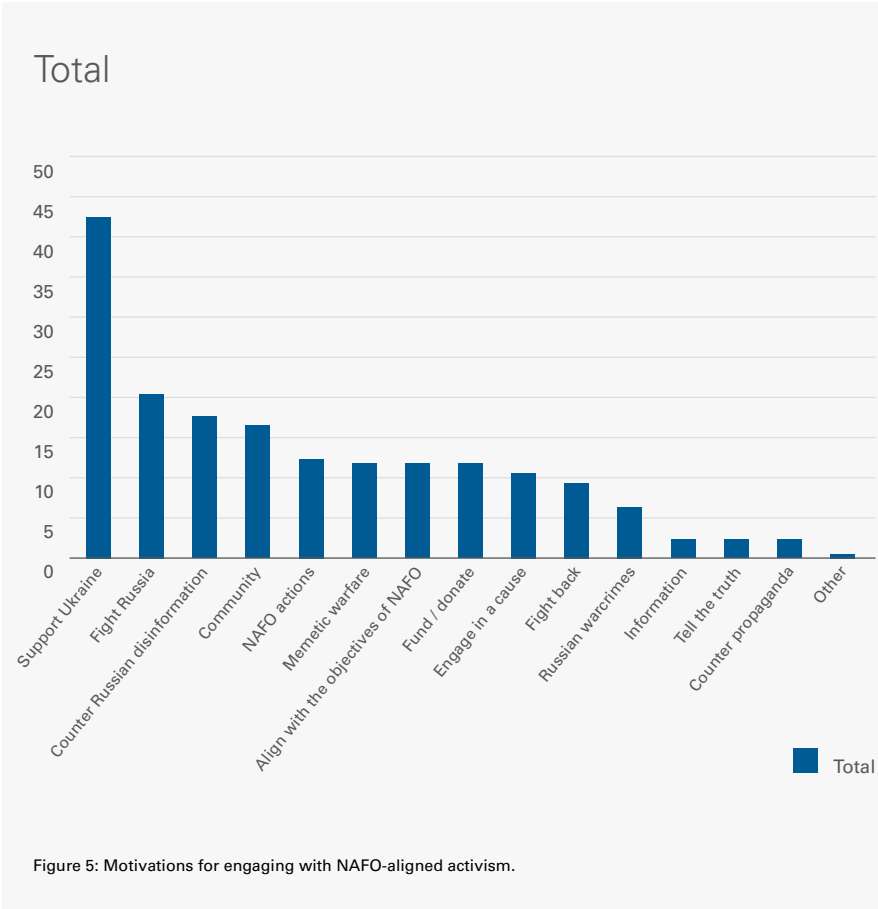
"I was angry and devastated when Russia launched its full-scale invasion in 2022 – and the Western world's slow responses to help Ukraine. Not enough has been done, and the constant delay costs lives. I felt that more should be done, and ordinary citizens should play a role too. NAFO has provided me with a way to help and, hopefully, to make a difference."

(Survey respondent 25)

"One's [motivation is] supporting Ukraine and on the other side engaging against political opponents that, even apart from [me] being pro-European, being pro-Ukraine are my political enemies."

(NAFO interviewee 14)

Examples of NAFO memes.

In line with motivations centred around supporting Ukraine and fighting Russia and Russian misinformation campaigns, respondents engaged in a wide range of different activities in a continuum of online and offline activism. The focus was on online engagement with social media, including raising awareness and informing people of the war and events unfolding in Ukraine, circulating memes and accepting financial donations. However, designing and sharing content, and challenging information disorder through reporting hostile posts and accounts, also received a considerable amount of attention.
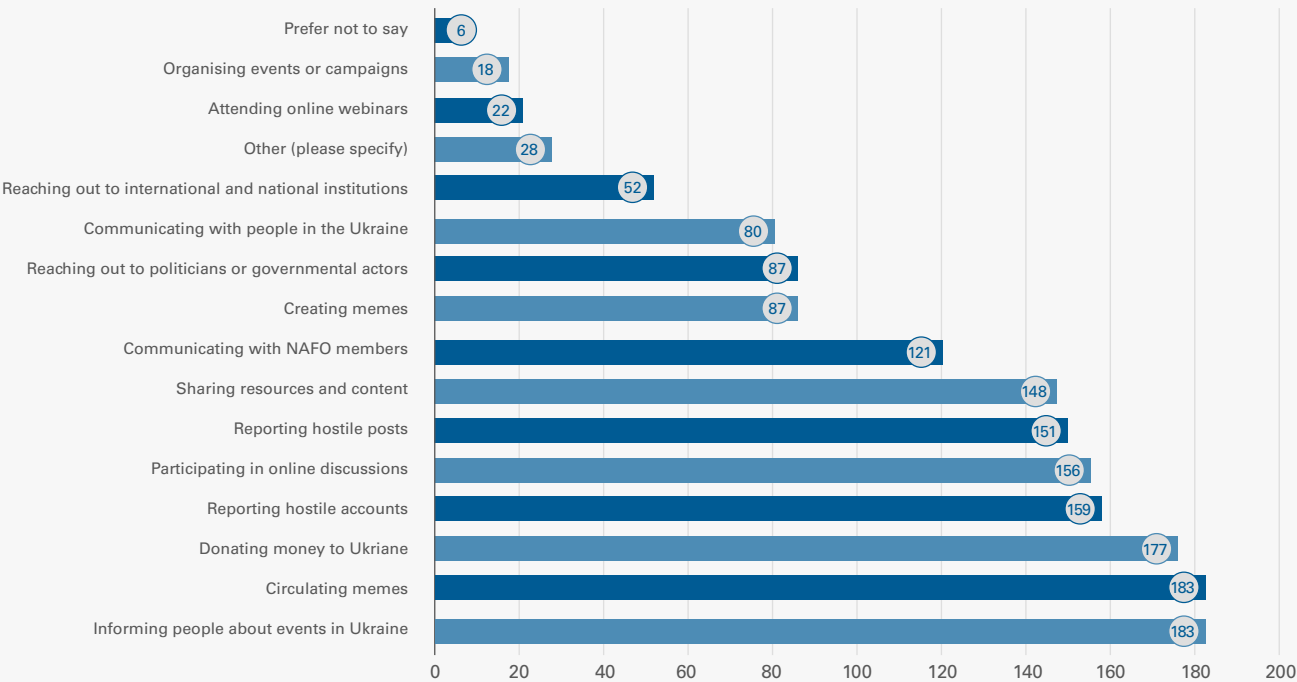
Action taken

Action	Count
Prefer not to say	6
Organising events or campaigns	18
Attending online webinars	22
Other (please specify)	28
Reaching out to international and national institutions	52
Communicating with people in the Ukraine	80
Reaching out to politicians or governmental actors	87
Creating memes	87
Communicating with NAFO members	121
Sharing resources and content	148
Reporting hostile posts	151
Participating in online discussions	156
Reporting hostile accounts	159
Donating money to Ukriane	177
Circulating memes	183
Informing people about events in Ukraine	183

Figure 6: Activities undertaken by NAFO 'fellas'. Responses tally to more than 255 where participants engage in a range of different activities.

Memetic warfare

Memetic warfare plays an increasingly important role in shaping conversations in civil society. Our participants spoke about this, sharing their perceptions of its role and impacts:

> "Memetic warfare is a type of hybrid warfare in which private or state actors are pushing a narrative on social media via form of memes. This can sometimes happen in combination of memes and the direct approach onto an entity (i.e. another country's embassy, interest groups like parties or NGOs or politicians and activists). The state actors may also operate in secrecy."
>
> (Survey respondent 77)

> "Memetic warfare is a propaganda technique of the information era in which conflicting actors with conflicting viewpoints use concise, witty and / or otherwise entertaining, but most importantly memorable, arguments to fill up the attention budget of an audience in support of, or against said actor."
>
> (Survey respondent 94)

Our participants are, then, aware of the meaning memes carry; they are created to express something, whether that's an emotion, opinion, apology, or question (Grundlingh, 2017; Munk, 2024b; Munk, 2025b). They also recognised that part of the strength of memetic warfare is its ability to reach diverse audiences quickly and effectively:

> "I think it's a very good way to spread awareness about some topics, to share information about them and to make this information accessible and understandable for people who live outside of a social group."
>
> (NAFO interviewee 8)

> "[W]ith the help of memes, some communities can... unite and convey some topics, issues. It's like a meme can be a main tool to express some of this big group's ideas."
>
> (NAFO interviewee 5)

Total

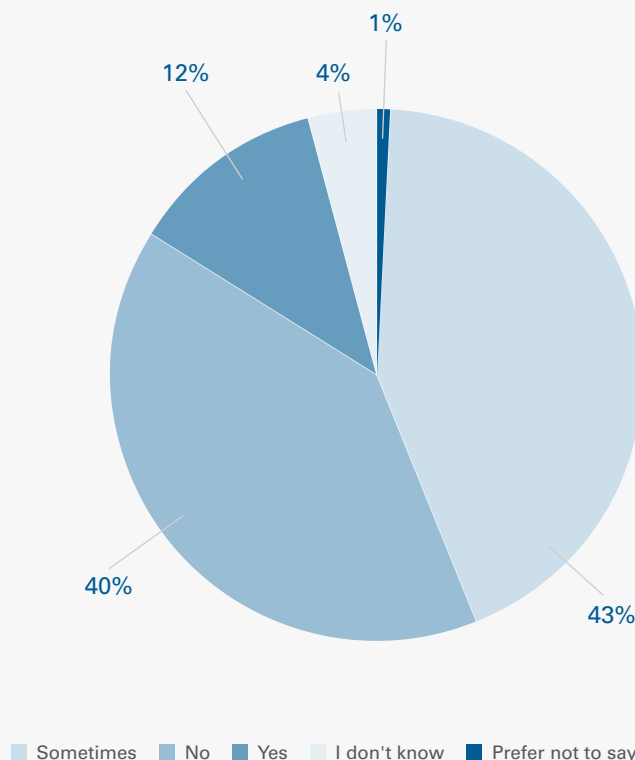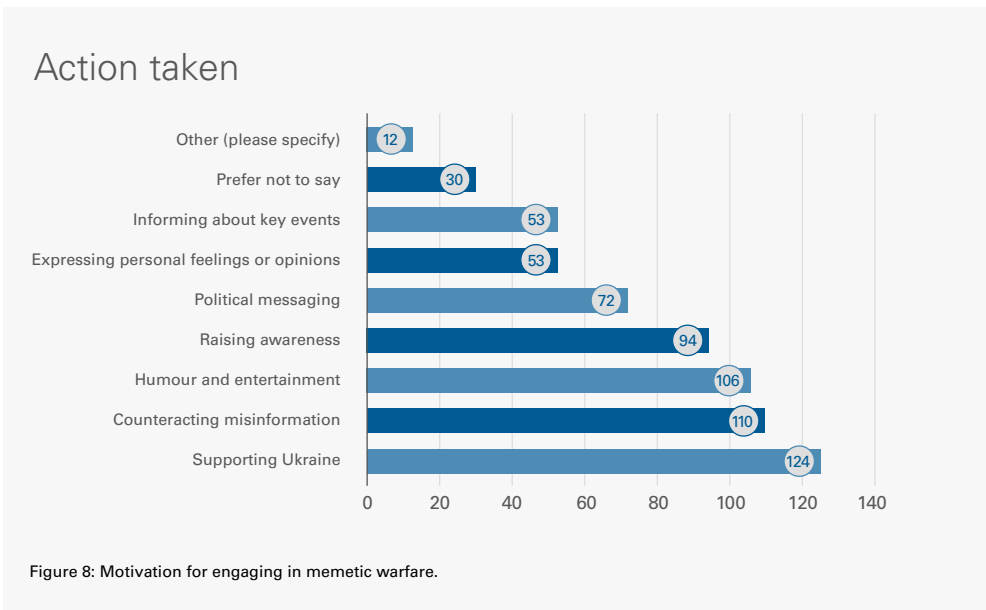Sometimes ▪ No ▪ Yes ▪ I don't know ▪ Prefer not to say

Figure 7: Responses to survey question asking whether participants would describe themselves as political activists.

Interestingly, very few of our sample group identified themselves as engaging in political activism. This was defined as activities including: contacting political and government-level figures; lobbying for change; and advocating for sanctions on Russia; as well as increased support for Ukraine and for wider international organisations (Figure 7). This demonstrates that NAFO fellas engage in a wide range of non-violent political activism, driven by personal values and motivations rather than just political beliefs. This becomes increasingly evident when exploring motivations for engaging in memetic warfare.

Action taken

Figure 8: Motivation for engaging in memetic warfare.

Motivations for engaging in memetic warfare and sharing memes often align with broader reasons for participating in NAFO. Many individuals do not view their actions as overtly political, reflecting a wider trend in civic resistance. These motivations are interconnected and mirror the varied drivers behind collective civic engagement more broadly (Butz & Ripmeester, 1999; Malmvig, 2016; Lilja, 2022).

Importantly, humour, entertainment and satire are also important motivators for engaging in memetic warfare, as shown in Figure 8. This may seem at odds with the serious ramifications of war, particularly for those who witness and experience direct combat, their families, and the states involved. However, while memes have traditionally served a humorous or sarcastic purpose, they can also convey serious messages. Some are created purely for entertainment, while others use humour to express opinions or comment on important social or political issues. This blend of humour and commentary makes memes a versatile tool for digital communication (Grundlingh, 2017).

Dismissing propaganda through humour offers important advantages. If the humour resonates, it is instantly understood and accessible, even to those uninterested or unable to compare competing narratives. This makes it especially effective for reaching broad or disengaged audiences. Humour also flips the dynamic of online disinformation. Rather than being drawn into fruitless debates with trolls and propagandists, ridicule makes the conversation itself absurd, discouraging engagement. As one of the founding NAFO members observed, "the moment somebody's replying to a cartoon dog online, they've lost" (Giles, 2023; McInnis, et al., 2022).

Internationally, humour also became a means for Ukraine's supporters to counter information disorder, call out official lies, and mobilise support, including fundraising efforts. Through humour, Ukrainians and their allies reclaim the narrative, turning ridicule into a weapon of resistance (Munk, 2024b; Munk, 2025b). On social media, where attention is fleeting and engagement brief, countermeasures must be swift and impactful. This makes humour and satire particularly effective tools for reaching broader audiences quickly (Giles, 2023). They also offer a way to process trauma, as well as navigate and share the collective experience of war (Mozolevska, 2024; Munk, 2024b):

"It keeps it helps keep morale up because they're fun. […] It's highly underated in a lot of activism, how important a sense of humour is. And there's enough both headspace for people who want something kind of intelligent to be dealing with and sufficiently forgiving for people who are novices."

(NAFO interviewee 1)

Our other findings help to contextualise this further. For example, when we asked respondents how the memes they encountered and engaged with online made them feel, solidarity, hope, amusement and pride featured particularly strongly.
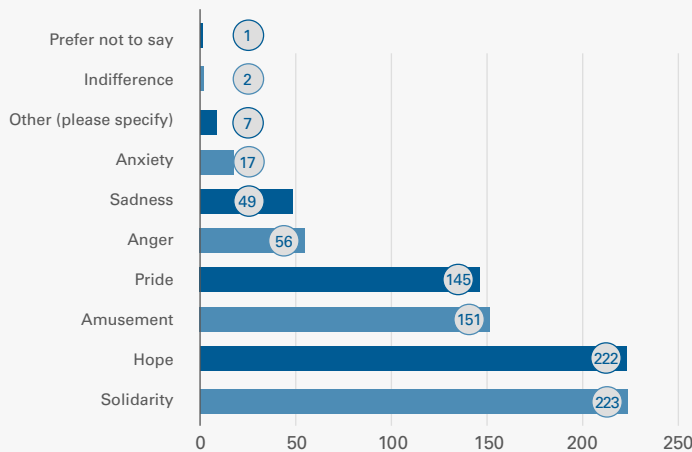
Action taken

Figure 9: Emotion experienced while engaging with memes.

Example of a NAFO meme ridiculing Vladimir Putin.

Genocide Barbie

This is particularly important in the context of war. Ukrainian respondents noted the psychological and emotional benefits of seeing social media content, often containing memes, by international audiences expressing solidarity with Ukraine and advocating for further support:

> "I saw a lot of memes, which make fun of Putin and Russians. […] For example, tonight, there was, like not a massive attack, but an attack, especially in my region. And… to have such feelings that you have a support, you are not tired because of the war, you can read memes, and you can feel that, for example, Zelenskyy is a hero and Putin is zero… And they make you feel better when you live in the period of war."
> (Ukrainian interviewee 4)

> "I think all the help is important, even if it's from foreigners. And I'm glad that they are not oblivious to this, to these problems. Maybe they have some relatives in Ukraine. So they help us to do this. But I think it's more about humanity things. It's the right thing to do, to speak for those who… are in need."
> (Ukrainian interviewee 5)

By turning satire into strategy, NAFO effectively disrupts information disorder while fostering a powerful sense of international solidarity (Dougherty, 2023; Propastop, 2024; Munk, 2024).

Effectiveness of memetic warfare and future directions

Our study also explored perceptions of memetic warfare's current and future effectiveness. Of the NAFO members we spoke to, 75% agreed or strongly agreed that memes and memetic warfare can have politically significant ramifications. This was centred around raising awareness, quickly communicating with diverse audiences, and shaping political arguments and public opinions:

> "I think it's like there is another hidden side of it. Because when we first see it, we see some funny figures, characters, and a bright image... But there is a side, it's a side that hides bigger problem. And it's a help, it helps to, to talk about big issues."
>
> (NAFO interviewee 5)

The internet enhances civic resistance by offering low-cost, rapid communication unconstrained by borders or state control. It has democratised media production, shifting from top-down mass broadcasting to horizontal, peer-to-peer communication across vast distances and divides. This fosters ideological and cultural pluralism. Technologically advanced countries and users with greater resources still dominate global content production, however, shaping the prevailing narratives (Kulyk, 2016).

While the internet expands linguistic diversity online, English continues to dominate transnational discourse, influencing language use even in local or postcolonial contexts (Kulyk, 2016; Chrystal, 2007). This presents important challenges, particularly where people may be less engaged with social media, or have limited comprehension of English as an online lingua franca. Over half (n=11) of our sample of Ukrainian citizens had never heard of NAFO, indicating limited penetration into Ukrainian society. This does not, however, undermine NAFO's wider role in raising awareness of the conflict and supporting Ukraine. United24, just one of the many organisations NAFO supports, has raised over $1billion in aid for Ukraine (United 24, 2025).

> "The current generation of pro-Ukrainian meme warfare works to elicit not only support for Ukraine but a general belief in the power of individual people to effect social and political change. This will have a far-reaching impact long after the Russo-Ukrainian war is over"
>
> (Survey respondent 214)

Memetic warfare requires a degree of media literacy to engage with and understand the meaning of the memes. This can be challenging for those who lack regular engagement with the field:

> "I didn't even always understand them. In order to understand this or that meme properly, I even googled what it means, why it is this way or that way. Because memes, from what I've seen, develop, for example, from some ordinary photo, so common on the web, where faces, facts, people or something else are then substituted. And I often don't understand what's funny or interesting about it until that moment, so I start googling and asking Google what kind of meme it is, why it's considered funny, what events it's talking about. Only then am I able, for example, to evaluate or not evaluate a meme as a tool for influencing others."
>
> (Ukrainian interviewee 7)

In part, these issues likely stem from the lack of users' familiarity with meme culture, functions, and conventions (Van Leeuwen, 2005; Grundlingh, 2017). It was also noted that social media algorithms, which can promote particular narratives and reinforce echo chambers, can play a key role in shaping the effectiveness of memetic warfare:

> "It's literally a dice roll. It depends on the algorithm, what people eat that day. It's really more on the algorithm and what Russia wants to push that day or doesn't want to push that day. It's quite literally that."
>
> (NAFO interviewee 10)

Social media algorithms prioritise viral content over truth, while anonymous trolls and bots spread information disorder, harass dissenters, and silence key voices. The design of these platforms accelerates the reach and impact of such operations, posing new international security risks (Bradshaw, 2020).

Fellas expressed uncertainty about whether NAFO would continue as a loosely organised activist collective after the war between Russia and Ukraine. However, most agreed that memetic warfare is unlikely to remain confined to this conflict. Some noted parallels, albeit on a smaller scale, with the Israel-Palestine war – particularly Israel's invasion of Gaza following the Hamas-led attack on 7 October 2023 (Hansted, 2023) – as well as with China's increasing aggression over Taiwan's sovereignty (Hale, 2022; Lock, 2025).

Other geopolitical tensions in South Asia, including the ongoing US-China tariff dispute, have similarly given rise to widespread memetic activity (Varma, 2025; Goodwin & Li, 2025; McDevitt, 2020; Tanakasempipat & Potkin, 2020). In the US, memes have become a prominent feature in political discourse. They were used extensively, and often combatively, by both parties during the 2024 presidential election, especially by President Trump (Way, 2021; Nagle, 2017; Donovan, et al., 2022; Demopoulos, 2024; Fabbri, 2020; Munk, 2024a). In the UK, online disinformation and meme campaigns featured prominently during the unrest that followed the tragic killing of three girls and attempted murder of ten others in Stockport in summer 2024 (Fox, 2024; ISD, 2024).

Example of a NAFO meme lobbying Western governments to allow Ukraine to strike targets in Russia.

Ethical and moral challenges

Throughout the project we've observed the extensive sharing of memetic imagery. This has included images of atrocity crimes, alongside death and destruction as part of ongoing memetic warfare propaganda campaigns. NAFO fellas' opinions on the sharing of such images were broadly divided into two categories. Some did not want to share graphic imagery out of respect to victims and to avoid traumatising others:

"I also don't want to capitalise on suffering. Capitalising on fun is kind of that's, that's within bounds. Capitalising on suffering is never, it's just no."
(NAFO interviewee 1)

"I'm not gonna actively like spread images of atrocities out of like sensitivity for the victims. You know it's… it's kinda tasteless."

(NAFO interviewee 9)

"So gore is not OK to post online guy. There are children with you under 18. No go. You can show a tank being blown up and have the turrets tossed 20 metres and make fun of it and call that 'a radar captured a flying saucer that looks like a tank turret' and nobody knows how is it possible … It's OK we make fun of it, no problem. But not that [gore]."
(NAFO interviewee 10)

Example of a NAFO meme pressuring Western governments to implement a 'sky shield' over Ukraine and not turn their backs on the country.

Example of a NAFO meme reminding people to be critical of pro-Russian information disorder campaigns.

Those who did share graphic imagery believed there was a need to raise awareness of the brutal realities of war, particularly for those receiving filtered news coverage or who are geographically distanced from the war:

"Even though some of videos or some photos can be controversial, they are controversial for a reason. If I were to show a massacre of Bucha to someone I know, those images or those videos are shocking and terrifying and they are… It is for a reason…Some people have had their pro-Russian ideologies questioned by such situations. Bucha really did speak numbers. Did the numbers with some people, and we need to share, even though it may not be viewed as positively with some with many people because they do not want to see it, but it is really important."

(NAFO interviewee 13)

"I think that the almost like the more gruesome images that you can share of a conflict and the more that you can make it seem like err, like things are very, very, extremely fucked up, the more people will pay attention to it. So yeah, I don't. I wouldn't draw ethical limitations on like propagating images or videos with like blood and gore or anything like that."

(NAFO interviewee 5)

However, even among those who are open to sharing graphic images, there remains a broad code of conduct and limitations as to what they are willing to share or see shared:

"Oh, yeah, absolutely. There's a tonne. Number one is rape… there was this, this one time, an image of a crying Russian woman was posted on [Reddit]… She was crying about something, probably getting evacuated from Kursk or something. And then like, just the rape jokes came in. And I'm like, no, ban, ban, ban, like, just we're not doing that. That's not us. And the example I hold up like, look at Bucha and Irpin. Like, do we wanna be doing the same stuff that they're doing? And also, if I'm a normie who's not following this conflict and I show up to a NAFO form and it's nothing but 'we wanna rape Russians', No!"

(NAFO interviewee 3)

"I guess anything that would directly cause, I guess direct emotional or physical harm to people within the video, I guess… I wouldn't support the propagation of say like that. I remember I saw a video of a Ukrainian man calling like the girlfriend or wife of a soldier he had killed or something like that. Something, like that kind of situation I think would be a bit too far to try and support, but I think that exposing like war crimes and videos of war crimes is, it wouldn't be wouldn't be past that line."

(NAFO interviewee 5)

Example of a meme highlighting misinformation.

It was also noted people can become desensitised by regularly witnessing and engaging with graphic content online:

"It's different. It's you see a lot of…this, this whole time. You get, it's not to say you get used to it, but you are, your level of what you can bear is higher up if you know what I mean? It's not a fluffy unicorn world. And so and me, morals? No."

(NAFO interviewee 12)

Graphic images of war, particularly the suffering of civilians, play a significant role in shaping public attitudes towards conflict (Freeman, 2022). Citizen-led imagery often captures perspectives that professional journalists and documentarians may miss (Mast & Hanegreefs, 2015), and it is frequently more graphic than content published by traditional news outlets, which are bound by editorial oversight (Greenwood, et al., 2025; Reading, 2009). This oversight aims to strike a balance between public interest, the need to report on atrocities, and the responsibility to protect audiences from vicarious trauma (Bissell, 2000; Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003).

The Russian-Ukrainian war has transformed war reporting, with events now unfolding in near real-time. Footage is shared by a wide range of actors, including governments, military units (particularly drone operators), civilians documenting war crimes, and groups such as NAFO. As a result, social media has become saturated with graphic images and videos depicting violence, death, and suffering. Many platforms have autoplay enabled by default and rely on users to flag disturbing content, meaning the public is often exposed to such material without warning. This raises serious concerns, as research shows that viewing violent war imagery can have significant psychological effects (Silver, et al., 2013; Holman, et al., 2024).

Further study is needed to assess the impact of such unfiltered visual exposure, especially in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war and other contemporary conflicts. Our own research experience highlighted particular challenges, especially in the early stages of the war, when videos frequently played without content warnings, increasing the likelihood of viewers unintentionally witnessing graphic scenes. The platform design, which prioritises engagement through autoplay, exacerbates this risk by encouraging accidental exposure to harmful content.

Examples of NAFO memes ridiculing Russia and its leadership.

Conclusions and recommendations

Our research demonstrates that memes and memetic warfare are playing an increasingly important role in communication, opinion shaping, and narrative formation. Developed during times of war, the practice is also observed during elections and periods of wider social unrest.

Example of a NAFO meme presenting Vladimir Putin as a contemporary threat to democracy.

Once Again The World Must Unite To Defeat Evil.

Drawing on data from an online survey, follow-up interviews with NAFO members, and interviews with Ukrainian citizens, our findings show that memes serve not only as vehicles for humour or critique but also as powerful tools for information resilience and civic mobilisation. Community involvement is central to sustaining support for Ukraine and coordinating digital defence against Russian and pro-Russian content. Participants help foster emotional solidarity, counter propaganda, and humanise the Ukrainian fight and struggle against the adversary. NAFO plays a key role in shaping online discourse, exposing and ridiculing Russian messaging, and encouraging grassroots donations to Ukraine's defence. Individuals are drawn to NAFO for varied reasons, and their broad engagement blurs the boundaries between activism, advocacy, and online subculture.

The project highlights memetic warfare as a modern form of soft power: deeply embedded in digital culture yet with tangible real-world effects. Memes are not trivial or transient; they are political instruments used to resist oppression, fact-check, reclaim narratives, provide support, and build community. This is particularly evident in the context of the ongoing war since May 2022. Our findings contribute to emerging frameworks in media literacy, cybersecurity policy, and civic engagement, especially in the context of hybrid warfare and information disorder. We find that current understanding of defensive memetic warfare remains limited, and further research is needed.

Over three years into the full-scale war, NAFO remains active and continues to grow, yet its efforts are largely overlooked by most governments, aside from Ukraine, the Baltic states, and a few international allies. NAFO members devote time daily to countering information disorder, exposing war crimes, and sustaining global attention on Ukraine, taking pressure off authorities and public institutions and filling gaps in official responses. Their use of humour and offensive memes has proven highly effective and engaging, offering a model from which state actors could learn. As a grassroots digital force, NAFO's success shows the need for greater recognition of civic led initiatives in defending facts and democratic values.

In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, coordinated information disorder campaigns continue to influence public and political narratives, aiming to erode support for Ukraine and promote Kremlin-aligned perspectives. Our findings suggest that Western governments and social media platforms are currently ill-equipped to counter these efforts. This is largely due to insufficient media literacy and a lack of public capacity to distinguish fact from fiction. To this end, we have the following recommendations:

1. To better understand the role and impact of memes and memetic warfare, researchers and governments should explore the feasibility of developing effective meme tracing tools and technologies. This could help us understand how memes spread and the circumstances in which they influence people's views, attitudes and opinions.

2. Support further research into the nature and effectiveness of defensive memetic warfare. Explore the use of memes as tools of digital activism that foster global engagement and deepen understanding of on-the-ground realities in war and conflict, particularly in the face of information disorder.

3. NAFO has highlighted the positive effects of active engagement in fostering support for, and engagement with, democratic principles and self-determination. Governments should learn from this to better engage people in national and international political debates and narratives and reduce political apathy.

4. Memes are a powerful communication tool widely used to highlight political and social issues. As government actors also engage in this space, there is a need for clear guidance on best practices, ethical considerations, and safe communication. With the rise of generative AI making it harder to distinguish real from AI-generated content, it is crucial to foster public understanding of how memes can be used responsibly and effectively, especially in an age of increasing information disorder.

5. Promote the development and use of defensive meme strategies, such as those employed by NAFO, to counter information disorder, strengthen public morale, and encourage critical engagement with online content. In war, conflict and crisis settings where information is easily manipulated, such tactics can help users distinguish real from false content.

6. There remains a pressing need for effective media literacy training. Effective training packages and toolkits aimed at all levels of civil society should be developed and disseminated rapidly and effectively.

7. Online information disorder requires consistent, rigorous fact-checking. Despite NAFO's effective efforts in countering false narratives, many misleading posts remain unchallenged and continue to circulate freely. We recommend reinstating professional moderation alongside AI tools and user reporting systems to support media literacy and active engagement. Platforms should also adopt shared norms on acceptable content, ensuring consistent enforcement and helping users better identify and respond to misinformation.

8. Social media companies should revise content moderation and sharing policies by disabling autoplay by default and enabling content blurring or labelling to give users control over engagement. AI tools should automatically detect and flag graphic content, particularly images depicting death, pain, or suffering. Given the volume of such content during war and conflicts, graphic content filters must be reassessed and strengthened.

Examples of NAFO memes.
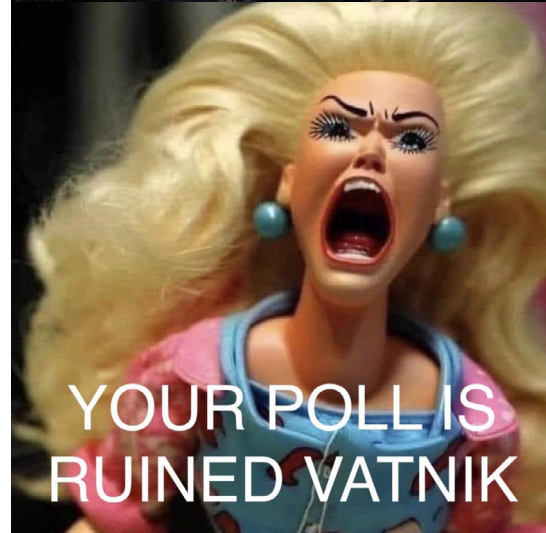
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Affiliations:

Nottingham Trent University
School of Social Science, The Criminology and Criminal Justice Department
50 Shakespeare Street
NG1 4FQ Nottingham
United Kingdom
('NTU')

and

Aarhus University
School of Culture and Society
Nordre Ringgade 1
8000 Aarhus C
Denmark
('AU')