

Submission to Senate Enquiry on Ukraine Support

About myself

I am writing in my capacity as a private Australian citizen, born in Australia. I hold a PhD in an area not related to this enquiry, and spent a total of around a year living in Russia and Ukraine several decades ago.

Summary

Russian disinformation is able to penetrate Australian broadcast media by relying on appearance of balance.

Terms of reference (c): disinformation and misinformation

I draw your attention here to one particular case of disinformation which illustrates a weakness in the approach of traditional media that appears open to exploitation.

Background

On March 18th 2024, the ABC's Four Corners broadcast a point-of-view documentary obtained from British broadcaster ITV4, entitled "Ukraine's War: The Other Side" (OW:TOS). In the documentary, journalist Sean Langan travelled behind the Russian lines and was shown speaking to various groups of soldiers and civilians, sometimes to the sound of shelling in the distance. The broadcast was sharply criticised by the Ukrainian ambassador [1] and an ABC spokesperson responded, saying, amongst other things, that ABC viewers "had the right to ... make up their own minds" [1]. Hundreds of complaints to the ABC resulted in an official statement from the ABC ombudsman [2] on March 25th, exonerating the ABC. The ombudsman's defence was that, taken together with other broadcasts about Ukraine, there was sufficient balance to meet the ABC's editorial standards, that nowhere were any opinions advanced that could be interpreted as belonging to the ABC, and that the journalist balanced pro-Russian statements with pro-Ukrainian ones. The program remains available on ABC iView.

Status of program as disinformation

The propagandistic nature of this program was explained by former diplomat Jon Richardson in an opinion piece in the Sydney Morning Herald on March 20th [3]. For example, the documented existence in occupied territories of torture cellars, mass graves, and genocidal mass deportation of children was absent, beyond a brief, inconclusive discussion about Bucha.

I wish here to focus on a further propagandistic aspect of the broadcast. The ombudsman's assertion that ABC output on Ukraine, when taken as a whole, is balanced, misses the point. An important disinformation tactic is "false equivalence" [4], or "false balance" [5], [6]. False equivalence would be to assert or imply that Russia and Ukraine are the same, e.g. because they are both fighting a war. "False balance" is to treat both sides of an argument as equally valid when one side has flimsy support: for example, UW:TOS broadcast Russian insinuations that Bucha was staged, then countered with the result of an international investigation concluding the opposite, subjecting neither assertion to scrutiny.

False equivalence is useful to propagandists wishing to discourage action. Where someone perceives both sides are balanced, they will be reluctant to commit to a particular side, for example by asking their representatives to support Ukraine; without Western support Ukraine will have trouble holding off Russia, as we have seen recently. Thus Russian goals are served whenever the impression of Ukraine-Russia equivalence is created. False equivalence is particularly effective in that it does not obviously favour a side and therefore appears objective. A similar strategy served global warming denialists well for decades.

In this light the otherwise unexpected willingness of an authoritarian state, supposedly at war with the West, to allow a Western journalist to film behind the front line becomes clear. They do not need to convince anybody that they are right; all they need is to produce enough of a perception of a counter-weight to the dominant pro-Ukraine narrative to create hesitation. The fact that their narrative is in the mouths of soldiers or bloggers rather than the ABC makes little difference to the outcome, as long as that narrative is not subjected to substantial scrutiny.

One might suppose that this program obtained ABC editorial approval as it came from a reputable foreign source and counts as a "point of view" documentary, for which editorial standards are lower. However, disturbingly, the false equivalence spread beyond the confines of the program when the ABC spokesperson claimed that they were allowing the viewers "to make up their own minds" [1] - implying that viewers could reasonably be confused

about the issues, exactly the situation that Russia is striving to create. No relevant information was provided in any case [3].

What can be done?

Strategies for avoiding false balance and equivalence in reporting are listed in [5], including the following statement:

It's important to keep in mind that it is not biased to expose deficiencies in an argument, as long as you subject all sides to the same level of scrutiny.

Disinformation on the ABC is of particular concern as the politically engaged class are more likely to source information from the ABC. The ABC is also a favourite target for accusations of bias from both sides of politics. It would be understandable in this environment if ABC journalists were to retreat to simple “he-said, she-said” reporting such as that seen in UW:TOS, removing perceived bias at the expense of sometimes becoming falsely balanced. “He-said, she said” reporting is also cheaper and easier to produce. The journalist need not be well-informed, nor struggle to pin down media-trained spokespeople, nor spend extra airtime explaining factual and logical flaws.

If we accept the ABC ombudsman’s verdict, we conclude that the ABC editorial standards or processes are compatible with “false balance” disinformation, despite the ABC itself flagging the importance of avoiding “he-said, she-said” journalism [6].

Suggestions

Suggestion 1: fund (at arms’ length) disinformation training modules in journalism and media courses

Suggestion 2: advise ACMA to develop materials covering false balance as part of its misinformation efforts. The absence of false balance from current materials might be because the main effect of false balance is passivity, whereas most personally harmful online misinformation aims to encourage action (e.g. financial scams).

Suggestion 3: public figures should defend media organisations from accusations of bias when those organisations have simply scrutinised arguments properly and found one side wanting. This is, of course, difficult when one’s political party might be itself relying on flimsy arguments.

Suggestion 4: Request removal of UW:TOS from ABC iView.

(d) Other relevant matters

This enquiry is, quite rightly, predicated on the need to support Ukraine. I have included the following paragraph in case the committee gets sidetracked discussing the importance of support for Ukraine. Getting sidetracked in this way would be, in itself, a victory for Russian disinformation (see above.)

Australia must do everything possible to quicken Russia’s defeat in this war. As noted American historian Timothy Snyder has repeatedly pointed out, how this war ends determines how international relations will work going forward. If Russia’s imperialism is successful, other countries, including some in our region, will be emboldened to pursue their own imperial ambitions. Conversely, decisive support for Ukraine from the West will give pause to such countries. Therefore I respectfully disagree with Prof. Williams (submission 2) that Ukraine is a European issue. Should Ukraine suffer defeat, or be seen to be abandoned by the West, we are more likely to face a hot war in our region, which would be much more costly in money and lives than support for Ukraine now. And it hopefully goes without saying that when we offer robust military help to Europe in their time of need, we stand more chance of receiving it in return. Given what we’ve seen from the battlefields, we want Ukraine on our side in any future war.

Suggested witnesses for the Enquiry

1. Retired diplomat Jon Richardson, author of [3].
2. ABC current affairs editorial staff able to answer questions on the decision to broadcast UW:TOS

References

- [1] Amanda Meade, "ABC defends broadcasting Russia-Ukraine war documentary after ambassador calls it 'bowl of vomit' ", The Guardian Australia, March 19th, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/mar/19/abc-four-courners-russia-ukraine-war-documentary-bowl-of-vomit>
- [2] ABC Ombudsman, 25 March 2024. <https://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Ombudsmans-Office-Investigation-Report-Four-Corners-The-Other-Side-18-March-2024.pdf>
- [3] Jon Richardson, "The ABC's Four Corners is spreading propaganda by only showing one side", Sydney Morning Herald, March 20th. <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/the-abc-s-four-corners-is-spreading-russian-propaganda-20240320-p5fdzs.html>
- [4] Zarina Zabrisky, "Big Lies and Rotten Herrings: 17 Kremlin Disinformation Techniques You Need to Know Now", Byline Times, 4 March 2020, <https://bylinetimes.com/2020/03/04/big-lies-and-rotten-herrings-17-kremlin-disinformation-techniques-you-need-to-know-now/>
- [5] Bob Eggington, "False equivalence and false balance", <https://mediahelpingmedia.org/advanced/false-equivalence-and-false-balance/>
- [6] ABC Guidance Note: Impartiality <https://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/GNImpartialityINS.pdf>