

DISCURSIVE REALITY AND THE ALLURE OF OTHERISM: LESSONS FROM THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

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About Me

I'm Patrick Gerard, a PhD student at the Information Sciences Institute at the University of Southern California working under **Kristina Lerman**. I'm interested in the intersection of machine learning and network science and how they can be utilized to uncover the mechanisms of (mis)information diffusion across media at a large scale.

My Current Interest

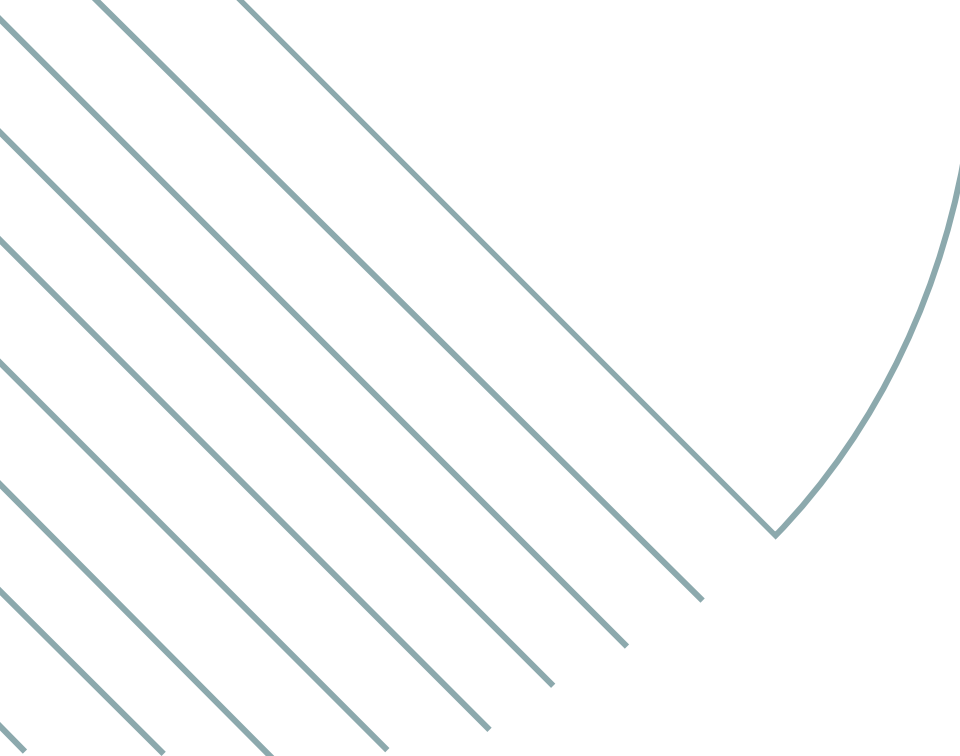
Currently, I'm interested in understanding the influence of narratives at mass and Otherism at mass.

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LET'S TALK ABOUT OTHERISM



**"CRIMES AGAINST CIVILIANS, ETHNIC
CLEANSING AND PUNITIVE ACTIONS
ORGANISED BY NEO-NAZIS IN UKRAINE. IT
IS AGAINST THAT EVIL THAT OUR
SOLDIERS ARE BRAVELY FIGHTING."**

- Putin, Jan 2023

**"UKRAINE ADMINISTERED DRUGS [TO ITS
SOLDIERS] COMPLETELY NEUTRALIZE THE
LAST TRACES OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS
AND TURN THEM INTO THE MOST CRUEL
AND DEADLY MONSTERS."**

- Russian Parliament, July 2023





WHAT IS OTHERISM?

No clear, universal definition, but several overlapping workable definitions

- Construction of positive self, negative other. (Pettersson and Sakki 2017)
- Outcasting of certain group based on arbitrary attributes. (Sakki and Castren 2022)

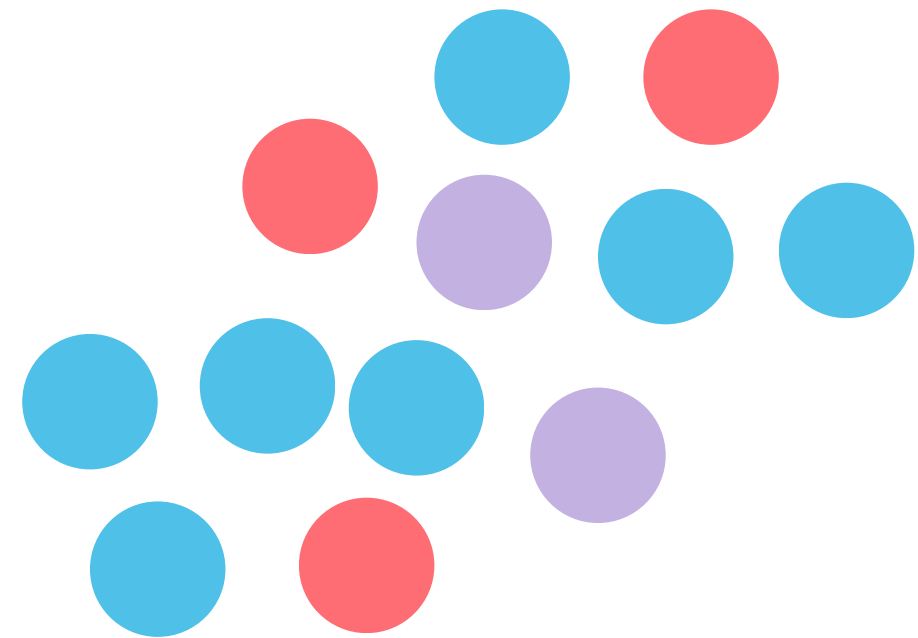


WHAT IS OTHERISM?

There exist differences between individuals

- Cultural
- Geographic
- Racial

Individuals

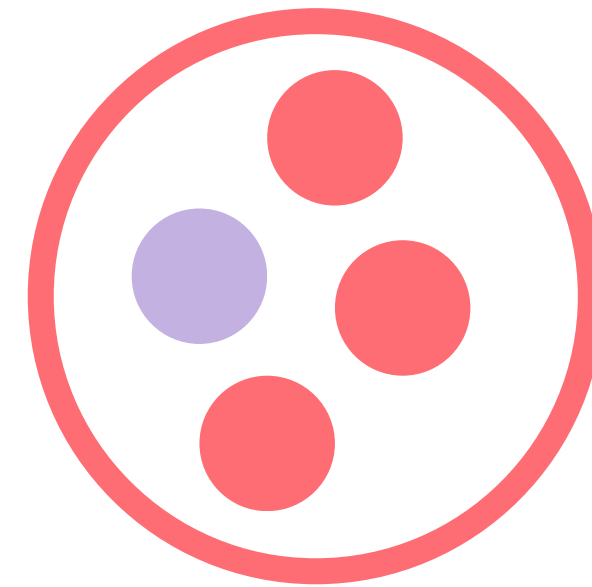


WHAT IS OTHERISM?

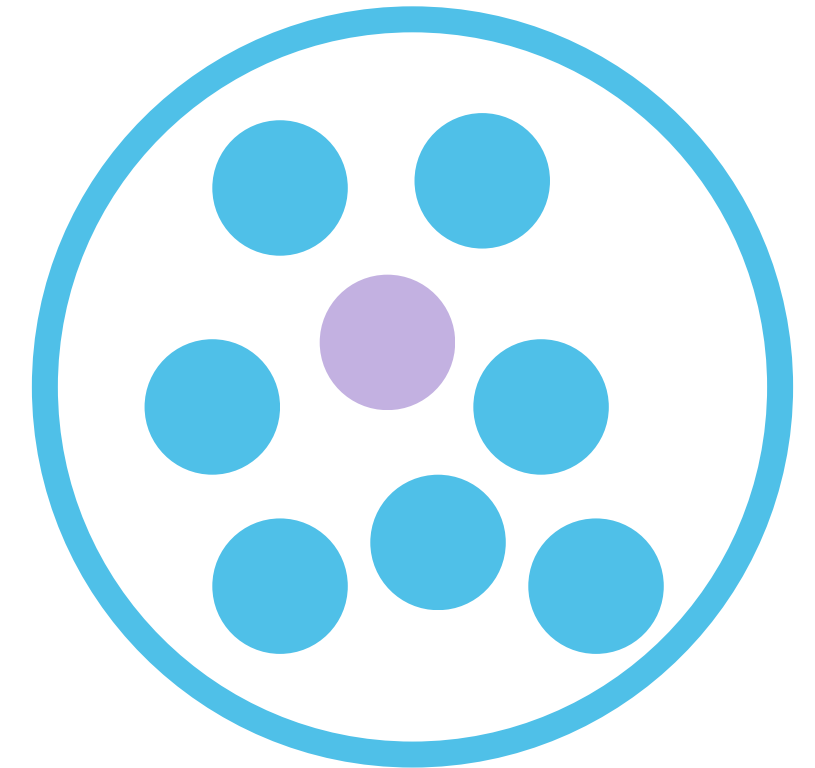
A cohesive ingroup “boundary” is formed

- This boundary is generally arbitrary (“there is no a priori threat”), but contextually understood. (Reicher et al. 2008)
- Typically emphasized and dictated by the “dominant” group.

Outgroup



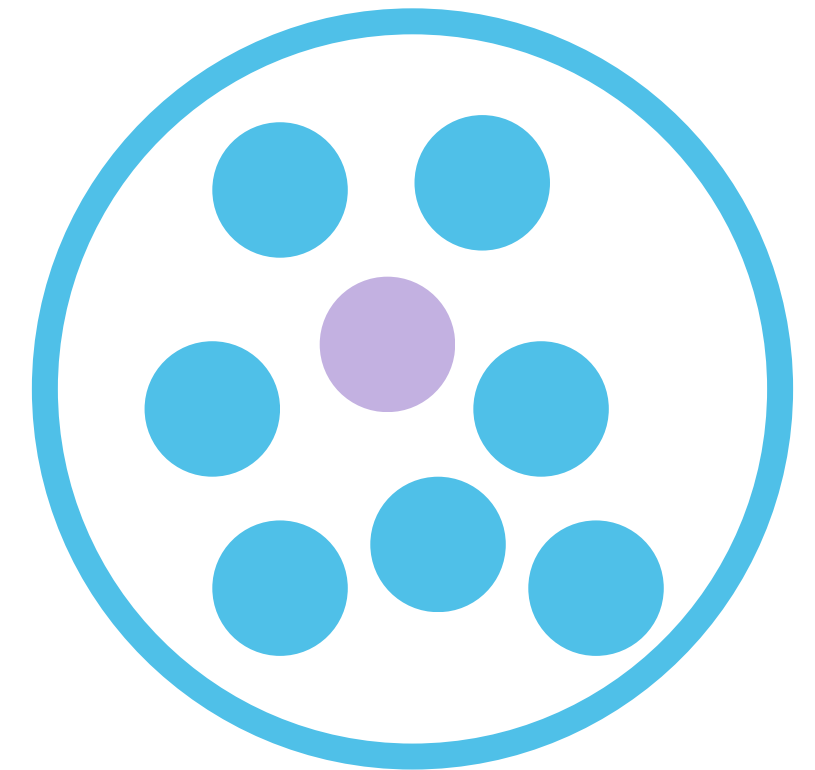
Ingroup



WHAT IS OTHERISM?

Outgroup constructed as a threat to the ingroup

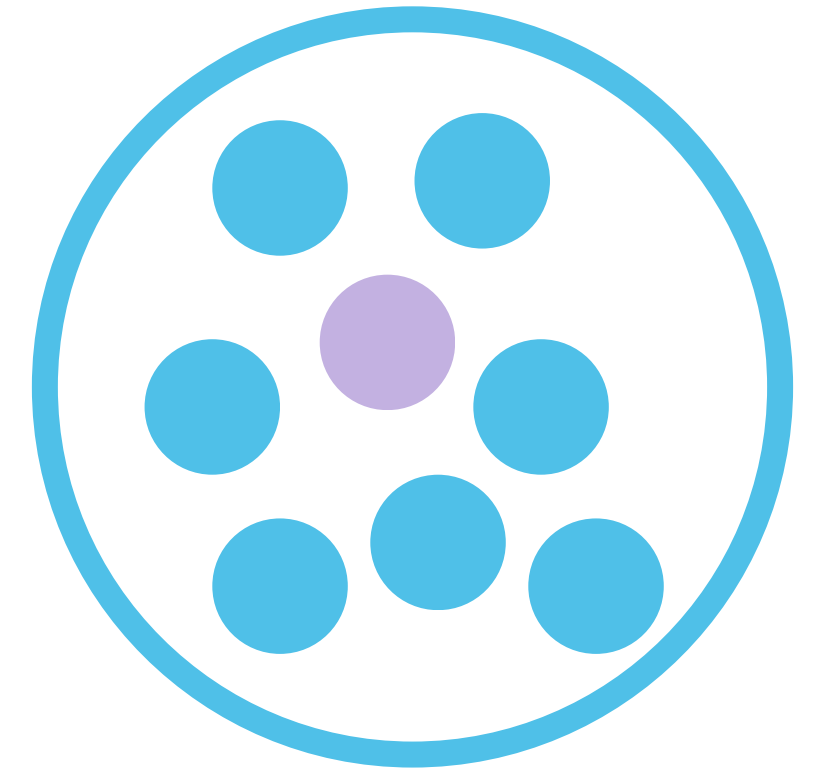
- Often accompanied by depersonalization of outgroup members. (Sakki and Castren 2022)



WHAT IS OTHERISM?

Harsh treatment of outgroup is justified.

- Celebrate the ingroup's right to *defend* itself from the outgroup. (Kennedy et al. 2023)
- Maintain status hierarchies. (Kennedy et al. 2023)
- Perpetuate prejudice. (Kennedy et al. 2023)





CREATING THE "OTHER" - FIRST STEPS

Ingroup Definition

Ingroup defines their identities through **common characteristics and shared beliefs**. This identification is often formed and emphasized in near-direct contrast to the "outgroup."

Ingroup Virtue

Ingroup virtue is often highlighted to justify actions against the outgroup. This **moral superiority** claim can make extreme measures, such as acts of terror or even genocide, seem defensible or necessary to protect the ingroup's values.

Outgroup Exclusion

Determines **who is not part of the ingroup by** setting boundaries based on (often cultural, religious, racial) definitions, leading to denial of rights and benefits to the 'others', and fostering discrimination.

Outgroup Threat

Outgroup perceived as a **direct danger** to the ingroup's way of life or values, potentially leading to aggressive acts such as hate crimes.



CREATING THE "OTHER" - FINAL STEP

**Justification and celebration of
hostile actions against the
outgroup.**





WHY IS THIS SO DANGEROUS?

MEANS (FORM)

Topical

Often presented as topical, adjustable arguments or infused with accepted narratives such that this speak may look quite acceptable and amenable to the general users. (Saha et al. 2023)

Dynamic

Outgroup threat tends to be actively constructed. It is adaptable to the context and values of the ingroup. (Reicher et al. 2008)

ENDS

Associated with Intergroup Strife

Research addressing acts of hate often focuses on the role of intergroup threat as a focal mechanism in the emergence of behaviors, such as hate crime. (Hall 2023)

Justification of Violence

By framing the outgroup as inherently different or dangerous, otherism can justify violence or oppression against them.



OTHERISM: A WORKING DEFINITION

The perception or treatment a group of people as fundamentally **different** from oneself, often in a way that **marginalizes, excludes, or discriminates** against them.



WHERE MIGHT WE SEE THIS IN ACTION?

Let's delve into the discourse surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian war to uncover how otherism might manifest.

THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Invasion Timeline

Current, full-scale was initiated in **February 2022**.

Russian Media Campaigns

Cast the invasion as a "special military operation" for Ukrainian "liberation". (Thompson and Myers 2022)

Narrative Presence and Impact

Diverse narratives, including "denazification" and bio-weapons claims appear to influence public opinion. (Thompson and Myers 2022)



New York Times: "How the Russian Media Spread False Claims About Ukrainian Nazis"



THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE SURROUNDING DISCOURSE?

Let's look at how **war bloggers** portray the
war.



RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR - WAR BLOGGERS

What are War Bloggers?

War bloggers have emerged as significant figures in the documentation of conflicts, particularly noted during the Russia-Ukraine war. Their work not only offers a real-time, unfiltered view of the war but also challenges or reinforces certain official narratives. (Hoskins and Shchelin 2023)

Where are War Bloggers?

Telegram - a messaging app that facilitates both user interactions in private and public groups and one-way broadcasts via channels.

Telegram is seen as a **bastion of a "free" Internet** in Russia and has emerged as a vital platform for military bloggers and a primary information source on the Russo-Ukrainian war, with approximately **39% of Ukrainians and 19% of Russians relying on it for news.** (Oleinik 2023)

Why Use War Bloggers?

The unprofessional and unofficial style of reporting by war bloggers can include a more visceral, unfiltered view of the conflict, which can be instrumental in creating a narrative of "us versus them". (Oleinik 2023)





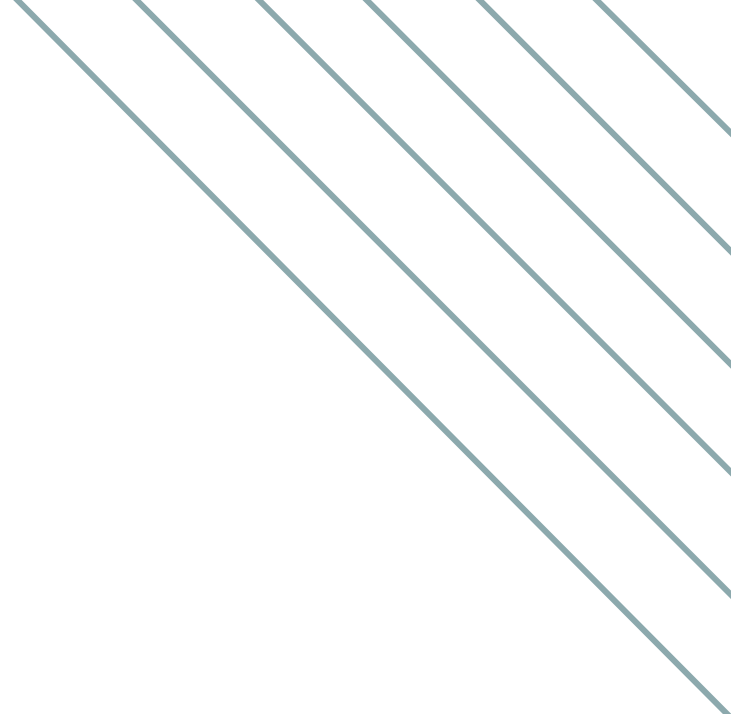


GUIDING TERMINOLOGY

DISCURSIVE REALITY

Reality is shaped by language and **communication**, including narratives, texts, and institutional dialogues. Discursive reality posits that **truth is created and continually reshaped through social interactions and cultural contexts.** (Sakki and Castren 2022)

NARRATIVES

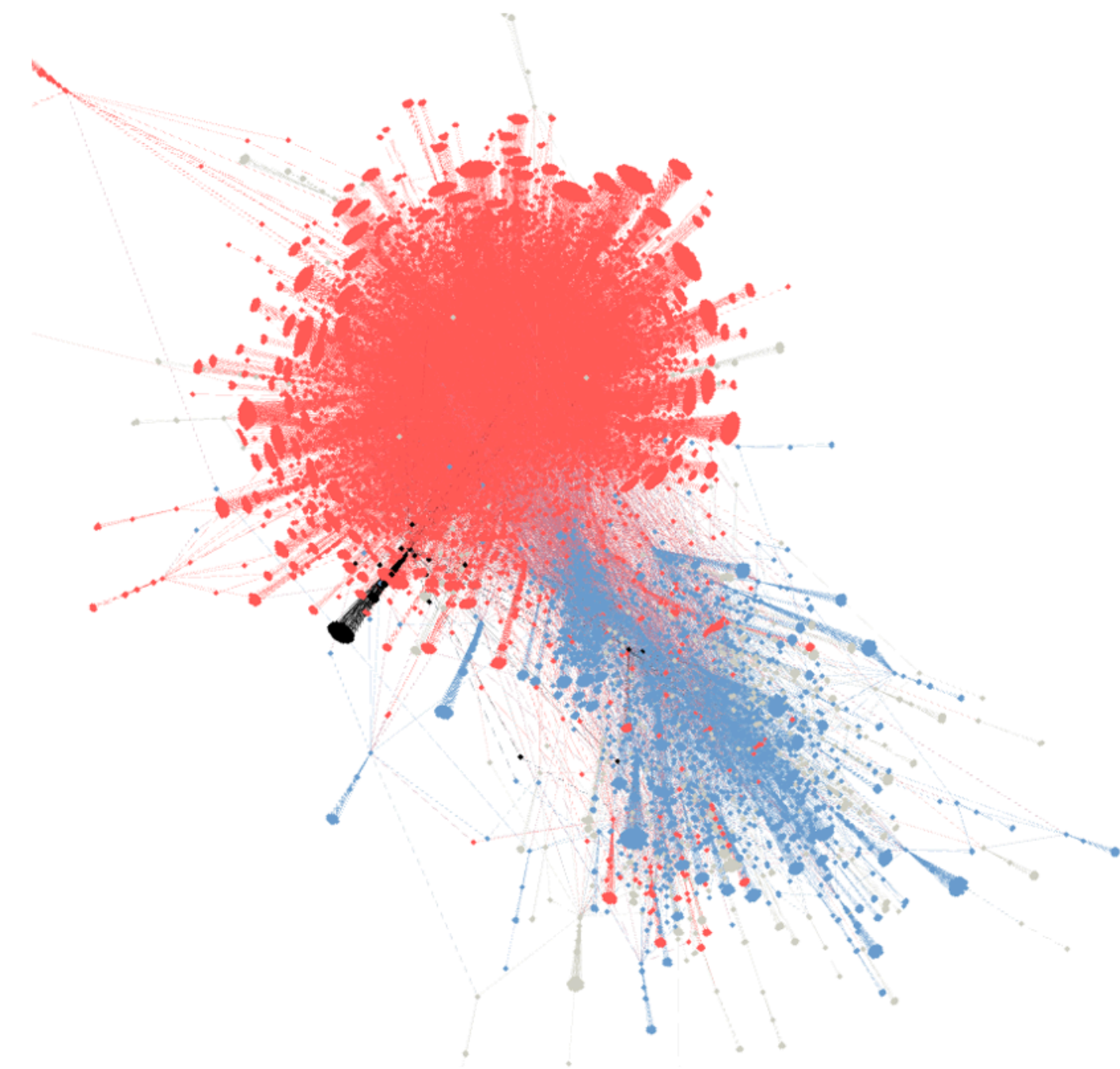
Act as **frameworks** comprised of stories which may align otherwise **disparate domains of knowledge** into a more **unified, compelling thread.** (Shahsavari et al. 2020)



WAR BLOGGERS - DATA OVERVIEW

- Spans **October 2015** through **August 2023**.
- Approximately **9.7 million total posts**.
- **243 Ukrainian channels** associated with war bloggers.
- **325 Russian channels** associated with war bloggers.

Leaning	Total Posts	Median Posts per Month
Ukrainian	4.2M	21.5K
Russian	4.4M	25.7K



Red: Russian-leaning War Bloggers
Blue: Ukrainian-leaning War Bloggers

WAR BLOGGERS - WHAT WE'VE FOUND

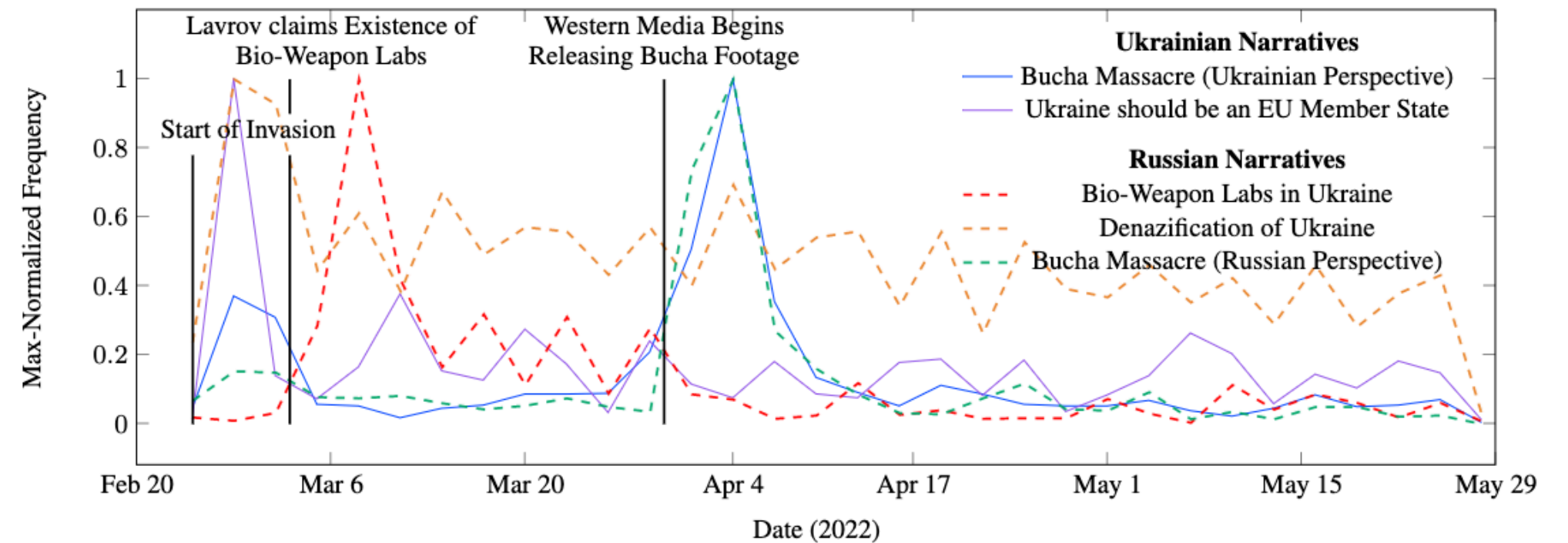
- Narratives adapt to environment.
- Focus of different macro-communities differ.

Weekly Trending Topics


Community	Military/War	Politics	
		Internal	International
Ukrainian	46.5%	9.3%	44.2%
Russian	16.7%	31%	52.4%

Makeup of top-10 trending story clusters each week. Trending designated by percentage increase in cluster size from previous timestep.

Max-Normalized Frequencies of Narratives



Max-normalized frequency of posts in key narratives within Ukrainian and Russian communities over time (summed over 3-day time-periods for clarity), where max-normalization adjusts frequency counts relative to each narrative's peak activity for comparative clarity.



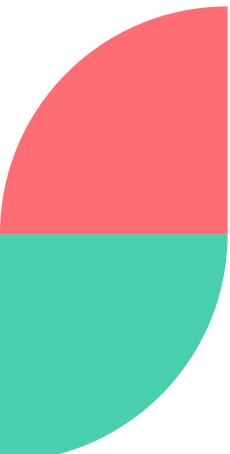
WAR BLOGGERS - (SUB-)NARRATIVE PREFERENCE

NARRATIVE

“There are biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine.”

THREADS



- Accusations of Concealment and Misinformation
 - United Nations Engagement
 - Development of Biological Weapons Components
 - Involvement of Hunter Biden in Financing Biolaboratories
 - Experiments with Bat Coronavirus in Ukrainian Biolabs
- 

WAR BLOGGERS - (SUB-)NARRATIVE PREFERENCE

NARRATIVE

“There are biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine.”

THREADS

$$P_{t,n} = \alpha \cdot \frac{Lifespan(t)}{MedianLifespan(n)} + \beta \cdot \frac{Likes(t)}{MedianLikes(n)}$$

where:

- $P_{t,n}$: Popularity score of thread t in neighborhood n
- $Lifespan(t)$: Lifespan of thread t
- $MedianLifespan(n)$: Median lifespan of threads in neighborhood n (over certain timespan)
- $Likes(t)$: Number of likes for thread t (over certain timespan)
- $MedianLikes(n)$: Median number of likes in neighborhood n (over certain timespan)
- α : Hyperparameter to weigh the influence of thread lifespan
- β : Hyperparameter to weigh the influence of thread likes

WAR BLOGGERS - (SUB-)NARRATIVE PREFERENCE

NARRATIVE

“There are biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine.”

THREADS

The average rank of a thread t across N neighborhoods is calculated as follows:

$$\text{AverageRank}(t) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^N R_i}{N}$$

where R_i is the rank of thread t in the i^{th} neighborhood.

The frequency with which a thread t ranks in the top 5 is calculated as:


$$\text{Top5Frequency}(t) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^N 1(R_i \leq 5)}{N}$$

where $1(\cdot)$ is the indicator function that equals 1 if the condition is true, and 0 otherwise.

The standard deviation of the thread's ranks, known as the Rank Dispersion Index, is calculated as:

$$\text{RankDispersion}(t) = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^N (R_i - \bar{R})^2}{N}}$$

where \bar{R} is the mean rank of thread t across all neighborhoods.



WAR BLOGGERS - (SUB-)NARRATIVE PREFERENCE

NARRATIVE

**“There are biological
weapons laboratories in
Ukraine.”**

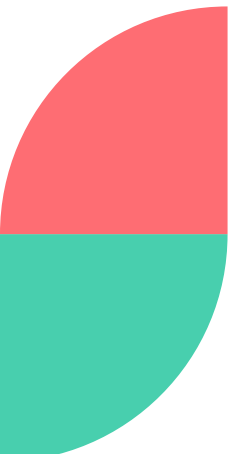



THREADS

To quantify the overall popularity of a thread, we calculate a combined score:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{PopularityScore}(t) = & \alpha \cdot \text{NormalizedAverageRank}(t) \\ & + \beta \cdot \text{Top5Frequency}(t) \\ & - \gamma \cdot \text{NormalizedRankDispersion}(t) \end{aligned}$$

where α , β , and γ are weights based on the desired emphasis of each metric.





WAR BLOGGERS - (SUB-)NARRATIVE PREFERENCE

NARRATIVE

“There are biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine.”

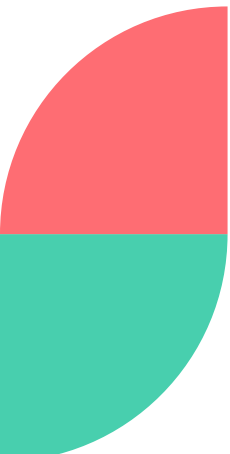


THREADS

Widespread Approval

- Accusations of Concealment and Misinformation
- United Nations Engagement
- Development of Biological Weapons Components

Scattered Approval

- Involvement of Hunter Biden in Financing Biolaboratories
 - Experiments with Bat Coronavirus in Ukrainian Biolabs
- 



**REGARDLESS OF NARRATIVE
PREFERENCE, MOST NARRATIVE
THREADS STILL PERPETUATE
OTHERISM**



**OTHERISM IS ADAPTABLE.
OTHERISM IS DYNAMIC.
OTHERISM IS DIVERSE.**



MESSAGE

“💣 EXPLOSIVE REVELATION: Hunter Biden is funding underground chemical laboratories in Kiev! 💰 Reports from deep inside the shadows confirm he's been funneling money into secret facilities, creating deadly concoctions for reasons yet unknown. The 'Biden Empire' has no bounds!”



AUDIENCE





MESSAGE

“ URGENT: Unconfirmed reports suggest the UN is covertly supporting the development of biological chemical weapons aimed at targeting Russians! ”



AUDIENCE



SAME DISCURSIVE END.
DIFFERENT MEANS.
DIFFERENT AUDIENCES AFFECTED.

Green Node: Message containing otherism
Colored Nodes: Affected users
White Nodes: Non-affected users






EXAMPLES OF OTHERISM

‘At a local school, a teacher reprimanded a child for speaking Russian during recess.’

‘And people like her and others like her for anger, swearing, inciting ethnic and religious hatred, attempts at moral corruption of society must be punished.’


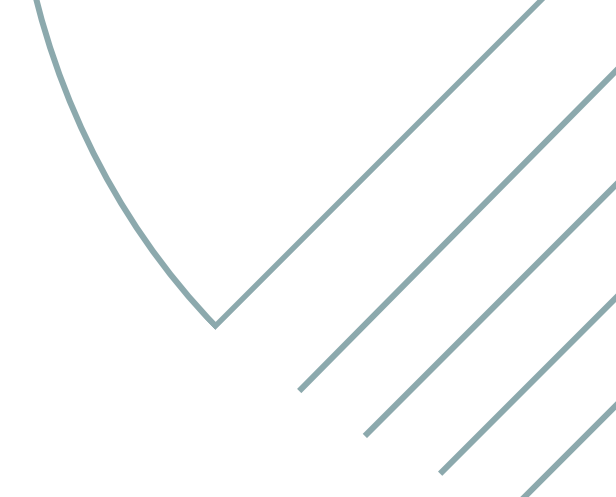
‘The sworn Russophobe called the taxi driver a “rapist” and “anti-Ukrainian nit” only because during the trip he refused to switch to Ukrainian with her.’

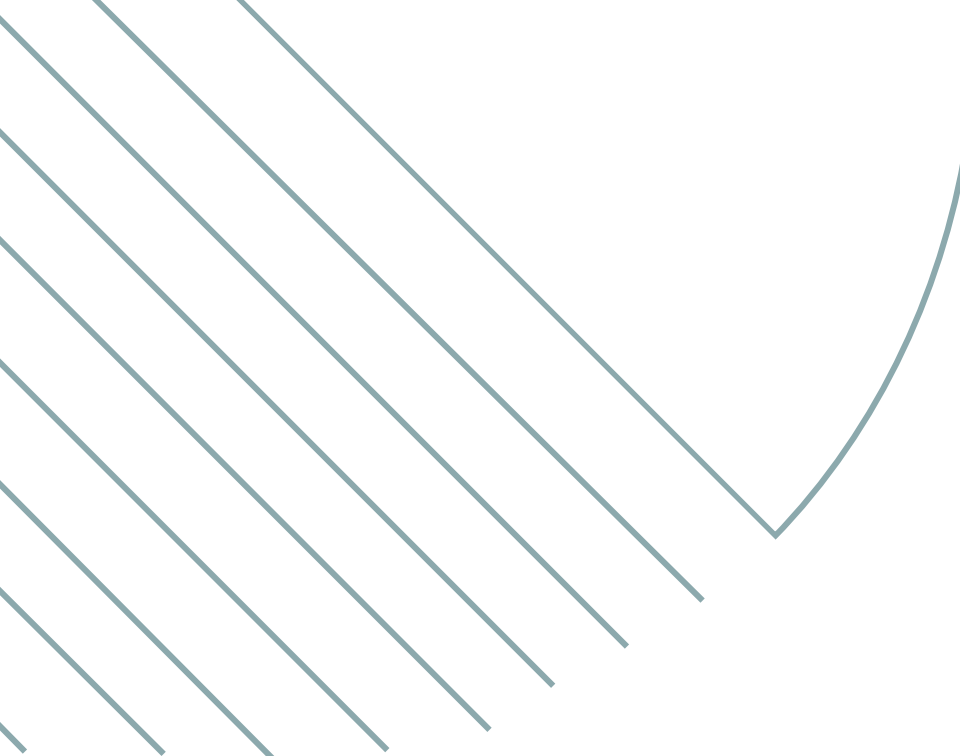




GENERALIZING OTHERISM TO OTHER CONTEXTS

OTHERISM APPEARS TO BE A STRATEGY ADAPTABLE TO MORE DOMAINS

- **Adjacent to “fear-speech”. (Saha et al. 2023)**
 - **Can use arguments and subtle ways to show some community as a threat, hate speech.**
 - **Carries similar discursive ends to hate speech, but in a more palatable, subtle manner. (Pettersson and Sakki 2017)**
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- 



**"THEY LET — [...] 15, 16 MILLION
[IMMIGRANTS] INTO OUR COUNTRY. WHEN
THEY DO THAT, WE GOT A LOT OF WORK
TO DO. THEY'RE POISONING THE BLOOD OF
OUR COUNTRY."**

- Trump, Dec 2023

**"I DON'T KNOW IF YOU CALL THEM PEOPLE
[...] IN SOME CASES THEY'RE NOT PEOPLE,
IN MY OPINION."**



- Trump, Mar 2024





OTHERISM IN AMERICAN (SOCIAL) MEDIA

Brings in a totally new set of advantages other other methods sharing its discursive end.

- Topical style allows for distancing from statement and does not require expression of explicit personal opinion. (Sakki and Pettersson 2016)
 - Often expressed in seemingly benign ways, which may make it more credulous to the users than hate speech.
 - Cannot be as easily moderated as hate speech.
 - Similar discourse shown to be much more palatable to “regular” users.
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OTHERISM - THE CHALLENGES AT HAND

Detection Methods

- Models like Perspective API have been found unable to detect speech akin to otherism.
- Much of “otherist” language depends entirely on the context of the ingroup, posing a major obstacle for generalization.

Moderation Methods

- Otherism is inherently slippery. This presents a much harder target for moderation than hate speech.
- 




SUMMARY

Otherism appears to be a generally overlooked discursive method. Evading existing moderation methods and allowing for more dynamic influence of hateful rhetoric, new techniques need to be formed to track, understand, and counter otherism.



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THANK YOU

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