Pro-Kremlin Propaganda about Neo-Nazis in Ukraine Targets South Africans Online

April 2024

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1. Executive Summary

This report examines pro-Kremlin propaganda targeting South Africans on social media. It finds that Kremlin-aligned actors are spreading false and misleading narratives that portray Ukraine as a Nazi-controlled state in an attempt to justify Russia's invasion and influence South African public opinion.

Analysis reveals these narratives spread across platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) through official Kremlin-aligned and controlled channels but also via social media influencers from other English-speaking countries and, at times, South African media outlets. During the data collection period, which ran from 1 September 2023 to 1 April 2024, there was significant discussion about alleged Nazism in Ukraine among South African users on X, with over 12k posts referencing the narrative.

There was also more engagement with posts from official Kremlin sources on X than on Facebook. For example, the Russian Embassy in South Africa received 30.7k engagements on 41 posts positioning Ukraine as a 'Nazi state' on X, compared with 1.3k engagements on 57 posts on Facebook. This raises questions about effective policy enforcement and moderation of false and misleading content.

The overarching narrative about Russia's so-called 'special military operation' to 'denazify' Ukraine dominated statements from the Kremlin around the time of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Since then, the topic has spawned multiple sub-narratives and conspiracy theories among social media users. The three most prominent sub-narratives in South Africa were that the Ukrainian government itself is a neo-Nazi regime, that the Ukrainian military employs Nazi-like tactics in its "indiscriminate killing of civilians," and lastly that the Ukrainian military willingly permits Nazis into its ranks.

2. Introduction

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many African nations have remained politically neutral, neither indicating wholehearted support for the Kremlin's actions nor publicly backing Ukraine. The South African government in particular has maintained an open dialogue with the Kremlin despite calls from both Ukraine and the US to take a stronger stance.

While public opinion polling of South Africans also demonstrates a willingness for their government to remain neutral, 75% of respondents agreed that "the Russia-Ukraine war has been bad for their country" with specific reference to food shortages and fuel prices. Economic impact outside of the immediate vicinity of Ukraine has been a consistent theme of Kremlin propaganda over the past two years and in some cases may act as a gateway to false and misleading narratives.

Another consistent theme of Kremlin propaganda has been the effort to justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a 'special military operation' intended to 'denazify' the country. This narrative was seeded during the escalation in tensions between the two countries in February 2022, prior to the full-scale ground invasion; the assertion that the entire Ukrainian military is neo-Nazi was extrapolated from initial claims about the far-right Azov Regiment.

3. Methodology

This research aimed to identify social media content within the South African context that portrays Ukraine as a safe harbour for 'neo-Nazis' – a demonstrably false claim used as part of a larger Russian disinformation campaign to justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To achieve this objective, a multifaceted search strategy was employed, utilizing a combination of automated tools and manual verification.

1. **Social Media Platform Selection:**

The primary platforms for analysis were Facebook and X. These platforms were chosen due to their widespread use in South Africa and their role in facilitating the dissemination of information. Additionally, media sites focused on South Africa were included in the investigation to ascertain the role of 'news outlets' in spreading pro-Kremlin narratives. For the sake of analysis, the sources of propaganda were divided into three categories:

- Official Kremlin Outlets: This includes official websites and social media accounts of Russian government entities.
- Kremlin-aligned Groups and Pages/Accounts: This refers to groups, pages, and accounts on social media platforms that demonstrably promote pro-Kremlin narratives, even if not directly affiliated with the Russian government.
- South African Media Outlets: This includes established news organizations and online publications with a focus on South African news and current events.

2. **Search Strategy and Tools:**

A multifaceted search strategy was implemented to identify relevant accounts. Firstly, a broad search query was constructed leveraging Boolean operators for precise targeting. These operators allowed the combination of multiple keywords to capture a wider range of relevant terms. The constructed search query incorporated the following elements:

- Target Country: The search was geographically restricted to South Africa to ensure retrieved accounts originated from the target region.
- Keywords: The search query included various terms related to Ukraine and Nazism, encompassing: ("Ukraine" OR "Ukrainian" OR "Ukrainians" OR "Zelensky") and ("Nazi" OR "Nazis" OR "Neo-Nazi" OR "neonazi" OR "neonazis" OR "Neo-Nazis" OR "Nazism").
- Time Range: September 1, 2023 – April 1, 2024

An additional dataset of key accounts found promoting narratives about 'neo-Nazis' in Ukraine was created. This helped further refine results around the narrative by focusing on accounts with a higher likelihood of promoting it.

3. Account Verification:

Retrieved accounts were then subjected to a manual verification process to confirm their relevance to the study. This verification process involved examining factors like:

- Account Location: Ensuring the account is based in South Africa or primarily targets a SA audience.
- Content Analysis: Scrutinising the content posted by the account to identify whether it actively promotes the 'neo-Nazis' narrative. This could include text posts, shared content, and visuals.
- Account History: Examining the account's past activity to assess its overall content focus and potential affiliation with known disinformation networks.

Through this multi-layered approach, we were able to better understand the behaviours of social media accounts in the South African context that are contributing to the spread of the 'neo-Nazis' narrative.

4. Social Listening Analysis:

Following the identification of relevant accounts through the search strategy outlined above, CrowdTangle and BrandWatch were employed to analyse the online posts emanating from these accounts. These social listening tools facilitated the comprehensive collection and organization of a large dataset of posts related to the 'neo-Nazis' narrative. By utilising these tools, we were able to:

- Gather a comprehensive dataset: CrowdTangle and BrandWatch allowed us to efficiently collect a vast amount of data from the identified accounts, including text posts, shared content, and visual content. This large dataset provided a more complete picture of the information being disseminated.
- Track trends and engagement: The tools facilitated the identification of trends and patterns in the online discourse surrounding the narrative. We could assess the frequency with which the narrative was being promoted, the level of engagement it garnered, and the types of content resonating most with audiences.
- 12.6k total mentions – most of them relevant to the discourse analysed – were collected on X and Facebook using the aforementioned keyword search. This included 677 posts from the 43 accounts found to be promoting the narrative.

4. Context

Given the time period for data collection covers the evolution of the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, a proportion of the pro-Kremlin content analysed relates to the situation in the Middle East. Much of this attempts to draw an equivalence between the conflict in Gaza and the war in Ukraine. While this content has been noted in many countries, in the context of South Africa, criticism of Western countries over their perceived 'double standards' has received significant traction.

These narratives rely upon the idea that the US and UK, among others, proclaim to be defenders of human rights in the context of Ukraine, yet are supporting the Israeli government, who Russian sources consider to be the aggressor. Similarly, Kremlin-aligned outlets and diplomats often remind their audiences that Russia has historically [shown solidarity](#) with African nations, while Western nations have acted as their 'colonial masters'. The overarching narrative in both cases is that Russia offers an alternative to the Western-led international order, with the BRICS nations (including South Africa) taking a leading role in reorganising global power.

As noted above, one of the most consistent sub-narratives offered by the Kremlin to justify military action in Ukraine has been about 'denazification'. Along with vilifying the Ukrainian military, content amplifying this narrative often also implicates NATO as responsible for the 'mainstreaming' of white supremacist ideals via their efforts to arm and train Ukrainian forces.

Previous [research from ISD](#) found that while the Kremlin was clearly influential in spreading this narrative initially, highly followed social media influencers seemingly unaffiliated with the Russian government have since willingly promoted these ideas across platforms. During the period studied (1 September 2023 – 1 April 2024), narratives about neo-Nazis in Ukraine were significantly more prominent on X compared to Facebook. There were just 222 mentions of these allegations on South African Facebook pages and groups, compared to roughly 12.3k across X, however, it is worth noting that the platforms provide different levels of data access for researchers and search results are therefore not always consistent.

Content promoting associated narratives also perform significantly better on X. For example, while engagements on the official Russian Embassy in South Africa [X account](#) received 29.2k engagements on 63 posts positioning Ukraine as a 'Nazi state', its counterpart [account on Facebook](#) received just 1.3k engagements on 57 posts with similar content. This account on X, which has 167k followers, was a dominant voice pushing misleading claims about Nazism in Ukraine, creating 21 of the 25 most shared posts in South Africa under the narrative.

5. Specific Neo-Nazis Narratives

Analysis of the total dataset of posts surfaced common sub-narratives, revolving around the claim of Ukraine providing a 'safe harbour' for neo-Nazis, being spread by accounts associated with the Kremlin. These are explored further below.

1. **"The Ukrainian government is a neo-Nazi regime/dictatorship."**

This narrative focused on [connecting](#) isolated instances of alleged Nazis in Ukrainian government positions to a broader trend. It frequently drew evidence from images and videos of senior Ukrainian leadership figures in proximity to Nazis or Nazi imagery and symbols. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was the focal point of the discourse, with roughly 15% of around 12.6k mentions on X and Facebook about Ukraine being associated with Nazis mentioning Zelensky by name.
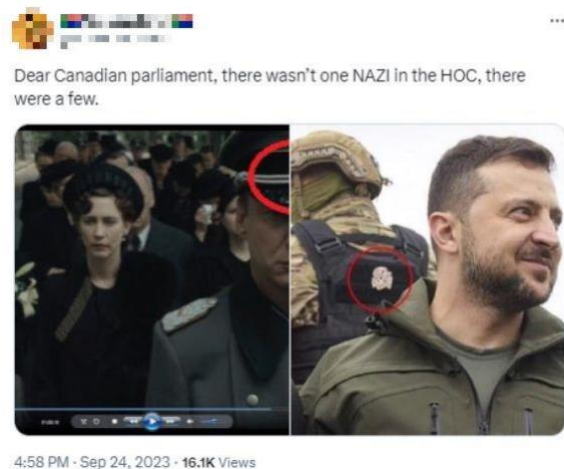
Figures 1 & 2: X users making allegations that Ukrainian President Zelensky has associations with Nazis. Disclaimer: The flag being signed by Zelensky (above left) is [in fact](#) that of the 103rd Separate Brigade of the Territorial Defence Forces.

The controversy surrounding the celebration of Yaroslav Hunka in the Canadian Parliament drove a spike in discussion with over 2.5k mentions during the week of September 25. Hunka was given a [standing ovation](#) by Canadian lawmakers on account of his reputation as a 'war hero' who had fought for Ukrainian independence, however, the revelation that Hunka had in fact fought with a Nazi military unit prompted the [resignation](#) of the Canadian House Speaker two days later and a [public apology](#) from President Trudeau. This incident prompted a frenzy of online discussion among South

Africans that furthered claims about 'neo-Nazi Ukraine', particularly given President Zelensky was in attendance at the event.

Figure 3: The Russian Embassy of South Africa posted about the Hunka standing ovation, commenting that this represents the "rehabilitation of Nazism in full swing".

Russian Embassy in the Republic of South Africa ✓
September 24, 2023 · 🌐

Check out the shameful video of President Zelensky of Ukraine, PM Trudeau of Canada with both chambers of parliament of Canada all joining in the standing ovation for 98-year-old Yaroslav Hunka, veteran of Ukrainian 'Galicia' division, a Nazi criminal who found shelter in Canada after the defeat of Hitlerites in WW2.

As you see in the video and the picture, both the Associated Press and speaker of the House of Commons of Canada Anthony Rota conveniently omit the affiliation of the said division with Waffen-SS troops. Really, why mention it? In that case one would need to explain that Waffen-SS was involved in numerous atrocities during WW2 and was officially convicted by the Nuremberg Trials in 1946.

Also, take note of the lady in blue behind the Zelensky couple and PM Trudeau applauding the 'WW2 veteran'. This is Chrystia Freeland, vice-PM of Canada, granddaughter of another Nazi criminal and Goebbels accomplice Mykhailo Chomiak, who ran a Nazi newspaper in Nazi-occupied Krakow.

Rehabilitation of Nazism in full swing.

#ukraine #nazi #nazism #canada #waffenss

Anti-Ukraine South Africans amplified anti-Western sentiment and linked not only the Ukrainian government but also Western governments to Nazis, driving highly influential calls for them to cut funding to Kyiv. As shown in Figure 4, this event represents the peak in conversation about 'Ukrainian Nazis' across the timeframe studied, with 2.5k posts across Facebook and X.

Weekly Volume of Ukrainian Nazis Narratives

Figure 4: Data from X and Facebook from Sep 1, 2023 – Mar 31, 2024, using the keywords outlined in the methodology.

2. "Ukraine shells/kills civilians indiscriminately and uses civilians as shields, therefore they are Nazis."

With at least 270 mentions of civilians in association with Ukraine-Nazi keywords, this narrative centred around connecting civilian causalities allegedly caused by the Ukrainian military, namely in Donetsk and Luhansk, to its 'Nazi intentions' to purge Russians from the country by any means. An RT report shared at least 12 times by South African X users argued that "horrible things were done to civilians after Russia's withdrawal from Kharkiv region", further solidifying the narrative.
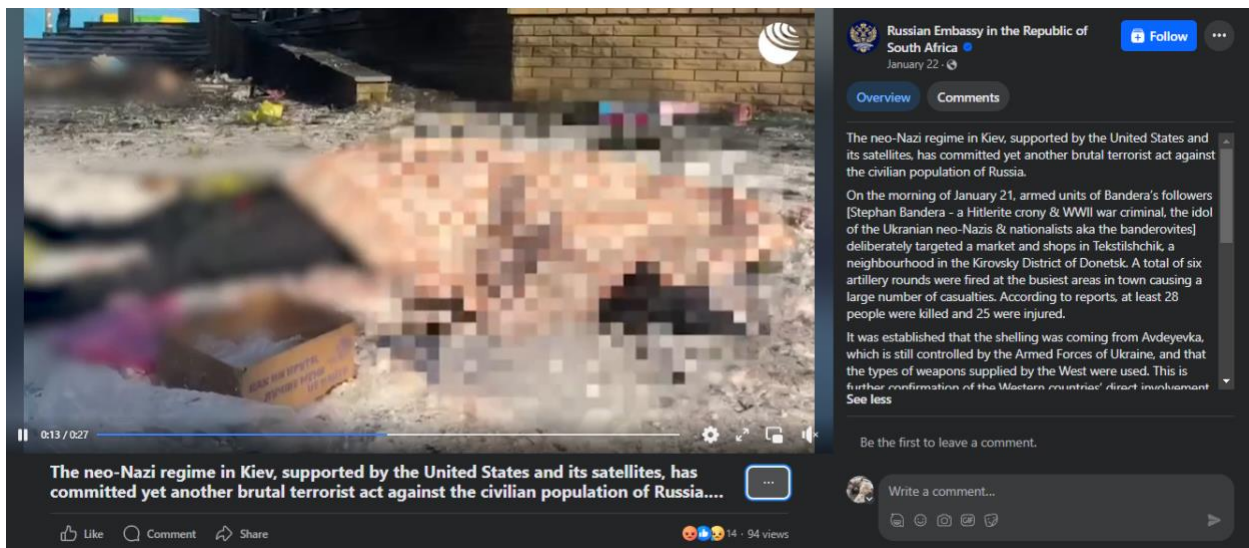

Figure 5: Another post from the Russian Embassy in South Africa from January 2023, alleging that the "neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv" has been killing indiscriminately in Donetsk.

As mentioned, common concerns in South Africa regarding the Israel-Hamas conflict are being linked to this discourse. Many believe that Western powers' support for Israel, accused of committing genocide in Gaza, is equivalent to their support of Ukraine, which

is perceived as engaging in similar actions. Hashtags relating to the situation in Gaza (#israel, #gaza, #freepalestine, and #gazagenocide) all appeared among the top 50 hashtags in association with Ukraine-Nazi keywords, with over 100 uses collectively.

Figure 6: An X post from an influential pro-Russian South African account with almost 5,000 views alleges that "Ukrainian Nazis" are targeting civilians in the same way as "Nazi Israel".

3. "Ukraine allows Nazis to join the army or act as mercenaries."

This narrative builds on a long-running effort to point at individual instances of confirmed or alleged involvement of neo-Nazis in the Ukrainian armed forces or mercenary units. By consistently pointing out such involvement, a misleading narrative develops that such instances are not isolated but indicative of a broader dominance of Nazi elements fighting on behalf of Ukraine.

Confirmed or alleged cases where neo-Nazis were killed by the Russian military are positioned as evidence that the invasion is working as intended. One such example is the killing of Cesar Aujard (or Ozhar), a French neo-Nazi mercenary fighting in Ukraine. This case saw reports on Telegram spread to X, eventually receiving coverage from TASS and the Russian Embassy in South Africa, driving further engagement among South African audiences.

6. Notable Actors & Network

Popular English-language accounts on X based in Western countries such as the US appear to have been highly influential in spreading narratives about Ukraine's alleged Nazi problem among South African users. 64% of engagements with geolocated accounts were of Western origin.

In essence, while a small cohort of Russian and South African accounts were prominent, Western influencers with a longstanding affiliation with pro-Russian narratives, who often derive their information directly from Russian government-affiliated sources, drove the narrative into South Africa via organic shares, quotes, and replies. For example, Jackson Hinkle (2.5m followers), an allegedly pro-Russia right-wing American influencer who has repeatedly spread misinformation about the conflict, was mentioned 901 times in the dataset. This compares to just 214 mentions of the aforementioned highly influential @EmbassyOfRussia account.
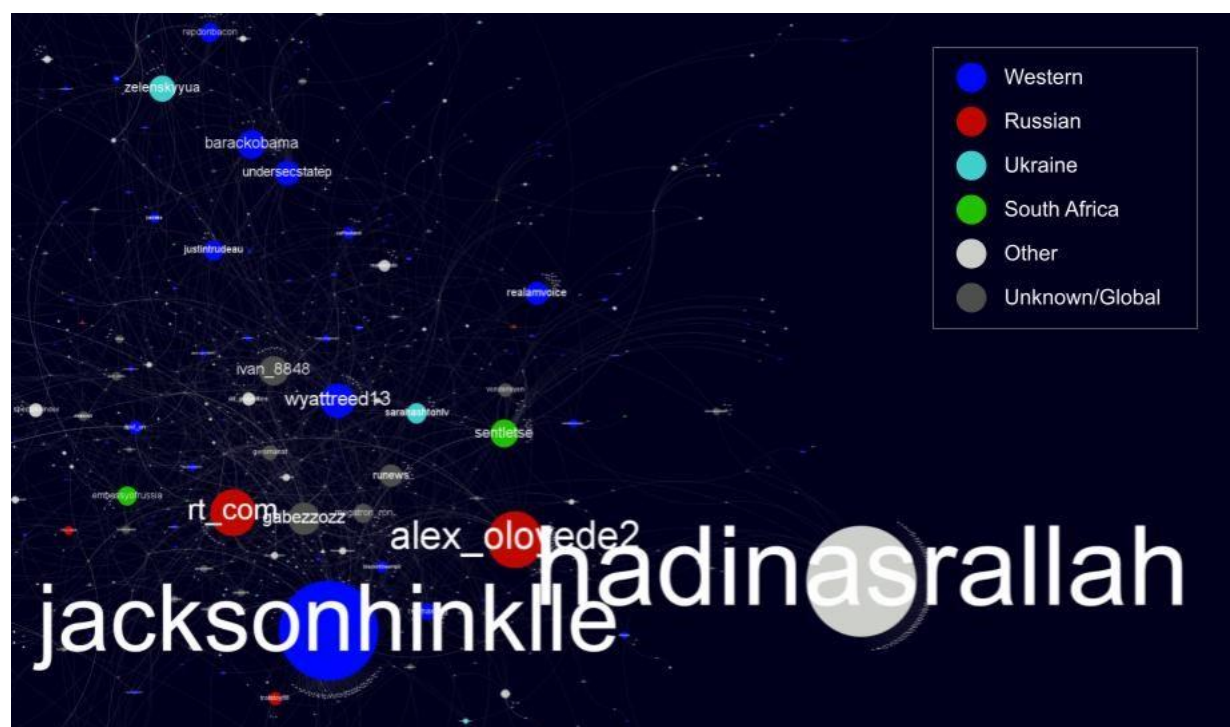

Figure 7: Network graph showing the connections between users on X, using a dataset about the Ukraine-Nazi narrative collected from South Africa. Each user is represented by a node, and links are drawn between nodes when users share, reply to, or mention each other. Nodes that are linked to more frequently appear larger in the graph, indicating higher engagement, such as @hadinasrallah, an account based in the Middle East that referenced Ukrainian Nazis in a viral post. As shown in the legend, the colour of each node represents a user's country or region of origin.

7. South African Pro-Kremlin Websites

News site African Times, whose Facebook page has 4.5k followers, regularly syndicates articles directly from Russian state media agencies (e.g. TASS) or government spokespeople and diplomats, such as the Ambassador to South Africa, Ilya Rogachev. Much of this content stokes fears and tensions about grain and fuel prices in African nations, which have been a source of global economic concern following the dissolution of the Black Sea grain deal in July 2023 despite President Cyril Ramaphosa's intervention.

Multiple articles from Ambassador Rogachev claim that Western sanctions on Russia are the cause of these economic concerns and echo common narratives about the Kremlin's 'special military operation in Ukraine'. One of these was shared in a South African Facebook group with over 180k members.

Another article by Rogachev posted verbatim on the African Times site, begins with "on 24 February 2022 Russia, being left with no other option to protect the people of Donbas from constant violence emanating from the Kyiv regime...had to launch the special military operation in Ukraine for the purpose of its denazification and demilitarization".

Alternative Viewpoint: The West's Labyrinth of Lies on Ukraine Special Military Operation

ILYA ROGACHEV | APRIL 24, 2023

AFRICAN TIMES

The Ambassador of the Russian Federation to South Africa and Lesotho, Ilya Rogachev.

Figure 8: Headline on the African Times website from an opinion piece about Ukraine, written by Russian Ambassador to South Africa Ilya Rogachev

IOL or 'Independent Online', which describes itself as "South Africa's oldest news site and a leading platform for news, current affairs and content in the country" is also known to publish verbatim statements from Russian diplomats and others associated with the Kremlin. This includes an article from Ambassador Rogachev commenting on the incident in the Canadian Parliament described above, claiming that this is evidence of "the West sheltering Nazi criminals" and providing additional context on the UK and Canadian governments harbouring members of Ukrainian SS units within their borders.

Rogachev also writes in various pieces published on the IOL site, among others, that "neo-Nazis gained decisive influence over the Ukrainian government" following the 2014 Euromaidan demonstrations in Kyiv. These events are decontextualised in a manner that

permits the justification of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine as a so-called "forced move".

This trend is however not unique to South Africa - other Russian diplomats have been noted as authors of content on popular news sites serving African populations. The Russian Ambassador to Kenya Dmitry Maksimychev, for example, has authored multiple articles found on Nation Africa and The Star.

8. Conclusion

The war in Ukraine extends far beyond the physical battlefield. The digital realm has become a crucial front, with pro-Kremlin influence and disinformation campaigns targeting audiences in many countries with favourable diplomatic relations, including South Africa. The fabricated narrative of a 'Nazi-infested' Ukraine not only fuels support for the Russian invasion but also undermines a balanced understanding of the conflict.

This report sheds light on the tactics employed in these campaigns. Social media platforms serve as breeding grounds for these narratives, often disguised as legitimate news or commentary and shared by official-seeming sources such as diplomats and news outlets. The analysis exposes the manipulation of historical events and the weaponization of isolated incidents to paint a distorted picture of the Ukrainian government and its military.

The volume of content associated with these narratives, particularly on X, raises questions about the effectiveness of current approaches to content moderation around disinformation and the flexibility of existing policies to adapt to rapidly changing conflict situations. These are moments in which social media users should expect easy access to credible news and verifiable information.

The pervasiveness of these narratives highlights the urgent need for media literacy initiatives and a culture of fact-checking in South Africa. Empowering citizens to critically evaluate online content and identify potential manipulation is crucial to navigating the ever-evolving information landscape. By fostering a more informed citizenry, South Africa can combat the distortion of truth and promote a more nuanced understanding of global events.

Robust fact-checking initiatives are essential to combat the spread of false and misleading content. Partnering with established South African fact-checking organizations allows them to leverage their expertise and existing networks. Targeted debunking and inoculation efforts, focusing on the most prevalent narratives documented in this report, can be disseminated widely through social media platforms, mainstream news websites, and community organizations. This empowers South Africans to critically evaluate online content and identify potential manipulation.

The information landscape online is dynamic, and pro-Kremlin narratives will likely adapt and mutate over time. Therefore, continuous monitoring of social media platforms is crucial in the next two months as South Africa approaches general elections. Continuing to track the evolution of these narratives, identify malign actors and networks, and

measure the effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives will allow for proactive counteraction.