

Humour in Ukraine's Strategic Communications



THE POWER OF HUMOR

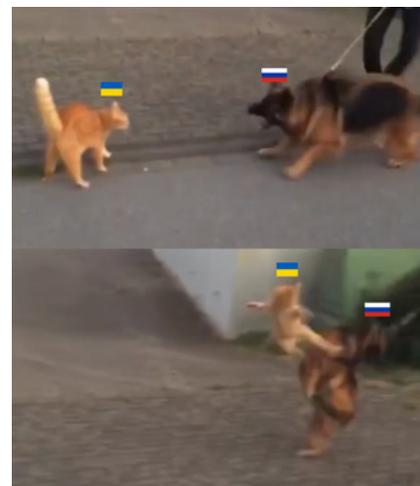
- Research by Social Scientists teaches us that humour brings people together and allow them to blow off the tensions of everyday life.
- When put into the context of wartime, humour and satire can be a cathartic method for individuals to express frustration and reclaim their agency.
- Lastly, humour can be used as a tool to undermine tyranny, as it provides the opposite feelings to fear. Consequently, autocrats have always been especially sensitive to how they are depicted in the media (Noriega's "pineapple face", Putin on "Kukly", Kim Jong Un in "The Interview"), while movements have used humour as a form of social protest called "Laughtivism/Pranksterism".
- In wartime, humour has also played a role in information operations at home and abroad; radio programs mocked the Nazi leadership, while Looney tunes proved to be an effective way of depicting the fight against Hitler and Imperial Japan to children through satire (even if the latter cartoon is now viewed as inappropriate).
- In the past century, technology limited the scope and reach of these operations, but now, with the advent of social media, new tools have emerged that can be utilised to express core narratives in simple and realistic formats while depriving autocratic regimes of their most valuable resource: fear.



Putin as a "gay clown", introduced after the 2013 "Gay propaganda bill", it has resurfaced to convey anti war messages.

THE TOOLS

- Memes
 - Put simply, memes are images (often prominent in popular culture) used in a certain context to convey a sentiment.
 - The benefit of memes is that, due to their viral nature, their meaning is instantly recognisable with minimal or even no text (as in the right-hand image); allowing them to transcend language barriers.
- TikTok
 - TikTok is a short-form, video-sharing app that allows users to create and share 15-second videos, on any topic.
 - They often include music and dancing, making them eye catching ways of delivering a message.
- The main appeal of memes and TikTok is their basis in imagery and authentic feel.
 - Imagery has been shown to be more engaging and lead to greater information retention; one study demonstrated those that watch information retained up to 95% of the information as opposed to only 10% from those who read only text.
 - It also requires less focus to intake information; a process known as "passive learning".
 - The fact many memes and TikToks are homemade and connect directly to the viral world gives them a feeling of authenticity that connects with modern users, particularly younger generations.



UKRAINE

- Throughout the current conflict, for all its horror and grief, Ukrainians have managed to make light of the situation; using instances such as farmers towing away Russian armaments (as in the left hand image), a "witch" threatening to curse Russian soldiers with impotence or a Ukrainian soldier moonwalking to Michael Jackson's "smooth criminal" to demonstrate resistance and humor.
 - Ukraine has had practice at this, first introducing this form of information operation after Russia's unofficial invasion in 2014.
- These instances have a common theme: the power of individuals standing up to a more powerful Russian aggressor, depriving the aggressor of fear and showing that even in the darkest of times, maintaining a sense of humor can be a powerful force for morale.