

“Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.” This profound insight comes not from a philosopher but from the celebrated science fiction author, psychotropic drug enthusiast and mystic, Philip K Dick. There is an ultimate primordial difference between reality and falsehood, between truth and counterfeit. Falsehoods, lies, counterfeits, deceptions are invented by human minds. The truth just *is* - objective, independent of all beliefs and conspiracy theories, unalterable and unavoidable. And yet, in an era in which the black art of spreading disinformation has become ever more sophisticated, how on earth can ordinary people ever distinguish between truth and lies?



Vladimir Putin has spent decades developing a propaganda machine for disseminating lies and disinformation. The Kremlin uses a range of overt sources - Russian State TV, TASS news agency and so on – as well as sophisticated covert digital strategies focussing on social media channels. The impact of Kremlin-orchestrated disinformation campaigns has been felt across the world, not least in recent democratic elections in the UK and USA.

Putin's focus on spreading disinformation was seen in the months leading up to the current invasion. “We are having normal military exercises”, “We will never invade Ukraine”, “Of course we don't want war”, “We are withdrawing troops from the border”, “We are merely protecting people who have been subjected to genocide”, “We are planning to demilitarise Ukraine” and so on.

Meanwhile American intelligence was receiving a stream of detailed covert information obtained from the Russian military about their invasion plans. According to a recent article in the *Economist* magazine (1) the US administration had already decided in October 2021 that Vladimir Putin's 'military exercises' were in fact focussed on invasion using massive military force. In early December, US intelligence had such detailed information that they were able to conclude that Russia was planning to invade Ukraine in February 2022 from multiple sites around the border, using 175,000 troops. But instead of normal intelligence practice, keeping this vital information strictly secret in order to protect their sources within the Russian military, the US administration took the unprecedented step of releasing its detailed stream of intelligence into the public domain, in order to achieve the widest possible dissemination.

In addition to the comprehensive plans for invasion, the Americans released details of a Russian plot to topple Ukraine's government from inside, active planning of 'false-flag' operations and plans for a fake propaganda video, include corpses and actors as mourners. The administration even released intercepts of Russian officers complaining that the Americans were broadcasting their schemes.

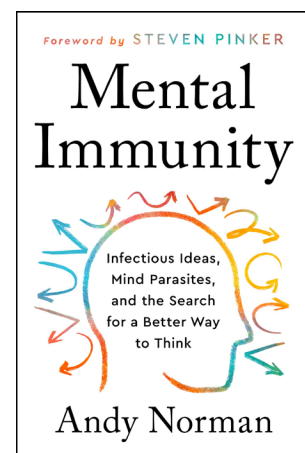
According to the *Economist*, the US approach rests on a recent psychological theory about how to combat disinformation. Falsehoods are viewed as viruses which are capable of infecting minds and replicating at enormous speed through a population. Traditional approaches to combat disinformation, attempting to debunk falsehoods once they have

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spread and infected millions of people, have turned out to be far less successful than might be thought. Once the contagious idea that Covid was being spread by 5G antennae had replicated across the world, the counter-explanations of reputable virologists seemed relatively powerless to dissuade many people. Once that particular mental virus had taken hold, dislodging it with truth and objective evidence turned out to be surprisingly difficult.

The concepts of 'mind parasites' and 'mental contagion' have some explanatory power in illuminating the explosive dissemination of false ideas in certain periods of history, such as the rapid spread of witchcraft beliefs in medieval Europe and the Salem witch trials in 1692. Applying modern mathematical understandings of viral replication within a population (such as estimating the infamous '*r number*') provides insights into the spread of false news. The independent Network Contagion Research Institute (which is linked to Rutgers University in New Jersey) (2) provides a current example of this methodology.

In order to counter the dangerous capacity that false ideas and deliberately misleading content have to spread at light-speed through a vulnerable population, an alternative approach has been devised – that of providing people with a pre-emptive dose of reality in order to attempt to 'immunise' the mind against subsequent falsehoods. Andy Norman, a philosopher and psychologist at Carnegie Mellon University, has popularised this approach which he calls 'pre-bunking'. His book *Mental Immunity: Infectious Ideas, Mind-Parasites, and the Search for a Better Way to Think* (3), published in 2021, provides a readable account of the theory of mental immunisation.



Of course, the 'pre-bunking' approach is not that novel or revolutionary. I remember more than 40 years ago being taught by a wise older Christian statesman that when confronted with a novel falsehood that was spreading amongst student Christian Unions, it was often better not to confront the falsehood directly but rather "aim to lay such a strong foundation of truth that the falseness of the new teaching becomes self-evident."

It seems likely that the US administration was advised by psychologists and experts in countering disinformation and it was this that led to the remarkable decision to release detailed intelligence into the public domain well in advance of the invasion.

Revealing to the enemy the efficacy of your own covert operations is not standard military doctrine. It is well-known that, during the Second World War, Churchill and his generals went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that the Germans never knew that their top secret Enigma messages were being decoded with astonishing accuracy and speed at Bletchley Park. In contrast the Americans have now given incontrovertible evidence to the Russian military of quite how effectively their communication networks have been compromised.

But so far it seems that the US administration's approach, with its combination of promptness, clarity and wide dissemination of Putin's real plans, has been pretty effective in providing a degree of international mental immunity against the outpourings of the Russian disinformation machine. Tragically, the difference between Putin's lies and the accuracy of

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the US intelligence reports has been demonstrated for all to see in the awful and bloody reality of what is now unfolding in Ukraine.

We cannot be complacent. The Kremlin disinformation machine has not gone to sleep. TASS, the Russian state-owned news agency, continues to pump out articles calling for an end to “Kyiv’s aggression” and refers to hundreds of mass graves containing the bodies of civilians—including women, children and the elderly – killed by Ukrainians since 2014. TASS has claimed that retreating Ukrainian forces were attempting “to inflict maximum damage on the local population”, and that Ukrainian troops planned a “large-scale offensive in Donbass” that Russia’s “special military operation” has successfully thwarted.

But perhaps there is room for a crumb of comfort as we witness the tragic and horrifying spectacle of just how much destruction and bloodshed one evil dictator controlling a massive war machine can unleash. The American administration has rediscovered the effectiveness of releasing accurate, clear and truthful information in advance, as a way of combatting a sophisticated and malevolent disinformation campaign.

The biblical metaphors of light and darkness carry a profoundly positive and encouraging message. The evil one is the father of all lies (John 8:44) and we are engaged in a life-or-death spiritual struggle against “the cosmic powers of this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12). But it only takes a small amount of light to eliminate a vast darkness and the simple, unvarnished truth will ultimately prevail against the most sophisticated and ingenious of lies.

May our political leaders continue to learn that message.

John Wyatt, March 2022

### References

- 1) <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2022/02/26/deploying-reality-against-putin>
- 2) <https://networkcontagion.us>
- 3) Andy Norman, *Mental Immunity: Infectious Ideas, Mind-Parasites, and the Search for a Better Way to Think*, HarperWave.