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Targeting Ontological Security: Information Warfare in the Modern Age

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Recent studies have made great strides looking at the implications that the human need for ontological security has for politics and International Relations. However, less attention has been paid to how actors might target this need. While Steele and Mattern both examine the possible manipulation of subjectivity, this article turns to the concept of information warfare (IW) to broaden the view of how, and to what end, this is pursued. Congruently, by elaborating upon how the digitalization of society has increased the potential to influence and manipulate cognition and emotion, OS strengthens current literature on IW. It argues that by covertly perverting the information landscape, IW can alter how events are connected to national narratives, influencing policy by making certain options appear more/less shameful, or it can unravel the bonds of society by polarizing domestic narrative debates, purposely sowing ontological insecurity. This provides a firmer understanding of the strategic implications interference can have generally and of Russia's interference into the 2016 U.S. election specifically. Therefore, by viewing facets of IW as part of a range of tactics employed to manipulate/undermine subjectivity, a more nuanced understanding of interstate relations subsequently emerges.

KEY WORDS: Cyber, information warfare, ontological security, Russia, U.S.

Ontological security (OS) has become of growing interest to scholars of politics and International Relations. Building from the works of Anthony Giddens and R. D. Laing, OS scholars posit individuals are not merely concerned with their physical security but also with their sense of being. Nation-states play a vital role in addressing this need, providing a stable environment and a national narrative that individuals are embedded within (Krolikowski, 2018; Skey, 2010; Zarakol, 2017). This leads to an interest in the maintenance of national identity and subjectivity, which can have a tremendous impact on state behavior (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2005; Subotic, 2016; Zarakol, 2010). Where theory could be developed, however, is the extent to which actors purposely target, and manipulate, the need for OS. Turning to the concept of information warfare (IW), this article broadens the view of how, and to what end, actors target OS. It argues IW can manipulate the interest in maintaining national subjectivity to influence policy, or it can undermine the bonds of society to generate ontological *insecurity* as an end goal itself, providing a more holistic understanding of the consequences interference can have.

Bially Mattern's (2001) work on representational force and Steele's (2007, 2012) work on reflexive discourse and counterpower similarly examine how states manipulate each other's desire to uphold subjectivity. While aligning more with Steele's focus on the manipulation of the endogenous sources of OS (explored below), the article differs from both scholars on a number of important

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points. First, while reflexive discourse and representational force employ overt rhetoric to influence policy and behavior, IW encompasses covert operations that masquerade the role of external actors. Second, while these operations might influence policy, perverting the information landscape to influence which options are seen as incongruent with, and thus shameful for, the national Self (Steele, 2005, pp. 526–527), they can also target the bonds of society—undermining the foundation of OS and generating intense anxiety. IW thus goes further than counterpower in suggesting the objective might not be to have victims engage their sense of Self, but to purposefully fracture the Self by turning factions upon each other. Third, counterpower focuses on the "aesthetic" vulnerability of large egotistical states, while representational force is primarily applicable when a state's subjectivity is dependent upon its relationship with the speaker. Here, rather than relative power, degrees of internal contestation over Self plays a greater role in gauging vulnerability, while actors with little role in upholding the victim's subjectivity can still effectively employ IW. Therefore, IW expands our understanding of the tactics employed, and the ends to which, actors target subjectivity and OS, nuancing how we envision interstate relations.

Congruently OS helps conceptualize and showcase the risks faced by those disregarding IW's widespread objectives and implications. This is exemplified by the inability of mainstream U.S. thinking on IW to account for Russian interference during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. When looking at the election. it is important to note Russian IW was but part of a myriad of factors undermining the stability of U.S. subjectivity. For example, Homolar and Scholz (2019) use OS to explore the rhetorical appeal of Donald Trump. They argue anxiety over perceived threats to the economy and jobs coupled with negative views of immigration provided a receptive audience for Trump's rhetoric, which simultaneously exacerbated this anxiety while providing hope of recapturing a superior past, thereby reinstilling OS. This was likely aided by the post-1960s dominance of ideational and racial issues in dividing Republicans and Democrats (Miller & Schofield, 2003), especially after Barack Obama's election (Tesler, 2016). Congruently, while American's generally hold moderate policy positions, growing alignment between partisan and ideological identities has increased behavioral polarization, making Americans politically "more biased, active, and angry" (Mason, 2013, p. 155). Russia was thus targeting an already divided and anxious population. Nevertheless, it is argued we should not fail to appreciate the concerted effort to enflame these divisions—thereby fostering ontological *insecurity*.

Russian interference was first recognized following cyberattacks on the Democratic National Convention and Hillary Clinton's campaign. While aware stolen information was being released through WikiLeaks to sow discord, U.S. officials remained focused on safeguarding hardware, such as voting machines (Porotsky, 2018), and monitoring that Russia did not physically alter votes. Only later did officials recognize a larger and more concerted Russian campaign was simultaneously playing out on social media to divide voters along an array of political and social issues (Linvill & Warren, 2020). Here Russian trolls employed information exposed in the leaks combined with dis/misinformation to enflame America's divided political landscape (Osnos, Remnick, & Yaffa, 2017). Subsequent analysis on 3 million "tweets" linked to Russian operatives (Roeder, 2018), and on cross platform data provided by Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Alphabet, concluded the aim was to encourage polarization around divisive cultural debates (DiResta et al., 2018; Howard, Ganesh, Liotsiou, Kelly, & François, 2018). In short, Russia employed IW to exploit and enflame division and undermine trust, targeting the bonds of society. Similar Russian tactics can be seen across Europe. This includes efforts to foster ethnic divisions in the Baltics (Winnerstig, 2014), promote a belief throughout the Nordics that the West is in "moral decline" (Committee on Foreign Relations, 2018, p. 109), and encourage inflammatory rhetoric and conspiracies to polarize debates on the EU, immigration, and terrorism in Western Europe (Polyakova, Laruelle, Meister, & Barnett, 2016). The problem is U.S. and NATO views of IW struggle to account for the breadth and success of these campaigns. While certainly engaged in IW (Crane, 2019), their theorization has remained relatively undeveloped and constrained in focus, with IW seen as primarily supporting conventional military operations. Russia, by contrast, holds a more integrated and expansive doctrine, one applicable to war *and* peace (Thomas, 2009; Giles, 2016a, 2016b), allowing Moscow to exploit vulnerabilities overlooked by the United States and NATO.

The first section elaborates upon this theoretical dichotomy and the fact Russia and the United States developed "two different languages and conceptual approaches" (Thomas, 1998, p. 6), so as to further reveal the risks of ignoring IW's wider objectives and consequences. This overview also raises the relevance of OS in conceptualizing the purposeful targeting of society discussed in Russian IW and, to a lesser extent, U.S. writings on the related concept of political warfare. The next section then introduces pertinent works on OS. It recounts how feelings of OS are entwined with one's community and the subsequent importance of nations and national narratives in providing OS. Expanding upon the work of Bially Mattern and Steele, it then looks at how, building from IW literature, this relationship is exposed to external interference, especially given the digital transformations of society. As explored in the following section, IW can pervert the information landscape to influence policy, making options appear more/less shameful, or polarize debates to erode the bonds of society and foster anxiety and ontological *insecurity*, as shown in regards to the 2016 U.S. election.

Conceptualizations of Information Warfare

Within the United States, IW is understood as the "range of military and government operations to protect and exploit the information environment" (Theohary, 2018, p. 1). This encompasses a number of siloed operational components primarily envisioned as supporting conventional wartime operations (Giles, 2016b, p. 4; Libicki, 2017, pp. 49–50). Accordingly, the United States struggled to account for Russia's incursion into its 2016 election, which focused more on targeting the bonds of society. Further examining U.S. and Russian views on the operational components of IW helps reveal Russia's ability to exploit vulnerabilities overlooked by the United States while also establishing the broader relevance of OS in conceptualizing the purposeful targeting of society.

For the United States, IW consists of a number of disparate operational components. The first are psychological operations—the use of propaganda and dis/misinformation to win over hearts and minds or weaken opposition. Envisioned as primarily supporting conventional military operations, these were eventually renamed "military information support operations." The second, electronic warfare operations, employ technology to disrupt adversaries' information networks and lines of commutation to degrade their war fighting capabilities, while the third, military deception operations, seek to mislead adversaries on military matters. Lastly, while viewed as pertinent to IW, computer network operations were increasingly envisioned under the separate banner of cyberspace, developing their own doctrine under U.S. Cyber Command (Theohary, 2018, pp. 2, 7). The U.S. Department of Defense defines cyberspace as "the interdependent network of information technology infrastructures and resident data," which Theohary argues fails to acknowledge how cyberspace was originally envisioned as existing in people's minds—a "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators" (p. 6). U.S. cyber operations have subsequently emphasized targeting infrastructure (Libicki, 2009), for example, command and control systems and lines of communication. While some touched on the broader role IW and cyber could jointly play, for example, by exploiting increased interconnectivity (Lind, Nightengale, Schmitt, Sutton, & Wilson, 1989, p. 24) or social media (Wirtz, 2015, p. 35), this was again viewed as supporting conventional operations by intensifying the fog of war.

For their part, Russian theorists, building from the USSR's emphasis on "active measures" (Abrams, 2016, p. 8), stress holding a broader and more integrated view of IW than, what they term, "the West" (Giles, 2016b, p. 4). There are of course similarities, with Russia discussing parallel operational components—from computer network operations and electric warfare to *"maskirovka"* (deception), psychological operations, and psychological pressure. Similarly, Russia discusses the importance of targeting an adversary's communication networks and influencing or controlling the dissemination of information during conflicts—what it terms "information-technology warfare." However, Russian doctrine goes further, stressing the importance of "information-psychological warfare"—the targeting of a wider population's psyche during peacetime (Giles, 2016b, pp. 6–9). A second key difference is how these operations work in tandem to advance centralized objectives (Libicki, 2017, p. 50). This is perhaps most notable regarding cyber, which Russia views as indistinguishable from IW and as often targeting the "domestic "nerves of government" or of society" (Connell & Vogler, 2017, p. 5). Consequently, while opting for the term "information space," Russia's focus on "computer and human information processing" (Giles, 2016b, p. 9) remains closer to the original definition of cyberspace than current U.S. formulations. Overall, Russia envisions a greater synthesis between the technical and the cognitive and emotional facets of IW. Jamming electronic communication and disrupting access to the electromagnetic spectrum, cyber espionage, and distributed denial of services (DDoS) attacks are no different from (and work in tandem with) using trolls and bots to spread dis/misinformation, establishing pro-Russian media outlets, or supporting local sympathizers to propagate favorable messages (p. 6).

The objectives for IW are therefore profoundly different from a Russian and U.S. perspective. Again, Russia shares the U.S. view that IW is vital to conventional military operations. Importantly, however, Russia envisions additional objectives in line with information-psychological warfare. The first is deep penetration and "reflexive control" (Thomas, 2004). This involves interjecting/highlighting the "necessary reasons and motive to the 'target system'" (Kasapoglu, 2015, p. 5), distorting facts or imposing "emotional impressions" on those involved in policymaking to influence how decisions are approached (Giles, 2016b, p. 21). The second is establishing "permissive environments" wherein discourse or debate lines favorable to Moscow permeate a targeted society. Finally, IW can undermine a society to increase Moscow's "relative strength in a classic zero-sum approach" (p. 24). Again, this is not relegated to times of war or as laying the groundwork for military conflict, with Russia's interference into the U.S. election falling neatly within this remit.

While U.S. theorization on IW struggles to account for such objectives and coordination, they do align with its broader concept of political warfare—the pursuit of national objectives through "all the means at a nation's command, short of war" (Kennan, as cited in Chau, 2006, p. 111). Washington's intermittent engagement with political warfare has generated fluctuations in what the term actually denotes (Lord & Barnett, 1989, p. xi; Smith, 1989, p. xiii). However, there is a recurrent theme that stands out—the seeming importance of culture and emotion. Political warfare is about "perceptions and emotions, about the behavior of individuals and groups under stress" (Lord, 1989, p. 19) and involves employing knowledge of local cultures, religions, societies, images, and ideas to achieve one's aims (Chau, 2006, pp. 114–115; Giles, 2016a, p. 44; Smith, 1989, p. 3). Similar to Russia's information-psychological warfare, political warfare thus envisions targeting society to advance one's interests. Unfortunately for the United States, following its introduction in the wake of World War II, political warfare was pushed to the periphery of strategic discourse as Washington emphasized paramilitary endeavors (Rudgers, 2002, p. 259).

Therefore, the U.S. failure to appreciate IW's wide-ranging implications and objectives (and intermittent attempts to conceptualize political warfare) meant society's growing exposure to external (Russian) inference in the run up to the 2016 election remained overlooked. As actors increasingly employ similar tactics elsewhere (Robinson et al., 2018), states must take heed of their own vulnerabilities. However, even when acknowledging IW's expanded objectives, larger questions remain over how to best conceptualize the purposeful targeting of society discussed in Russian IW (and U.S. political warfare) and how/why this triggers the emotional responses alluded to. It is here OS becomes pertinent. Scholars argue one of the most basic principles behind feeling secure is the maintenance of OS—the security of the self (McSweeney, 1999, pp. 153–154). For Giddens (1991), OS requires possessing "'answers' to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses"

(p. 47). The question of most relevance is that of self-identity, "the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his own biography" (p. 53). In order to "be" then requires the ability to provide a coherent and sustained narrative of Self (Kinnvall, 2004, pp. 746–747). Of particular relevance is the fact that OS is intimately entwined with one's community. When conceptualizing IW as targeting society, we might, therefore, focus on how actors purposefully manipulate and/or undermine this relationship—that is, how they target OS.

Ontological Security and Information Warfare

Feelings of OS are intimately entwined with one's community. Communities provide a shared "ordering of the environment," helping individuals stabilize their sense of Self (Mitzen, 2006, p. 348) and contend with anxiety over existential questions around existence, meaninglessness, and guilt and condemnation (Browning, 2018, p. 338; Giddens, 1991, pp. 47–53). In modern society, this is best understood in relation to nations and nation-states (Krolikowski, 2018; Skey, 2010; Zarakol, 2017). One's community also structures the stories they develop and tell about Self. The content of one's narrative is thus only intelligible within the social milieu from which it is partially derived and which influences its content (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015, p. 142; Ezzy, 1998, p. 247), providing a "menu of narrative forms" to select from in line with lived experiences (McAdams, 2006, pp. 15–16). And while individuals have numerous and possibly contradictory subnarratives, our tendency to "relate events within different temporal perspectives" means we begin to nest these. Stability is sought within macronarratives, with national narratives taking pride of place, laying the "foundations within which other narratives are constructed" (Gergen & Gergen, 1988, p. 34). Indeed, as studies on entitavity, the perceived "groupness of groups," show, the human need for a secure sense of Self is achieved at the level of social categories—that is, the nation (Hamilton, Sherman, & Castelli, 2002, pp. 143–145). While the individual Self may be in flux, it is comforted by the perceived continuity of the nation it is embedded within.

Given this relationship, individuals become "attached to these stable group identities" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 352). How and when these identities, and thus OS, become threatened has, however, become a source of debate (Zarakol, 2010). For example, Mitzen (2006) suggests national identity is dependent upon external relations, the "exogenous approach"—meaning the breakdown of routinized relations can become an OS threat. By contrast, scholars such as Steele (2005) and Subotic (2016) emphasize endogenous sources. Here OS threats emerge when the national narratives out of which identity emerges appear disjointed or incongruent with state behavior. For their part Zarakol (2010) and Kinnvall (2004) advocate a more middle line, with OS seen as a "quest for a stable narrative" (Zarakol, 2010, p. 7), but one influenced by the larger social environment. This article provides a slightly different middle ground, arguing external actors can employ IW to manipulate and/or undermine the endogenous sources of OS.

Scholars have revealed how efforts to maintain OS can potentially destabilize other collectives' national (or group) narratives and curbing positive recognition, generating ontological *insecurity* within those populations (Croft, 2012; Kinnvall, Manners, & Mitzen, 2018). However, less attention has been paid to the *purposeful* targeting of OS. Such a sentiment builds from Bially Mattern's work on representational force and Steele's work on reflexive discourse and "counterpower." Both explore how external actors might influence state behavior by manipulating the desire to maintain subjectivity, though only Steele discusses OS specifically.

Bially Mattern (2005, p. 595) begins by distinguishing persuasion, the use of agreed upon values to make a convincing argument, from representational force, a form of coercion that employs threats aimed at the audience's subjectivity. The latter is often a more appealing option given it reduces the prospect for rejection (pp. 602–603). However, as Steele (2007, p. 909) notes, Bially Mattern's view of subjectivity is derived more from external relationships and the larger social setting—equivalent to the exogenous approach above. Consequently, for Bially Mattern (2004), "subjectivity can "die" when the configurations of the self-other relationships that constitute it change" (p. 97). For example, the United States sought to "trap" other states into supporting the War on Terror by framing it as a legally justified action against immoral and illegal terrorists. States *could* choose not to support the United States, but for many, this would result in an untenable position for their subjectivity. However, this was largely restricted to states whose view of "good" not only conformed with the United States, but who also depended upon U.S. acknowledgment of this conceptualization; Germany's position as "good," for example, enjoyed many other reinforcements, allowing it to withstand U.S. questioning (Bially Mattern, 2005, pp. 605–608). Similarly, it was the links between the U.S.-U.K. "special relationship" and key self-conceptualizations of each state that provided representational force influence during the Suez crisis (Bially Mattern, 2001, p. 387). The viability of representational force is therefore somewhat limited to actors integral to the victim's subjectivity.

While sharing similar sentimentalities regarding how states "trap" one another, Steele (2007) views biographical narratives as the foundation of subjectivity. He argues that when responding to humanitarian crises, rather than appeal to international identities or norms, which large and proud states are likely to be unmoved by, reflexive discourse becomes a potent tool. Here weaker actors use rhetoric that openly acknowledges their asymmetric power relationship while also highlighting the incongruence between the larger state's self-narrative and its failure to intervene, thereby provoking shame and stimulating behavioral change. This can be seen in the U.S. decision to increase funding for Asian tsunami relief after being labeled "stingy" by the U.N Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs. Reflexive discourse is one of three forms of counterpower—a challenge towards the aesthetics of a state. In other words, if the state is "a work of art," counterpower are instances that stimulate the state to "engage its own 'art of living'" (Steele, 2012, p. 47). The second form is parrhesia, instances wherein the parrhesiastes, a truth teller, openly criticizes and reveals contradictions within a dominant actor, removing their certainty over past and present behavior (p. 107). Cynic parrhesiastes do this through particularly "provocative dialogue" as exemplified by Osama bin Laden's 2004 speech using specific examples to portray Washington as "incompetent, feckless, and even helpless" (p. 116). The final form is self-interrogative imaging—distributing images that force states to engage their sense of Self, as seen, for example, in the United States when images of prisoners in Abu Graib were circulated during the Iraq War. While providing important insight regarding the manipulation of endogenous sources of OS, counterpower's emphasis on power disparity and its focus on large egoistical states (Steele, 2007, p. 906, 2012, Chap. 1) constrains its applicability. Moreover, given its overt nature, those employing counterpower risk being vilified as the targeted population seeks to maintain positive views of Self (Chernobrov, 2016), potentially limiting the influence of external actors. Thus counterpower is only momentary and ends once it is "captured by power…when it becomes 'classified'" (Steele, 2012, p. 49), often allowing states to discredit external challengers.

While similarly focused on the endogenous sources of OS, IW allows us to expand how, and to what end, actors target subjectivity and OS. By covertly distorting the information environment of *any* state, IW facilitates domestic questioning of the congruence between policy and national subjectivity and/or the very existence of national subjectivity itself. In this sense, IW provides fodder to encourage/strengthen domestic "counterpower," making *domestic actors* the target of potential backlash. Indeed, part of IW's power comes from encouraging such *internal* hostility. Rather than seeking behavioral adjustment by threatening the "exposure of intolerable incongruities" (Bially Mattern, 2004, p. 99) within a victim's subjectivity, IW might thus enflame internal discrepancies towards this very end. Here the aim is not merely to encourage "engagement" with Self, but to radicalize internal debates to erode the Self, generating a sense of existential crisis and anxiety—ontological *insecurity*.

To establish this process, we must begin with the fact that national narratives are not independent objects removed from human agency. They are formed and maintained through inherently political processes (Bell, 2003, p. 75). Tellingly, Renan (1992) writes "historical error" is essential for nations, while Smith (1999, p. 16) suggests internal diversity most likely prevents a single version of the past. At the same time, while nations are "contingent," they are also "situated, ordered and bound" (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 264), premised upon a "bedrock of shared meanings and ideals" (Smith, 1999, p. 56) upon which a dominant account usually takes hold (Ringmar, 2011, p. 7). While there is always negotiation and contestation amongst derivative narratives, this often occurs without jeopardizing the metanarrative (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 279), allowing it to provide OS for a large majority of the population (Skey, 2010) who become emotionally attached to it (Steele, 2007, p. 912).

IW allows external actors to impinge upon this process. Following the USSR's collapse and unraveling of communist ideology, Thomas (1998, pp. 9–10) notes how Russian society lost its "cementing mechanism" and had to rely on controlling the information psychological to recoup mental stability. However, this position can easily be reversed; actors can employ IW to *target* OS by intruding upon domestic narrative debates. Turning to Berzina's overview of Russian IW scholarship, this connection is seen rather explicitly. For example, given Russian scholars' view of humans and nations as "informative self-learning systems," IW can insert new information into this system to "destroy national consciousness" (Berzina, 2018, p. 165).

Technological advances and the emergence of the "networked society," which facilitated the rise of societal debate (Cronin & Crawford, 1999, p. 260), provide actors with increasing opportunities to pursue such aims. For one, debates are increasingly polarized, as technological advances enable the avoidance of dissonant, and acquisition of affirming, information (Lupovici, 2012, p. 818). Second, the Internet has become a primary "transitional object" for achieving OS, embedding individuals within online networks (Areni, 2019) that reinforce social affiliations and deliver digital sources of news (Milina, 2012, p. 55), providing the "warmth and information" critical for OS (Cohen & Metzger, 1998, p. 52). A consequence, however, is individuals are progressively interacting within "identity bubbles" (Kaakinen, Sirola, Savolainen, & Oksanen, 2020), helping increase partisanship as a salient social identity (Lupton, Singh, & Thorton, 2015; McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018, p. 22). While ingroup bias does not presuppose intergroup conflict (Allport, 1954/1979, p. 42), IW is positioned to exploit the role digital and social media play in fostering/reinforcing partisan views to accentuate *perceived* incompatibility. Studies have already found consumers of partisan news "tend to express less accurate beliefs about a host of politically charged topics" (Garrett, Long, & Jeong, 2019, p. 490). Given digital and social media lack the restraints found in traditional media outlets (Cronin & Crawford, 1999, pp. 260, 492), external actors are readily able to interject dis/misinformation or masquerade as members of the targeted society to push these trends further, manipulating the propensity to seek out validating information and the ability to quickly circulate information throughout online identity bubbles to influence intergroup perceptions.

As perceived estrangement and incompatibility grows, the subnational other progressively appears "undomesticated" (Skey, 2010, p. 729), as transgressing social convention and championing a radicalism that transforms them from "normal political adversar[ies]" into an "existential threat" (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 19). This can degrade into "mass hysteria" (Umbrasas, 2018)—periods when distorted perceptions of "social, cultural, or political issues" take hold, sparking anxiety. Instead of a "taken-for-granted" national identity (Skey, 2010, p. 716), individuals thus face intense competition for ownership over defining national subjectivity, particularly as subgroups strives to maintain positive self-images (Chernobrov, 2016). Accordingly, such rifts generate a breakdown in social interaction (Mitzen, 2006, p. 348) and disrupt daily life, making it difficult to sustain a sense of constancy in one's "social and material environment"—of being "at home" (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 747). Individuals are thus faced with a "fateful moment"—"phases at which things are wrenched out of joint" and consequential decisions must be made (Giddens, 1991, pp. 113–114). As individuals seek to grapple with this challenge, they are simultaneously confronted with reduced cognitive certainty—the result of IW helping establish and then broadcasting the existence of alternative "perceptions of reality" (Umbrasas, 2018), making knowledge appear increasingly contingent. Through these processes, IW comes to challenge OS on two fronts. First, by undermining a stable metanarrative and sense of home, IW destabilizes individuals' biographical narratives. Second, by polarizing debates and augmenting perceived incompatibilities to the point former compatriots appear "undomesticated," IW subverts existing frameworks for managing anxiety around existential questions: eroding certainty over where threats reside (existence), undermining the stability of established belief systems (meaninglessness), and curbing positive subgroup recognition (condemnation). This results in heightened anxiety and an existential crisis as "the 'business as usual' attitude" critical to OS is eroded (Giddens, 1991, p. 114).

Overall, the digitalization of society has raised the prospect for actors to target the endogenous sources of OS. Increasingly, this means all information is now strategic; for example, acquiring/stealing troves of digital data, personal and corporate, facilitates machine learning and refines algorisms to allow for more efficient messaging in IW (Rosenbach & Mansted, 2019, pp. 5–6). Russia has actively recognized and sought to capitalize on these changes (Gerasimov, 2016, p. 24), investing into "enabling factors to adapt the principles of subversion to the internet age" (Abrams, 2016, pp. 19–20; Giles, 2016a, pp. 27, 36)—tactics increasingly employed by other actors (Robinson et al., 2018). Fusing IW and OS helps to better conceptualize such efforts. Specifically, the next section further develops how actors target the endogenous sources of OS to influence policy or foster ontological *insecurity* with reference to various Russian IW operations.

Targeting OS: From Policy Change to Ontological *Insecurity*

The "strategic openings" afforded by debates around national narrative emerge to varying degrees. They can be generated in response to specific events and policy decisions or new experiences that must be addressed and taken into account as part of the consistent unfolding of Self (Berenskoetter, 2014). As seen above, actors can employ IW to influence the course and scope of these debates. While not mutually exclusive, and often employing similar tactics, we can view two different end goals. The first is similar to the Russian objectives of permissive environments or reflexive control and involves perverting the information landscape to shape how states perceive and link policy options to Self-conceptualizations, influencing what is seen as shameful. The second involves polarizing internal debates to undermine the perceived stability of the national metanarrative, erode a sense of home, and amplify domestic challenges to the positive identity of subgroups. Here the result is a growing sense of existential crisis and heightened anxiety as the foundations of OS are eroded, a sentiment that helps account for Russia's interference into the 2016 U.S. elections.

Manipulating Self-Conceptualizations

States discuss "who they are in order to determine what to do" when faced with foreign-policy decisions (Steele, 2005, p. 537), with actions deemed incongruent with this conceptualization seen as shameful. Such debates raise the prospect for external interference. Here, rather than rely on overt mechanisms (persuasion, reflexive discourse, or representational force), IW can masquerade the role of external actors by covertly distorting the information landscape. Specifically, IW can orchestrate perceptions of: a discontent between policy and subjectivity (generating shame and an impetus for policy adjustment); of certain policy options being contradictory to the Self (and thus undesirable); or of otherwise questionable events as more in line with a state's sense of Self (and thus more palatable). By exploiting how technology makes disseminating information easier and able to remain "slightly 'ahead' of a power attempting to classify and regiment it" (Steele, 2012, p. 52), IW thus manipulates the desire for OS by influencing the perceived relationship between policies/events and national narrative. This provides a new perspective through which to explain permissive environments and reflexive control while also helping synthesize the technical and emotional components of IW. For example, information acquired through cyber espionage, coupled with dis/misinformation and images (be they real, misleading, or doctored), can be disseminated throughout a target audience to influence perceptions between national narratives and specific policies or events. Bots and trolls can then amplify the reporting of this information, in conjunction with potentially sympathetic segments of the local population, while also helping suppress counterfactuals, perhaps assisted by DDoS attacks.

This can be seen in Russia's use of disinformation to sway the Netherland's 2016 referendum on the EU trade deal with Ukraine. Prior to the election, voters were subjected to stories of Ukrainian soldiers crucifying a child and reports from individuals, purporting to be experts, portraying Ukraine as a "bloodthirsty kleptocracy, unworthy of Dutch support" (Higgins, 2017). The deal was subsequently rejected, and while opposition was partially in protest to EU policies—for example, around immigration—it can also be linked to perceived discrepancies between the Dutch sense of Self and the image of Ukraine painted by IW operations. Relatedly, Russia disseminated propaganda and disinformation through state media and YouTube to distort perceptions of its intervention into Syria as aligning more with U.S. self-conceptualizations (the good fighting ISIS), making an otherwise intolerable action appear more opaque. While quickly debunked by NATO and open source intelligence, Russia maintained claims of combating "terrorists" (Czuperski, Herbst, Higgins, Hof, & Nimmo, 2016, pp. 8–13). Finally, belligerent states can, by asserting control over the information landscape of its operating zones (e.g., electric grid or communication facilities), limit accurate reporting that might contradict its propaganda—a tactic employed by Russia in Crimea (Giles, 2016b, p. 50). This makes it harder for others to discuss what an event actually means to their sense of Self, impeding coherent responses.

Therefore, because perceptions of how events are juxtaposed to Self-conceptualizations have profound implications for policy by influencing what is viewed as more/less shameful, states have a strong incentive to ensure their preferred interpretation wins the day, with IW providing a useful tool. Such a view can still account for efforts to erode/build support for an ongoing war effort, the focus of current U.S. IW and Russian "information-technology warfare." However, as shown, it also becomes possible to account for a wider range of issue areas as well as the process through which IW successfully gains influence.

Fostering Ontological Insecurity

In addition to debates over specific events, states are exposed to new experiences that must be discussed in regards to national narrative. For Smith (1999, pp. 83–84), national myths emerge into "political daylight" during periods of accelerated social and economic change, incipient secularization, and prolonged warfare, with political cleavages often championing competing positions. By engendering particularly divisive debates to take a dominant position, or enflaming them further, IW can target the bonds of society. This offers an important new optic through which to examine Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. election.

As noted above, cyberspace allows societal debates to become more volatile (augmenting partisan social identities) and susceptible to external influence. This is particularly true in the United States, where the Internet and social media's increasing prevalence in political discourse and news (Pew Research Center, 2016), coupled with the ideological segregation of social media users (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015), inflates perceived discrepancies between national subgroups. Consequently, while American's generally hold "more common ground than the daily fights on social media might suggest" (Mounk, 2018), ideological cleavages hold increasingly radical perceptions of one another (Mason, 2013), particularly by more avid news consumers (Pew Research Center, 2019b; Yudkin, Hawkins, & Dixon, 2019). However, even less enthusiastic news watchers are increasingly exposed to partisan stories shared by politically active members of their online networks (Lelkes, Sood, & Iyengar, 2017, pp. 5–6), while the impetus for democratic media outlets to provide the full spectrum of views further enables the coverage these radicalized positions enjoy (Giles et al., 2015, pp. 47–48). Therefore, the prevalence of cyberspace in framing *perceptions* of difference and incompatibility afforded Russia a strategic opening to undermine the endogenous sources of OS.

By "leveraging vulnerabilities in [the U.S.] information ecosystem" (DiResta et al., 2018, p. 99), interjecting dis/misinformation (partially attained through cyberattacks), and fake news stories that a majority of those exposed to believed true at the time (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016), Russia stimulated radicalized discourse within the echo chambers of social media. This reinforced misperceptions and tribalism and engendered each side to endorse more extreme positions of their own. For example, Trolls on Twitter galvanized support for increasingly radical positions on divisive issues such as immigration, racism, Black Lives Matter, media bias, religion, and gender (Roeder, 2018). They then responded to unfolding events within the United States, focusing on certain accounts depending on which members of society they wished to incite (Linvill & Warren, 2020), even going so far as to organize opposing protests at the same location (Howard et al., 2018). Examining Facebook's Ads Manager software, one finds how Russia also grouped Facebook and Instagram users along racial, ethnic, and ideational lines to run targeted campaigns—fusing data analytics with social media operations in a comparable fashion to domestic political campaigns (Rosenbach & Mansted, 2019, p. 6). The aim was to employ messages appealing to subgroups as clickbait, increasing traffic to Russian established pages that would then post content "intended to elicit outrage" (Howard et al., 2018, p. 18). Social media subsequently enabled Russian computational propaganda to become more personalized (Howard et al., 2018, p. 39), allowing Trolls to develop "deeper relationships" with their audience (DiResta et al., 2018, p. 20).

As IW distorts and augments perceptions of polarization, former political/social rivals degenerate into deviant others—advocates of a narrative that is no longer a derivative of, but is antithetical to, the metanarrative. For many, it thus felt America's "taken-for-granted" identity was increasingly being contested (Jones, 2017; Vavreck, 2017) and the "social contracts expected in American society" jeopardized (Umbrasas, 2018), destabilizing feelings of being "at home" (for example, Routledge, 2018) and undermining trust (Pew Research Center, 2019a). When this occurs, individuals might engage in a degree of "homesteading" (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 947), seeking to secure their sense of Self within partisan subgroups—as perhaps indicated by the growing entanglement between party affiliation and Americans' self-identity (Westwood et al., 2018). However, given the proclivity of collectives to try and uphold positive self-images (Chernobrov, 2016, p. 587), anxiety will remain as partisan groups increasingly question each other's "moral legitimacy" (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 19). This also stems from the "undomesticated" other's continued presence within the spatial demarcations of home (Bell, 2003, p. 76); indeed, they might come into political power. Therefore, not only was the national metanarrative unraveling, but specific components of Self-identity (party affiliation) were perceived as under threat. This helps explain both the growing antagonism between American ideological cleavages (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019), including on nonpolitical issues (Pew Research Center, 2019b), and for rising lethal partisanship—wherein harming opponents is rationalized, sympathy decreased, and/or violence supported (Kalmoe & Mason, 2019)—with many worried America is moving closer towards civil war (GU Politics Civility Poll, 2019).

Through this unraveling of communal stability, destabilization of national metanarrative, and augmented hostility towards subnational group affiliations, Russian IW could subvert individuals' biographical narratives and challenge frameworks for dealing with anxiety around existence (blurring compatriot-threat distinctions), meaninglessness (eroding taken-for-granted belief systems), and condemnation (reinforcing nonrecognition between subgroups). For many, this resulted in ontological *insecurity*, as indicated by Americans' growing anxiety. As the American Psychological Association (2017, pp. 1, 5) reports, the 2016 election was "a somewhat or very significant source of stress" for 52% of Americans, with a majority of Republicans and Democrats stressed about future of the nation. Another 59% were stressed by America's "social divisiveness," which they were constantly reminded of by news and social media, while one third of adults reported feelings of anxiety, irritability, and fatigue. Rankin and Sween (2019) reveal anxiety was particularly high for the politically engaged and those who felt the election was "more important." Smith, Hibbing, and Hibbing (2019, pp. 2, 7–8) similarly found America's divisive landscape was negatively impacting the psychological and physical health of those who frequently discussed/were interested in politics and who held "harsher views of their political opposites." Accordingly, while mental health professionals recorded further spikes in Democrats' anxiety following Trump's election, Republicans also cited feeling anger and sadness at the visceral reactions they faced (Gold, 2017). Routledge (2018) subsequently concludes the "weaker sense of belonging" within American society has "increased existential despair" and contributed to rising suicide rates.

Compounding this situation was IW's ability to erode cognitive stability. The decline of mainstream journalism as "an arbiter of 'the truth'" (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 25) has contributed to this problem generally. So has expanded access to the Internet's diverse and fast-paced information arena. While recognition diversity is the result of information's constructed nature helps discredit others' positions, it also means one's cognitive certainty becomes "dislodged by this informational excess" (p. 22). IW provides fodder to accelerate these trends. For example, through coordinated efforts to selectively leak stolen documents to Wikileaks, propagate fake or misleading stories—for example, Clinton's health—and amplify coverage of dis/misinformation through bots and trolls (Timberg, 2016), Russia accentuated perceived differences between the realities of partisan groups and accelerated the prevalence of, and discussion on, "fake news" (Pew Research Center, 2019b), reinforcing information's contingent nature and undermining cognitive certainty.

In addition to eroding OS, such fragmentation and instability has profound implications for the state, which, as the "political guardian" of the national "story-telling community" (Ringmar, 2011, p. 6), must guarantee a degree of certainty and "relatively stable and shared sense of being" (Huysmans, 1998; Marlow, 2002, p. 242). While not the only contributing factor, IW can thus be seen as exacerbating the growing distrust Americans have of each other and the government by fueling perceived discrepancies between the social realities of partisan groups (DiResta et al., 2018, p. 99; Pew Research Center, 2019a). Additional implications stem from the fact that, when faced with ontological *insecurity*, regaining stability becomes prioritized (Mitzen, 2006, p. 348). Yet the need to reduce this stress is only part of the problem; as seen, IW *also* enflames narrative competition. It is not just about regaining stability but, for many, also ensuring one's interpretation wins the day. This duel effect of distraction and competition has profound implications for foreign policy, which can become subservient to, and a victim of, domestic power struggles. For example, Schultz (2018, p. 142) reveals U.S. polarization and partisan jockeying has jeopardized a cogent (and consistent) foreign policy. These rifts might also lead to public calls for such contradictory behavior that policymakers are faced with "ontological dissonance" (Lupovici, 2012)—when conflicting responses emerge to various identity challenges, leading to avoidance. Moreover, by actively providing recognition/support to subnational groups, it becomes possible for actors to cultivate a positive image with segments of the targeted population. Again, elements of this can be viewed within the United States, where party affiliation is increasingly linked to notably divergent threat perceptions (Smeltz, Daalder, Friedhoff, Kafura, & Wojtowicz, 2018). Russia has also simultaneously managed to increase its image amongst Republicans (Matthews, 2018) by supporting many of their narrative claims (Caryl, 2018), with Republicans subsequently holding more docile views of Russia (Smeltz et al., 2018, p. 115).

A number of strategic benefits can therefore be acquired by purposefully undermining the bonds of society and OS. As seen in the case of the 2016 election, Russia managed to facilitate an increasingly divided and distracted U.S. population whose focus on debates over the essence of the nation has come at the expense of a cogent foreign policy. While not responsible for creating such divisions, Russia nevertheless utilized IW to manipulate these divisions towards its own ends.

Conclusion

Our view of how states interact and compete is expanded when we combine IW with OS. Much as with any other interest (e.g., physical or economic security), the desire for OS can be manipulated and undermined. Facets of IW can thus be viewed as part of a spectrum of tactics used to target the endogenous sources of OS. While representational force and counterpower both target subjectivity, their applicability is limited, either to when a victim's subjectivity depends upon its relationship with the speaker or to large egoistical states, respectively. Moreover, their overt nature means the speaker is exposed to backlash, potentially diluting the impact external actors have. Given these limitations, actors have impetus to pursue IW. By covertly perverting the information landscape, IW can manipulate domestic efforts at relating events or policies to national narrative, making certain options appear more/less shameful. Actors might also polarize debates between subgroups in an effort to undermine the perceived stability of the national narrative, erode a sense of home, and increase challenges to the positive recognition of subgroups. As seen during the 2016 U.S. election, Russia was able to exploit technological advances to exacerbate and polarize debates and foster misperceptions between ideological cleavages, eroding the foundations of OS and generating anxiety. The result was a divided American populace preoccupied with regaining stability and the preservation of specific interpretations of the meta-national narrative.

While this article examined how IW exploited widespread contestation within the United States, future research might explore how IW can bring more latent debates to the fore. For example, James Sherr notes how, prior to Russian meddling, conflict within Ukraine around "ethnic, confessional and linguistic lines" or the perception of Ukraine as European remained largely on the periphery. Most Ukrainians could "[distinguish] between linguistic and state identity or between ethnic origin and 'belonging' (nalezhnist')." It was Moscow that endeavored to stimulate these divisions into salient issues (Giles et al., 2015, pp. 23, 26), "weakening social cohesion" (Umbrasas, 2018). Such efforts could be aided by growing access to vast databases of personal information, for example, those held by Facebook and Google. As MADCOMs, "the integration of AI systems into machine-driven communications tools," are enhanced (Chessen, 2017, p. 2), the ability to mine this information will become increasingly applicable to helping incite societal divisions. Concurrently, as AI plays greater roles in selecting/promoting user content, it will become possible to secretly influence their decision-making algorithms by distorting the information they use, altering viewer consumption (Rosenbach & Mansted, 2019, p. 11). This all raises the prospect for widespread microtargeting and manipulated-information exposure, increasing the susceptibility of societies to IW. Research might then also examine how acquiring access to, and controlling, this information will become of growing importance to struggles over subjectivity.

Finally, this article built from the discussions of "targeting society" found in Russian IW and U.S. political warfare to examine how IW could target OS. In line with political warfare's broader focus, future research should examine additional mechanisms through which this might be pursued—for example, funding/publishing historical works (e.g., Berzina, 2018, p. 167; Giles, 2016a, p. 34), establishing museums (Gustafsson, 2014), or through cultural sites/diplomacy (Clarke, Cento Bull, & Deganutti, 2017). All of this will help further reveal how, as Matterm claimed, soft power is often not soft. Instead, it is often bound up with how actors support/undermine each other's OS.

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