Russian and U.S. News Media Coverage of Ukrainian Biological Laboratories, February – March 2022

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Abstract
Soon after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, narratives about U.S.-funded biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine began circulating in both Russian and U.S. news. We sought to characterize news media coverage of this topic and to understand potential differences in coverage between different news sources. 401 news media items from Russian and U.S. news sources covering Ukrainian biological laboratories between February 24 and March 24, 2022 were analyzed for content and framing tactics based on theories of risk perception, persuasion, and misinformation/disinformation. Results showed strong differences between U.S. mainstream news coverage and Russian news coverage and similarities between U.S. hyper-partisan right (HPR) news coverage and Russian news coverage. Differences between U.S. HPR and Russian coverage of the topic were also found. Findings indicate that the U.S. HPR media ecosystem serves as an important amplifier of Russian strategic narratives about U.S. cooperative biological research. Moreover, findings suggest that U.S. HPR news sources have become sophisticated purveyors of false information, capable of applying the Russian “firehose of falsehoods” model more forcefully than Russians themselves.

Acknowledgements
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Introduction

The information environment has emerged as an important front in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, with both sides of the conflict engaged in efforts to promote narratives that best suit their military and geopolitical objectives. These so-called strategic narratives, or “means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors,” can play a critical role in armed conflict. However, such narratives can also have more far-reaching implications for global security. The Russian Federation, for example, has recently sought to propagate the narrative that the United States is operating clandestine offensive biological weapons research facilities in Ukraine. Such allegations are dangerous given their potential to undermine the Biological Weapons Convention, subvert peaceful cooperative biological research, and erode trust in the U.S. government and its intentions.

Russian narratives about allegedly nefarious scientific activities are not new. During the Soviet period, an antisemitic campaign and conspiracy theory, the “Doctors’ Plot,” accused prominent physicians of participating in a Western or Zionist plot to kill Soviet leaders. Later, Soviet officials, together with their East German allies, promoted a narrative about U.S. biological weapons development through a disinformation campaign. This campaign, known as Operation Denver, accused the United States of manufacturing human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) at Fort Detrick (a U.S. Army research laboratory) as part of an offensive biological weapons program. The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought about a brief respite from such allegations, but they reemerged under Boris Yeltsin and subsequently Vladimir Putin. Since then, Russian allegations have focused on the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program, a U.S. Department of Defense initiative that assisted countries of the former Soviet Union in diverting their nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons facilities to peaceful purposes. The U.S. CTR program has evolved since its initial conception, with the biological arm of the program now focused on enhancing research and diagnostic capacity as well as improving biosafety and biosecurity in laboratories across the globe. Despite the peaceful nature of the program, however, laboratories in participating CTR countries seem to have assumed the role of Fort Detrick in Russian political discourse, as Kremlin representatives have repeatedly accused the
United States of using them to create biological weapons, with their most recent accusations directed at laboratories in Ukraine.9

Though Russian scientific conspiracy narratives have existed for decades, the environment in which such narratives spread has changed dramatically. Technological advances and the rise of social media have created an online environment in which false information can spread faster than true information.10 Moreover, the combination of social media algorithms and individual psychological tendencies (such as confirmation bias) has fostered the emergence of echo chambers, or digital spaces in which individuals are selectively exposed to content that aligns with their pre-established beliefs.11 In addition to contributing to the rapid spread of false information, these echo chambers also likely facilitate discord by creating isolated, hyperpolarized groups of individuals.12

The Russian government has taken advantage of the opportunity provided by the digitalization of communication, using social media trolls and state-owned media companies to propagate falsehoods and sow discord.13 Russian state-owned media companies in particular have wide digital reach and have been implicated in numerous state-sponsored information campaigns, including those accusing the United States of conducting offensive biological weapons research.14 It is important to note, however, that far-right media outlets in the United States have also contributed heavily to the dissemination and amplification of the biological weapons narrative, particularly in the context of the current conflict in Ukraine.15

Past research has investigated parallels between narratives propagated by the Russian government and those propagated by right-wing media in the United States.16 However, these analyses have not included discussion of the biological weapons narrative—a narrative which, if believed and propagated, could damage trust in the U.S. government, undermine cooperative biological research, and contribute to domestic and international conflict. Given that news media framing may affect public opinion, it is critical to understand how Ukrainian biological laboratories are covered in U.S. news and the extent to which such coverage aligns with a Russian strategic narrative.17 The aim of this paper is to fill this gap in the literature by providing a systematic characterization and comparison of the content and framing of the Ukrainian laboratories in U.S. and Russian news.
Methods

Search Strategy

The research team used purposeful sampling to collect news items from sources that varied by location, audience, and political bias. Given limited overall coverage in the United States, the research team sought to examine several U.S. news source types.

- Russian sources: The research team chose four online Russian news sources, Ria Novosti, Lenta, TASS, and RT, based on popularity, reach, and accessibility. These sources include the second and third most popular Russian news sources, the largest state-owned news agency, and one of the most prominent Russian news sources catered to English speakers. The research team collected Russian articles from the news websites themselves and saved copies in both Russian and English (using an automatic translation service).

- U.S. newspapers: The research team searched for articles from the top five U.S. newspapers with national audiences and the top five domestic newspapers from each U.S. census region to obtain a broad sample of domestic newspaper coverage of the Ukrainian biological laboratories. Newspaper rankings were based on circulation numbers. Most newspapers were searchable via the online database Newsbank; those that were not available through Newsbank were searched manually via their websites.

- U.S. blogs: The research team selected six U.S. blogs based on website traffic and variation in political perspectives, including three left-leaning blogs (Huffington Post, Foreign Policy, and Talking Points Memo) and three conservative blogs (InfoWars, The Gateway Pundit, and HotAir).

- U.S. cable news: The research team used lists of top cable news shows in Q1 2022 to identify the top 25 news sources. Most of these shows provided transcripts on the site Newsbank. Of the shows with available transcripts, the following covered the biological laboratories topic and were therefore included in the sample: The Five, Tucker Carlson Tonight, Hannity, Special Report with Brett Beier, The Ingrahm Angle, Greg Gutfeld Show, Your World with Neil Cavuto, and Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell. The research team reviewed transcripts from The Rachel Maddow Show.
but did not find content related to the Ukrainian biological laboratories.

- U.S. Podcasts: The research team collected transcripts (or created them using an automatic transcription service) from several podcasts including: NPR’s Morning Edition, All Things Considered, Fresh Air, NPR State of Ukraine, NPR Politics Podcast, The Charlie Kirk Show, and Bannon’s War Room. The research team chose these podcasts because they reflect different political views and have large audiences based on Nielsen and Apple podcast ratings.

The research team collected news items during May 2022. Five researchers used the search terms bio*, lab*, and Ukrain* to find articles published in English between February 24, 2022, and March 24, 2022. The researcher with Russian language proficiency ran a similar search in Russian, using equivalent key terms and the truncation necessary to capture different grammatical version of those terms. The research team chose the starting date because February 24, 2022 was the first instance in which U.S. media covered the biological laboratories in Ukraine. Coverage of Ukrainian biological laboratories in U.S. media was limited after the selected month. The research team searched each source systematically, with many yielding no results.

Instrument Development

The research team developed a coding instrument based on a review of existing literature on risk perception, persuasion, and misinformation and disinformation, including Russian disinformation. General codes included: Date published, country of origin, type of medium, and news source bias (hyper-partisan right, right-leaning, balanced/middle, left-leaning, and hyper-partisan left). News source bias was determined using Ad Fontes news media bias resources. Content and framing codes included: Citing authoritative sources (referencing remarks or documents from individuals in positions of authority), listing a risk perception increasing factor, amplifying existing grievances or narratives, discrediting ideological opponents, framing the biological laboratories as justification for the invasion of Ukraine, framing specific (U.S. or Russian) governments as untrustworthy, and framing the Ukrainian biological laboratories as a risk to Russia.
The research team used a series of codes to identify if the article or transcript framed the biological weapons laboratory narrative as true, framed it as possible, or framed it as false. The research team also used codes to characterize the coverage of biological research activities in Ukraine, including whether the news item framed such activities positively or negatively, whether the item included statements calling for the investigation or cessation of U.S.-funded biological research in Ukraine, and whether the item included any specific mention of U.S.-funded laboratory programs or pathogen-specific research. The research team also used codes to identify news items that labelled the biological weapons laboratory narrative as disinformation, framed the allegations as a narrative effort of U.S. right-wing media, or described the history of Russian disinformation efforts. Researchers included an open-ended code for additional narratives related to the Ukrainian biological laboratories. Finally, the research team included a code to identify news items with contradictory statements. The three researchers who conducted data coding piloted this instrument on 30 articles and adjusted the instrument based on piloting results. The articles used for piloting were drawn from the same sources as the articles in the final sample, using the same search terms, but were published after the cut-off date.

**Coding and Analysis**

The research team conducted data coding and analysis between June and September 2022. Two researchers coded each article and discussed any disagreements to ensure consistent interpretation of messages. The team coded all Russian articles in English using translations conducted with Microsoft Office. A fluent Russian speaker on the research team provided translation assistance as needed. The team excluded articles if they did not contain content related to the Ukrainian biological laboratories. Following data collection and coding, the research team used STATA 17 to obtain descriptive and inferential statistics, using Pearson’s chi square test to assess differences in content and framing between different news sources when the sample size was large and Fisher’s exact test when the expected frequency in any cell was less than 5.
Results

Using the sampling methodology described above, the research team identified an initial 457 news items. The team excluded 56 items after review determined that they did not contain content related to the Ukrainian biological laboratories, they were duplicates, or their content could not be assessed. The final analytic sample consisted of 401 news pieces. Of these news pieces, 290 (72 percent) were from Russian sources and 111 (28 percent) were from U.S. sources. Of the U.S. news items, 16 were from podcasts (14 percent), 45 from blogs (41 percent), 21 from cable news shows (19 percent), and 29 from newspapers (26 percent). Over one third (41 percent) of U.S. news items were from sources categorized as hyper-partisan right (HPR), 12 percent from sources categorized as right-leaning, 16 percent from sources categorized as balanced or middle, and 31 percent from sources categorized as left-leaning. Only 1 news item was from a source categorized as hyper-partisan left.

The four Russian sources produced 160 percent more individual pieces of biolaboratory-related content than U.S. sources during the month-long sample (Figure 1), even though the research team searched more U.S. news media sources than Russian news media sources. Four percent of U.S. coverage occurred between February 24 and March 5, followed by a rapid increase in Russian coverage (Figures 1 and 2). The most active three-day span of coverage for both countries was March 9 (the day of the Mariupol maternity hospital attack) – March 11. This period accounted for 49 percent and 37 percent of U.S. and Russian coverage, respectively. Coverage slowly tapered in the United States following this spike and remained steady in Russia. During the final three days of the sample, Russian sources continued to provide frequent coverage of the bioweapons narrative (17 percent of news items), while U.S. sources continued to reduce coverage (9 percent of total news items).
Figure 1: News Items Covering Ukrainian Biological Laboratories by Country, February – March 2022

- Feb 24: Russia begins invasion of Ukraine
- Mar 6: Russia nears Kyiv, Irpin bridge evacuation
- Mar 9: Mariupol maternity hospital attack
- Mar 16: Mariupol theater bombing

Figure 2: U.S. News Items Covering Ukrainian Biological Laboratories by Media Type, February – March 2022

Source: Authors.
The content and framing of the Ukrainian biological laboratories topic in Russian and U.S. news items differed significantly (Table 1). However, U.S. news sources were not homogenous, and news items from U.S. HPR sources had distinct differences from news items from other U.S. sources (Table 1). HPR sources were the only U.S. news source that framed the biological weapons laboratory narrative as true or possible (37 percent and 54 percent of all HPR articles, respectively). Compared to U.S. HPR-sourced news items, news items from U.S. non-HPR sources were significantly more likely to frame the Russian government as untrustworthy (55 percent versus 20 percent; p < 0.01). Table follows on next page.
Table 1: Comparison of the Content and Framing of News Items from Russian, U.S., U.S. Non-HPR, and U.S. HPR Sources

* indicates p < 0.05; ** indicates p < 0.01. Source: Authors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Type</th>
<th>Russian Media n (%)</th>
<th>U.S. Media n (%)</th>
<th>Russian versus U.S. p-value</th>
<th>U.S. HPR n (%)</th>
<th>Russian versus U.S. HPR p-value</th>
<th>U.S. Non-HPR n (%)</th>
<th>Russian versus U.S. Non-HPR p-value</th>
<th>U.S. HPR versus Non-HPR p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cites Authoritative Source</td>
<td>277 (95.5%)</td>
<td>89 (80.2%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>42 (91.3%)</td>
<td>0.226</td>
<td>47 (72.3%)</td>
<td>0.013*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Perception Increasing Factor</td>
<td>149 (51.4%)</td>
<td>31 (27.9%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>27 (58.7%)</td>
<td>0.356</td>
<td>4 (6.5%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amplifies Preexisting Grievances or Narratives</td>
<td>99 (34.1%)</td>
<td>20 (18%)</td>
<td>0.002**</td>
<td>18 (39.1%)</td>
<td>0.509</td>
<td>2 (3.1%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efforts to Discredit Opponents</td>
<td>243 (83.8%)</td>
<td>38 (34.2%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>38 (34.2%)</td>
<td>0.840</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification for Invasion</td>
<td>9 (3.1%)</td>
<td>5 (4.5%)</td>
<td>0.494</td>
<td>5 (10.9%)</td>
<td>0.014*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.007**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk to Russia</td>
<td>71 (24.5%)</td>
<td>13 (11.2%)</td>
<td>0.005**</td>
<td>12 (26.1%)</td>
<td>0.815</td>
<td>1 (1.5%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frames U.S. Gov as Untrustworthy</td>
<td>93 (32.1%)</td>
<td>26 (23.4%)</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>25 (54.4%)</td>
<td>0.003**</td>
<td>1 (1.5%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frames Russian Gov as Untrustworthy</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td>45 (40.5%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>9 (19.6%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>36 (55.4%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biolabs Narrative True</td>
<td>217 (74.8%)</td>
<td>17 (15.3%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>17 (37.0%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biolabs Narrative Possible</td>
<td>57 (19.7%)</td>
<td>25 (22.5%)</td>
<td>0.524</td>
<td>25 (54.4%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biolabs Narrative False</td>
<td>21 (7.2%)</td>
<td>74 (66.7%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>9 (19.6%)</td>
<td>0.006**</td>
<td>65 (100%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labels Narrative Disinformation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>61 (54.9%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>5 (10.9%)</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>56 (86.2%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentions Russian Disinformation History</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23 (20.7%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>1 (2.7%)</td>
<td>0.508</td>
<td>22 (33.9%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frames as Right-Wing</td>
<td>1 (0.3%)</td>
<td>24 (21.6%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.690</td>
<td>24 (4.8%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lists known U.S.-Funded Laboratory Research Program</td>
<td>62 (21.4%)</td>
<td>39 (35.1%)</td>
<td>0.005**</td>
<td>20 (43.5%)</td>
<td>0.001**</td>
<td>19 (29.2%)</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frames Research Positively</td>
<td>8 (2.8%)</td>
<td>24 (21.6%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>4 (8.7%)</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>20 (30.8%)</td>
<td>0.005**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frames Research Negatively</td>
<td>252 (86.9%)</td>
<td>36 (32.4%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>36 (78.3%)</td>
<td>0.120</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lists Biological Agent(s)</td>
<td>138 (47.6%)</td>
<td>23 (20.7%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>17 (37.0%)</td>
<td>0.179</td>
<td>6 (9.2%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls to Investigate or Stop Laboratory Research</td>
<td>39 (13.4%)</td>
<td>4 (3.6%)</td>
<td>0.004**</td>
<td>4 (8.7%)</td>
<td>0.370</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.015*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Narrative</td>
<td>117 (40.3%)</td>
<td>23 (20.7%)</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>23 (50.0%)</td>
<td>0.271</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradictory Statement(s)</td>
<td>19 (6.6%)</td>
<td>7 (6.3%)</td>
<td>0.929</td>
<td>7 (15.2%)</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.001**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There were notable similarities between items published by U.S. HPR news sources and those published by Russian news sources. Both U.S. HPR (37 percent true, 54 percent possible) and Russian (75 percent true, 20 percent possible) news items frequently included claims that the bioweapons laboratory narrative was true or possible. A large percentage of both U.S. HPR (78 percent) and Russian (87 percent) news pieces framed U.S.-funded biological laboratory research in Ukraine negatively. U.S. HPR news sources and Russian news sources also frequently used risk perception-increasing language when describing the biological laboratories in Ukraine (59 percent and 51 percent) and referenced authoritative sources of information (91 percent and 96 percent). U.S. HPR news sources and Russian news sources (39 percent and 34 percent) also often sought to leverage pre-existing narratives such as Nazism, NATO aggression, and ethnic conflict.

U.S. HPR news pieces also differed from Russian news pieces in several ways. When comparing U.S. HPR items with Russian articles, U.S. HPR items were more likely to include contradictory statements about the biological weapons laboratory narrative (15 percent versus 7 percent; p < 0.05) and to describe known U.S. biological research programs (44 percent versus 21 percent; p < 0.01). Although both U.S. HPR and Russian news items frequently labeled the biological weapons narrative as true or possible, U.S. HPR news items more often labeled it as possible (54 percent versus 20 percent; p < 0.01). Notably, U.S. HPR news items were more likely than Russian items to frame the U.S. government as untrustworthy (54 percent versus 32 percent; p < 0.01), to frame the Russian government as untrustworthy (20 percent versus 1 percent; p < 0.01), and to cite the alleged biological weapons laboratories as justification for the Russian invasion of Ukraine (11 percent versus 3 percent; p < 0.05).

Most articles describing the Ukrainian biological weapons laboratory narrative as true used one of the following tactics: Risk perception increasing messaging (60 percent), amplification of existing grievances (35 percent), efforts to discredit opponents (90 percent), and citing authoritative sources (97 percent). In 22 percent of U.S. items, news sources described the narrative as both false and as a conservative talking point.
Specific additional narratives (Table 2), such as the possibility that biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine were working on SARS-CoV-2, that biological weapons were being created in those laboratories to target specific ethnic groups, that migratory birds could be used as a biological weapons delivery mechanism, and that Joe or Hunter Biden were involved with the Ukrainian biological laboratories were identified in 140 news pieces (35 percent). These narratives were found only in Russian and U.S. HPR news items. Fifty percent of U.S. HPR articles and 40 percent of Russian articles mentioned one of these narratives. In 22 (5 percent) news items, more than one additional narrative was identified.

Table 2: Most Prevalent Additional Narratives in News Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Prevalent Additional Narratives</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainian labs were working on SARS-CoV-2 (often insinuating lab release)</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States posed a risk to countries other than Russia or the entire world</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainian labs were responsible for previous outbreaks in animals or people in Eastern Europe</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter Biden has monetary ties to the laboratories in Ukraine</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors.

Discussion

Given its potential to justify the invasion of Ukraine, stir up animosity and mistrust towards U.S. officials, and distract from Russian atrocities, the Russian government has a vested interest in ensuring the American public is exposed to—and persuaded by—its narrative about biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. Russian state-owned media companies appear to have timed their coverage of the laboratories strategically to do just that. Coverage ramped up immediately following the Irpin bridge evacuation and the Mariupol maternity hospital attack—two events that the U.S. press covered extensively and that highlighted Russian brutality. However, narratives promoted by Russian state-owned media companies alone may not be sufficiently potent to influence U.S. public opinion. It has been argued that “for Russians to be influential, their efforts must flow through the media ecosystem Americans inhabit. It is there that stories flourish or falter.”22 The similarities (in both content and tactics) between news items from U.S. HPR sources and those from Russian sources indicate that the Russian biological weapons narrative successfully infiltrated the U.S. HPR media ecosystem, allowing the Russian government to more effectively exert soft power.
Of course, this is not the first time that U.S. HPR or right-wing news sources have picked up and amplified Russian narratives. Such narratives flourish in the U.S. right-wing media ecosystem because there is ideological alignment between far-right groups in the West and the Russian regime. However, the biological weapons narrative may have unique consequences that have not yet been considered by U.S. policy makers. One potential consequence is reduced support for U.S. cooperative biological research activities like the CTR program and related efforts to enhance partner countries’ capacity to prepare for and respond to infectious disease threats. Given that pathogens can easily cross international borders, these activities not only protect the countries in which the laboratories are situated, but also the broader international community. Moreover, the Russian biological weapons narrative could further erode trust in U.S. government entities, particularly those involved in biological or public health research. As the COVID-19 pandemic has made clear, mistrust of scientific and health authorities can seriously undermine public health emergency response efforts. Internationally, such narratives may also influence global norms against research and use of biological weapons.

The potential consequences described above are contingent upon whether individuals actually believe the biological weapons narrative. A recent survey of 1500 U.S. adult citizens may shed some light on this question. When presented with a statement that the United States “has been developing bioweapons in biolabs throughout Ukraine,” over a quarter of respondents in the survey indicated that the statement was either definitely true or probably true. An even larger percentage (29 percent) indicated that they were unsure of the statement’s veracity. Although the study was small and observational, limiting conclusions about causal connections between exposure to the Russian narrative and personal beliefs, such findings suggest that many Americans are, at the least, dubious of the U.S. government’s intentions regarding the biolaboratories in Ukraine.

It is also important to note the differences between news pieces published by U.S. HPR sources and those published by Russian sources. U.S. HPR news pieces were more likely than Russian news pieces to frame the U.S. government as untrustworthy. However, U.S. HPR news pieces were also
more likely to frame the Russian government as untrustworthy. In addition, U.S. HPR news pieces were more likely than Russian news pieces to contain contradictory statements. The Russian approach to propaganda has previously been described as a “firehose of falsehood,” or a strategy in which the information environment is flooded with misleading and often contradictory claims designed to confuse the public. In this sample of news media, however, U.S. HPR news items seemed to reflect the firehose of falsehood model more closely than Russian news items. Indeed, while most of the Russian articles framed the biological weapons narrative as true, over half of the U.S. HPR items framed it as possible, leaving significantly more room for confusion and doubt. This finding suggests that U.S. HPR news agencies may be capable of employing Russian manipulation tactics more intensely than Russians themselves.

The use of Russian manipulation tactics in the U.S. HPR news environment to propagate pro-Russian biological weapons narratives is concerning. However, numerous organizations, institutions, and individuals have been working to develop interventions to counter manipulation campaigns and manage the spread of false or misleading information. One approach that has been found to be particularly effective in experimental studies is prebunking, which involves pre-emptively exposing individuals to false information or manipulation techniques in order to bolster their resistance to future attempts at deception. Given that Russian, and formerly Soviet, officials have been propagating false information about U.S. biological weapons development for decades, it may be possible to anticipate and prebunk future Russian biological weapons narratives as well the inevitable amplification of such narratives by U.S. HPR media outlets. Characterizations of such narrative efforts, such as that provided in this article, may be a useful first step towards developing effective prebunking materials.

In addition to prebunking, debunking (refutation of false information that is already circulating) has also shown promise as a strategy for combatting false information. U.S. non-HPR news sources, which are already publishing more factual information about U.S.-funded biological laboratories in Ukraine than Russian or U.S. HPR news sources, may serve as key partners in future debunking efforts. However, they may have to substantially ramp up coverage to compete with Russian and U.S. HPR outlets and may not reach the same audiences. It is also important to note
that while U.S. news coverage of the Ukrainian biolaboratories slowed after the month-long sample period, conspiracy theories about the laboratories continue to circulate on social media. Prebunking and debunking efforts will need to take place on both mainstream and alternative news platforms, including social media sites.

Limitations

This research is not without limitations. Although the research team developed extensive search protocols, information about Ukrainian biological laboratories may have circulated through other information channels that were not captured by the search strategy (such as social media or closed communication networks). Moreover, while the researchers double coded all news items to ensure accuracy, they may have interpreted statements in news items differently or with different context than either U.S. HPR or Russian audiences may have. Finally, although the research team was careful to evaluate topics using an approach that could apply broadly to different types of narratives, many codes were focused largely on biological laboratories and may not be generalizable to other narratives.

Conclusion

This analysis revealed similarities in the coverage of Ukrainian biological laboratories in Russian and U.S. HPR news items, suggesting that the U.S. HPR media ecosystem serves as an important amplifier of Russian strategic narratives about U.S.-funded cooperative biological research. However, there were also differences in how U.S. HPR and Russian sources framed the topic. U.S. HPR items contained more contradictory statements and were more likely than Russian news items to frame the narrative about biological weapons laboratories as possible. In this way, U.S. HPR news sources demonstrated the ability to apply the Russian firehose of falsehood model more forcefully than Russians themselves. Such findings indicate that U.S. HPR news sources have become sophisticated purveyors of false information. Policy makers and communicators should consider tailored interventions (such as prebunking and debunking) to address the spread of false information about biological laboratories on both Russian and U.S. HPR news platforms.
Endnotes


28 Leitenberg, “False Allegations of Biological-Weapons Use from Putin’s Russia.”


31 Paul and Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model.”