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SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS RESPONDING TO THE INVASION OF UKRAINE

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Disastrous events, such as wars and catastrophes, have been theorised as 'focusing events' that can bring about abrupt changes in policies and institutional arrangements (Birkland 1998; Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006). These events can generate new conceptions and actions or, alternatively, reinforce the prevailing politics and structures of power (Lukes 2006). Russia's invasion of Ukraine seized political and media attention, raising urgent public discussions about the responses and responsibilities of different actors in Europe. This question of responsibility also concerns the role of social media platforms, which wield notable power in shaping political and civic processes today. However, as multinational private companies, they are principally driven by commercial interests, not by public good (Gillespie 2018; Helberger et al. 2018).

Digital platforms have played an important role in global crises, conflicts and war in the twenty-first century. Humanitarian organisations, activists and ordinary people have used them to document human rights violations, appeal to the international community for solidarity and organise relief efforts (Pantti et al. 2012). Although digital platforms offer an immense amount of information about wars, they are also used by various participants in conflicts to muster support or discredit the opposing side. Today, platforms have come under growing global criticism for not being able to prevent the spread of harmful content,

as recently seen in the criticism of their failure to control hate and extreme speech in countries such as Myanmar and Ethiopia (Pohjonen 2019; Sablosky 2021; Udupa, Gagliardone and Hervik 2021).

In times of conflict, digital platforms become the tools for information warfare, which is understood here as the use of communication and information technology to achieve influence in digital information space, often through 'particularly unethical forms of communication' (Szostek 2020: 2740), such as disinformation, fake accounts, propaganda, cyberattacks and hacking. During conflicts and war, information warfare intensifies with magnified propaganda and disinformation campaigns for national and international audiences. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, disinformation channels and users known to spread disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic pivoted towards supporting pro-Russian disinformation (EDMO 2022).

In the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, digital platforms have taken a wide array of steps to counter disinformation, predominantly by blocking Russian state-affiliated media locally or globally (HRW 2022). These actions are not unseen in previous conflicts and wars, but their scale and consistency have been unprecedented. Historically, digital platforms have tried to balance the conflicting demands of governments and civil society groups to moderate and remove illicit content by positioning themselves as neutral intermediaries who are not legally liable or socially responsible for the published content (Gillespie 2010; Napoli and Caplan 2017). Platforms have also previously been seen supporting the foreign policy interests of the United States (US) and the European Union (EU). For instance, during the various 'social media revolutions' (Iran 2009, Egypt 2011, Tunisia 2011 and EuroMaidan in Ukraine 2014), digital platforms were actively promoted by Western democracies as tools to bring about democratic change in authoritarian regimes. These examples of platform and government interests visibly aligning towards similar geopolitical aims, however, have so far been mostly regional in scale. One exception is the relative global consensus that emerged in response to the use of social media by jihadi groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS (Conway et al. 2017). Within a relatively short time, these platforms acted to remove violent content through collaborations, such as the Global Internet Forum for Counter-terrorism (GIFCT). These collaborative efforts between social media companies and governments were later expanded in the Christchurch Call following the Christchurch Mosque attacks in New Zealand in 2019 to control other types of terrorist content on social media (Hoverd, Salter and Veale 2021).

This chapter argues that the Russian war in Ukraine represents the first time where such geopolitical alignment between platforms and governments has extended to major geopolitical players, such as Russia. A qualitative reading of social media companies' blog posts in the aftermath of the Russian invasion shows how the platforms responded to public demands for greater responsibility against Russian information warfare. This chapter studies how the war in Ukraine opened a new horizon of action that compelled the platforms to actively side with EU policy to 'intervene' and how this intervention, in turn, informed major digital platforms' responses to the war.

Digital platforms in the information war

The regulation of the Council of Europe (EU 2022/350) to suspend broadcasts from Russian state-sponsored media outlets RT and Sputnik was implemented on March 1, five days after Russia invaded Ukraine. Some national authorities in the EU acted even before the regulation to crack down on Russian propaganda. Although the securitisation of disinformation in various EU documents had started following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (e.g. European Council 2015), such restrictions had not previously been used to regulate social media platforms in times of crisis, at least at such scale and scope against another major geopolitical player.

Blocking the Russian state-backed media was an attempt to block Russia's expected aggression and interference on social media, as previously seen in Russian disinformation campaigns to influence Western elections. The regulation was justified as a response to the security threat that Russian disinformation poses to the EU: 'The Russian Federation has engaged in continuous and concerted propaganda actions targeted at civil society in the Union and neighbouring countries, gravely distorting and manipulating facts' (EU 2022/350: 7). Disinformation was interpreted as 'part of a hybrid warfare strategy Russia was using against the EU', requiring extraordinary measures 'to defend all citizens and infrastructure, as well as their democratic systems', as stated by the 'Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation' (INGE) (European Parliament 2022). The committee concluded that the EU should tighten control on platforms as a part of this new strategy of defence to protect European citizens and democracy.

Even before these events, there was growing interest and policy pressure in Europe to confirm intermediary responsibility for platforms. At the core of this aspiration is the question of whether and in which situations social media platforms are accountable for their users' online actions. The Digital Services Act (DSA), launched in April 2022, sets out new standards for the accountability of platforms regarding harmful content. In this regulatory framework, platforms are required to mitigate risks, such as disinformation and hate speech. As stated by the Commissioner for the Internal Market, Thierry Breton, who is responsible for strengthening EU tools for countering disinformation, '[w]ith the DSA, the time of big online platforms behaving like they are "too big to care" is coming to an end' (European Commission 2022). The changing nature of the relationship between digital platforms and governments in times of serious crises is written in the DSA's 'crisis response mechanism' (DSA 2022, Art. 27a), which allows the European Commission to intervene in content moderation decisions and requires 'very large' platforms to limit any urgent threats to public security.

In this context, which is characterised by both a growing political will to hold platforms accountable and an unprecedented sense of urgency in the face of the Russian attack, the EU put pressure on social media companies to use their power and take down Russian disinformation and other forms of propaganda. Other parties, including the Ukrainian government, several national governments and the prime ministers of countries bordering Russia or Ukraine (Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), added to the pressure by making public statements demanding a crackdown on Russian disinformation on platforms. In particular, Mykhailo Fedorov, Ukraine's Minister of Digital Transformation, launched a shame and guilt eliciting campaign on social media that pressured all main social media and tech companies to cut ties with Russia. For instance, Tim Cook, Apple's CEO, was tagged in a tweet: 'Now @tim_cook let's finish the job and block @AppStore access in Russia. They kill our children, now kill their access!' (March 2, 2022). These high publicity requests placed digital platforms at the centre of the information war and geopolitical conflict, in which they were forced to pick sides and put their preferred impartial stance aside.

Platforms adopted similar policy changes one after another in response to the pressure because these platforms tend to closely watch each other's actions (Gillespie et al. 2020). As Caplan and boyd (2018) stated, platforms create joint normative visions by unifying their policies of what is 'harmful' and 'how and when they should intervene'. Facebook (Meta) and the Chinese video platform TikTok took the lead and blocked access to RT and Sputnik across Europe,

along with barring Russian state media from running ads. Twitter followed with a similar ban. The actions extended to information technology companies: Microsoft blocked downloads of the RT app worldwide and Google did the same in Ukrainian territory. In addition, Google-owned YouTube blocked RT and Sputnik channels in Europe and barred their ad revenue on YouTube. Apple blocked RT and Sputnik from the Apple App Store outside Russia and suspended all product sales in Russia. As a distinct measure, Meta platforms Facebook and Instagram issued a change in their regular hate speech policy to allow users in Ukraine to call for death against Russian leaders and troops in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This decision led to global controversy about the alleged double standards adopted by platforms and critics pointing out that 'Facebook's human rights and free speech rules tend to match up with US policy preferences' (Biddle 2022).

In response to these policies, commentators have argued that the actions adopted by platform companies potentially represent a paradigm shift in how tech companies operate in the context of war and conflict. Scott and Kern (2022) stated that these decisions to take a stand against Russia could 'fundamentally change the companies' relationships with governments that are being forced, in real time, to acknowledge the power that social media wields in a time of war'. From an alternative perspective, however, these decisions show that the EU and European governments had the power to direct how platforms responded to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As we argue, the geopolitical crisis added more momentum to efforts in Europe to demand greater accountability from platforms and, in practice, force them to pick a side.

Platforms in times of armed conflicts

As international corporations, platforms have not been known to be proactive in self-regulating harmful content, arguably because disinformation and extreme content attract users' attention, here according to the logic of the algorithmic recommender systems of the platforms. For instance, since 2014, the Ukrainian government has urged, without success, platform companies to improve their efforts to stop Russia from spreading disinformation and promoting support of Russia's occupation of parts of Ukraine (HRW 2022). The usual criticism on social media platforms has been that they act on problems too late and do too little (Wagner, Deutch and Zuidijk 2022). Historically, internet platforms have argued that they only host content produced by other parties

and, therefore, unlike media companies, should not be seen as responsible for what is published on their platforms (Gillespie 2010; 2018).

However, in recent years, following heated debates around privacy breaches, political interference and disinformation, platforms have increasingly been subject to political scrutiny; accordingly, scholars have identified a 'responsibility turn' in their public communication (Flew 2018; Mager and Katzenbach 2021). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms have collaborated with governments and public health authorities and introduced, 'at an unprecedented speed and scale' (Baker et al. 2020), new tools and policies to combat the spread of harmful content related to global crises, such as COVID-19 and climate change (e.g. Gadde and Derella 2020; Meta 2022).

Content moderation inevitably has geopolitical implications (Banchik 2021; Hallinan et al. 2021). As Roberts (2019) noted, the content moderation decisions of social media platforms 'point to the ideological preferences' embedded in the platform companies' global policies and systems of moderation. Social media platforms have also been criticised for not meeting human rights responsibilities in wars and crises globally (e.g. DeCook et al. 2022; HRW 2022). A common view among human rights activists and scholars is that platform companies lack an understanding of the societies and political environments in which they operate (Brown 2020). Particularly in developing countries, social media companies have failed to invest in content moderators who are fluent in local languages and familiar with local contexts. On the other hand, governmental pressure to remove 'extremist' content has led to situations in which platforms remove content documenting human rights violations or legitimate protests (Banchik 2021).

Accountability demands targeted at platform companies have generally been divided into global civil society organisations' campaigns for better content moderation of harmful content and demands by different governments to control the information circulating on social media platforms in their countries. Civil society organisations have actively campaigned against platforms in an effort to prevent hateful and misleading content. Critics have argued that these companies have been too slow to respond to the spread of harmful or misleading content, which, in some cases, has led to widespread unrest and violence amplified by content circulated online (De Gregorio 2019; Stremlau and Marchant 2020; Suzor 2019).

Conversely, the relationship between governments and platforms has historically been contentious. Examples of this antagonistic relationship include India banning TikTok in 2020 because of a geopolitical dispute with China.

Facebook has been temporarily or partially banned by 30 countries globally. In China, for instance, Facebook was blocked following the 2009 riots in Urumqi. According to the Chinese government, Facebook was used to coordinate the protests. YouTube has been temporarily or partially banned in 23 countries and remains permanently banned in five countries. Twitter also remains blocked in seven countries, including China, and was temporarily banned in Egypt, Nigeria and Turkey in response to government demands to remove content. As these examples show, blocks and restrictions typically result from the censorship of nondemocratic governments or relate to government relations with the company. De Gregorio and Stremlau (2020) argued that the content moderation practices by the major digital platforms should be seen as one among the many tactics that different global actors have available to control information circulating online. One tactic that is used especially in times of political unrest and in nondemocratic regimes is to use internet shutdowns – usually without the complicity of platforms – to remove access to social media.

Within this context, we can position the actions taken by digital platforms during the Ukraine War. Although the requests to remove content by governments are not unique globally, the actions taken in the aftermath of the Russian invasion nonetheless represent the most comprehensive efforts by platform companies to respond to government demands for removing content. Thus, the actions taken by Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and other platforms in response to Russian state-owned media's propaganda campaigns represent the most significant and wide-reaching open campaign so far to explicitly deal with online disinformation and hate speech on social media or to align with the foreign policy interests of the EU.

Social media company blogs

Platforms are under constant pressure to respond to the growing accountability demands from governments and civil society actors, as well as communicate their policies to wider audiences. One forum where such public communication takes place is the public blogs of these social media companies, such as the Newsroom for Meta/Facebook or the official blogs by Twitter and YouTube. Although these blogs represent the official public relations and brand-building messages made by corporations to directly address their various stakeholders (Colton and Poplovski 2019), they also allow researchers to explore how the platforms themselves articulate their position and activities in response to major crises and conflicts. In the case of the war in Ukraine, the platforms

have used their blogs strategically to explain what their policies and actions have been following the Russian invasion.

To explore the narratives found in the corporate communication of platforms during the Ukraine War, we collected all the blog posts of the major social media companies and their owner companies available from their websites. This included all the blog posts published between the Russian invasion at the end of February until the end of October 2022. The keyword 'Ukraine' was used to identify and subset all the blog posts specifically mentioning Ukraine for the analysis. The final corpus consisted of 40 blog posts collected from Google, Meta (Facebook, Instagram), Twitter and YouTube. The material is not evenly distributed between the platforms. Google produces blogs very actively and, therefore, has by far the most blogs in our data set (27), followed by Meta (8), Twitter (3) and YouTube (2). Our initial aim was also to include TikTok, the only non-Western company. However, what was noteworthy in the data was the absence of posts from TikTok that directly addressed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In general, TikTok's corporate communication rarely discusses political issues. Based on the available data, we then carried out a qualitative analysis to identify how these platforms narrated their stance and activities during the war.

Blog narratives and credibility building

Unsurprisingly, the corporate blogs did not directly address their companies' shortcomings regarding the circulation of disinformation and hate speech or the accountability demands placed on platforms. Instead, they stressed their objectives of keeping their users and workers safe and helping Ukrainians, both in their immediate needs when faced with a violent invasion and in rebuilding their future. For the platform companies, the war represented an opportunity to rehabilitate their reputations and highlight their key values after facing accusations of not having done enough to prevent the spread of harmful content. The literature on disasters and humanitarian communication has shown that involvement in humanitarian projects represents excellent branding and public relations opportunities for companies with 'further potential benefits, such as increased visibility, access to new markets, access to data, and opportunities to pilot new technologies' (Madianou 2019: 5).

One of the key functions of corporate blogs is to build and maintain corporate credibility (Colton and Poplovski 2019). In credibility building, manifesting responsibility, trustworthiness and caring, as well as demonstrating

expert knowledge, are key qualities. Reading blog posts against these authority-building strategies, we identified three broad *social roles* through which the social media platforms narrated their response to the war in Ukraine: (1) humanitarian actors; (2) cybersecurity experts; and (3) guardians of democracy through technology and innovation.

Platforms as humanitarian actors

Amidst the accountability pressure targeted at the platforms by Ukraine and the EU, a key theme that the blogs highlighted was the multiple humanitarian missions the companies were engaged with to help Ukrainians by collaborating with several governmental and non-governmental agencies. These partnerships with authoritative organisations and various philanthropic practices effectively communicated that the company/platform was socially responsible. Reporting acts of social responsibility are usually aimed at demonstrating a moral responsibility that goes beyond profits (Colton and Poploski 2019). Through blogs, the platforms publicly expressed empathy towards the plight of Ukrainians, as seen in the opening sentence of the Twitter blog post entitled 'Our ongoing approach to the war in Ukraine': 'Like so many around the world, we're disturbed and deeply saddened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the humanitarian crisis unfolding there' (Twitter 16 March).

The companies engaged in charitable giving in various ways. Google, for instance, focused on Ukrainian refugees and supporting education in Ukraine. Accordingly, it described collaboration with UNESCO, the International Rescue Committee, the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science and others. Similarly, Meta stressed collaboration with leading global humanitarian organisations and detailed its own humanitarian foci, including supporting journalists and human rights activists in Ukraine:

> We're committing $15 million to support humanitarian efforts in Ukraine and neighboring countries. This includes $5 million in direct donations to UN agencies and more than a dozen nonprofits, including International Medical Corps who will be using these funds to deploy mobile medical units to Ukraine and Internews to support at-risk journalists and human rights defenders in the region. We're also donating to UNICEF to scale up lifesaving support for children and families in Ukraine and the region. (Meta 3 March)

This narrative of involvement in the humanitarian responses to the Ukraine War demonstrates platforms' efforts in reclaiming public accountability, providing them with an excellent opportunity to create a positive perception of

their social responsibility and caring for people in need. In CEO of Google and Alphabet Sundar Pichai's words, responsibility towards refugees is 'embedded in Google's DNA' (Google 19 September). The blog narrates Pichai's personal experiences as an immigrant and his encounters with Ukrainian refugees after he received a Global Citizen Award from the Atlantic Council, which recognised Google's response to the Russo–Ukrainian War and the support of refugees. In Google's narrative, its products and services, employees and Googlers of different nationalities were bringing relief:

> I'm also thinking of 10-year-old Yana, who left Ukraine with her family and enrolled in school in Poland. With the help of Google Translate, she's made a new best friend, despite the language barrier. Yana and her family are among the 7 million refugees from Ukraine in Europe today. The need is unprecedented. So is the response. When I was in Warsaw last spring, I was struck by how many Google employees were hosting multiple families in their homes. (Google 19 September)

A well-known critique of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is that a moral discourse offers companies a cover for profit making. In her research on 'technocolonialism' in disaster response, Madianou (2019) argued that, by engaging in humanitarianism, corporations have been extending their authority over social life. In other words, companies can reframe social problems and solutions in line with their own objectives – for instance, by stressing the role of technology in the rebuilding of the refugees' lives (Madianou 2019). Such an attempt can be seen in Google's persistent emphasis on its products' role in crisis relief:

> To help teachers keep teaching, Google is working with the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science, UNESCO, and partners from around the world to provide hardware, software, content and training. To help education continue for both remaining and displaced students, Google is giving 43,000 Chromebooks to Ukrainian teachers – helping them to connect with their students, wherever they are now based. To ensure those devices make the best possible impact, Google is partnering with local organisations to train around 50,000 teachers – and providing our Chrome Education Upgrade so that schools can set-up and manage devices remotely. (Google 24 May)

Although the above quote illustrates a generous contribution to the assistance of the Ukrainian people, it could also be interpreted as an example of how private companies work to make themselves indispensable to key public sectors, including education. As van Dijck, Nieborg and Poell (2019) stated, platform

power is based on making diverse societal institutions dependent on the infrastructure and services of major platform companies.

Platforms as cybersecurity authorities

The stress placed on technological expertise and innovation in corporate blogs reflects what Keller and Aaker (1998) have called the expertise dimension of corporate credibility. In this narrative, details about the verifiable proficiencies of companies, their employees and technology help demonstrate the benefits that such companies possess for society more broadly. Besides positioning themselves as humanitarian actors, the platforms' communication stressed their role as leading cybersecurity actors during (and preceding) the war in Ukraine. The blogs portrayed platforms as actors whose technological expertise can be used to support Ukraine in the information war and cyber war, but, more broadly, defend democracies against various cyber threats, often originating from authoritarian countries such as Russia.

The platforms stressed how they were taking measures to both support Ukraine by removing misleading and harmful content and, just as importantly, by providing the technological support needed to protect the Ukrainian government from cyberattacks such as phishing, malware campaigns, espionage and malign information operations. One such measure was Twitter's new 'crisis misinformation policy' announced on 19 May, supposedly sped up by the public pressure following Russia's invasion. According to the post, their crisis misinformation policy is as follows:

> . . . a global policy that will guide our efforts to elevate credible, authoritative information, and will help to ensure viral misinformation isn't amplified or recommended by us during crises. In times of crisis, misleading information can undermine public trust and cause further harm to already vulnerable communities. [--] While this first iteration is focused on international armed conflict, starting with the war in Ukraine, we plan to update and expand the policy to include additional forms of crisis. (Twitter 19 May)

What is interesting about this framing is that such technological expertise has also been linked explicitly to the broader geopolitical implications of the Russo–Ukrainian War. Defending cybersecurity is not only a necessary corporate strategy for digital platforms, but it is also linked to the security of Western democracies. Thus, the technological expertise the companies provide, in conjunction with work done by governments and academics, can help defend

openness, transparency, free access to information – and democracy – more broadly in a new global situation.

Platforms as cybersecurity actors have perceived themselves as active participants in the information war – not as neutral players as might have been the case before – whose interests are aligned with the geopolitical interests of the Western world. In this narrative, the platforms had gained their authority through persistent technological development and sharing their knowledge with others – platform companies, governments and other societal actors. The emphasis on the long-time efforts to create technologies and policies to safeguard online safety aims to rehabilitate their reputations after facing demands in recent years to take responsibility for spreading harmful content. In this way, Ukraine's proclaimed winning of the information war, in some sense, was owed to these companies' long-standing efforts in the region:

> In recent months, we have witnessed a growing number of threat actors – state actors and criminal networks–using the war as a lure in phishing and malware campaigns, embarking on espionage, and attempting to sow disinformation. But this time, we were ready with a modern infrastructure and a process for monitoring and responding to threats as they happened. [---] And we helped the Ukrainian government modernize its cyber infrastructure, helping fortify it against attack. We are proud that we were the first company to receive the Ukrainian government's special peace prize in recognition of these efforts. Online security is extremely important for people in Ukraine and the surrounding region right now. (Google 19 July)

Thus, platforms' technological expertise – and the values these companies embody – are articulated as a crucial force helping defend the democratic world against external actors and the dangers related to cybersecurity. The above-cited Google blog post titled 'Transparency in the shadowy world of cyberattacks' summarises this in the following way:

> And, looking beyond Russia and Ukraine, we see rising threats from Iran, China, and North Korea. Google is a proud American company, committed to the defense of democracy and the safety and security of people around the world. And we believe cybersecurity is one of the most important issues we face. (Google 19 July)

Guardians of democracy

If the platform companies' expertise in cybersecurity is articulated as a positive force helping defend Western democracies against external threats, another

shared narrative in the blogs positioned the platforms as guardians of democracy. Whereas the cybersecurity narrative focused more on sharing technological expertise to fight against cyber threats, this narrative addressed the role technology companies can have in defence of Western values more broadly. As such, it echoed the earlier debates about Silicon Valley as a 'force for good' globally, as exemplified by the rhetoric around 'liberation technology' during the so-called 'social media revolutions' (Meijas 2012; Morozov 2011). The role of the guardian of democracy was articulated as a response to the criticism that the platforms have been a target of in recent years, especially for their inaction and ineptitude for moderating hate speech and disinformation. The war seems to have offered an opportunity for platforms to redeem themselves and regain their role as defenders of democratic values. In his remarks at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit, Google's President of Global Affairs Kent Walker summarised this relationship between technology and democracy:

> I'd like to speak today about the debt technology owes democracy, and how technology can work with democracy to repay that debt. But first, let's talk about why that partnership is so critically important . . . democratic values of openness and pluralism allow cooperation and scientific inquiry to flourish . . . but technology can also benefit democracy itself, by proving that democracies can deliver for citizens, expanding choice and raising living standards. (Google 6 October)

Beyond the Ukraine War, technology – and technological innovation in particular – can help defend democracies from attacks from authoritarian countries through supporting values and processes such as democratic deliberation, open access to reliable information and a free press. Walker remarked in the same Google blog post:

> Technology and innovation can also be a force for democratic procedural legitimacy: Supporting democratic institutions, increasing transparency and accountability in governance, and protecting and promoting human rights. When developed and used responsibly, technology can foster the essential exchange of ideas and broaden civic engagement in the democratic process. (Google 6 October)

Thus, the Ukraine War provided an opportunity to show how technology companies can, once again, be the solution rather than the cause of the problems that democracies face. In particular, the technological innovation represented by these companies can also provide the necessary resources to respond to future crises and defend the free exchange of ideas necessary for democracies to function.

Accordingly, a Meta post titled 'Meta's Ongoing Efforts Regarding Russia's Invasion of Ukraine' explicitly positioned Meta's policies in defence of Ukrainian 'rights to speech as an expression of self-defence in reaction to a military invasion of their country' (Meta 26 February). This included the actions taken by Meta to block propaganda from state-led media outlets run by Russia, such as RT and Sputnik. However, although this ideal of defending democracy from external threats and state propaganda by authoritarian countries can be seen in how the social media companies' public relations communication tried to explain their role during the war, in practice, the actions taken by the companies represent, as has been the case in other crises, more *ad hoc* decisions taken in response to the changing political situation and growing public and political pressure. As critics have argued, Meta's Facebook and Instagram, for instance, have made more than a dozen policy revisions since the start of the invasion, leading to internal confusion, especially among content moderators working on the front lines of deciding what content is acceptable and what is not (Mac, Isaac and Frenkel 2022). What these narratives nonetheless show is how the policies of social media platforms often work reactively in relation to changing political environments and public opinion, trying to find a suitable position in an increasingly strict regulatory environment, especially in the EU.

Conclusion

The Ukraine War provided an opening during which the platforms were compelled to take government demands for more accountability seriously. The war has become an accelerator of existing trends and challenges, turning tech companies and platforms into major battlefields at a critical geopolitical moment. It also represented a shift where the political and public demand to support Ukraine brought social media platforms to closer alignment with the Western government's concerns. This represented a break from previous cases globally, where the relationship between platforms, content moderation and freedom of speech has been historically more antagonistic and contested.

This new kind of geopolitical alignment can be seen in the corporate communication of the major platforms. The blogs explicitly positioned the platforms in support of Ukraine against Russia and, more broadly, in support of democratic nations against attacks from authoritarian governments, here in a system where tactics such as cyberattacks have become commonplace.

In our exploratory analysis of the blog posts, we can see similar attempts to communicate this new positionality to the broader public and other stakeholders. It shows that the interests of the platform's narratives aligned, even if temporarily, with the geopolitical interests of the EU in three ways: through positioning them as humanitarian actors; through a focus on their cybersecurity expertise; and through the promotion of democratic values. Whether this geopolitical alignment was temporary, however, or whether the war was indeed a focusing event in the sense that the major social media platforms and the Western governments become aligned more permanently remains to be seen. The corporate communication of the major social media companies during the beginning of the war in Ukraine seems to suggest that digital platforms would prefer to, once again, see themselves as collaborating – rather than being in an adversarial relationship – with Western governments, which has long been the case in contested debates on platform accountability focusing more on hate speech and mis/disinformation.

Platforms' decisions following the invasion and governmental pressure in Europe also led to criticism from civil society activists for disregarding the ideals of freedom of speech and platforms' uneven application of human rights across global conflicts. A petition signed by 31 civil liberties organisations rightly argued that other crisis situations where lives are at stake have not received the same amount of support:

> While we recognize the efforts of tech companies to uphold democracy and human rights in Ukraine, we call for long term investment in human rights, accountability, and a transparent, equal and consistent application of policies to uphold the rights of users worldwide. *Once platforms began to take action in Ukraine, they took extraordinary steps that they have been unwilling to take elsewhere.* (EFF 2022; our italics)

In conclusion, the corporate communication of social media platforms suggests a new kind of geopolitical alignment between social media platforms and democratic governments, especially the EU, in response to the Ukraine War. This fits the broader narrative the EU has been promoting, which increasingly sees digital platforms as important players in geopolitical security and protecting European values, such as human rights, democracy and freedom of speech (Ringhof and Torreblanc 2022).

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