

Truth Under Attack: How Information Warfare Undermines Democracy

Reflections on moral and religious dimensions of security in the context of Russia's Hybrid War

Markus Vogt, Chair of Christian Social Ethics at LMU

Russia is waging not only a military war of aggression against Ukraine, but also a multi-layered information war against the free and democratic societies of the West. This dimension of hybrid warfare has so far been insufficiently countered. The high level of uncertainty in dealing with social media and the longing for simple answers in the context of the present day's multiple crises provide fertile ground for disinformation campaigns. These campaigns cause deep social divisions and weakens democratic societies.

The instrumentalization of religions plays a significant role when it comes to unleashing political emotions. While the politicization of religion has long drawn attention in the context of Islamic anti-modernism, it has recently gained new momentum within Christianity as well. What is striking here is a worldwide perversion of ecumenism, which unites heterogeneous groups and beliefs from different Christian denominations in an anti-democratic culture war against the way of life of the supposedly decadent, individualistic, tradition-forgetting, and godless West. The debate is also resonating widely because, beyond strategic polemics, it has a fundamental philosophical dimension that challenges us to re-examine the relationship between truth, justice, freedom, and peace. Here, it is useful to refer to the peace ethic of Catholic social teaching. However, this is only helpful if the profound ambivalence of religious claims to truth is taken into account.

The following theses are presented in the context of the symposium “Russia's Hybrid War and Dissolution of Truth,” which will take place on February 11 and 12, 2026, at LMU. It is the third symposium in the series “Moral and Religious Dimensions of Security,” which is being held in the context of the Munich Security Conference jointly by LMU Munich, the Ukrainian Catholic University (Lviv), and the University of Notre Dame (Indiana, USA).

1. “The lie becomes the world order”

In the ninth chapter of his novel “The Trial,” which Franz Kafka wrote during World War I, he anticipated the power of ideological propaganda with unsurpassed conciseness: “The lie becomes the world order.” Kafka formulates this as the resigned response of his protagonist Josef K to an evolutionary worldview in which everything is subordinated to the pursuit of utility. At the same time, he prophetically and presciently characterizes the change in the ethical-political situation brought about by the perfection of propaganda. Hannah Arendt further developed this in her political philosophy on National Socialist totalitarianism. According to her view, the core of the problem is not individual lies, but the systematic blurring of the distinction between truth and lies. There is no longer any room for anything that can claim validity beyond instrumental rationality. That which is valuable for its own sake, unconditionally good and sacred, can no longer be conceived. Everything is completely

instrumentalized and profaned. The category of truth is replaced by that of usefulness and thus dissolved in a post-factual manner. Even history is reinterpreted according to interests. Arendt's analyses of the connection between truth, power, and politics are helpful in understanding the intellectual situation of our time, but must be further developed in view of the changed conditions of communication.

2. The perfection of lies in the disinformation war of the present

There have always been attempts to manipulate claims to truth. However, the perfection of propaganda in the totalitarian systems of the 20th century and the possibilities offered by digital media in the 21st century have given this a new political dynamic. Systematic disinformation undermines the standards of rational communication and thus the prerequisites for democratic decision-making. Putin's regime perfidiously and effectively uses the new "playing field" of social media to promote social divisions and anti-democratic forces. Millions of people are deliberately unsettled, manipulated, and polarized—every day, even in Germany, the most important target of Russia's disinformation war. For example, bots are programmed with a high degree of professionalism in Russian troll farms and deployed en masse. Their flood of comments and misinformation creates a climate in which truth and falsehood become indistinguishable for many citizens. "Over the years, a complex network of individuals, institutions, private companies, and secret services has emerged that actively participates in Moscow's information war, partly publicly, but mostly behind the scenes." (Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven: Putin's Attack on Germany, Bonn 2025, p. 77)

The targeted dissemination of false narratives has become a decisive weapon of war. Trained by the KGB and a long tradition of socialist propaganda, Putin and his aides have refined the methods of manipulating information spaces with breathtaking professionalism. This is a new variation on the ancient art of warfare through deception, which aims to make the enemy surrender without a fight, as the Chinese philosopher and military strategist Sun Tzu recommended 2,500 years ago. Already today, the liberal West has been massively weakened and divided by the multi-layered information war. However, there has been a lack of serious measures and a comprehensive strategic approach to counter the sometimes latent, sometimes obvious manipulation of public and semi-public opinion.

Rational communication in the political arena is also coming under pressure from the post-factual communication of the current US administration, which follows algorithms designed to maximize attention. This undermines the foundations of democracy, which is based on reasonable arguments and compromise. The future of Europe and liberal democracies as a way of life will depend on whether we succeed in overcoming the lethargy in the current information war. What was once the transatlantic community of values can no longer be relied upon.

3. The four pillars of peace according to Catholic social teaching

In Catholic social teaching, the connection between truth and peace is fundamental. This was first formulated by John XXIII in the encyclical “*Pacem in terris*” (1963), which remains the Catholic Church's authoritative document on peace to this day: “Peace on earth can only be firm and lasting if it is built on truth.” (No. 36) The Pope names four pillars of peace: truth, justice, love, and freedom. Truth comes first, because without truth, rights are distorted, guilt is concealed, and abuse of power is legitimized.

The loss of the ability to distinguish between truth and lies undermines trust and destroys relationships. Without truth, human dignity is inconceivable, because then everything is a question of the power of the strongest. While propaganda thrives on the control and manipulation of truth, demanding truth limits the arbitrary exercise of power. Power without truth becomes violence. The protection of freedom cannot be justified. Lies are instrumentalized, while truth is structurally designed for recognition and respectful debate between different perspectives. Truth is often uncomfortable because it reveals error and guilt. It demands criticism and never-ending learning. Without truth, there is no repentance, no forgiveness, no overcoming of errors, and no science.

Without the regulative idea of truth, every effort toward peace, justice, and freedom stands on shaky ground. The paradigm shift in the understanding of truth under John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) has since been the basis of Catholic peace ethics, interreligious dialogue, and a reassessment of the relationship with Judaism. However, today it must be systematically developed further and actively defended against the return of pre-conciliar patterns of thought.

4. Absolute claims to truth as a cause of war

The connection between truth and peace has not only a positive side, but also a negative one: the supposed possession of absolute truth has been and continues to be used to justify wars. When religious communities claim that only they know the whole truth, peace is endangered. The inability to reconcile truth and plurality is the philosophical and theological dimension underlying countless wars. This is particularly true of European history, and ultimately also of the war against Ukraine, which is being waged in the name of the supposed need to protect the one true set of Russian Orthodox values. It seems as if this attack purposefully ignores lessons from the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. The struggle between truth and freedom, which repeatedly comes to a dramatic head, has shaped the history of Europe.

It has often been forgotten that the biblical understanding of truth implies an ethical dimension: it is not relativistic and arbitrary, but relational, based on relationship, love, and freedom. Truth cannot be possessed. Biblically, truth is an unattainable horizon of openness to the ever greater God and ever deeper knowledge. It is unavailable and, in this respect, a dimension of the sacred. Those who ideologically appropriate and instrumentalize it are its greatest traitors. If religions do not learn this lesson again and again, they become dangerous warmongers.

5. The perversion of ecumenism in the shadow of anti-modernism

There are new global alliances of Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical groups that have come together to supposedly protect Christian traditions against secular modernity. The enemy image of secular liberalism unites heterogeneous groups and schools of thought, far beyond Christian ecumenism to anti-democratic camps in Islam and Judaism. What unites them is their radical criticism of the ideals of equality and plurality in Western liberalism, which they regard as a denial of the need to protect culture-specific values and ways of life. The political energy center of criticizing liberalism revolves around migration and gender debates. A fundamental reflection on the relationship between morality and politics is needed in order to conceive of truth and freedom, universalism and love of one's homeland, transformation and tradition as complementary concepts, instead of getting lost in the moral spectacle of the polarized culture war between the simple truths of left-wing and right-wing denial of complexity.

One example of the perversion of ecumenism, which brings together heterogeneous groups on the basis of an anti-democratic enemy image, is the World Congress of Families, founded in the mid-1990s by a financially powerful Russian-American alliance. The supposed protection of family values serves here as a cover for an anti-democratic alliance of the religious right across denominations and continents. The unifying bond is the criticism of “gender ideology” and liberalism (cf. Gesine Dornblüth and Thomas Franke: *Putin's Poison. Russia's Attack on Europe's Freedom*, 127-139). Through a network of very different actors across the religious right spectrum, church groups have gained a significant geopolitical influence. on the dynamics of hostilities and alliances in the information wars of the 21st century, but with a variety of very different motives and underlying beliefs.

For example, support from the religious right was a decisive factor in Trump's election as president of the United States (in the first election, it was more Protestant-evangelical, in the second election, more Catholic-neoconservative). The orthodox contempt for democracy in the circle of Patriarch Kirill, who legitimizes the war in Ukraine as a “metaphysical struggle” against the supposedly decadent West, may seem absurd, but it is a highly effective demagogic component of Putin's imperialist propaganda of the Russian world (*russkij mir*).

Summary

In view of this complex debate, we should invest not only in weapons systems, but also in pooling all our resources for media education and democracy building. For this, the regulative idea of truth in the sense described above is indispensable as a sober and dialogical orientation toward the often uncomfortable reality beyond digital bubbles. Without a practical and interculturally open understanding of truth, as well as the individual and societal practice of significantly greater resistance to manipulation in dealing with digital media, lies will become the world order. A dialogue between theology and political science that brings together freedom, truth, justice, and peace in a new way could render a significant service to the future of democracy.