

Understanding the war in Ukraine: Comparing knowledge and bias in Russia and the U.S.

Peter Beattie ¹ | Elena Sherstoboeva²

¹MGPE Programme, SGPS, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong SAR

²Essex Law School, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

Correspondence

Peter Beattie, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 516A Chen Kou Bun Building, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong SAR.
Email: pbeattie@cuhk.edu.hk

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Abstract

What mass publics know about foreign affairs is of great importance in international politics. Knowledge and ignorance probabilistically delimit the range of opinions likely to form on foreign affairs issues. Military strategists understand the importance of “information warfare,” since publics apply foreign affairs knowledge to form opinions that may help or hinder a government's foreign policy goals. However, little research has investigated what the Russian and U.S. publics know about the invasion of Ukraine. By using a signal detection technique to assess the accuracy of, and bias in, knowledge related to the war in its first few months, this study provides insight into the knowledge both publics used to form opinions about the conflict in mid-2022. The results indicate that both groups have more accurate knowledge pertaining to the dominant narrative in the opposing country, compared to the dominant narrative in their own country. Both groups evinced greater bias toward their own-country narrative, with Russians more biased than Americans. These results are connected to differences and similarities in the two countries' media systems and political contexts. Normative implications differ; from a classical realist international relations perspective, public ignorance is expected and irrelevant, but some versions of democratic theory require unbiased and accurate knowledge found absent here.

KEYWORDS

media effects, political economy of media, political knowledge, signal detection theory, Ukraine war

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INTRODUCTION

Modern information warfare includes attempts to manipulate the information mass publics use to form political opinions, thereby influencing voting decisions, support for foreign policies, and other forms of political behavior (Lei, 2019). Information warfare in the Russia-Ukraine war is ongoing, with successful early Ukrainian information operations focused on Europe and the United States to ensure support from Western democracies, and Russian information operations focusing primarily on shoring up support internally and in the Global South, often framing the conflict as “the West vs. the Rest” (Bronk et al., 2022). A key premise of information warfare is that public opinion—and the information mass publics use to form opinions—has major military implications. If shaped according to strategic objectives, public opinion can facilitate policies preferred by leadership (e.g., mobilization) and impede disfavored policies (e.g., making concessions in peace negotiations). In extreme cases, it may lead to regime change.

But how is public opinion shaped—or put another way, how do members of the public come to believe what they believe about politics? The theoretical approach used here follows Beattie (2019), in which individual ideas (defined broadly to include factual knowledge, beliefs, hypotheses, theories, ideologies, narratives, and representations, without regard to their truth value or how closely they map onto external reality) about political matters—whether idiosyncratic or widely shared social representations—are formed through the interplay of “supply” and “demand” factors. The demand side includes a wide range of psychological traits and biases that incline people to accept some ideas rather than others from among the set of ideas to which they are exposed. An example of demand-side biases is in-group bias, which makes ideas flattering to the national in-group more likely to be accepted as true; an example of demand-side traits is need for cognitive closure, which makes ideas that simplify an uncomfortably complex reality more likely to be accepted as true. The supply side includes all sources of information about politics accessible in one's environment or information ecology, out of which political ideas are formed. This includes parents, peers, educators, and the news media. For most people, the news media is the predominant source of political information; being unable to directly perceive politically relevant events in the many far-flung locations where they occur, people rely on the news media to transport political information. (Or, on political experts and activists in their social networks, through the two-step flow of information from media to interlocutors, who may reinterpret or reframe that information [e.g., Ahn et al., 2014].) Supply and demand sides are causally interlinked, with demand-side factors influencing supply (e.g., audiences' national in-group bias affecting how commercial media outlets frame news stories) and supply-side factors influencing demand (e.g., consistent repetition of nationalist narratives in schools and the media informing confirmation bias, wherein people seek out information affirming nationalist ideas and avoid information challenging them). This interplay between supply and demand factors produces a “web of beliefs” about politics: logically connected ideas describing the political realm, encoded in schemas, which delineate what is the good society (and international system), identify good and bad actors and their motivations, offer narrative explanations of political conflicts in explicitly or implicitly moral terms, and more. Those with high interest in politics form a densely populated and connected web of beliefs and are susceptible to a “spiral of conviction” in which they continuously acquire belief-consistent information, making their political ideas seem ever more self-evidently true and difficult to dislodge in the face of contrary evidence (Friedman, 2019).

Hence from a purely military perspective, ignoring democratic norms, the goal is to ensure that the supply of information in a target population is such that its members are likely to form webs of beliefs resulting in widespread public support for military objectives. For instance, a colonial power would seek to flood the information ecology of the metropole and colony alike with justifications for colonial rule (a civilizing mission, economic development), true

or false accounts of atrocities committed by the resistance (labeled “terrorists” rather than “independence fighters” or “revolutionaries”), and other ideas which, if accepted, would tend to support continued colonial rule; and seek to limit the supply of nationalist ideas in the colony, along with accounts of atrocities committed by the colonial power, acts of heroism by the insurgents, and justifications for a war of independence. Contrariwise, a national liberation movement would seek to flood the metropole's and colony's information ecology with the very same ideas the colonial power seeks to suppress.

Influencing the supply of information—as in information warfare—*probabilistically delimits* the range of opinions likely to form in a population. While it is strictly *possible* that a colonized people may largely form opinions supportive of the colonial power even if their supply of available information is replete with nationalist arguments for independence, stories of colonialists' atrocities, and the like—demand-side factors like identifying with the metropole as their in-group, system justification, self-preservation, and more can potentially overwhelm supply-side forces—but all else being equal, it is *less likely*.

Despite military scholars' recognition of the importance of what the public knows (or *thinks* they know, in the case of misinformation), there is a significant gap in the literature regarding precisely this. Public opinion research has generated limited knowledge of what mass publics know and do not know about foreign affairs (recognition of events and foreign leaders; e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), and rudimentary measures of foreign affairs knowledge have been linked to foreign policy opinions (e.g., Page & Bouton, 2008). A great deal of research has investigated foreign policy *values*, proposing discrete foreign policy orientations or ideologies and how they relate to measured opinions on foreign policy (e.g., Dolan, 2008; Holsti & Rosenau, 1990; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Rathbun, 2007; Rathbun et al., 2016; Rosati & Creed, 1997). Only one study, however, has investigated the *specific knowledge* citizens and elites have and rely on to form their opinions on foreign affairs (Beattie & Snider, 2019); not merely a one-to-five-question measure used as a proxy for *general knowledgeability* on foreign affairs, but measuring what specific knowledge people possess and use in forming their opinions. This gap in the literature persists, despite the foundational importance of specific knowledge in forming opinions being known for decades (e.g., Annis & Meier, 1934).

This gap in the literature may arise from a lack of methods to *measure* specific knowledge. In social psychology, the social representations tradition investigates widespread knowledge, beliefs, or “representations” of social reality (e.g., Moscovici, 2001), but no social representations research of which we are aware has explored knowledge of international affairs and how it relates to opinions (for a partial exception, see Elchereth et al., 2011). Memory research in psychology is concerned with testing recall and recognition of previously learned information (e.g., Malmberg, 2008), rather than assessing what information has and has not been acquired. In political science, the most common method of measuring “political knowledge” comprises five or more questions about basic political facts (e.g., Barabas et al., 2014). This measurement is interpreted in the following manner: if respondents correctly answer basic factual questions about politics (e.g., names of current office holders, roles of government branches), this is a reliable indication that they possess a much broader store of political knowledge (e.g., Bennett, 2003; cf. Lupia, 2016). That is, it would be unlikely that people could score high on such measures of political knowledge because they *only* know the basic political facts asked in the measure; more likely, they learned these basic facts along with a great deal of other political information. And vice versa: if people score low on this measure, it is likely because they lack a broad store of political knowledge. Hence measuring knowledge of five basic political facts can be used as a proxy for a much broader store of knowledge, and knowledge gaps revealed by this measure have been linked to a wide range of differences in political opinions and behavior (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). But precisely *what* high scorers know, or low scorers do not know, is impossible to determine using this measurement.

A simple quiz could be used to measure foreign policy knowledge. However, this method faces significant problems. All researchers have their own ideology, a systematic organization of their knowledge and opinions about politics; and this “bias,” or the epistemically neutral term, “decision vector” (Solomon, 2007), may skew a simple quiz by including items well known to those who share the researcher's ideology, and excluding items more widely known by ideological opponents. For instance, a simple knowledge quiz on Covid-19 designed by an opponent of public health regulations may include more items on their negative (early education deficits) than positive (reductions in mortality) consequences, making fellow opponents of public health regulations perform better than supporters. This unreliable result could be obtained through opponents' greater knowledge of putative negative impacts (and vice versa), or through simple motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990).

This problem has been addressed by social psychologists adapting a bias-sensitive method widely used in psychological research to measure political knowledge (e.g., Nelson et al., 2013). The present study applies this method to measure accuracy (ability to correctly distinguish between true and false statements) and bias (tendency to classify as true statements congenial to one's in-group or ideology) in U.S. and Russian samples' knowledge of the war in Ukraine. Obtaining this knowledge about knowledge is important, for the same reasons that military scholars understand the importance of information warfare: what mass publics know and do not know probabilistically delimits the range of opinions they are able to form on foreign policy issues, influencing public support for (or opposition to) government policies.

The present study

This study was designed to investigate what Russian and U.S. publics know about the conflict leading up to the Russian invasion: the basic historical facts comprising key elements of competing narratives explaining, justifying, or condemning the invasion. We selected Russia, a belligerent and the aggressor, and the United States, the largest provider of military, humanitarian, and financial assistance to Ukraine (Antezza et al., 2022). Knowledge related to the conflict, and the opinions that are constructed out of this knowledge, are of particular consequence to the war in these two countries. When the study was conducted, U.S. public opinion was strongly pro-Ukrainian and in favor of U.S. military assistance (Newport, 2022), and indications of Russian public opinion suggested high public support for the “special military operation” (Levada Centre, 2022).¹

Political information is primarily provided by the news media, and national media systems are often compared for their effects on public knowledge of politics (e.g., Aalberg & Curran, 2012). Despite the proclamation of extensive guarantees for free speech and the press, and the ban on censorship in Russia during the early 1990s, journalism was soon reduced to a weapon in the “information wars” fought by the Russian oligarchs (Koltsova, 2006). The state information monopoly established in the country under Putin supported the regime's vertical power structure (Vartanova, 2012), discrediting alternative news and opinions (Sherstoboeva, 2020). At the invasion's onset, the Russian government shut down the remaining independent media in Russia and imposed speech restrictions, completing the return of the Russian media system into an organ of state propaganda, censorship, and disinformation (Sherstoboeva, 2024).

¹The U.S. partisan split in Ukraine-related opinions emerged and widened after the study was conducted (e.g., Cerda, 2023). Polling on war-related opinions in Russia should be interpreted carefully, given the likelihood of self-censorship and response bias (e.g., Kizilova, 2022).

Although the U.S. media system is *relatively* closer to the ideal of a free press facilitating a democratic public sphere (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2011), it suffers from commercial biases (McChesney, 2008; Uscinski, 2014), source bias (Manning, 2011), and exclusion of dissenting views, particularly on foreign policy (Bennett, 1990; Pedro, 2011; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). Without the top-down control, overt censorship, and criminalization of dissent in today's Russian media system, a range of structural and psychological pressures exert their own influence on media content, jointly comprising a form of "censorship with American characteristics" in the U.S. mass media (Beattie, 2019).

Using signal detection to assess political knowledge

Signal detection theory (SDT) has been used in a wide variety of applications (Stanislaw, 2018). In psychology, SDT surveys include binary choices (e.g., true/false) to calculate signal (true hits) and noise (false alarms) distributions, providing measurements of response bias (criterion scores, or c) and accuracy/sensitivity (d -prime, or d'), which help distinguish motivated reasoning from knowledge accuracy. For example, SDT was applied to investigate the causes of knowledge deficits that impede successful treatment for schizophrenic patients (Wong et al., 2006). Using a checklist of symptoms caused by either stress or schizophrenia, schizophrenic patients displayed lower knowledge accuracy (lower d') and greater bias (higher c , indicating motivated denial) than a control group. These results suggested that clinicians need to supplement educational efforts with help on patients' motivation and coping strategies.

SDT has also been used in political psychology. Closer to the present study, researchers applied SDT to investigate whether accurate knowledge of past racism would be greater in ethnic-minority than -majority communities, and would partly account for differences between the two groups in their perception of racism in contemporary events (Nelson et al., 2013). Their survey instrument was split between true instances of past racist incidents and fabricated incidents resembling actual ones. Their Afro-American participants demonstrated significantly more accurate knowledge of historical racism than Euro-American participants (a higher d'), and this greater "reality attunement" mediated Afro-Americans' more acute perception of contemporary racism, both systemic and individual. That is, Afro-Americans' more accurate knowledge of historical racism made them better able to detect contemporary instances of racism than Euro-American participants, separate from the knowledge gained from personal experiences.

This illustrates an important point: knowledge (or information, defined within communication theory as that which reduces uncertainty [Pierce, 1980]) is essential for political judgment (e.g., Althaus, 1998). Without accurate knowledge of the history of racism in the United States, for instance, it is more difficult to recognize present instances of racism. One could suppose that the racial wealth gap is caused by racism, somehow; but to conclude so with certainty and precision is more likely when one is informed of the history of employment, housing, and credit discrimination against Afro-Americans. This information makes manifest historical continuities that would otherwise be invisible.

Knowledge and ignorance, information and misinformation, are the foundation of political judgments. As such, examples are endless. Public support for banning chlorofluorocarbons would not have existed without knowledge of their effects on ozone, and the ozone layer's role in protecting life on earth (Egelston, 2022). Misinformation (and disinformation, misinformation intentionally disseminated) can play a no less powerful role. Misinformation was a key cause of the Iraq War, the source of consequential misperceptions among U.S. elites (Duelfer & Dyson, 2011), and the public (Kull et al., 2003).

OVERVIEW OF PRESENT RESEARCH

The present study applies SDT to investigate the accuracy of, and bias in, knowledge relevant to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, within the United States and Russia. This is important because political narratives—our understandings of and opinions on issues, which influence our political actions—comprise bits of information, whether accurate or inaccurate (Beattie, 2019, pp. 17–62). Bits of politically relevant information are usually absorbed as parts of broader narratives, rather than individually, at random (for a categorization of types of information that comprise such narratives, see Roselle et al., 2014). Social psychologists in one research tradition call these “social representations,” and have studied how similar mental representations of various phenomena are spread by the media and other means of communication until they are so widely shared as to be properly “social” (e.g., Wagner & Hayes, 2005). By testing for accuracy and bias in issue-specific knowledge, we can gain insights into the narratives (based on the information comprising them) to which a population has been exposed. This is a coarser-grained version of Moscovici's (2001, p. 158) idea of leveraging individual terms, like a radioactive “tracer” used in medicine, to detect the circulation of much broader social representations throughout a society.

Our SDT instrument (see [Appendix S1](#)) was designed to include key facts used within dominant narratives in the United States and Russia during February–April 2022 to explain and justify each government's policies amid the invasion. These narratives were “dominant” in the sense that they were promulgated by political elites and mass media outlets in the United States and Russia, respectively, crowding out or completely excluding contrary narratives. We read from a wide array of mass media outlets in the United States and Russia representing both sides of partisan divides (i.e., liberal and conservative in the United States, pro-government and dissident in Russia). We selected well-documented facts at the core of these narratives, like the United Nations Secretary-General condemning the invasion as illegal under international law (part of the dominant U.S. narrative), and the UN estimate of deaths caused by the war in eastern Ukraine since 2014 (part of the dominant Russian narrative). We created false items from real-world disinformation (e.g., claims in the Russian media that U.S.-funded biological warfare laboratories in Ukraine were developing bioweapons targeting Slavic genetic profiles), exaggerating documented facts (e.g., the extent of U.S. military assistance to Ukraine before the invasion), and fabrications that might be found plausible to the underinformed (e.g., that Putin wrote an op-ed in 1999 calling for reconstituting the Russian Empire). We finalized our SDT instrument after soliciting input and feedback from colleagues. It consisted of 20 items, evenly split between the dominant U.S. and Russian narratives; half of each set were “true,” in the sense that given currently available information they were not seriously, or in good faith, contestable as worded; half were “false,” either considerable exaggerations of actual facts or completely fabricated. That is, items were not “true” or “false” from either the U.S. or Russian governments' perspectives (i.e., what they wished were true/false, or wished the public believed were true/false), but that “true” statements were supported by the weight of contemporaneous publicly available evidence, and “false” statements were not (here and in [Appendix S1](#), items are labeled with “US” and “R” respectively referring to U.S. and Russian narratives, “T” is true and “F” is false, and are numbered 1 through 5).

During the first months of the invasion, the dominant narrative we identified in Russia about the war was that it was merely a “special military operation” to protect ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine (1RT, 1RF, and 4RT are related to this point; subsequent labels are related to the points they follow), “demilitarize” a growing security threat on its borders (3RF, 5RF, 5RT), and “denazify” the Ukrainian government. The Ukrainian and Russian peoples are joined together in brotherhood, and most of the Ukrainian population recognizes this; but the Ukrainian government is a puppet of the United States (3RT, 3RF), controlled by neo-Nazis (2RT, 2RF). Therefore, the Russian Federation's special military operation is not a war of

aggression condemned around the world (4RF), but a justified effort to protect the Russian ethnic minority in Ukraine, remove neo-Nazis from their positions of political power over historically Russian territories, and ensure that Ukrainian territory is not used by the United States and NATO as a military staging ground for troops and offensive weaponry that would represent a grave national security threat for Russia.

The dominant early 2022 narrative we identified in the United States about the war is that it is an illegal act of aggression under international law (1UST), motivated not by the Russian government's stated concerns over NATO expansion (5UST, 1USF, 3USF) or "denazifying" Ukraine (2UST), but rather by Russian nationalist revanchism seeking to regain territories formerly part of the Russian empire (3UST, 2USF), and by Putin's fear of democracy in Ukraine which threatens his preferred authoritarianism (4USF). The Russian government's claims cannot be taken seriously, because NATO does not threaten Russia (3USF) and Putin himself once recognized that before he began to use the NATO-expansion excuse for his own aggression (5UST, 1USF). The charge of neo-Nazi influence is preposterous, since Ukraine has a Jewish president and far-right political parties are not widely popular in Ukraine (2UST). Russia is a rogue, aggressive state that ignores international law and the norms of the international community (1UST, 4UST, 5USF). The U.S. government did not exacerbate tensions with Russia; the best explanation for Russia's invasion is Putin's authoritarianism, aspirations to rebuild the Russian empire, and fear of democracy spreading close to his borders.

To develop an understanding of which early narratives about the war were dominant in the United States and Russia, we drew from mass media outlets and statements from high-ranking politicians ([Appendix S1](#)). This process—as with all scientific inquiry—is unavoidably influenced by the authors' own knowledge, values, and beliefs; what philosopher of science Miriam Solomon (2001) calls "decision vectors," an epistemically neutral term for all factors that influence the direction or focus of scientific decisions. As both authors condemn the invasion as a war crime of aggression, our inclusion criterion decisions may have overlooked key information that may have been obvious to a scientist holding the opposite opinion, along with other possibilities. Hence research on specific political knowledge would benefit from additional researchers applying the same method, and using their own decision vectors to guide their survey design. Applying ideologically diverse decision vectors is particularly useful for this SDT method: selecting well-established facts, and falsehoods likely to be widely believed, requires a knowledge base established by the researcher's diet of media and scholarship—and as such diets (hence knowledge bases) invariably differ, SDT research on specific political knowledge is more illuminating as the diversity of ideological decision vectors increases.

Aspects of the Russian and U.S. media systems—the Russian system's subordination to the imperatives of the government (e.g., Vartanova, 2012), and the U.S. system's tendency to give minimal foreign affairs coverage "indexed" to opinions of domestic political elites and lacking dissenting perspectives (e.g., Bennett, 1990)—influenced our expectations. Russian citizens are more likely to encounter the dominant Russian narrative in their media diets (and more likely to accept arguments placing their national in-group in a positive light and enemy out-groups in a negative light), and U.S. citizens are more likely to encounter the dominant U.S. narrative in their media diets (and more likely to accept arguments matching their intergroup bias). Therefore, we anticipated that Russian participants would have less accurate knowledge relating to the dominant Russian narrative than U.S. participants; and that U.S. participants would have less accurate knowledge relating to the dominant U.S. narrative than Russian participants. (That is, Russian participants would have a lower d' for Russian narrative items than U.S. participants, and U.S. participants would have a lower d' for U.S. narrative items than Russian participants.) We also expected Russian participants to exhibit greater response bias in favor of the Russian narrative than U.S. participants (a higher c), and U.S. participants to exhibit greater response bias in favor of the U.S. narrative than Russian participants, indicating motivated reasoning.

SDT measures of response bias and accuracy cannot reveal *precisely* what people in either country believe about, or how they understand, the war. In the most limited interpretation, these measures uncover the level of accuracy and bias in knowledge of the items included, within the samples tested. The broader interpretation is the same one commonly used to interpret “political knowledge” scales in political science research (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; cf. Lupia, 2016): the greater the knowledge of basic civics facts tested in standard political knowledge scales, the more likely it is that one also has a wealth of other politically relevant knowledge. (While it is possible that one's political knowledge could be entirely limited to such basic civics facts, skewing “political knowledge” scores derived from these scales, it is unlikely; more likely is that the tested facts are learned incidentally while accumulating larger stores of information on political developments and debates.) Likewise, the greater the accuracy (ability to distinguish true from false items) and the lesser the bias (tendency to label items supporting one's own side “true” and vice versa) in knowledge of the items tested here, the more likely it is that one has a much greater store of accurate and unbiased knowledge, respectively, on the background to the war. Precisely what that store of knowledge includes is impossible to determine, outside of the tested items—just as with interpretations of standard political knowledge batteries. However, only the SDT method measures issue-specific rather than general political knowledge, and accounts for bias (e.g., motivated reasoning, which can skew results of simple quizzes), allowing for more reliable inferences on the accuracy and bias of respondents' broader knowledge of particular issues.

The relevance of knowledge accuracy is that its opposite—ignorance or knowledge inaccuracy—probabilistically delimits the range of opinions one can form on an issue. For example, one might have held pacifist moral commitments, but having only misinformation about Iraqi WMD and close Iraqi ties to the terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks—and lacking information contradicting such claims—one's options were probabilistically limited to a courageous (or reckless) commitment to pacifism in the face of a seemingly existential threat, or making an exception to pacifist principle in response to exceeding peril. Similarly today, a Russian opponent of Putin and his ideology, who has absorbed a significant amount of misinformation in the media about “genocide” in eastern Ukraine and no information challenging such claims, is more likely limited to accepting them but rejecting the government's reaction in favor of some alternative, or choosing the “lesser evil” by supporting a purported humanitarian intervention. Hence knowledge (in)accuracy does not determine opinions, but it does affect the likelihood of arriving at some opinions over others—and engaging in political (in)action accordingly.

Participants

Two online survey and market research companies were employed to obtain quota samples of 1000 respondents each in the United States and Russia for modest monetary compensation.

using panel and river sampling methods, with quotas matching major demographic categories in the two countries. (The company obtaining the Russian sample was based in a European country bordering Russia, and requested anonymity.) Studies of this method of sampling have found it to be less representative than random digit dialing, but with reference to demographic characteristics unlikely to be related to levels of political knowledge, however (MacInnis et al., 2018). In the United States, demographic quotas included age, sex, ethnicity, education, income, and region, according to their percentage of adults over 18 in the 2020 census. (Due to a lack of participants without a high school diploma in the sample, we weighted the data according to the latest census figures.) In Russia, demographic quotas included age, sex, region, and size of settlement, and data was weighted according to the 2010 census figures. 90.7% claimed that they were of Russian ethnicity, 2.2% were Tatar, and the remaining 7.1% reported other ethnicities or mixed family composition. The highest level of education was secondary for 15.4%, secondary vocational for 30.5%, some college for 6.1%, bachelor's degree for 24.7%, and specialty, master's, or academic degrees, and other postgraduate studies for 23.2%. 18.4% reported a monthly income of up to P18k, 16.7% between P18 and 25k, 31.2% between P25 and 49k, 15.7% between P50 and 74k, 8.4% between P75 and 99k, 5% between P100 and 149k, and 4.5% over P150k. As no differences emerged between weighted and unweighted data on the comparisons of interest, we reported results from weighted data here.

Measures

The survey instrument began with a notice that all answers would be provided at the end (to reduce cheating), followed by the knowledge test. Participants were instructed to read each item (including “well-documented facts as well as fictional items that we created,” the proportions of which were falsely said to be randomized “but never exceed a 1:4 or 4:1 ratio” of true to false), “decide whether you think it is true or false, and then indicate your choice using” a sliding scale from -10 (false with absolute confidence) to $+10$ (true with absolute confidence). They were instructed not to select the scale midpoint of 0 (which would prompt an error message), and to make their best guess. They were given two unrelated and obvious examples for practice and were directed to try again if they did not confidently answer “false” that Earth's moon is larger than Jupiter and other planets combined, and “true” that most plant leaves are green. Simple multiple-choice math and do-not-select-an-option questions were used as attention checks, failures were redirected out by the survey companies, and not included in the data analysis.

Applied to the responses to our true-false items, d' , measures the distance between the signal (true hits, or true items correctly labeled) and noise (false alarms, or false items labeled true) means in standard deviation units, using the loglinear approach to reduce distortion from extreme values (Stanislaw & Todorov, 1999). Positive d' scores indicate a progressively greater ability to distinguish true from false items, 0 indicates a complete inability to distinguish true from false items, and negative scores suggest inaccurate knowledge or response confusion. Criterion scores, or c , measure response bias in standard deviation units. They were calculated so a positive c indicates a bias in favor of answering “true,” a value of 0 indicates no bias, and negative c indicates a bias in favor of answering “false.”

Both d' and c were calculated separately for U.S. and Russian narrative categories (comprising only the five true and five false items for each country). U.S.- and Russia-specific d' measures accuracy of knowledge related to dominant U.S. and Russian narratives, respectively, and U.S.- and Russia-specific c measure bias toward answering true or false to all items reflecting dominant narratives in either country. Response bias in country-specific c scores helps explain overall knowledge (in)accuracy, whether due to motivated reasoning (more likely when knowledge accuracy is relatively low) or an ideologically biased store of information (more likely when knowledge accuracy is relatively high).

RESULTS

Assessed as a simple true-false 20-item quiz, Russian participants did marginally better than U.S. participants, with an advantage of nearly one-half correct response on average (Russians: $M=11.41$, $SD=2.04$; U.S. Americans: $M=10.96$, $SD=1.84$; $t(2379)=5.65$, $p<.001$, $d=.26$). Our SDT measures reveal more significant differences (Figures 1 and 2). As expected, U.S. participants exhibited greater knowledge accuracy than Russian participants on items relating to the dominant Russian narrative (U.S. Americans: $M=.45$, $SD=.68$; Russians: $M=.27$, $SD=.64$; $t(2379)=9.724$, $p<.001$, $d=.40$). Contrariwise, Russian participants exhibited greater knowledge accuracy than U.S. participants on items relating to the dominant U.S. narrative (Russians: $M=.47$, $SD=.81$; U.S. Americans: $M=-.001$, $SD=.66$; $t(2379)=15.66$, $p<.001$, $d=.65$). That is, U.S. participants were better able to accurately sort true from false in the dominant Russian narrative than Russians themselves (an average true-hit rate of 62% for U.S. Americans, versus 81% for Russians; and an average false-alarm rate of 46% for US. Americans, versus 73% for Russians), and Russian participants were better able to accurately sort true from false in the dominant U.S. narrative (an average true-hit rate of 63% for Russians, versus 65% for U.S. Americans; and an average false-alarm rate of 48% for Russians, versus 65% for U.S. Americans). Russian participants also indicated significantly higher confidence in their answers on a 1–10 scale ($M=6.60$, $SD=2.21$) than U.S. participants ($M=4.70$, $SD=1.79$; $t(2379)=23.10$, $p<0.001$, $d=.96$).

Criterion (c) scores indicate the expected patterns of response bias between the two samples. U.S. participants had a greater tendency to answer “true” to items representing the dominant U.S. narrative (U.S. Americans: $M=.66$, $SD=.81$; Russians: $M=.25$, $SD=.91$; $t(2379)=11.59$, $p<.001$, $d=.48$), while Russian participants had a much greater tendency to answer “true” to items representing the dominant Russian narrative (Russians: $M=1.40$, $SD=1.00$; U.S. Americans: $M=.23$, $SD=.92$; $t(2379)=29.58$, $p<.001$, $d=1.23$). Neither group evinced bias *against* the other-side narrative, however (these c scores were positive, not negative).

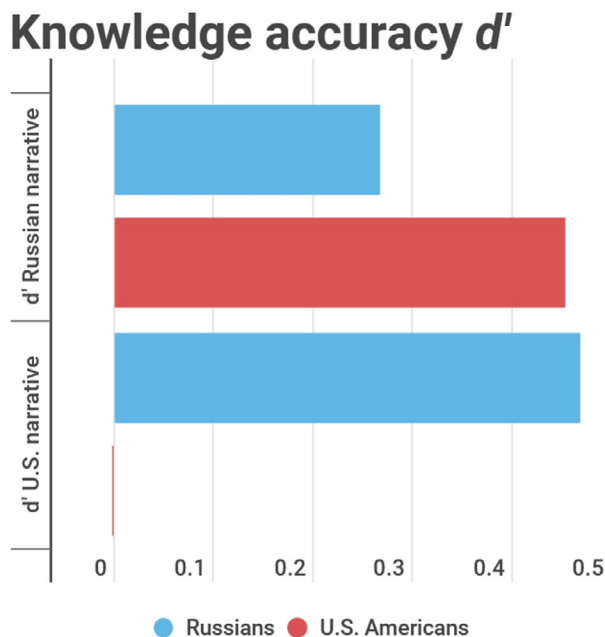


FIGURE 1 Knowledge accuracy d' .

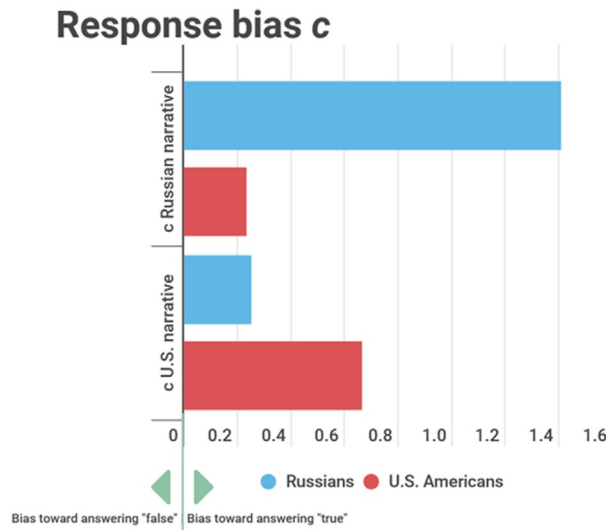


FIGURE 2 Response bias c.

These aggregate results can be examined more closely by looking at differences in individual items. Russian participants performed significantly better recognizing the five RT statements as true (Russians: $M=4.37$, $SD=1.07$; U.S. Americans: $M=3.22$, $SD=1.27$; $t(2379)=23.16$, $p<.001$, $d=.96$), but significantly worse recognizing the five RF statements as false ($p<.001$), except for the item concerning the UN General Assembly vote, where they were indistinguishable from U.S. participants ($p=.311$). The U.S. sample's knowledge accuracy suffered from outperforming the Russian sample on only one of the UST statements: The UN Secretary-General condemning the invasion as illegal under international law ($p<.001$). The two samples performed equally well classifying statements on the low percentage of the vote won by far-right parties in the last Ukrainian election, Putin's claim that Lenin and the Bolsheviks created Ukraine by severing Russian land, and a list of recent internal and external wars the Russian Federation has fought. Unexpectedly, 55% of the Russian sample correctly classified as true the statement that in 2000 Putin expressed openness to Russia joining NATO and difficulty in imagining NATO as an enemy, compared with 47% of the U.S. sample ($p<.001$). The Russian sample outperformed the U.S. sample in correctly classifying all of the USF statements as false (at the $p<.001$ level, except for one: 47% of Russian and 43% of U.S. participants correctly labeled "false" that until 2008 no prominent Russian politicians opposed former Soviet countries joining NATO, since none considered the alliance to pose a security threat [$p=.053$]).

To examine relationships between knowledge accuracy and opinions on the war, we asked both samples two questions on their war-related opinions. The Russian sample was asked to rate agreement with whether Russia should stay the course in its special military operation, and whether Russia should use its full military power without restrictions to achieve its war aims; the U.S. sample was asked to rate agreement with whether the United States should enforce a no-fly zone in Ukraine, and whether the U.S. military should enter the war against Russia. Averaging their responses as a measure of militaristic policy preferences, Russian respondents' preference for militarism in Ukraine was positively related to accurate knowledge of the U.S. narrative, $r(1009)=.20$, $p<.001$, $d=.42$, but negatively related to accurate knowledge of the Russian narrative, $r(1009)=-.26$, $p<.001$, $d=.53$. U.S. respondents' preference for militaristic policies was negatively, weakly related

to overall knowledge accuracy, $r(1350) = -.09$, $p = .001$, $d = .19$, knowledge of the Russian narrative $r(1350) = -.08$, $p = .002$, $d = .17$, and non-significantly to knowledge of the U.S. narrative $r(1350) = -.05$, $p = .086$, $d = .09$.

DISCUSSION

Our results indicate that neither the U.S. nor the Russian publics have been exposed to a range of narratives, the factual information comprising them, and open debate between proponents of competing narratives that could provide accurate knowledge of the background to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.² This result few may find surprising regarding Russia—its government has long waged a “war against reality” (Pomerantsev, 2019), exercising “the raw power of criminal law enforcement, surveillance by security forces, censorship by its media regulator, and legal and extralegal demands against internet platforms” (Kaye, 2022, p. 140). Its media system, now more than ever since the dissolution of the USSR, resembles the Soviet one, as a mouthpiece of state propaganda and disinformation serving the interests of the political elite. The effects are clear in our data: a population confident in their beliefs related to the war, but unable to separate truth from fiction in their government's narrative. The greater confidence expressed by our Russian sample may be the result of greater emotional involvement, more (biased) information acquisition, weaker critical thinking skills, and/or social desirability bias accentuated by the Russian government's repression of internal dissent.

The U.S. media system shares few of the pathologies of its Russian counterpart. Commercial media have not been brought under state control by a domineering executive, and freedom of speech and of the press are still protected rights in U.S. jurisprudence. However, media scholars have long noted a lack of ideological diversity internal to the most-used outlets in the United States (e.g., Porto, 2007), although the internet offers no shortage of ideological diversity for those with the skills, time, and inclination to construct their own diverse media diet. Oleinik and Paniotto's (2023) content analysis found comparable levels of alignment in both the United States and Russia between the discourse of political leaders and mass media coverage during the first few months of the invasion, and a contemporary poll of the United States, United Kingdom, Poland, Germany, and Brazil found that U.S. media audiences were the least likely to perceive a wide range of different perspectives on the war in their media (only 1/3rd did so; Eddy & Fletcher, 2022). In our data, instead of looking like well-informed democratic citizens to Russia's propagandized authoritarian subjects, U.S. participants, in key respects, formed a mirror image of their Russian counterparts: much more effective at discerning truth from fiction concerning the foreign narrative, but worse at doing the same regarding the dominant narrative in their own country. However, as would be expected in a relatively more open media system, the U.S. sample evinced lesser bias toward their own country's dominant narrative.

Nonetheless, we did not predict the significantly greater bias from Russian participants toward their in-group narrative, compared to U.S. Americans. Why might the population of autocratic Russia have more accurate knowledge of facts in the U.S. narrative than U.S. Americans have toward the Russian narrative; and why, despite this greater accuracy, are

²This conclusion is supported inductively, from the present knowledge accuracy results and in light of the vast literature on media effects, but also deductively: that information on distant events must be transported, and the news media is the predominant logistical system for transporting such information, whether directly or via the two-step flow (news media to an interlocutor, and from the interlocutor to recipient). Despite there being no evidence for this of which we are aware, and despite contradicting the political economy of media literature, it is strictly logically possible that residents of the United States and/or Russia were amply exposed to a range of narratives, the factual information comprising them, and debate between proponents of competing narratives—but that this was not reflected in our data due to differential forgetting or rejection of ideologically uncongenial information, however unlikely.

Russians considerably more biased toward the narrative dominant in the Russian state media and propaganda system? Providing coverage of the opposing side's narrative, specifically to challenge it, may be an effective strategy to harden public opinion against this narrative; particularly in the digital era, when controlling information flows on the Internet, with widely available tools to circumvent media censorship, make total erasure of opposing narratives effectively impossible. Recent interview-based research with pro-war Russians suggests that state propaganda related to the war in Ukraine mostly “challenges alternative information [i.e., competing narratives about the war], instead of providing false facts” (Svoboda, 2022). Offering weak versions of an opponent's arguments and then providing evidence to discredit them, would represent a disturbing real-world application of “attitude inoculation” from research in political psychology (e.g., Pfau et al., 2003). Such a strategy may not only help governments discredit critics but also distract from internal problems by providing a seemingly considerable diversity of perspectives. Besides arising from greater involvement (hence interest) in the war, the Russian sample's ostensibly greater collection of information may be part of a strategy to cope with stress, anxiety, fear, and humiliation that many Russians experience, as surveys of public opinion in Russia show (Meduza, 2022). Under a prolonged state of stress, individuals may be particularly vulnerable to emotional manipulation, for example, appeals to patriotism, which in Soviet culture often meant loyalty toward the government, notably during WWII (Edele, 2017). Collecting and interpreting war-related information may help the population find rationalizations to avoid discomfort and responsibility, and may explain the Russian sample's greater knowledge accuracy of the other-side narrative.

While these results were expected due to features of the two countries' media systems, influences on the development of political perspectives and opinions arise from the “demand side” as much as the media system's “supply side” (Beattie, 2019). Psychological pressures, like intergroup bias or system justification tendency, affect which ideas—among those offered from the media's supply—are more likely to be accepted as true. Therefore, knowledge accuracy can be influenced both by a supply of in/accurate information from the media, selective exposure to ideologically congenial media sources, and a desire to believe some information to be true and others false, due to intergroup bias, system justification, spiral of silence dynamics, the “rally around the flag” effect, and other psychological influences. These psychological influences may also affect memory; knowledge gaps evinced by participants in this study likely come from both supply and demand sides, with less information comprising the other-side narrative included in one's own-side media system, and less information comprising the other-side narrative recalled or remembered accurately by participants due to demand-side, psychological influences. Additionally, the bias of Russians and U.S. Americans toward narratives demonizing the other country may be reinforced by the historical memory of the Cold War ideological confrontation between the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union. For instance, studies of public opinion in Russia found a widespread belief that the Russian state currently wages war against the United States, rather than Ukraine (Meduza, 2022; Svoboda, 2022).

Much depends on how these SDT measures are interpreted. A radically limited interpretation would be that these results reveal the level of accuracy and bias in knowledge only of the included items, within the samples tested. But this reasoning would also apply to, and effectively invalidate, the significantly narrower political knowledge measurements used in a great deal of public opinion and political behavior research. A broader interpretation, much the same as used to interpret standard political knowledge measures, is that these measures of knowledge accuracy and bias serve as a proxy for a great deal of related information not included within the survey. Paradoxically, the limited interpretation may in fact require a greater leap of faith: that information relevant to explaining the war is randomly distributed, not connected in narratives that are disseminated via the media and peer-to-peer, such that accurate

knowledge of the tested items has no relationship to accurate knowledge of related items (and vice versa with inaccurate knowledge).

A key theoretical implication of the study is that investigating precisely what knowledge people bring to bear in forming political opinions is an essential part of explaining how they formed such opinions (Beattie & Milojevich, 2023; Beattie & Snider, 2019; Nelson et al., 2013). The formation of opinions on individual issues, and entire worldviews or ideologies, is influenced by several factors, from individual psychological traits to one's social network; but paramount among them are the informational building blocks one has available, out of which issue opinions and ideologies alike are constructed (Beattie, 2019). As such, to explain why a given opinion was formed, one must start by investigating what issue-related information a given person or group is in possession of (or "knows"). Social representations theory offers a foundation for, and examples of, such investigations. What remains is to apply a collection of methods to investigate politically relevant knowledge, the sources of such knowledge, and link the results to political opinions and behavior.

Some of the limitations of this study have been mentioned above (e.g., reasons to believe the Russian sample exhibited greater social desirability bias), but others inhere in the diverse, complex ways in which participants may have interpreted the SDT items. Questioning what truth is did not start or end with Pontius Pilate, and participants in this study may have interpreted our instructions ("well-documented facts" vs. "fictional items we created," "not seriously, or in good faith, contestable as worded") and the SDT items in unanticipated ways. For instance, some participants may have interpreted the term "civil war" in IRT as an affirmation of Russian propaganda claims denying any involvement, disregarded the accurate UN estimate of deaths and the commonplace understanding that civil wars have often included foreign involvement, and selected "false" even though they had accurate knowledge of the UN estimate (though if this occurred, it was likely minimal, with 81% of the U.S. sample labeling it "true"). Others may have been confused by item wording (e.g., "not ... suggest" and "refrain" in IUSF; though confidence ratings and their variance for this item were not markedly different from the average), or answered incorrectly due to differences of opinion (e.g., in 2RT, that the existence of neo-Nazi groups was not "concerning" or a "problem," *contra* the references from Jewish and human rights organizations, and majority opinion condemning violent, racist ideologies; however, responses from those reporting the furthest-right ideology [in the top 10 and 20%] did not significantly differ from the rest; nonetheless, we cannot discount the possibility that some U.S. respondents interpreted "concerning" relative to other countries or other considerations). Removing IRT (classified correctly by 81% of the U.S. sample and 85% of the Russian sample) and 2RT (classified correctly by 60% of the U.S. sample and 86% of the Russian sample) from the calculation of the Russian-narrative d' reduces both groups' scores while retaining a significant gap in the same direction (U.S. Americans: $M = .20$, $SD = .86$; Russians: $M = .04$, $SD = .69$; $t(2379) = 4.848$, $p < .001$, $d = .20$). Presumably, readers supportive of the Russian government could apply this ideological "decision vector" to claim flaws in the UST and RF items as well, though the authors, our colleagues, and the reviewers did not. (Further discussion of item interpretation is included at the end of [Appendix S1](#)).

Normative implications of the study's results differ widely. From a classical realist perspective, the results may be heartening. The public is not to be trusted to make wise decisions on foreign policy, so their proper role is to support whatever decisions are made by their informed and responsible leadership (e.g., Morgenthau, 1985). From this perspective, the U.S. and Russian publics are appropriately informed, able to see through their enemy's narrative, but credulous concerning the narrative propounded by their own country's leadership. But who guards the guardians, or how is it ensured that a country's leadership is informed and responsible in its foreign policy decisions? From a liberal democratic perspective, these results indicate a problem. The people are to guard the guardians, and ensure that their leaders are informed and responsible; but if the people are poorly informed, they cannot play this role effectively.

Without accurate and unbiased knowledge of factual information necessary to construct narrative understandings of the war, citizens are probabilistically limited in the policy preferences that follow from their understandings. For instance, a Russian citizen with accurate knowledge related to the dominant U.S. narrative, but less accurate and more biased knowledge related to the dominant Russian narrative, is less likely to develop a preference for ending the war—because they believe that ethnic Russians in Ukraine face genocide, and neo-Nazi extremists and quislings of U.S. empire dominate the Ukrainian government, posing a national security threat to the homeland. While it is certainly *possible* that they may develop anti-war preferences regardless, a lack of accurate knowledge regarding these alleged threats makes it more *probable* that one would support a humanitarian intervention to eliminate them. Similarly, a U.S. citizen with the equivalent knowledge deficiency is less likely to adopt a preference for, among other possibilities, diplomatic negotiations to end the war. The evidence available in the court of their minds is limited to supporting the explanation that Putin is motivated by vast imperial ambitions, and there is none to suggest that his behavior is consistent with traditional great power politics, with more limited security aims that might be accommodated through diplomacy. Advocating for a ceasefire and negotiations would then seem self-evidently foolish or catastrophic, akin to appeasing Hitler—regardless of the unobservable reality—which may indeed have been exactly that, or, the opposite, a practicable means of ending the violence early on. (While NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, 2023 has since argued that Putin “went to war to prevent NATO, more NATO, close to his borders,” this perspective was vanishingly rare in early U.S. media coverage.) Without privileging any one narrative, or labeling one entirely “true” and another “false,” the issue here is only that ignorance should not play a determinative role in the development of political opinions, no matter the result. Insofar as public opinion should be free to develop autonomously, out of a multitude of tongues, these knowledge deficits are problematic (United States v. Associated Press, 1943).

Even for those in the United States and Russia who believe that their government's policies have been correct may have cause for concern. Certainly, if one supports a given policy, then propaganda that generates public support for that policy may seem like an unalloyed good, regardless of the false beliefs such propaganda may create (Lee, 2014). But if the population is left with demonstrably inaccurate beliefs on matters of fact, they are relatively more vulnerable to counterpropaganda that highlights such inaccuracies to persuade targets to adopt the opposite belief—compared to those with much the same narrative understanding and opinion, but who have accurate knowledge of these matters of fact. After this survey was conducted and our first draft was written in the summer of 2022, this speculation may be in evidence: conservative mass media outlets and Republican politicians have since begun challenging aspects of the narrative dominant in the United States at the start of the war, and this has led many Republican voters to change their views on U.S. support for the Ukrainian war effort (Agiesta, 2023; Cerda, 2023), threatening worse outcomes for Ukraine after more than two years of bloodshed (Fix & Kimmage, 2023; Zakaria, 2023).

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psychology as a field and a community of scholars is impoverished by losing him. We hope that the next generation of political psychologists will carry on his legacy, among other ways, by ceaselessly questioning conventional wisdom and the *fad du jour*.

ORCID

Peter Beattie  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9665-2297>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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