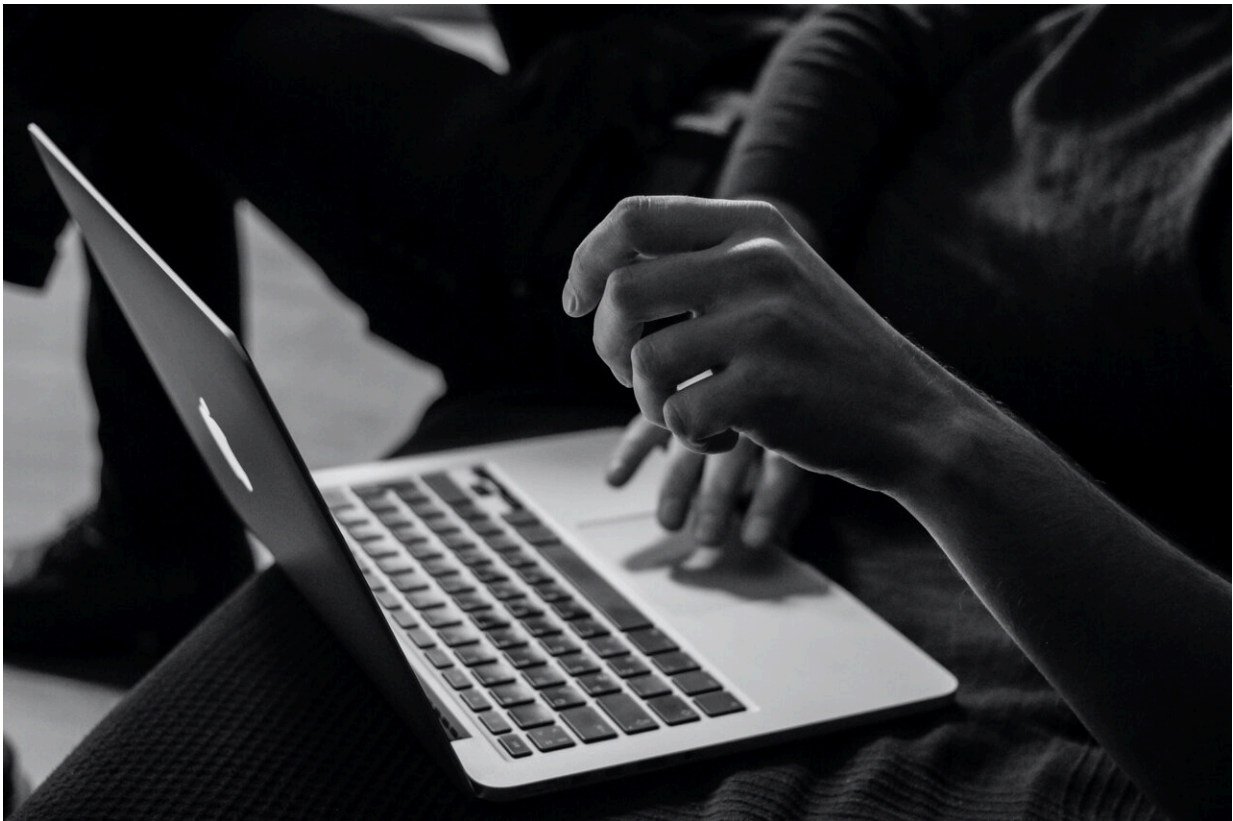


War tourists fighting on a virtual front, since Ukraine-Russia war

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, a new group of "war tourists" has emerged—those who are fighting on a virtual front.

A new study from the University of Portsmouth has found that war tourism, which typically used to be people traveling to past or present war zones, is now also an online phenomenon.

Researchers analyzed data from the Subreddit [forum](#) "Volunteers for Ukraine," which was started on February 25, 2022, a day after Russia invaded Ukraine. Two weeks later, the forum had some 44,500 members.

Lead author Dr. Nigel Williams, from the University's Faculty of Business and Law, said, "War tourism has a long history, with travelers visiting battlefields, memorials, museums, prison camps or current war zones. In the past we've seen war tourists who want to go and fight in wars, those who want to volunteer as humanitarians and then those who are voyeuristic thrill seekers.

"But what we're seeing now is an emerging trend for war tourists to be involved virtually, by countering misinformation, providing funding and raising awareness from the comfort of their own homes. The presence of hybrid war activities, such as campaigning for sanctions' enforcement on [social media](#), has lowered the barrier to observation and participation."

Dr. Williams obtained over 20,000 posts from the dedicated Volunteers for Ukraine Reddit forum from the first month of the conflict and found that participants in the forum were engaging in activities that could be seen as combating non-military hybrid warfare tactics, such as countering propaganda "[fake news](#)" and "Russian trolls and shills" to donating money and providing helpful information for Ukrainian refugees.

He said, "Social media, media activity, sanctions and [fundraising](#) are all part of modern warfare, which means wars are no longer about face-to-face contact or bound by geography. Our findings show that combating

hybrid warfare has expanded to an online domain, where people can shape perceptions and mobilize resources."

The paper, published in *The Journal of Travel Research*, highlights the complicated relationship between war tourism, volunteering and voyeurism in a new form of "hybrid war tourism."

Dr. Williams added, "Public forums like Reddit can put people at risk of becoming radicalized. You don't know who you're really talking to online—could it be a Russian agent or a Ukrainian soldier? Future research should aim at a deeper understanding of these concepts and the complex links between them."

More information: Nigel L. Williams et al, Social Representations of War Tourism: A Case of Ukraine, *Journal of Travel Research* (2023).

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