FEATURES OF THE COMMUNICATIVE SPACE OF UKRAINIAN ONLINE MEDIA DURING WARTIME

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Abstract: The article represent at attempt to analyze the landscape of Ukrainian online media and their communicative space during current Russia-Ukraine war. It is showed that the communicative function of journalism is more closely integrated with the informative function, and professional journalism – with citizen journalism. It is revealed that "emotions of war" often dominate "chronicles of war" and even supplant them. Within this analysis, the authors address cases of former Yugoslavia and war in Syria, claiming that the war reporters bear the usual load of biases and misconceptions, and covering violent and miserable events requires careful handling of such load, taking into account the critical influence of media today both in national and global scale.

Keywords: online media; journalism; wartime; bias.

1 Introduction

The communicative space of online media responds flexibly and dynamically to societal changes. As correctly noted by K. Nastoiashcha, the transformation of the communicative space (in social networks) is associated not only with exerting a specific influence on the persona of network actors but also with the restructuring of this space as a whole. Primarily, communicative sense-making changes, encompassing the definition, marking, and declaration of various meanings [1;2;17;22;23]. This particularly pertains to the confrontation between enemy' and Ukrainian narratives, which in the realm of online communication is notably vivid and dynamic.

L.V. Sorochuk notes: "Nowadays, in a difficult time for Ukrainian society, despite the financial crisis, political instability, manifestations of hybrid warfare, the aggravation of the military conflict in the east of Ukraine, the Ukrainian nation is modernizing and actively creating its cultural field. Ukrainian ethno-cultural tradition finds new forms of living and functions in the informational and cultural space of the state to satisfy aesthetic and cultural needs and harmonize people with the surrounding world" [21, p. 169]. This ethno-cultural tradition is reflected also in the functioning of domestic online media, their journalistic tradition.

Examining how media and communication technologies build the infrastructures that shape how conflicts are portrayed and acted out is an ongoing and crucial work for academics from several disciplines. Research on the connection between the media and war has looked into how print and broadcast journalism affects public opinion and, in turn, how policies are made. Scholars have focused on how nations' attempts to regulate and choose information from the front lines have shaped media framings of war, beginning with Harold D. Lasswell's groundbreaking propaganda studies during the interwar years [16]. Many different state and non-state actors use the media as weapons of mass destruction. As understood in scholarly discussions concerning "mediatized conflicts", which refer to media as an entity that is actively involved in co-structuring conflict, they constitute a channel for making conflicts known and visible for local and global audiences as well as one of the environments in which war is waged and shaped.

N. Zhukova, understanding communicative practices as "methods of interaction aimed at transmitting information and generating meanings, creating, reproducing, and transforming social reality, fostering a sense of engagement in interaction with others, and thus creating cohesion and identification of communities and self-identification of individuals" [27], notes that first and foremost, the harsh conditions and course of struggle during armed conflict are documented, along with reflection on events, and this applies not only to informational materials directly related to wartime themes.

As A. Chervinchuk aptly writes, in conditions of war, a journalist, including an author of online media, acquires a distinct status as a communicator. He can engage with his audience through the lenses of "war chronicles" or "emotions of war". These two modes of representation serve different communicative goals. "War chronicles" primarily focus on events with factual and documentary precision, aiming to provide readers (viewers, listeners) with an understanding of the causes and consequences (context) of events. The communicative intentions behind representing the "emotions of war" involve conveying the tragedy of war through subjective perceptions of events, displaying the emotional experiences of individuals directly affected by the war "here and now", and bringing their stories to a mass audience [3].

Both representations require improvement and prior preparation of the media space, clearing it of "information garbage". This process is quite challenging in the Ukrainian internet space. According to the study "Ukrainian Media and War: Results of IMI Monitoring 2022", conducted by the public organization Institute of Mass Information (IMI), the beginning of journalistic reflection, motivated by the need to improve communication with readers under wartime stress, was marked by the near-complete disappearance of "denim and sexism" [15] from online media publications. However, by the fall of 2022, researchers found that the situation had changed, and "those media that had discriminated against women reverted to their old ways" [15].

On their official website, IMI representatives write about their communication standards with the audience as follows: "We show tolerance towards other social network users. If we are criticized, we respond cautiously, without making it personal, addressing only the substance of the criticism. We may choose to refrain from responding" [14]. This reflects a liberal and sometimes avoidant approach by the editorial team in shaping the communicative space, where the leading role is assigned to tolerance towards the consumer of the informational product [5; 24].

Particular attention should be given to how representatives of the journalistic public organization manage conflict communication in cyberspace. Publishing different viewpoints on conflict topics within a single piece is a common practice for IMI. When it is not possible to promptly publish comments from one of the parties, these comments are presented separately with a reference, providing context for the audience. The positions of the parties are presented by legitimate speakers of the same representative level, sometimes with the involvement of external, unbiased experts who are competent in the subject matter of the discussion [20]. This approach ensures the objectivity of the journalistic material on one hand and fosters dialogic interaction with the audience on the other. Additionally, professional communicators must consider the specifics of building communication with people traumatized by military actions - soldiers, their relatives, and civilians [3].

The influence potential of a certain cyber media outlet on the Ukrainian-language communicative space is determined by the scale of its audience, meaning its popularity. However, the available potential for influencing the information space is not always fully realized by journalists. According to IMI research, at the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the traffic of some Ukrainian media increased by 300%. In the first quarter of 2022, "Ukrainska Pravda" led in the number of views with a record average of 136 million views per month. Last year, "Censor" was the leader with 41.2 million views. However, in the second and third quarters of the same year, IMI experts noted a significant decline in audience growth and engagement with the content. According to IMI analysts, Ukrainians grew tired of

living with constant war updates, leading to decreased interest in news sites. However, from our perspective, the decline in audience interest in certain cyber media is not only due to fatigue but also to insufficiently effective communication with readers, which would motivate them to maintain long-term loyalty to the publication. Another significant reason is rapid growth of popularity of citizen journalism, the example of which is Telegram channel "Trukha".

This specific landscape of Ukrainian online media needs deep investigation and comprehension, with the use of methods for study the functioning of media in war zones, in particular with application of case studies analysis, best practices and failures of media during war conflicts.

2 Materials and Methods

Based on the fact that the problems of the development of journalism in armed conflicts are interdisciplinary in nature, it seems quite logical to turn to the methodology of complex analysis, which allows considering the journalism of modern armed conflicts as a set of journalistic practices and texts.

In accordance with the chosen systematic approach to analysis, journalism of armed conflicts is considered as a special type of journalism, representing an integral system. The typological approach used in the course of the study made it possible to analyze and present the typology of journalistic publications on the issues of armed conflicts.

Methods of inductive and deductive analysis are also used to understand the specifics of journalism in modern armed conflicts.

3 Results and Discussion

In the context of the informational wartime noise, the quality of creating the media's communicative space and a responsible approach to this process are becoming increasingly important. According to A. Chervinchuk, it is crucial that journalistic materials "… shape public opinion, provide a multifaceted and vivid understanding of the war, while simultaneously adhering to journalistic standards" [3].

Not all editions influential in terms of reaching a large audience were included into the IMI's "white list". A two-stage in-depth monitoring of online media conducted by the Institute of Mass Information in August-September 2023 included the editorial teams of "Suspilne", "Hromadske", "Liga", "Ukrainska Pravda", "Ukrinform", ZN.ua, "Babel", NV, and "Espreso" [6]. In the first half of 2024, 11 editions entered the IMI's "white list": "Suspilne", "Radio Svoboda", "Ukrayinska Pravda", "Babel", "Hromadske", "Texty", ZN.ua, "Espreso", "Slovo i Dilo", "Ukrainskyi Tyzhden", and "Hromadske Radio" [12].

During the monitoring by the Institute of Mass Information, the following aspects are analyzed:

- Research of 50 popular Ukrainian online media outlets, which were featured in previous IMI, SimilarWeb, and Gemius monitors, regarding "presence of manipulations, fakes, hate speech, black PR, ethical violations, and materials with signs of being commissioned" [11].
- Evaluation of whether journalists adhere to "standards of balance, reliability, and separation of facts from comments", as well as checks for transparency, "including the presence of contact information, editorial policies, data about the owner, information about people responsible for content, and more on the website" [11].

It is important to emphasize that all the criteria of this monitoring directly relate to the communicative function of e-journalism, a responsible approach to interacting with the audience, whose expectations of media professionals are quite high under difficult wartime conditions. Researchers from the Institute of Mass Information formed the monitoring sample solely from online media registered in Ukraine, without

analyzing the Ukrainian pages of foreign media [11]. This approach can be explained by several reasons, including:

- The regionalization of e-journalism
- The study of the national (ethnomental) communicative space, influenced by factors beyond just the Ukrainian language.
- Differences in journalistic standards in Ukraine and abroad.
- The varying involvement of Ukrainian journalists and foreign correspondents both in the war events directly and in communication with the domestic audience, among other factors.

Research conducted by IMI in 2023 revealed that in terms of communicative influence and the capabilities of informational activities in cyberspace, reputable Ukrainian media often fall behind "shadowy" resources of questionable quality. For instance, in March 2023, using the TGstat service, researchers from the Institute of Mass Information identified the 10 most popular Telegram channels in the Ukrainian segment. Among them, there were seven anonymous and three personal resources, some of which are confirmed to collaborate with Russians [10]. Notably, President Zelenskyi's official channel (chosen by 5.2% of respondents) ranked lower than the anonymous channel with a dubious owner, "TrukhaUkraine" (8.7% of respondents). In November 2023, the top three among news telegram channels included "Trukha" (15%), "Ukraine Online" (7%) and "Lachen writes" (7%). The leaders are also Facebook (19%) and Youtube – 15% (this includes TV channels broadcast by Youtube, personal channels of experts, etc.). According to surveys, the transparency of the source from which news is read also plays an important role - every third respondent considers it necessary to know who owns the media. In particular, the famous businessman Maxim Lavrinenko publicly stated that he is the owner of Trukha, which means that the channel has ceased to be anonymous and now is more trustworthy.

Ukrainians consciously choose Telegram resources characterized by "anonymity, immediacy, lack of information verification, thematic focus on war, shelling, and emergency situations" [10], according to experts' conclusions. Among the popular top 10 channels, seven are anonymous, only three have the messenger's verification badge, and 5 out of 10 channels are registered under "News and Media", yet none of them qualify as professional media outlets. This indicates that the communicative impact of "legitimate" Ukrainian social media in cyberspace during wartime is relatively weak compared to amateur and sometimes anti-Ukrainian e-journalism of questionable quality. At the same time, citizen journalism became a source of quick news, sometimes presented even in more objective, non-biased from that in official media.

In our opinion, this is primarily due to the lack of a well-defined and clear standard of journalistic communication in Ukraine, catalyzed by the military "information noise", as well as the low consumer demands of many Ukrainians for information products. Researchers at IMI have concluded that the average social media user is not primarily oriented towards truthful and properly verified news created in accordance with journalistic standards and ethics during wartime. On one hand, the audience has expectations regarding journalists' work, often high. On the other hand, Ukrainian readers often show little critical judgment towards the quality of what they read in their social media feeds.

One of the main means of constructing the media's communicative space in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war is media narratives. In the Doctrine of Information Security of Ukraine, a strategic narrative is described as a specially prepared text aimed at verbal expression during strategic communications for informational influence on the target audience [6]. According to N. Lebid, in a general sense, a strategic narrative can be described as a story and a tale, and in another interpretation (quoting an analytical note from the National Institute for Strategic Studies) - as the foundation of ideology [13].

Among the most widespread Ukrainian narratives, the scientist identifies the following:

- "Second army of the world", "Russian army - army of beggars and marauders" - calling things by their names, direct talk about the crimes of the Rashists against Ukrainians;
- "President of Russia - bunker grandpa" - debunking the myth of "imperial greatness" of Putin's ambitions, demonstrating the inadequacy of the behavior of the head of the Russian Federation not only towards Ukrainians, but also towards representatives of his own people;
- "Take Kyiv in three days" - inconsistency of propaganda with the real capabilities of aggressors;
- "Russia - a terrorist country" - informational fixation that the enemy deliberately commits crimes against peaceful and defenseless population, destroys Ukrainian infrastructure, commits genocide;
- "Ukraine - an invincible country" - reminding of the phenomenal resilience of Ukrainians in the struggle against a fairly powerful and ruthless opponent;
- "The West - partner of Ukraine and helper" - opposition to the enemy's narrative of allegedly non-recognition of Ukraine by the world;
- "Glory to the Armed Forces of Ukraine!", "Glory to the heroes!" - honoring the feats of Ukrainian soldiers, who are depreciated and demonized in Russian media;
- "Ukraine – united" - in contrast to the Rashist narratives about the confrontation between Ukrainian West and East, etc. [13].

From our perspective, war narratives in mass media are primarily important for building communication with like-minded audiences, creating a unified language of the media space that would unite Ukrainians and provide them with additional psychological resources to overcome the military crisis. Military narratives effectively blend with other equally important narratives for the survival of Ukrainians. For example, in the description of the Telegram channel of the project "Ukrainska Pravda" "Economic Truth" – "EP. Economic Chronicles of War" with nearly 15,000 subscribers by the end of April 2024 - such a narrative is present: "We write about the Ukrainian economy and business. Without them, there would be no country or army, and without the military - all of us" [8].

Closely linked to narratives is another instrument for shaping the information cyber space in wartime — the specific lexicon of the media associated with the Russian invasion into Ukraine: *рашисти (рашики), орда, орки, бавовна, святі хаймарси, болота, дондон, могилізація, чмобіки (чмоні) пушкінопад, Білгородська Народна Республіка (rashists (rashyky), horde, orcs, cotton, holy khaymars, swamps, dondon, mohilization, chmobiks (chmoni), falls of Pushkin, Bilhorod People's Republic)*, and so on. Such thematic lexemes can be considered markers of communication (or linguistic tools for structuring communicative discourse). V. Teleutsia refers to communicative markers as "an important component of national identity" [25]. Since war conflict always constitutes a difficult and critical stage in the continuous formation of national identity, media communicative markers play a special role in this process. Using this communicative tool, the media contribute to the creation of a lively and contemporary Ukrainian folklore, which, like in previous eras, promotes the consolidation and survival of the nation during difficult times.

An attempt to create an 'eco-system' playing significant role in creating a global communication space that unites Ukrainians in the challenging conditions of Russian invasion was launching of the "Unified News" marathon ("#UAtogether"), launched on February 24, 2022, by the channels "UA: Pershyi", "Rada", "1+1", ICTV, "Inter", and "Ukraine 24". At the same time, according to Danilo Mokryk, author of The Kyiv Independent, this centralization and control of the information flow motivated journalists' target audience to "turn more actively to internet sources, including Telegram and YouTube" [14]. The space of

communicative influence naturally expanded, demanding appropriate responses from domestic e-journalists.

According to Roman Kravets, a political commentator for the online publication "Ukrayinska Pravda", the space of online communication has significantly been affected by self-censorship among Ukrainian media professionals, as well as "counter-propaganda", which sometimes conflicts with journalistic objectivity [14]. "War emotions" often dominate over "war chronicles" and even displace them. The results of these detrimental strategies of Ukrainian official online media were sharp changes in percentage of sources of information popularity in Ukrainians, which is clearly demonstrated by Ukrainian research company Gradus (see Figure 1 below).
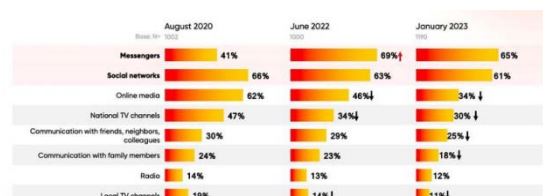

Figure 1. Social and political news: preference of Ukrainian audience concerning sources of information [26]

Thus, while social networks actually did not manifest any evident changes (within 5% only), messengers demonstrated more than 50% of popularity growth. At the same time, the popularity of online media crucially decreased within two years of war, showing a decrease of about 80%.

The communicative space of Ukrainian online media in wartime, shaped by strategic narratives representing "war chronicles" and "war emotions", primarily serves as a context for producing new Ukrainian e-journalism. Its standards are being reconsidered in terms of the effectiveness of conducting information warfare against the enemy, consolidating Ukrainians, and easing the coping with "info noise" for both military personnel and civilians. The communicative function of journalism is increasingly integrated with informational purposes, and professional journalism intertwines with amateur reporting by eyewitnesses and participants in wartime events.

Within this context, it is appropriate to address the experience of Syrian journalism during war. The idea of "communities of interpretation", as proposed by Ouariachi and Peralta [18], is taken up to suit the function and labor of "professional" and "citizen journalists" in the sample. Their research demonstrates that local journalists, a diverse group with varying socio-labor backgrounds, are drawn to news concerning worldwide ramifications of conflicts as well as humanitarian issues and tales about disputes between the government and the opposition. However, there is a significant disconnect between practitioners' "positive" beliefs about their capacity to attain "objectivity" and the real-world limitations they face in such incredibly hazardous and challenging situations. These unfavorable trends actually apply to Ukrainian war journalism as well. Frequent phenomenon of the lack of objectivity is observed in both professional and citizen journalists in reporting the war. Interestingly, however, in these two journalistic 'camps', this phenomenon has different roots – while in citizen journalism it is actual absence of any control except public (audience') opinion (predominantly it refers to Telegram and social media like Facebook), in professional journalism it is editorial censorship, presented as "editorial policy".

"They say [the] Vietnam War was the first television war," said BBC chief international correspondent Lyse Doucet. "Syria was the first social media war" [7]. This is indeed a truth also for Ukraine. Online media have sound effect on the moods in society, and there is a kind of competition between 'official' media and citizen journalism media like Telegram.

In today's disputes, the media frequently has a significant impact. In essence, they can play one of two opposing roles.

Either the media actively participates in the disagreement and is accountable for the rise in violence, or it maintains its objectivity and avoids involvement in the issue, helping to resolve it and reduce the amount of bloodshed. The media's position in a particular conflict, as well as its pre- and post-phases, is determined by a number of intricate elements, such as its relationship to the conflict's participants and its degree of independence from society's power structures.

One should be well aware of real (albeit at first glance latent) power of media. Let us recall that the Balkan conflicts served as an example of the expanding understanding of the significance of local media coverage in influencing and advancing the conflict on the ground. Forging War, Mark Thompson's ground-breaking account of the role of local media in the former Yugoslavia, provides the best documentation of this. It shows how the media encouraged the fall of Yugoslavia, the rise of extreme nationalism, and the emergence of conflict between groups of people who had coexisted peacefully for their entire lives [19]. It was a terrifying illustration of how a society can fall apart and how the media's ability to instill fear in the hands of those with the dishonesty to use it as a weapon. The local media was crucial in setting the stage for war by ensuring that public opinion was mobilized behind the various players. War was not necessary nor the only way to resolve the disputes that led to the breakup of Yugoslavia. Rival media outlets' publicity tactics anticipated the actual battle. As local communist leaderships transformed into nationalists, they were willing to utilize the media as significant policy vehicles because, in keeping with their communist roots, they recognized them as such. Social media news sources, both traditional and unconventional, have an impact on the public's understanding and discourse. Within the landscape of internal tensions in Ukrainian society arose due to the war (language issue, sharp disagreements and even mutual ridicule and harsh criticism with elements of contempt between supporters of the current President of Ukraine and former President Petro Poroshenko, etc.), media' responsibility for stability in society is extremely high – any publicly expressed biases and inclinations threaten with internal conflicts and disintegration of society, which in times of war represents a critical factor in weakening of the country and is favorable for enemy. Unlike the majority of people, reporters are impressionable, even emotional humans, despite popular opinion to the contrary. They bear the usual load of biases and misconceptions. Covering violent and miserable events requires careful handling of such load. Unfortunately, it is a rule of the game that a reporter dispatched to cover a dispute will most often make headlines on the front page when he is least qualified to tell the story accurately.

Strangely enough, Cole-Adams [4] observed back in 1999 that novice reporters' first days in uncharted territory are typically marked by the greatest desire to write excessively dogmatically about difficult circumstances and to claim an authority not founded on expertise. Editors prefer it when their correspondents appear to be up and running right away, which contributes to this. "I think the best way of handling that newcomer's dilemma is to discipline yourself to stick to describing, as graphically and accurately as you can, what you actually see and hear", Cole-Adams writes [4]. Real professionals don't take any chances when it comes to writing analyses or forecasts until after they have taken a few days to acclimate, read through as much background material as they can find, and listen to locals, expatriates, diplomats, and yes, other reporters who are familiar with the area (with the assistance of an interpreter if needed).

The position and professional behavior of Ukrainian journalists also influence global media coverage of war in Ukraine. Journalist Timour Azhari of Reuters has observed a discrepancy in the news coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. "When you look at the reporting from Ukraine," said Azhari, the news service's Bureau Chief for Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, "you see a lot of journalists, whether they be from Ukraine, the U.S. or from Europe, who are extremely empathetic. They are embedded with Ukrainian troops. They're even covering Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian positions with a lot of support and a lot of empathy" [9]. "Can you imagine," Azhari said, "CNN embedding with Palestinian resistance fighters in Israel, fighting against Israeli occupation? Both of those situations are essentially the same and I think that has raised questions" [9]. This is another plane for analysis of Ukrainian online media' communicative space during the war.

Moreover, because certain places are easier to reach than others, and because journalists choose what their audience needs or wants to hear, prejudice frequently shows up in news organizations. Journalism decision-makers typically believe that stories about individuals who are similar to them in places that are both physically and culturally close to them are what their viewers desire [9].

Thus, the array the features of communicative space and practices of Ukrainian online media during the war represents a broad field of research, where not only journalistic studies should be employed, but also sociology, political science, and social psychology provisions. Moreover, in the process of such research, case studies of professional and citizen journalists' activities in war zones are of great value, giving the possibility to fully comprehend Ukrainian was journalism specifics, prospects, and implications for Ukrainian and global society. A multidimensional study of journalism in modern armed conflicts can become the key to understanding many mechanisms for managing public opinion, the basis for countering the influences exerted by information warfare technologies.

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Secondary Paper Section: AL