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TELEGRAM CHANNELS AS TOOLS OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: A STUDY ON UKRAINE'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE DURING THE WAR

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The evolution of Ukraine's state strategic communications system gained momentum following the annexation of Crimea and the onset of Russian aggression in 2014. By February 2022, this framework had been both codified and institutionalised. This article delves into the transformative trends observed after the onset of the full-scale war. These include a personal approach in state communication, accentuated by President Zelenskyy's leadership; shifting the weight of institutional communication to security and law enforcement agencies; an amplified public trust in the military and volunteers; and the emergence of novel national metanarratives and symbols. Parallely, there is a notable augmentation of governmental oversight on conventional media, aimed at countering both oligarchical and pro-Russian predispositions. Simultaneously, there was a discernible migration of audiences from television to state-unregulated mobile media platforms.

Recent 2023 studies indicated that most Ukrainians now source their news from social media and messaging apps, with Telegram emerging as a predominant force within the media sphere. This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of this media platform's impact, focusing on its challenges

to the consistency of Ukrainian strategic communications during the war. Utilising empirical insights from the TGStat service, the study discerns the most impactful Telegram channels and evaluates their alignment with the state's overarching strategic narratives. It further sheds light on the stratagems employed by Ukrainian governmental entities and top-tier officials to manoeuvre within this rapidly shifting media landscape and scrutinises the emergence of non-institutional influencers and anonymous channels.

The author posits that, during a full-scale war, Ukraine's strategic communications meld state intentions with grassroots initiatives, resulting in a certain subjectlessness of such communications. This synergy produces an incredibly potent communication form. Its efficacy is rooted not just in the messages but also in the array of voices and channels relaying them, magnifying their impact on both domestic and international audiences. Conversely, the surge of anonymous Telegram channels introduces potential risks. In essence, as illustrated by Telegram's trajectory in Ukraine, the digital realm fosters inclusivity and instantaneous communication but also challenges narrative consistency and control. This paradigm shift provides political science with vast avenues for future exploration, especially in understanding how such digital platforms might redefine political discourse, influence, and authority.

Keywords: strategic communication, war in Ukraine, digital media, political discourse, socio-political narratives, impersonality

Наталіна Н. О. Телеграм-канали як інструменти стратегічної комунікації: дослідження медіа-ландшафту в Україні під час війни

Система державних стратегічних комунікацій в Україні отримала імпульс до розвитку після анексії Криму та початку російської агресії в 2014 році. Станом на лютий 2022 року, ця система вже була законодавчо та інституційно оформлена. У статті розглядаються нові тренди, які спостерігаються із початком повномасштабної війни, а саме: особистісний підхід у державних комунікаціях, акцентований лідерством Президента Зеленського; зміщення комунікаційної ваги до безпечових і правоохоронних органів; зростання довіри громадськості до військових та волонтерів, а також поява нових національних метанаративів та символів. Не менш важливим трендом є посилення державного контролю за традиційними ЗМІ з метою нейтралізації як олігархічних, так і проросійських впливів. Водночас із цим, телевізійна аудиторія зменшується на користь мобільних медіа-платформ, що не регулюються державою.

Останні опитування 2023 року демонструють, що більшість українців споживають новини через соціальні мережі та месенджери, при цьому Telegram стає лідером у медіа-просторі. Ця стаття аналізує вплив цієї цифрової платформи, зосереджуючись на викликах для узгодженості українських стратегічних комунікацій під час війни. Спираючись на емпіричні дані сервісу TGStat, автор визначає найбільш впливові канали Telegram та оцінює їх відповідність стратегічним наративам держави. Увага також акцентується на тактиках, що використовуються українськими державними структурами та високопосадовцями для адаптації в цьому динамічному медіа-ландшафті, а також на впливі неінституційних лідерів думок та анонімних каналів.

Згідно із висновками автора, під час повномасштабної війни система стратегічних комунікацій в Україні поєднує державні інтенції з низовими ініціативами, що призводить до певної безсуб'єктності комунікаційного поля. Ця синергія створює особливо потужну форму комунікації. Її ефективність ґрунтується не лише на повідомленнях, але й на різноманітності голосів і каналів, що їх ретранслюють, посилюючи вплив таких наративів як на внутрішню, так і на міжнародну аудиторію. Цифрова сфера, як показує розвиток Telegram в Україні, сприяє інклюзивності та миттєвій комунікації, але водночас кидає виклик наративній послідовності та контролю. Така зміна парадигми відкриває перед політичною наукою широкі можливості для майбутніх досліджень, особливо в сфері того, як такі цифрові платформи можуть переосмислити політичний дискурс, вплив і владу.

Ключові слова: Стратегічна комунікація, війна в Україні, цифрові медіа, політичний дискурс, соціально-політичні наративи, безсуб'єктність

Introduction

In today's world, fast-evolving digital technologies have profoundly altered state-driven strategic communication dynamics. These changes become even more palpable during war conflicts, revealing the sophisticated relationship between technology, strategic messaging, and information dissemination. "Information and communication are now part of warfare, and any decision in this area must be made in the context of combat operations," remarked Deputy Minister of Defence Andriy Shevchenko at the Kyiv StratCom Forum 2023 [1]. As Ukraine finds itself amid warfare, it emerges as an essential study of how digital platforms are used in the strategic communications realm.

Problem Statement. As instantaneous media platforms like Telegram or TikTok gain traction, they not only reshape political discourse and power dynamics but also become vital tools for national security. How do these platforms mould political narratives and public sentiment in conflict-ridden Ukraine? To what extent do these largely unregulated channels, interacting with traditional political institutions, either challenge or solidify prevailing power structures? This article *is aimed* to dissect the evolving media paradigms in Ukraine. It seeks to contextualise the rise of platforms like Telegram within the broader political landscape, explore their ramifications on political communication, and identify the potential challenges they bring to the integrity of strategic communication. The research further delves into the strategies employed by governmental bodies in navigating this new media terrain and evaluates the emergence of non-institutional figures of influence within these platforms.

Research Methodology

Strategic communication (SC), bridging disciplines such as communication, media studies, and political science, were explored by scholars such as D. Dubov, T. Popova and V. Lipkan, G. Pocheptsov, S. Bondarenko and others. Concurrently, manuals aiding security and governmental bodies in strategic communication are gaining traction [2]. Noteworthy studies include papers on communication strategies in the Ukraine conflict (e.g. [3, 4]). However, existing SCs' research, especially within the context of wartime Ukraine, offers limited insight into the intricate dynamics between digital platforms and political narratives. This article bridges this gap by outlining the latest trends in political communication in Ukraine and providing a comprehensive analysis of Telegram's role in shaping political discourse, assessing its influence on public opinion, and exploring its interaction with traditional political institutions.

The term "*strategic communications*" (SC) is pervasive across various disciplines, underscoring a strategic approach, planning, and coordination. Broadly, SC denotes "the purposeful use of communications by *any organisation* to achieve its mission" [5]. More specifically, SC is an instrument of *national policy* within communication realms, seen as "coordinated actions...designed to inform, influence, or persuade target audiences to support national goals" [6] and mould their behaviour "to promote interests or policies" [7]. In 2014, The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence was initiated to enhance the SC capabilities of the Alliance and its affiliates. NATO's perspective on SC is "a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests" [8]. The importance of long-term, integrated solutions and flexibility while maintaining core values is stressed.

Thus, *strategic communication* can be understood as a coordinated set of actions, events, messages, images, and semantic forms created by public authorities in collaboration with other stakeholders. It is aimed to influence the beliefs and behaviours of target audiences, align the communication efforts of various actors, and embed state (national) strategic values and interests into the collective consciousness.

Although SC principles are applicable to the private sector, state-driven SC is inherently more intricate. The state possesses significant influence over symbolic spaces and meaning production. However, the bureaucratic nature, intricate decision-making processes, and the occasional lack of skilled communication professionals make harmonised messaging challenging. The very political and managerial culture inherent in the bureaucracy is, in many ways, an obstacle that constantly accompanies state strategic communications, including in Ukraine. An effective SC system requires explicit inter-agency coordination and a consistent narrative.

To navigate the Ukrainian SC during wartime, this study employs a multi-pronged methodological approach:

- *Quantitative Analysis:* Utilising data from the TGStat service [9], the study first establishes the scale and scope of Telegram's influence, revealing patterns of audience engagement and channel distribution.
- *Qualitative Content Analysis:* Selected Telegram channels undergo detailed content examination to gauge their political leanings, the nature of discourse, and potential biases.
- *Political Framework Analysis:* Drawing from political science theories and models, the study situates its findings within broader political dynamics, examining how Telegram channels may be influencing or being influenced by larger political narratives and actors.

Research results

Institutional framework and significant trends of SC during the war. Ukraine's commitment to a strategic approach to state-driven communications notably intensified following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the onset of Russian aggression in Donbas. The term "strategic communications" was enshrined in the Military Doctrine of Ukraine in September 2015. This document posits SC as the "harmonised and effective utilisation of the state's communicative assets – spanning public diplomacy, public relations, military relations, information, and psychological operations, all steering towards state objectives"[10]. In 2015, the blueprint for the NATO-Ukraine Strategic Communications Partnership Programme was ratified, followed by the 2016 endorsement of the Doctrine of Information Security of Ukraine [11]. By February 2022, the Strategic Communications Directorate had been established within the Ministry of Defence and the Security Service of Ukraine.

In March 2021, the inception of the Centre for Strategic Communications and Information Security was declared. Operating under the Ministry of Culture and Information, this centre, a structural segment of the Ukrainian National News Agency Ukrinform, was envisaged as an instrument to fortify national resilience, counter information threats, and combat disinformation in collaboration with pertinent governmental entities, NGOs, and global allies. However, as of 2023, its operational capacity remains modest.

Therefore, by the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, Ukraine had a notably institutionalised SC system comprising:

Public Diplomacy domain moulds, modulates and metamorphoses the state's public image abroad. As remarked by S.A. Hutsal [12], before 2015, Ukraine lacked a conceptual grasp of public diplomacy or strategic communications, often eluding even the government's understanding. However, by March 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs formulated a Communication and Public Diplomacy Strategy. The Ukrainian Institute, established in 2017 and functional by 2018, was a key initiative for Ukraine's global image. Its outreach extended to foreign regions, such as Germany, by January 2023.

Information and Psychological Operations (IPSO) are orchestrated efforts to impart targeted information to foreign (enemy) entities, moulding their emotional and cognitive perspectives and influencing both their individual and collective decisions [13]. In the Ukrainian context, agencies like the Special Operations Forces, the Defence Intelligence, and the Centre for Countering Disinformation undertake these operations.

Public Relations (PR) is defined as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics [14]. Apart from formalised departments in the Ukrainian public sector, individual experts or external consultants are often onboarded for PR strategies targeting specific officials or agendas. Despite a structured approach and a transparent command chain, the state's PR communications landscape is intricate and multifaceted, marked by the intricacies of the political milieu, diverse stakeholders, and continuous rivalry, rendering it seemingly chaotic and often not fully aligned.

Some trends in state-driven PR during war include (but are not limited to):

The Personal Touch in State Communication: During the war, as was noted by experts [15], the communication style of the government noticeably shifted, with Ukraine's institutions exuding a demeanour of balance, passion, assurance, and courage. A pivotal moment was the President's decision, along with other key figures, to remain in Kyiv, which at times seemed on the verge of being besieged. This instilled a feeling of safety and unity among the populace. President Zelenskyy emerged as the primary communicator, addressing both international and domestic audiences. As for September 2023, he consistently broadcasted daily video messages, engaged with leading global media, and presented at multiple international events. President's communications blended emotional depth with rational arguments, frequently utilising historical contexts. Integral to his appeal is Zelenskyy's down-to-earth persona and the synergistic communication with First Lady Olena Zelenska. Taking a cue from the President, many leaders of the military administrations, formerly known as region administrations, who had previously been somewhat in the shadows, emerged as distinct communication channels. A standout example is Vitaly Kim, the leader of the Mykolaiv military administration, who quickly rose to prominence by consistently updating the Mykolaiv community with his signature composure and wit.

– *Shifting Institutional Weight in Communication:* As the conflict intensified, communication led by the Ministry of Defence and the Security Service of Ukraine gained prominence, overshadowing outputs from political institutions like the parliament (Verkhovna Rada) and especially political parties. Traditional political figures such as Y. Tymoshenko, P. Poroshenko, or Y. Boyko seem to be receding from the spotlight [16].

– *Unwavering Public Trust in the Military and Volunteer:* The Ukrainian Armed Forces remain the most trusted institution, with trust ratings escalating from 72% in December 2021 to 96% in December 2022. Volunteers also experienced an upsurge in trust from 68% to 84% during the same period [17]. This burgeoning trust is anticipated to translate into political capital post-conflict potentially. Moreover, the war precipitated a significant rise in self-organisation, civilian mutual aid networks, and grassroots movements, which became vital for survival. Sustaining this heightened level of civic participation post-war will be crucial.

– *The Genesis of New Narratives and Symbols:* As Ukraine endures, it is crafting new symbols and myths that have the potential to unify its society. Icons like the "ghost of Kyiv", the canine Patron, and the symbolic defiance of Ukrainian defenders of Zmiinyy island towards a Russian vessel have become part of the national psyche. These myths and heroes are essential, especially in a nation where few figures have been universally revered historically. Notably, current figures like Volodymyr Zelenskyi and Valeriy Zaluzhnyi are now mentioned in the same breath as Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, Taras Shevchenko, and Prince Volodymyr the Baptist [18].

The trends delineated herein are presented concisely, not with the intent of exhaustive description. Nonetheless, highlighting them is vital to grasp the dynamics of SCs within Ukraine's digital realm amid wartime.

The sweeping changes in Ukraine's media landscape following the events of February 2022 underscored the profound transformation of the country's information space. Following Russia's full-scale invasion, President Zelenskyy's administration decisively centralised and controlled traditional media channels, a feat unparalleled since Ukraine's independence. This move sought to diminish the outsized influence of financial-industrial (oligarchic) entities over prominent TV channels and media platforms.

In the name of fostering a unified information policy during martial law, national TV channels were amalgamated into a continuous broadcast («Єдині новини #УАразом») [19]. This realignment led to significant financial repercussions for media moguls such as Viktor Pinchuk, Ihor Kolomoisky, and Dmitry Firtash. Their media empires, once buoyed by advertising revenues and top-tier programming, found themselves reeling from sharp revenue declines and considerable staff departures [20]. In a momentous declaration in July 2022, Rinat Akhmetov, the beneficiary of SCM Group, ceded all terrestrial, satellite TV, and print media licenses in Ukraine to the state.

Furthermore, TV channels associated with pro-Russian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk faced obstructions from National Security and Defence Council sanctions, and those affiliated with former president Petro Poroshenko were removed from digital broadcasting by April 2022.

December 13, 2022, marked the adoption of the long-anticipated Law on Media [21], a pivotal legislation aligned with Ukraine's aspirations to secure EU candidacy. This legislation enhances the regulatory purview of the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting, maintains quotas, and introduces governance over online media.

However, this consolidation of media power by the state coincided with a decline in television viewership, especially after the initial information overload at the war's onset. War times invariably induce adaptability, leading to the proliferation of *rapid, mobile-centric media platforms*. The surge in popularity of such platforms, often unregulated and driven by interpretations instead of objective news, presents challenges and opportunities. These platforms democratise political discourse, lowering barriers to entry and potentially ushering in novel political contenders who parlay media traction into political influence. Such platforms, particularly messengers and bloggers, have begun to exert a transformative influence on Ukraine's political space. They introduce new influencers who have successfully converted their media prominence into political relevance.

Recent studies illuminate the evolving media consumption habits of Ukrainians. A Gradus research study from April 2023 [22] revealed that while news remains paramount, a staggering 69% of Ukrainians predominantly access it via messaging apps such as Telegram and Viber. Traditional television, in comparison, trailed in popularity for both entertainment and news consumption. Furthermore, a July 2023 survey by Civil Network OPORA [23] identified Telegram as Ukraine's foremost social network, reflecting a trust equivalent to television. Interestingly, the ageing population's shift towards platforms like TikTok is notable, hinting at broader societal changes in media consumption. According to TGStat's data from September 2023, the Ukrainian domain of Telegram (inclusive of occupied and annexed territories) included 66 000 channels and 8500 chats showcasing dominance in specific channel categories: News and Media (10.4K channels), Blogs (3.7K channels), Humour and Entertainment (3.7K channels) and Politics (2.1K channels).

The author's analysis of the top 50 Telegram channels (on the number of subscribers), based on TGStat data, reveals that channels boasting over 500 thousand subscribers can have a single post reach between 90 thousand and 1.5 million users. This reach occasionally surpasses even mainstream television programs. Intriguingly, 76% of these top channels remain anonymous, leaving content creation sources shrouded in mystery. Only a meagre 14% are verified by Telegram. That is, the messenger team confirms that the profile represents the declared person, company or organisation.

Among the top 50 channels studied, 70% predominantly feature news content, with only a tiny fraction verified by Telegram (e.g., "Україна сейчас: новости, Украина, Россия" or "Ukraine NOW"). A considerable number merely repackage existing news without generating original content. Their growth strategies sometimes veer into unethical territory, such as creating channel networks or linking to other platforms. Some also rely on content shared with administrators by users (n.d., "Труха Україна", 2.7 million subscribers).

The consumption of news on Telegram also manifests a localised preference. Channels focusing on major cities like Kyiv, Odesa, or Kharkiv naturally attract more subscribers (for example, "Реальный Киев / Украина" with 1 million subscribers, "Одесса INFO 🇺🇦 Новости" – 694K, "Харьков Life | Харків UA" – 572K).

The Ukrainian authorities, recognising the platform's influence, began to adopt Telegram as a communication medium around 2019-2020, inspired by President Zelenskyy. Various government agencies and personal channels of notable officials have since established a significant presence on the platform. In particular, the largest number of subscribers belong to the Security Service of Ukraine (358K), followed by Verkhovna Rada (166.5K), the Office of the President (134.2K), the State Service for Special Communications and Information Protection (98K), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (91.3K), the State Tax Service (52K), the National Police (48.5K), and the Ministry of Digital Transformation (47.6K). Interestingly, the Telegram channels for the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine (233.9K) and the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine (54.4K) were established in March 2023, after Russia's full-scale invasion. Among government officials' personal Telegram channels, the most subscribed include the President of Ukraine channel (Zelenskiy/Official) with 907K subscribers, Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko with 206K subscribers, Minister of Digital Transformation Mykhailo Fedorov boasting 109K, and Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal with 21.7K subscribers.

While governmental agencies and officials have established a presence on Telegram, strategic narrative control remains elusive. The grassroots creation of pro-Ukrainian content often mirrors official messages, yet managing this burgeoning space is a complex endeavour. The transmission of raw news content often necessitates interpretation, and this is where the government's voice often falls silent. In these tumultuous times, we witness the meteoric rise of opinion leaders lacking the requisite expertise in pertinent fields. An August 2022 public opinion poll [24] revealed that the top "opinion leaders" among Ukrainians included President Volodymyr Zelenskyi, recognised by 29% of respondents, and Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (9%). He is outranked by Oleksiy Arestovych (14%), a former advisor to the Office of the President, who actually lacks the necessary expertise. However, for many respondents, Arestovych stood out because his uplifting and reassuring statements fostered hope, provided a positive vision, and offered psychological support.

Thus, the narrative is not solely crafted by official channels. Notable bloggers, representing their interests or those of their backers, have carved out large followings on Telegram. Their significant reach can often overshadow mainstream media outlets. Two such pro-Ukrainian bloggers are "Лачен пише" and "Николаевский ванек," each amassing an audience of 1.3 million. Conversely, anonymous channels and bloggers dominate a considerable segment of the communication spectrum. Some overtly support Russia, while others maintain a purportedly "neutral" posture, crafting narratives with the underlying intention of delegitimising Ukrainian authorities. Examples of these are Yuriy Podolyaka boasting 2.7 million subscribers with an average engagement of 1.6 million users per post, as well as Anatoliy Sharyi with 1.2 million followers, and channels titled "ЛЕГИТИМНЫЙ" and "Резидент" each attracting over 1 million subscribers.

While Telegram dominates the discourse, other platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter each harbour their influential figures. Despite the government's presence across these platforms, the audience often autonomously generates pro-Ukrainian content, aligning with official narratives. Grassroots initiatives, such as the creation of information troops, have surfaced. Moreover, Ukrainian communications during the first year of the full-scale invasion are estimated to be "a whole-of-society endeavour, based on a strong sense of national unity and resilience that translates into a polyphonic, nonhierarchical, and creative strategic communication effort" [3].

Conclusions

In examining the war in Ukraine, it becomes evident that the strategic communications employed during this period were not merely the result of top-down directives or centralised narratives. Instead, they emerged from a *unique blend of state-driven intentions and grassroots efforts*, culminating in what can be termed as the 'subjectlessness' of these communications. This concept refers to the fluidity and adaptability of the messages, not tethered to a single source or perspective but somewhat shaped and reshaped by a variety of actors both at the state and local levels. This dynamic interaction between the top-down narrative formation, driven by political actors and state institutions, and the bottom-up symbolic politics, expressed and shaped by the populace, resulted in an incredibly potent and resonant form of communication. The power of this mix was not just in the messages themselves but also in the diverse range of voices and channels through which they were conveyed, making them both practical and successful in reaching and influencing a broader audience. On the other hand, as the conflict prolongs, internal political fissures may become more visible, potentially intensifying polarisation. The significant proliferation of anonymous Telegram channels also poses a potential threat.

In sum, the digital landscape, as exemplified by the rise of Telegram in Ukraine, reflects and participates in the country's broader political trajectory. While it offers enhanced inclusivity and real-time communication opportunities, it also challenges information integrity and narrative control. For political science, this presents a rich avenue for further exploration, gauging how such platforms will continue to mould the contours of political discourse, influence, and power in the digital age.

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ОРГАНІЗАЦІЯ СТРАТЕГІЧНИХ КОМУНІКАЦІЙ ВІДПОВІДНО ДО СТАНДАРТІВ НАТО

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Проаналізовано основні підходи до організації стратегічних комунікацій у країнах-членах НАТО. Розглянуто особливості організації та виокремлено основні суб'єкти загальнонаціональної системи стратегічних комунікацій у США. Описано типову структуру інформаційного або об'єднаного інформаційного бюро США, яке утворюється залежно від масштабів операції і складу об'єднаного угруповання військ.

Розглянуто місце і роль системи стратегічних комунікацій у Великій Британії, Французькій Республіці, Федеративній Республіці Німеччина та Литовській Республіці.

Проаналізовано особливості фахової діяльності Центру передового досвіду з питань стратегічних комунікацій НАТО (м. Рига, Латвійська Республіка) та Європейського центру протидії гібридним загрозам (м. Гельсінкі, Фінляндська Республіка).

Розглянуто оновлені підходи до планування операцій НАТО та типову структуру підрозділу стратегічних комунікацій J10. Доведено, що основними цілями організації стратегічних комунікацій у країнах-членах НАТО є інформаційно-комунікативне супроводження воєнних операцій, а також місії і діяльності НАТО шляхом включення стратегічних комунікацій до процесів планування на всіх рівнях військового управління та сприяння проведенню відповідних заходів щодо роз'яснення громадянському суспільству особливостей діяльності НАТО.

Доведено, що для сучасних держав та міжнародних інституцій стратегічні комунікації виступають інструментом управління, метою якого є формування (коригування) соціальних систем