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## Internet platforms as alternative sources of information during the Russian-Ukrainian war

### Las plataformas de Internet como fuentes alternativas de información durante la guerra Rusia-Ucrania

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Written by:

**Kateryna Horska<sup>1</sup>**<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3430-6206>

Scopus Author ID: 57449483000; Researcher ID: AAD-8913-2021

**Anzhelika Dosenko<sup>2</sup>**<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5415-1299>

Scopus Author ID: 57211338507; Researcher ID: Z-1396-2019

**Gaiana Iuksel<sup>3</sup>**<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0894-7544>

Scopus Author ID: 57216205308; Researcher ID: AAB-2490-2021

**Lyudmyla Yuldasheva<sup>4</sup>**<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6561-8827>

Researcher ID: Y-6026-2019

**Victorya Solomatova<sup>5</sup>**<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0597-6347>

Scopus Author ID: 57221338041

#### Abstract

The deployment of Russian military aggression in Ukraine actualized the search for additional sources of information about hostilities. The war has shown that the official pro-Kremlin media is spreading outright propaganda. So, the demand for independent and operational information about the situation at the front has led to the emergence of individual observers who use available platforms for their activities. The purpose of the article is to analyze Internet platforms as alternative sources of information about the Russian-Ukrainian war. The research used methods of analysis and synthesis, prognostic method, content analysis. The results trace the peculiarities of the use of digital platforms as sources of information about Russian aggression. The main attention is paid to the peculiarities of work in social networks Facebook and Twitter (we are talking about the channels Hromadske.ua, InformNapalm),

#### Resumen

El despliegue de la agresión militar rusa en Ucrania actualizó la búsqueda de fuentes adicionales de información sobre las hostilidades. La guerra ha demostrado que los medios de comunicación oficiales pro-Kremlin difunden una propaganda descarada. Así que la demanda de información independiente y operativa sobre la situación en el frente ha llevado a la aparición de observadores individuales que utilizan las plataformas disponibles para sus actividades. El objetivo del artículo es analizar las plataformas de Internet como fuentes alternativas de información sobre la guerra ruso-ucraniana. La investigación utilizó métodos de análisis y síntesis, método de pronóstico y análisis de contenido. Los resultados trazan las peculiaridades del uso de las plataformas digitales como fuentes de información sobre la agresión rusa. La principal atención se presta a las peculiaridades del trabajo en las redes sociales Facebook y Twitter (estamos hablando de los

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Habil. (Social communication) Educational and Scientific Institute of Journalism, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine.

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. in Social Communications, Associate Professor of International Journalism, Kyiv University by Borys Hrinchenko, Ukraine.

<sup>3</sup> Ph.D. (Philology), Associate Professor (Docent), Associate Professor (Docent) of the V.I. Vernadsky Taurida National University, Educational & Scientific Institute of Philology and Journalism, Department of Slavic Philology and Journalism, Kyiv, Ukraine.

<sup>4</sup> Ph.D. in Philology Department of Slavic philology and journalism, Tavrida National V.I. Vernadsky University, Ukraine.

<sup>5</sup> Ph.D. in History Department of Event Management, Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts, Kyiv, Ukraine.

messengers (Telegram pages of the Center for countering disinformation at the NSDC, InformNapalm, DeepState). Attention is also drawn to independent OSINT researchers, whose reports made it possible to detect war crimes committed by the Russian army during the occupation of certain areas of Ukrainian territory. The conclusions emphasize the importance of further research into this vector, as independent groups of analysts actively use Internet platforms for work.

**Keywords:** Russian-Ukrainian war, Internet platforms, OSINT analytics, mass media.

## Introduction

The unfolding of Russian aggression in Ukraine, which began in 2014 with the occupation of Crimea and the organization of separatist quasi-state formations (Sydorova et al., 2022), broke out with a new force in February 2022. In fact, it is possible to follow the conduct of hostilities in real-time, as the breadth of the frontline and the saturation of information transmission facilities ensured that footage from both the Ukrainian and Russian sides was quickly aired. This level of saturation changes the perception of war journalism and journalism in general, which are beginning to “compete” with the latest Internet platforms, where all interested parties post content of interest that quickly spreads across the Web. The use of such a tool can become an instrument of propaganda because there is a desire to present one's achievements in a more favorable light in a hard-fought environment (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2018). At the same time, the very principle of presenting military actions is quite revolutionary. Moreover, it is not only the political or informational aspect that is being talked about. Thanks to digital technology, there is also surveillance and recording of the commission of war crimes - for example, Russian shelling of Ukrainian settlements with incendiary shells. Some military specialists, thanks to available videos, make detailed analyses of the tactics of troop movements and their actions in combat.

The use of Internet platforms also has negative manifestations. The use of Internet platforms also has negative aspects, most notably the use of provocative or deceptive materials, covert propaganda, sowing discord and intolerance, etc. (Singh, 2021). (Singh, 2021). In the context of

canales Hromadske.ua, InformNapalm), mensajeros (Telegram páginas del Centro para contrarrestar la desinformación en el NSDC, InformNapalm, DeepState). También se llama la atención sobre los investigadores OSINT independientes, cuyos informes permitieron detectar crímenes de guerra cometidos por el ejército ruso durante la ocupación de determinadas zonas del territorio ucraniano. Las conclusiones subrayan la importancia de seguir investigando este vector, ya que grupos independientes de analistas utilizan activamente las plataformas de Internet para trabajar.

**Palabras clave:** Guerra ruso-ucraniana, plataformas de Internet, análisis OSINT, medios de comunicación de masas.

war, these measures will definitely increase in frequency and frequency of use.

The purpose of this article is to analyze Internet platforms as alternative sources of information about the Russian-Ukrainian war.

## Theoretical Framework or Literature Review

The literary basis of the study consists of the works of European and American scholars who have studied the peculiarities of the functioning of Internet journalism. In particular, the American researchers Brooks & Porter (2020) formed a model of media influence on the ideology of content in social networks. They note that many people now rely on social media as their main sources of information, while at the same time, how the dissemination of media information with ideologies in the whole political space is important for the formation of online discussions outside the networks. Norwegian researchers Karlsen & Aalberg (2021), in their pilot study, determined the impact of Internet media on the formation of consumer trust in content. American researchers Warwick et al., (2021) described the problem of the successful use of social media. In addition, Golbeck (2015) investigated the peculiarities of the development of modern Internet journalism, characterized the main features of Twitter.

At the same time, Pavlik (2022), a well-known American researcher of the influence of modern technology on the media, described the key features of the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the Western media. Hurska (2021) described the main manifestations of

hybrid warfare using the events in Ukraine as an example. Key aspects of the information confrontation between Ukraine and Russia are reflected in the work of Romanian scholars Bină&Dragomir (2020). The Bulgarian researcher Michailova (2022) explored similar issues. Ukrainian researcher Bukina (2022) described the importance of media literacy during Ukraine's hybrid war. On the other hand, Veselkov (2022) investigated the specifics of information warfare since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russians. Zhabotynska & Ryzhova (2022) analyzed pro-Russian Chinese media and identified the main disinformation facts disseminated by these media. The methodological basis of the article is also based on the findings of researchers who have studied the peculiarities of information security in the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In particular, Prokopenko (2022) studied the key aspects of information policy formation in the conditions of global challenges of modernity. Hbur (2022) identified the theoretical foundations of information security of Ukraine as a significant part of the national security of the country as a whole.

### Methodology

The study is formed based on analysis and synthesis, by which initially the main subject of research (Internet platforms) is divided into smaller parts (problems): features of the use of Internet journalism in the conditions of military operations, coverage of war events on Twitter, the value of Telegram channels for informing the population is investigated. Later these parts are combined and their own judgments are formed. Based on the predictive method the problem of further use of Internet platforms as sources of coverage of the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war was reflected.

The study analyzed the individual Internet sites talking about the war and their acanthus in social networks, in particular, Facebook and Twitter: Hromadske.ua, InformNapalm, Ukraine Crisis Media Center, etc. At the same time, much attention is paid to the role of modern Telegram channels in informing, for this purpose such channels as the Center for Counteracting Disinformation under the National Security and Defense Council, Spravdi, InformNapalm, DeepState, etc. are studied. Particular attention is paid to the personal channels and pages of famous politicians.

The descriptive method, which was implemented to implement the theoretical basis of the

scientific work and the main theoretical postulates of the functioning of platforming and content; content analysis of the content of the platforms in the period of four months from July to October 2022. The method of surveying 1000 respondents to find out the estimated number of platforms subscribed to by different categories of respondents.

During the survey, respondents were asked to indicate the range of Internet resources and digital channels of information transmission that they used to obtain truthful information about events in Ukraine, in particular, about the unfolding of Russian military aggression. To complete, the survey was divided into age groups, which made it possible to determine the dynamics of the influence of digital journalism on the audience, according to preferences. Based on this, it was possible to generalize about the greater impact of the transmission of digital information on social processes in the future. Such a result could also be obtained thanks to the combination of interviews with the forecast method

### Results and Discussion

#### Digital Platforms as Sources of Information on Russian Aggression: Features of Use

Of particular importance in covering the events of the Russo-Ukrainian war is Twitter, a social network where users can create messages (tweets) with a maximum length of 280 characters and share them with their followers (Golbeck, 2015). In particular, the independent media resource Hromadske.ua is dedicated to news and events in Ukraine. It actively monitors the events of the war in Ukraine and shares information about the consequences of local residents. InformNapalm media platform specializes in tracking Russian aggression in Ukraine and other countries. Their Twitter account distributes all sorts of news about the war in Ukraine and provides comprehensive analysis of Russian propaganda in social networks. A non-profit resource called Ukraine Crisis Media Center was created to implement information analytics regarding various events in Ukraine. The account generates special reports on the war and shares analyses of the situation in certain areas. In general, this resource covers various topical reports related to the war in Ukraine, which cover economic, political, humanitarian and cultural issues. According to a study of Ukraine Crisis Media Center content on their Twitter account, several themes can be identified. First, reporting on the war and

violations of major international conventions by the Russians is important. The platform regularly reports on the situation on the front, including a number of crimes committed by the Russians, analyzes the statistics of attacks on Ukrainian Bpositions, etc. (Center for countering disinformation at the NSDC, 2023, February 20). Second, a separate focus of the account is humanitarian aid and the protection of human rights: the platform provides up-to-date information about humanitarian aid to residents in frontline areas, as well as information about the protection of human rights in the realities of war (Center for countering disinformation at the NSDC, 2023, February 25). On the other hand, the platform characterizes Russian propaganda, analyzes Russian fakes, disinformative messages, and demonstrates how the Russian media falsify the real facts about the events in Ukraine. Also, this resource publishes actual political statements of presidents, governments, politicians of different countries about the events in Ukraine and its support. Their official page has a separate section called Russia attacks Ukraine: live update, where news related to the Russian-Ukrainian war is constantly updated (Ukraine Crisis, 2022), the section links to current updates on Twitter.

Recently, Telegram has become especially popular and is displacing Facebook as a source of communication and information delivery (Bukina, 2022). The key reason for this is that Facebook has not changed at all in recent years (Karpitskaya & Chuyanava, 2021), and the generation that grew up on it, therefore, it does not meet the basic needs and requirements of today's younger generation (Pavlik, 2022). Therefore, Telegram positions itself as a mainstream messenger whose key goal is to provide a safe environment for communication. The main distinguishing feature of this platform is channels that are completely different from those on Twitter or Facebook (Warwick et al., 2021). This platform works in a very different way, it satisfies the demands of society directly through the delivery of short these messages at maximum speed. Consequently, the key features of Telegram are promptness, speed, and accessibility. Ukrainian Telegram functions through so-called nets: channels that display current social and political topics and often distribute materials from one channel to another (Pavlik, 2022). What distinguishes them is their openness and anonymity, i.e., they can be hosted on behalf of a well-known political, cultural, or other figure. In addition, they are formed based on anonymity, that is, no one will know their origin and it is not always easy to establish their

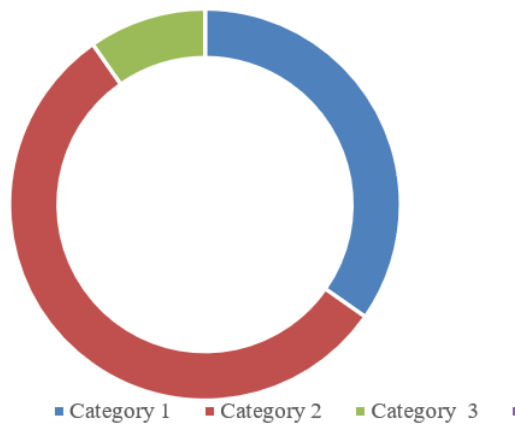
key purpose. These factors often influence the formation of the illusion of freedom in Telegram (Brooks & Porter, 2020).

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, the messaging platform has become a digital war news distribution network (Hbur, 2022). Contemporary researchers note that it is a tool for governments and citizens on both sides to share information (Prokopenko, 2022). Many Ukrainian politicians, parties, and officials, including President V. Zelensky, run their own channels. The Russian government does the same. Consequently, the Telegram network has become the main social Internet platform offering an unfiltered view of the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war. It is known that the Ukrainian government quickly repurposed the official channel COVID-19, which had been used in recent years to share news about the spread of the crown virus and to provide official effective information on the fight against it. This project was renamed UkraineNow and now has more than four million readers on Ukrainian and English channels. Minister of Digital Transformation N. Fedorov's team used this program to recruit the so-called "T Army," now consisting of 300,000 cybersecurity volunteers. President V. Zelensky actively uses Telegram to report important news and share personal videos with the world. As of February 2023, his channel had more than 9 million people. At the same time, Ukrainian authorities have found several other practical uses for the platform. Most different cities and towns or local authorities organize their own Telegram channels. In this way, authorities disseminate various air raid warnings, shelter map data, security information, etc. Consequently, since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, this platform has become not only a means of receiving information but also acts as a kind of way to inform the civilian population. There are also special telegram bots through which Ukrainian citizens can report on the movement of Russian troops or equipment (Pace University (n.d.)). The most common Telegram channels in Ukraine are: Center for Countering Disinformation under the CNBO, Spravdi, Inform Napalm, Deep State, Public, etc. A special feature of the DeepState platform is the map of military operations, which reflects in detail all the territorial changes in the war. In addition, the resource maintains detailed daily analytics and a review of events on the front. The Center for Countering Disinformation debunks major propaganda fakes and disinformation messages. In particular, the official website of the Center contains important messages, such as "What is the purpose of the

main Kremlin IPSOs in the war against Ukraine,” “Behind Putin's Address to the Federal Assembly,” “How the Kremlin Altered Entire Wars Against Ukraine,” etc. The International Intelligence Community's InformNapalm channel has over 150,000 subscribers and is a volunteer initiative to disseminate current news and reporting on the Russian-Ukrainian war. DeepState contains important analysis about events on the front in Ukraine. AFU-operational channel, with 450 thousand subscribers, actively disseminates reports on current news regarding

the situation on the front and the successes of the AFU.

Also, the interview was provided. Respondents had the question: "How many platforms and publics are you subscribed to in order to be constantly informed about events in Ukraine?". All respondents were divided into age categories. The first category was Youth (18 to 35). The second category was Middle (35–50 years old). The third group was Old (from 50 to 61 years old). Schematically, it can be represented as follows.



**Fig. 1.** The amount of platforms subscribed to by respondents of different age categories

In results we obtained the following statistic: the first age category receives information systematically from at least 5 to 8 platforms or publics. The second category is from 5-11, but 75% of the respondents of this age category indicate that they have at least 3 publics that they prioritize and trust the most among all subscribers. The third age category subscribes to 3 to 6 telegram channels and media platforms that they trust the most and do not take into account others, because they are authoritative for them. Also, the specified age category informs that they receive news from traditional mass media, which are more authoritative for them than other sources.

As a result, we obtained the following statistics: representatives of the first age group systematically received information from at least 5-8 platforms or online publics. Representatives of the second category indicated that they have at least 3 publics that they consider to be quite authoritative. People in the third age group subscribe to 3-6 telegram channels or other online platforms that they trust. At the same time, these people also consider traditional media reports to be authoritative, which are sometimes trusted much more. Thus, representatives of the

younger generation have more trust in online resources and digital media than older people. This indicates that trust in online journalism and digital information channels will continue to grow.

**OSINT research on the Russian-Ukrainian war**

OSINT platforms became popular during the Russian-Ukrainian war, publishing private investigative information and having high efficiency (Kordan, 2022). Open-source intelligence (OSINT) is a theoretical methodology, concept, and definition of tools for searching and retrieving military, political, and economic information in principle using open sources that are not in violation of law (Hurska, 2021). These analytics are acceptable for use in national defense and security decision-making, operational investigative procedures, etc. (Veselkov, 2022). Typically, OSINT consists of the following elements: finding information resources, registering them, recording and analytic-synthetic parsing of “raw” information, storing the resulting data, disseminating it, and setting up security. Primary data, even from open sources, with the proper level of processing, can

contain a lot of valuable information, which after synthetic parsing can already be secret (if there is a need to have the status of state secrets) (D'Anieri, 2019). In addition to photographs and television footage, the field of analysts includes media publications, scientific publications and conference presentations, open government data, commercial literature, patent information, radio monitoring, and aerial surveys from open sources (e.g., Google Maps).

Such research, due to the development of digital technology, is being done not only by professional analysts and intelligence agencies but also by ordinary users who like to investigate (Pawłowski et al., 2022). Since information is publicly available on the Internet, it is not forbidden by law (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021). In the realities of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, such analysts have had several notable successes that have become global sensations, unfortunately with a negative flavor.

On July 17, 2014, the Malaysian Boeing 777 was shot down in the sky over the Donetsk region. Bellingcat group of private researchers, based on the analysis of the available material on the web, determined that the perpetrators of the tragedy were pro-Russian separatists, who used Buk SAM of one of the Russian brigades (apparently, under the command of the Russian military) to carry out the attack. The Russian side concealed this crime for a long time, but the case before the Dutch court established the direct involvement of Russian citizens in this act (Inform Napalm, 2023). During the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Russian Ministry of Defense and the official Kremlin attempt to recognize the released photographs and video evidence of Russian brutality and crime as provocations and staging for the European and American media (Bîñă & Dragomir, 2020).

The official Kremlin media have long denied the crimes of Russian troops in Bucha, noting that local residents were not harmed and that exits from the city were not blocked. Such assessments were picked up on pro-Russian Internet platforms, and there were even attempts to disprove the Wikipedia article in question as false. At the same time, OSINT specialists from the U.S. company Maxar Technologies were the first to try to refute the fakes of Kremlin propaganda. Having analyzed satellite photos, they presented pictures of tortured bodies left in Bucha after the Russian military left there. Thanks to this, it is established that civilians began to be killed from March 9-11. They were in the same places where they were found by the

Ukrainian military who liberated Bucha on March 31. Based on OSINT analysis, it was possible to establish that the killed civilians had been in this position for three weeks - the said crime was definitely committed by the Russian military. The information of private OSINT-researchers, when verified, turned out to be true and was published by several well-known American publications on their websites.

A weighty Internet platform for independent experiments was the Dutch project Oryx. It is based on OSINT analytics, a confirmation of combat losses in equipment based on open sources. Initially, this site was focused on the Syrian war. However, since February 2022, the focus has been on Russian aggression. Thanks to the detailed work of this project, the catastrophic losses of the Russian army in Ukraine are now proven. It is primarily about military equipment, as Oryx specialists work with visual sources, collecting information about destroyed, captured, and disabled combat vehicles, tanks, artillery, etc. At the same time, OSINT researchers are functioning, researching personnel losses. For example, the account NecroMancer (which operates on the platform of the social network Twitter) from 2014 calculates losses of pro-Russian separatists and the Russian army in eastern Ukraine. For this purpose, it uses information from open sources - primarily social networks. He supports his calculations and messages not only with messages taken out of context, but also with photos from funeral sites, official reports of the Russian authorities, etc.

So, OSINT analytics looks like an extremely promising independent branch of journalism that posts relevant information on relevant Internet platforms (Bila & Hrytsenko, 2022). Although these studies can spread fakes and propaganda, individual groups of researchers value their renown and report only verified information.

## Conclusions

Internet platforms have become influential alternative sources of information about the course of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The digitalization of society has resulted in information that can be obtained and transmitted instantly. Because of this, the Internet has become an influential field for the emergence of independent research that is not devoid of subjectivity (personal or planned). In particular, the Russian-Ukrainian war is actively represented in social networks that span the entire modern world. For example, there are independent Hromadske.ua, InformNapalm, and

other media researchers on Twitter who specialize in reviewing the consequences and course of Russian aggression in Ukraine. There are also descriptions of military actions and separate information on them on Facebook and other powerful platforms. The resources of messengers are also actively used to disseminate independent information. In Ukraine, Telegram is particularly popular, with individual groups disseminating information about the course of hostilities and other messages. Such groups also have a political bias (pro-Russian, pro-Ukrainian).

The work of OSINT researchers has become an important area of activity, which the Russian-Ukrainian war has brought to the fore. Independent groups of experts and analysts working with open-access information have dispelled several myths of Russian propaganda and attested to the war crimes committed by the Russian army since 2014. For example, Belingcat group was one of the first to provide weighty photo and video evidence of Russian military involvement in Boeing 777 damage in July 2014. Also, other groups of private analysts proved by open source materials the involvement of the Russian military in the mass murder of civilians in Bucha, Kyiv region. Although the OSINT research community is also biased, serious international groups value their own reputations and do not allow doubts about the truthfulness of their own investigations. Further research in this area is quite promising since through the use of Internet platforms private groups of analysts are able to act as a valid alternative to the official media.

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