

Journalists, Social Media and News Consumption

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Between Precarity and the War: Journalists' Safety in Ukraine

Dariya Orlova (Mohyla School of Journalism, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy) and Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova (University of Liverpool)

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Abstract

This article examines the state of journalists' safety in Ukraine during wartime, drawing on survey data from the Worlds of Journalism Study and focusing on the four dimensions of safety—physical, psychological, financial, and digital. The analysis also incorporates available secondary data on the state of media and journalism in Ukraine to provide a comprehensive overview of the threats and risks associated with practising journalism in wartime Ukraine and to discuss the implications of these risks for the media environment. This article contributes to the study of journalism's precarity aggravated by war conditions.

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 has caused unprecedented challenges and threats for Ukrainian media and journalists. Damage has occurred on multiple levels, as documented by media NGOs and international organizations. Dozens of journalists have been killed and kidnapped; more than 300 media outlets have had to close down (IMI, 2025), and almost one-third of the media have had to suspend their work at some point following the invasion (LMF, 2025). The media market has been hit along with the rest of Ukraine's economy, and the list of dire consequences could go on. While each of these aspects merits attention and exploration, this analysis focuses on one critical dimension of the challenging environment for Ukrainian media and journalists—the issue of safety. Drawing on survey data collected within the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS), a cross-national academic research project that assesses the state of journalism around the world, the article highlights the extent of risks and dangers as perceived by journalists and the various dimensions of safety and discusses implications for the media environment in Ukraine against a backdrop of ongoing war and related pressures on journalism.

Journalists' Safety and Why It Matters?

Journalists' safety is widely regarded as one of the primary indicators of the state of journalism, freedom of speech, and the overall health of democracy. Any impediment to journalists' work undermines the overall safety of the profession. The concept of journalist safety has been a matter of both academic and policy-related discussion, especially given the ever-expanding range of threats and risks journalists may face due to changes in technological affordances for pressuring journalists. This article relies on the definition employed by the Safety of Journalists Index¹ developed within the Worlds of Journalism Study.

According to this definition, journalists' safety is conceptualized as “the extent to which journalists can perform their work-related tasks without facing threats to their physical, psychological, digital, and financial integrity and well-being” (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). The proposed approach thus identifies four dimensions of safety—physical, psychological, digital and financial. While the notion of journalists' safety has long been associated primarily with the physical dimension because of the potentially gravest effect of physical attacks on journalists, other types of threats also impact journalists' ability to perform their work and serve their publics. Psychological pressure and stress are becoming more widely recognized as serious issues that may undermine journalists' safety. The burden of witnessing and reporting traumatic events, such as the ongoing Russian war on Ukraine, has a palpable effect on journalists' psychological health (Matviyenko and Larin, 2025). The scale of digital technology proliferation adds another layer to the vulnerability of journalists through digital surveillance and intimidation, often resulting in “hostile attacks” and “digital harassment” (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2024). Finally, the lack of financial security has led to increased precarity among the journalists, a trend observed globally. By and large, any risks or threats journalists may face while performing their professional duties undermine their occupational safety, make journalism vulnerable and impact its quality (Waisbord, 2018)—all with grave consequences for democracy as well.

While the problem of journalists' safety has recently attracted increased attention, particularly in the context of conversations on a multifaceted crisis of journalism in the West caused by structural changes in the news economy, the rise of populist forces, and the precarization of the profession (e.g., Waisbord, 2020; Zelizer 2015), Ukrainian journalism has largely been overlooked in the scholarly literature. Russia's full-scale invasion of

1 <https://safetyofjournalists.org/index>

Ukraine has drawn attention to Ukrainian media and journalists, especially those of NGOs and international organizations advocating for press freedom and journalists' rights, such as Reporters Without Borders, Committee to Protect Journalists, and others. Their reports, as well as the efforts of Ukrainian media NGOs to document the challenges, experiences, and threats Ukrainian journalists have been encountering, provide a valuable source of information on the media landscape during wartime and help to contextualize the data on journalists' safety from the Worlds of Journalism Study.

Ukrainian Journalists During the Full-Scale War. Challenges and Vulnerabilities

Russia's war against Ukraine has been affecting Ukrainian media and journalism since 2014, following the annexation of Crimea and the eruption of the armed conflict in the eastern regions of Ukraine. The earlier stage of the war, spanning eight years before the full-scale invasion, had already scarred Ukrainian journalism in many ways. Dozens of journalists had to leave their homes, as their regions had been directly occupied or controlled by Russia, and many outlets had to shut down due to repression. The occupation went hand in hand with pressure on journalists, persecutions, coercion, detentions, and seizure of media facilities—all aimed at silencing or driving out independent journalists and establishing a tightly controlled media system to serve propagandistic goals of the occupying authorities (Detector Media, 2024). The impact of the war before the full-scale invasion, however, had a more pronounced regional dimension, primarily affecting journalists in the occupied regions of Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, as well as journalists from areas adjacent to the frontline. While the frontline reporting posed substantial challenges in terms of journalists' safety, the danger was rather localized along the frontline.

The full-scale invasion marked a critical point in this regard. The brutal toll of the full-scale war became evident from the very first days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. During the following months, at least 22 journalists were killed while performing their professional duties (UNESCO, 2025), nearly 30 journalists were kidnapped, and more than 30 newsrooms were seized or damaged (IMI, 2025). Physical safety has been a major concern for the media, given the countless indiscriminate air missile and drone attacks across the entire country and the threats of frontline reporting, which, among others, include deliberate targeting of the press by the Russian military (RFS, 2025a). Other forms of physical violence have been enacted against journalists in the areas occupied by Russia, including coercion, threats, arbitrary arrests, and prosecution (Oliinyk et al., 2024; ZMINA, 2025a). According to a Ukrainian human

rights organization, ZMINA, at least 26 Ukrainian journalists from the occupied areas have been detained as of 2025, with 17 out of those being Crimean journalists (ZMINA, 2025b). Reporters without Borders has identified 29 Ukrainian media professionals detained by Russia, most of whom were arrested in occupied territories (RFS, 2025b). Notably, some of the journalists on these lists have been in captivity since before the full-scale invasion. According to the IMI, at least 100 Ukrainian journalists have been captured by Russia since 2014 (IMI, 2024c). Human rights organizations have reported that detained journalists often face torture, intimidation, forced labour, and a lack of access to medical and legal aid (RFS, 2025b; ZMINA, 2025; MIHR, 2024).

Not only have individual journalists suffered from the dangers of the war, but the media has also been hit at an institutional level. According to the IMI, more than 300 Ukrainian media outlets have had to halt operations during the first three years of the full-scale war, and only 16% of those managed to resume their activities over time (IMI, 2024e). In a survey conducted by the Lviv Media Forum (LMF) NGO, 40% of media outlets and 44% of journalists experienced physical or material damage due to Russian aggression (LMF, 2025). In most cases, they have lost some property and had their premises or equipment destroyed or damaged. Local media from areas that had been either occupied or nearly destroyed by Russia during its advances have been disproportionately affected. In many cases, their facilities and equipment were seized and used by the occupying administrations to install their own media (IMI, 2024d). Numerous media outlets had to shut down, and their workers fled the regions that fell victim to occupation or heavy fighting. While media monitoring NGOs have been trying to document cases of Russia's crimes against journalism and media in occupied areas, there is a lack of comprehensive and reliable information about the situation there. However, the existing evidence reveals dreadful conditions for the safety of journalists.

The scale of the war and the pervasiveness of the attacks on civilian infrastructure have critically affected the psychological and mental state of Ukrainian citizens. Owing to the character of their professional occupation, journalists are disproportionately exposed to war-related trauma and stress. The psychological implications of the war on journalists have attracted substantial attention from local NGOs and international organizations, who have advocated for the protection of journalists' rights. This issue has been addressed in a number of surveys of journalists. According to one study, 85 per cent of interviewed journalists reported having some psychological problems because of the war (LMF, 2025). The Institute of Mass Information (IMI) has also conducted several waves of surveys focusing on mental health issues among

Ukrainian journalists and reported an increase in levels of fatigue from 59% in 2023 to 75% in 2024 and in depression or hopelessness from 35% in 2023 to 67% in 2024 (IMI, 2024a). Another survey, by the 2402 Foundation (Daily Humanity), also revealed the prevalence of stress and anxiety as the most widespread emotional reactions of journalists with regard to their work (75 per cent and 70 per cent, respectively) (2402 Foundation, 2025).

Notably, despite apparent threats to physical safety, psychological exhaustion, lack of rest, and constant stress were reported as the main challenge faced by media professionals in 2024, according to a survey by the Institute of Mass Information (IMI, 2024b).

Although they differ in their methodological approaches and timeframes, these surveys reveal a general trend of ubiquitous adverse effects of the war on the mental state of journalists in Ukraine. To address this issue, many media NGOs, foundations, and international organizations have increasingly incorporated mental health and psychological aid elements into their support programs for Ukrainian media, including psychological support groups and retreat trips. However, these kinds of assistance have limited availability and effectiveness given the scale of the problem. Increased workload, financial constraints, and other pressing concerns also restrain journalists from receiving psychological help. According to the Lviv Media Forum survey, the vast majority of respondents (70%) who reported having psychological issues have not sought psychological assistance (LMF, 2025).

Burnout among media workers has been another widespread problem, highlighted in reports from media support organizations, with some estimates suggesting that 85% of journalists have experienced professional burnout because of constant overload, emotionally heavy content, a loss of purpose in their work, and other factors (2402 Foundation, 2025).

Unfortunately, there is a lack of data on the state of mental well-being and stress levels among Ukrainian journalists before the full-scale invasion, which makes comparisons difficult. It seems reasonable to assume that the war has been a major contributing factor to the discussed problems. However, burnout, work overload, and related stress are common attributes of journalism precarity, which has been increasing globally (Rick and Hanitzsch, 2023), rather than only in vulnerable countries such as Ukraine.

The precarity of journalism in Ukraine is also vividly manifested in the extent of financial difficulties in the media. According to the IMI, economic and financial problems ranked second after psychological challenges in the list of top challenges journalists encountered in 2024 (IMI, 2024b). Another study by the Media Development Foundation (MDF) also revealed that a lack of funds was among the top three problems Ukrainian local media faced last year, along with staff shortages and psy-

chological burden (MDF, 2025a). Independent Ukrainian media have long been struggling financially, and the war has further exacerbated these struggles. Nearly 70% of the media reported financial decline, according to the LMF survey (LMF, 2025). Another financial blow occurred in early 2025 after USAID stopped providing aid to Ukrainian media. Most of the independent media in Ukraine have relied on foreign grant support to a greater or lesser degree over the past few years (MDF, 2025b). Foreign aid helped sustain the media in a challenging economic environment, and it also increased in response to full-scale invasion (LMF, 2024). According to some estimates, foreign donors provided almost \$150 million to support the development of Ukraine's media sector between 2010 and 2019 (CIMA, 2022). The departure of USAID, which had previously been among the leading supporters, signalled a new crisis for Ukrainian media and journalism (Dutsyk and Umland, 2025; MDF, 2025b), adding further economic pressure to the already vulnerable and fragile sector.

The digital dimension of journalists' safety has also been substantially compromised because of the full-scale invasion. While it is less discussed than other aspects of journalists' safety, there is considerable evidence of the increased aggressiveness of cyberattacks targeting Ukraine, potentially including media organizations (Oliynyk et al., 2024; Internews, 2023). Multiple cases of online harassment and threats have been reported as well. For instance, more than 1,500 emails threatening a bomb attack were sent to Ukrainian media outlets, government agencies and other institutions in October 2024, blaming three Ukrainian journalists for provoking the alleged attack (CPJ, 2024). The Institute of Mass Information has documented 110 cybercrimes against journalists during the full-scale invasion, including DDoS attacks on media outlets, phishing attempts, and other incidents (IMI, 2025).

The discussed challenges reveal the complexity of the environment in which Ukrainian journalists have been operating in recent years. A number of structural issues had shaped the precarity of journalism in Ukraine before the full-scale invasion; the war aggravated them and added a whole new layer of existential threats and operational risks for Ukrainian journalists. The following section draws on data from the Worlds of Journalism Study survey to examine how journalists evaluate their safety across the four outlined dimensions.

Ukraine in the Global Index on Journalists' Safety

As outlined above, the full-scale war and its impact on Ukrainian journalists have attracted substantial attention from local media NGOs and international organizations, which has resulted, among other things, in an increased number of surveys of media professionals compared with

previous periods. While all these surveys contain valuable data, their methodological approaches sometimes lack consistency and comprehensiveness. This section presents data collected during the third wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study (2021–2024), which relies on a common conceptual and methodological framework, allowing for comparisons among participating countries and, prospectively, comparisons of dynamics in separate countries over time.

The WJS survey contains several blocks of questions that address various dimensions of journalism culture, such as professional role orientations, epistemologies, ethics etc. The third wave of the study incorporated safety questions designed in cooperation with UNESCO. On the basis of these questions, as well as data from UNESCO's Observatory of Killings, the WJS Global Index on Journalists' Safety was developed. The index is compiled on the basis of a worldwide survey of 30,890 journalists in 73 countries conducted between 2021 and 2024. The index consists of four dimensions—physical, psychological, digital, and financial safety. The physical dimension contributes 50% to the overall score, the psychological dimension contributes 25%, the digital dimension contributes 12.5% and the financial dimension contributes 12.5%.²

The two previous waves of the WJS have not included Ukraine. The Ukrainian dataset for the third wave was collected in 2023–2024, with a total of 185 surveyed journalists. Although the survey has not yet reached the threshold necessary for qualification as representative, the sampling approach attempted to maximize representativeness to the extent possible.

The Safety Index is based on a score ranging from 0 to 100 that is assigned to each country. A score of 100 indicates the safest conditions for journalists, whereas 0 indicates the worst possible score, suggesting the least safe environment for journalists. Ukraine received a score of 69.21, which placed it in 58th place out of 73 countries in the Index. Among the four dimensions of safety, the digital dimension has the strongest position, even though digital threats such as the hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites were reported by the surveyed journalists (see Table 1 on p. 8).

All three other dimensions reveal substantial vulnerabilities among Ukrainian journalists. For example, more than half (54.1%) of the respondents (strongly) agreed with the statement “I am concerned about my physical wellbeing”. Furthermore, 69.2% expressed concerns about their emotional well-being. More than one-third of surveyed journalists were concerned about losing their jobs in journalism within the next 12 months (WJS Ukraine, 2025). Notably, approximately two-thirds of

the respondents (70.3%) reported feeling stressed at work often or very often during the previous six months. WJS survey data confirm the trends identified in other surveys of Ukrainian journalists, that is, the acuteness of physical and psychological safety challenges. The financial dimension of safety appears somewhat less pressing on the basis of the WJS data; however, this could be explained by the timeframe of data collection. The survey was conducted before the abrupt cuts of USAID's aid to Ukrainian media in early 2025, which significantly restructured the entire foreign media assistance aid landscape.

WJS survey results reveal the adverse effects of the war on journalists' safety in Ukraine, as evidenced through a comparative analysis of data from other CEE countries that often share many structural similarities with Ukraine in terms of their media landscapes.

For instance, compared with 54.1% of Ukrainian journalists reporting concerns for their physical well-being, 25.1%, 12.2%, 42.3% and 31.1% of journalists in Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria, respectively, reported such concerns. In terms of concerns about emotional well-being, the numbers show similar comparative dynamics. While 69.2% of Ukrainian journalists expressed concerns about their emotional well-being, the numbers were significantly lower in Poland (36.6%), Slovakia (28.3%), Romania (47.2%), and Bulgaria (41.9%). Approximately half as many journalists as in Ukraine reported fears of losing their jobs in neighbouring countries, at rates of 13.4% in Poland, 14% in Slovakia, 9.8% in Romania, and 16% in Bulgaria.

In regard to actual experiences of threats, attacks such as demeaning or hateful speech, public discrediting of journalists' work, and questioning of their morality were among the most common (Table 1 on p. 8). It should be noted, however, that the survey instrument was developed as a universal one for the entire WJS network, which means that it might lack some context-specific questions or response options to capture the peculiarities of the context. In the case of Ukraine, for instance, recurring air missile and drone attacks have threatened the safety of all citizens across the country, including journalists, but they are largely perceived as war-related, specific threats rather than as common threats associated with the occupation of journalism. However, these threats, along with other pressures journalists encounter in their work, have been shaping their physical and psychological safety, or rather, their lack of it. At the same time, journalists' responses suggest that despite the limitations of martial law and concerns around national security that often entail diminished freedom of speech, Ukrainian journalists have, for the most part, experienced a low level of pressure from the government and domestic actors (see Table 1 on p. 8).

2 See detailed methodology <https://safetyofjournalists.org/index/methodology>

Conclusions

The Safety Index shows that Ukrainian journalists have been working in an immensely stressful and risky environment, one of the worse among the 73 studied countries. There is only one European country that scores lower than Ukraine in the index, namely, Albania. Most of the other countries in the lower part of the index have low levels of political and press freedoms, including Venezuela, Ethiopia, Turkey, and Kazakhstan, among others. Ukraine's low place in the Safety Index is explained by the large number of actual killings of journalists documented, as well as high levels of concern Ukrainian journalists express with regard to their physical and emotional wellbeing. Ukrainian media professionals are also commonly more worried about their job security than their colleagues in other European countries.

Although there is a lack of reliable data on the safety of Ukrainian journalism before the full-scale invasion to ensure accurate comparative analysis, it is reasonable to assume that the overall level of precarity of the profession was quite high before the invasion. The war has dramatically exacerbated the situation. While foreign aid, both financial and technical, has been instrumental in sustaining the bulk of the media outlets and

necessary infrastructures for journalism under the conditions of an ongoing war, actual losses in the media sector, including human and organizational capacity, have been profound. The departure of USAID as a crucial donor and the subsequent restructuring of foreign aid pose another risk for the Ukrainian media, which have found it increasingly difficult to secure funds for their work in the economy hit by the war. Financial challenges loom as critical from short- and mid-term perspectives. The psychological toll is unlikely to decrease, given the scale of accumulated stress, fatigue, and workload. Aggravated precarity is also evident in the reported personnel deficit. Journalism remains a poorly paid profession with numerous accompanying pressures, which makes it difficult to attract new professionals. Finally, the continuation of the war is likely to amplify the structural challenges outlined in the article and create new ones. A protracted war of the current intensity tends to erode institutions and place immense pressure on society as a whole. The strength of Ukrainian journalism as an institution will continue to be tested. The response to safety threats and precarity, which media, journalists, and other stakeholders are to find, will shape the state of journalism and define the capacity to address the dire consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine.

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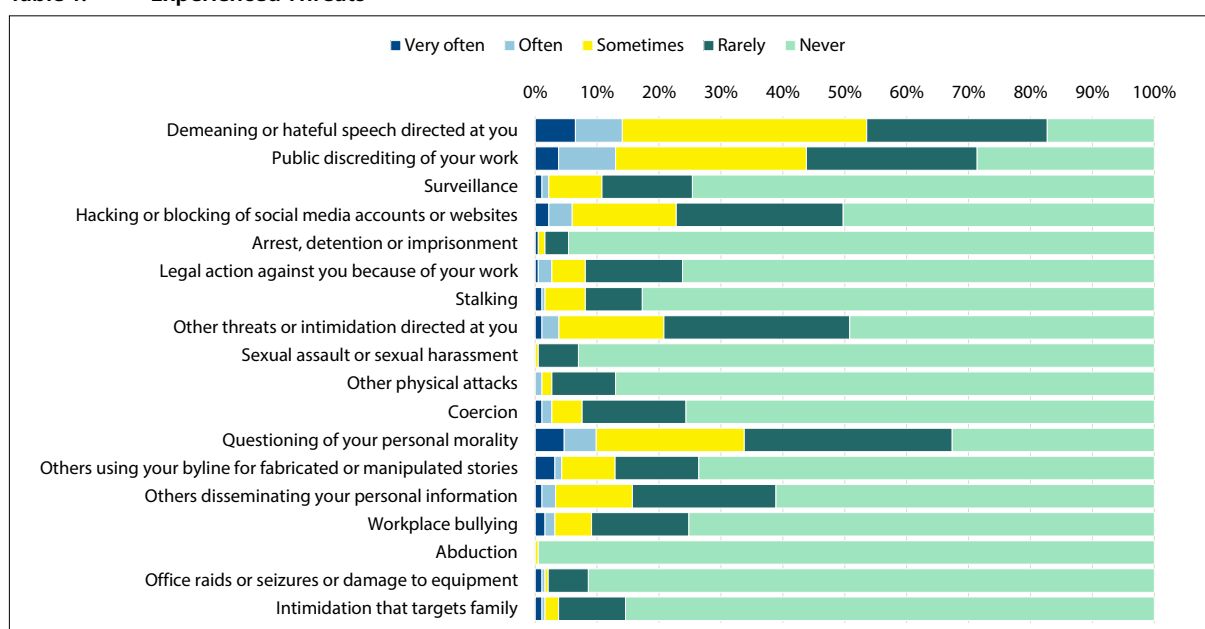
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Table 1: Experienced Threats



| | Very often | Often | Sometimes | Rarely | Never |
|--|------------|-------|-----------|--------|-------|
| Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you | 6.5% | 7.6% | 39.5% | 29.2% | 17.3% |
| Public discrediting of your work | 3.8% | 9.2% | 30.8% | 27.6% | 28.6% |
| Surveillance | 1.1% | 1.1% | 8.6% | 14.6% | 74.6% |
| Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites | 2.2% | 3.8% | 16.8% | 27.0% | 50.3% |
| Arrest, detention or imprisonment | 0.5% | 0.0% | 1.1% | 3.8% | 94.6% |
| Legal action against you because of your work | 0.5% | 2.2% | 5.4% | 15.7% | 76.2% |
| Stalking | 1.1% | 0.5% | 6.5% | 9.2% | 82.7% |
| Other threats or intimidation directed at you | 1.1% | 2.7% | 16.8% | 29.7% | 48.7% |
| Sexual assault or sexual harassment | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.5% | 6.5% | 93.0% |
| Other physical attacks | 0.0% | 1.1% | 1.6% | 10.3% | 87.0% |
| Coercion | 1.1% | 1.6% | 4.9% | 16.8% | 75.7% |
| Questioning of your personal morality | 4.9% | 5.4% | 25.0% | 35.1% | 34.1% |
| Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories | 3.2% | 1.1% | 8.6% | 13.5% | 73.5% |
| Others disseminating your personal information | 1.1% | 2.2% | 12.4% | 23.2% | 61.1% |
| Workplace bullying | 1.6% | 1.6% | 5.9% | 15.7% | 75.1% |
| Abduction | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.5% | 0.0% | 99.5% |
| Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment | 1.1% | 0.5% | 0.5% | 6.5% | 91.4% |
| Intimidation that targets family | 1.1% | 0.5% | 2.2% | 10.8% | 85.4% |

N = 185

Source: *Worlds of Journalism Study, Country Report: Ukraine*, <https://www.worldsofjournalism.org/wp-content/uploads/WJS3-Report-Country-Reports-Ukraine.pdf>

The Making of Patriotic Journalism: Negotiating Professional and National Identities in Wartime Ukraine

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Abstract

This article examines how the assessment of security sensitivities during wartime influences the practice of patriotic journalism in Ukraine. Drawing on three studies conducted between 2019 and 2025, it demonstrates how Ukrainian patriotic journalism reflects a conditional adaptation of liberal professional norms to the context of the full-scale Russian invasion, analysing how journalism reshapes its ethical and professional boundaries when democratic accountability and collective survival come into conflict. Empirically, the article shows that journalists' professional and national roles are activated in a topic- and security-sensitivity-dependent way: professional identity remains salient for low-sensitivity issues, whereas national identity and solidaristic orientations become dominant when topics are perceived as security sensitive. This article contributes to the understanding of patriotic journalism as a dynamic practice situated at the intersection of national loyalty and professional identity in wartime and discusses the implications of these role negotiations for the future of Ukrainian journalism and for theories of journalism under conditions of crisis and armed conflict.

Introduction

Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian journalism operated within heterogeneous institutional and professional environments. Oligarch-owned and politically affiliated outlets coexisted with independent, donor-supported and community media that sought to expand spaces of editorial autonomy. Rather than a binary division between "high-quality" and "low-quality" journalism, the pre-2022 media landscape was marked by a spectrum of professional orientations, ranging from journalists embedded in political or commercial projects to more activist and Western-like watchdog-oriented practitioners (Budivska and Orlova, 2017). These long-standing tensions between objectivist norms and civic-oriented activism shaped editorial decisions well before the war.

The full-scale invasion reconfigured this context. Faced with Russian disinformation, operational secrecy requirements and heightened security risks, the state introduced additional formal and informal constraints on information dissemination, a process documented in independent monitoring reports such as Reporters Without Borders' comprehensive wartime assessment of Ukraine (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). These developments coincided with a recalibration of journalistic role conceptions. Although Western normative models emphasising neutrality, objectivity and watchdog journalism have been influential, they have consistently coexisted with Ukrainian traditions of activist and civic-oriented journalism (Budivska and Orlova, 2017). The rise of wartime "patriotic journalism" should therefore be understood not as a rupture but as a reconfiguration of these preexisting tensions, in which con-

cerns for social cohesion and information security gain heightened salience.

In this article, these shifting practices are conceptualised as a wartime role orientation that intertwines professional and national identities. Drawing on three studies (DIF, 2019, 2023 and 2025), this article argues that journalists activate national or professional roles in a topic- and security-sensitivity-dependent manner. Rather than assuming that structural wartime constraints directly affect behaviour, this article examines how journalists interpret those constraints and translate them into professional meaning-making. This approach allows for a more precise analysis of when and how patriotic journalism emerges and how it may evolve after the war.

Conceptual Framework

To analyse the transformation of journalistic practices during full-scale invasion, this article draws on research on patriotic journalism, journalism culture and role conceptions, and self-censorship.

Following Mas-Manchón et al. (2021), building on Ginosar's (2015) model, patriotic journalism is defined as a set of practices and role orientations in which loyalty to the national community is prioritised over adversarial scrutiny. Its core features include (1) elitist framing of political and military developments, (2) reluctance to openly criticise state authorities during crises, (3) emphasis on national unity and solidarity, and (4) marginalisation of adversary perspectives. These manifestations are not fixed but depend on journalists' ideological commitments and on features of the social environment, which influence how quickly patriotic role orientations escalate or recede.

This article situates patriotic journalism within Hanitzsch's (2007) framework of journalism culture, which conceptualises journalistic roles along dimensions such as interventionism versus detachment, ethical orientation, and power distance. Patriotic journalism is treated here as a specific wartime configuration in which interventionist and high-loyalty orientations become more prominent, while watchdog and adversarial orientations are temporarily weakened, especially towards defence institutions.

Self-censorship is defined, following Jungblut and Hoxha (2017), as an individual restriction of expression prompted by anticipated negative consequences outweighing the perceived benefits of dissemination. This definition captures both instrumental calculations (fear of sanctions, job loss, and physical harm) and normative considerations (protection of national security or vulnerable groups). In this article, self-censorship is analytically distinct from patriotic journalism, although the two phenomena may overlap. Journalists may withhold information because of institutional pressures, audience expectations, or professional caution, as well as out of solidaristic or patriotic motivations.

The article distinguishes between censorship, lawful restrictions, and ethical withholdings. Censorship refers to deliberate interference with journalistic content by state or nonstate actors backed by sanctions. Lawful restrictions constitute legal prohibitions grounded in constitutional or human rights frameworks (e.g., operational secrecy). Ethical withholdings entail voluntary decisions not to publish to minimise harm. In wartime, these categories often overlap; formal regulations, informal pressures and internalised patriotic reasoning can simultaneously shape decisions to withhold information.

A central argument of the article is that journalists' perceptions of a topic's security sensitivity mediate between structural constraints and practice: perceived sensitivity influences whether national or professional role orientations become salient and which forms of withholding—censorship, lawful restriction or ethical withholding—become normalised.

Methodology

The article draws on three complementary studies, the 2019 study, the 2023 study, and the 2025 study, each contributing distinct evidence on journalists' perceptions of censorship, self-censorship and role conceptions.

The 2019 survey ("Freedom of Speech and Challenges for Journalists' Work in the Conditions of Armed Conflict in Ukraine") included 127 journalists across different regions (DIF, 2019). Although not representative, the sample captured diverse media types. The structured questionnaire assessed perceived media freedom; personal experiences of violations of freedom of

speech and lawful journalistic activity (such as obstruction of access to information, censorship attempts, legal pressure or harassment); perceived forms of censorship; drivers of self-censorship (including political pressure, owner influence, safety concerns and personal beliefs); and willingness to conceal information for state benefit. These items provide a prewar baseline on perceived threats, early patriotic rationalisations, and subjective assessments of autonomy.

The 2023 study ("Challenges to Freedom of Speech and Journalists in Times of War") consisted of three focus groups (n=33) and an expert survey (n=132) (DIF, 2023). Focus groups explored wartime experiences of censorship, self-censorship, relations with authorities, and perceptions of the "Yedyni Novyny" telethon—a unified national broadcast combining the output of major TV channels under a shared wartime information policy. The survey, distributed through voluntary and snowball sampling, replicated key 2019 indicators and added wartime-specific questions regarding the telethon, permissible criticism of the military and perceived constraints. The respondents represented a diverse media landscape: 47% online media, 28% television, 19% print, 15% radio, and 10% media NGOs, with 23% working for multiple outlets. This allows examination of differences across media sectors and organisational environments.

The 2025 study ("Self-Censorship of Ukrainian Journalists During the War") used a mixed-methods experimental design (DIF, 2025). A controlled online experiment with 200 respondents exposed participants to four fictional news stories about mobilisation practices. The respondents chose whether to publish each story unchanged, publish with modifications, or withhold publication. The following five experimental conditions were used to simulate different motivations for self-censorship: a spiral of silence, fear of sanctions, ethical conflict, media-owner influence, and patriotism. These conditions were grounded in prior literature and in findings from 2019 and 2023 studies. Self-censorship was operationalised as the decision not to publish. While publication with modifications may reflect caution, only complete withholding was coded as self-censorship to maintain analytic clarity. In the second stage, 12 qualitative interviews explored respondents' reasoning, focusing on how they balanced professional and national identities and assessed the security sensitivity of each scenario.

All three studies rely on nonprobability samples, limiting generalisation. Self-reported measures may be subject to social desirability and respondents' own definitions of self-censorship. The experimental design mitigates some limitations by observing behavioural choices but cannot fully reproduce real editorial pres-

tures. Nonetheless, behavioural patterns were consistent across experimental groups and align with existing theory, providing robust, context-bound insights into the dynamics of journalistic roles and self-censorship in wartime.

Media Freedom and Wartime Constraints: Context for Role Activation

Wartime conditions led to a reconfiguration of media–state relations in Ukraine. Survey data show a perceived decline in media freedom from 7.6 (DIF, 2019) to 6.4 (DIF, 2023) on a 10-point scale. This perception aligns with other indicators: Ukraine’s position in the World Press Freedom Index improved, yet its absolute score decreased, indicating a shift from overt violations to more structural forms of constraint (Reporters Without Borders, 2019, 2023).

Central institutional development was the launch of the “Yedyni Novyny” telethon (United News), initially coordinated among major media actors (Ostapa, 2022) and later formalised by a presidential decree (President of Ukraine, 2022). While widely justified as a measure against Russian disinformation, 62% of surveyed journalists in 2023 perceived the telethon as an instrument of state censorship (DIF, 2023). Reports of restricted access to information for journalists outside the President’s Office’s communications orbit contributed to these assessments (Detector media, 2022; Skliarevska, 2023; Kravets and Strashkulych, 2024).

These structural constraints should not be understood as mechanically generating patriotic journalism. Rather, they shape an environment in which patriotic role orientations become more likely to be activated, depending on how journalists interpret the surrounding context, perceived threats and their own responsibilities. Many journalists regarded certain wartime restrictions as legitimate while viewing their own withholding of information less as a limitation on media freedom and more as an expression of professional duty or ethical caution (DIF, 2025). This interpretive work—rather than constraint in a purely structural sense—is central to understanding how patriotic journalism emerges and is justified in practice.

Boundaries of Patriotic Journalism in Ukraine

The combined findings suggest that wartime conditions are conducive to the activation of patriotic journalism across journalists but do not produce uniform behaviour. Drawing on the criteria formulated by Mas-Manchón et al. (2021) on the basis of Ginosar’s work (2015), Ukrainian journalists in a full-scale invasion might be expected to adopt elitist framing of the war, avoid open criticism of the government, emphasise solidarity with the national community, and marginalise the adver-

sary’s perspective. However, the specific manifestations of patriotic journalism and the pace of departure from it depend on journalists’ ideology and social environment. In Ukraine, the preexisting tension between activist/citizen roles and professional roles (Budivska & Orlova, 2017) is amplified rather than replaced by wartime pressures.

Interview data from 2025 show that respondents oscillate between professional and national identities (DIF, 2025). At times, they define themselves as professionals bound by reporting standards, objectivity and the duty to inform the public about all important events. At other times, they speak as Ukrainians, individuals who are part of the state and national community and who must fight the enemy and protect society from disinformation. This duality becomes especially visible when journalists locate specific topics on a security-sensitivity scale.

For topics directly related to military action and state information security—such as providing a platform for Russian perspectives, disclosing locations of shelling, revealing production sites of Ukrainian weapons, or reporting on troop movements—national identity tends to dominate. Decisions to withhold such information align with global war-reporting norms and lawful restrictions aimed at minimising operational harm. However, journalists also frame these decisions as contributions to national defence and as expressions of solidarity with the armed forces. In these high-sensitivity contexts, journalists report close cooperation with authorities, willingness to withhold information upon request, avoidance of Russian viewpoints, and readiness to attribute responsibility for war crimes without procedural confirmation, despite awareness that these practices diverge from peacetime standards. Here, the combination of alignment with wartime norms and explicit patriotic rationalisations constitutes a key manifestation of patriotic journalism.

At the other end of the spectrum, low-sensitivity topics—issues that are not related to the war and unlikely to affect defence capabilities—are governed primarily by professional role conceptions. Journalists emphasise the balance of opinions, objectivity, and rigorous fact verification. For example, when reporting on social issues, local governance, or general political debates unrelated to security matters, respondents describe adhering to standard professional routines: presenting multiple viewpoints, substantiating claims with evidence, and maintaining procedural fairness. When deviations occur, they are not framed in terms of national loyalty, and recognisable attributes of patriotic journalism are largely absent. These cases illustrate that wartime pressures do not erase established professional norms; rather, professional identity remains the primary anchor when security sensitivities are low.

The most contested boundaries appear in medium-sensitivity areas, such as corruption in the defence sector or mobilisation practices. With respect to these topics, journalists balance national and professional identities more delicately. When a topic is perceived as relatively non-sensitive, respondents often intensify their professional routines: they verify information through multiple independent sources, are cautious about publishing content that may damage individual integrity and pay close attention to official validation. If authorities refuse to comment, some journalists still choose to publish but stress that negative actions are attributed to specific actors rather than to the state as a whole. These practices reflect professional and ethical standards aimed at accuracy, balance and fairness and can be read as attempts to reconcile critical reporting with a desire not to undermine morale or delegitimise state institutions.

When the same topics are perceived as more security sensitive, professional and ethical standards are more frequently invoked as reasons to withhold information. For example, some journalists refrain from publishing stories about possible corruption in the Ministry of Defence in the absence of official comments, even when open data suggest inflated procurement costs. Similarly, cases of alleged excessive force by Territorial Centres of Recruitment and Social Support may go unreported if the Centres do not respond, despite testimony from victims and video evidence. In interviews, such decisions are justified not only by reference to balance, the right to reply and the avoidance of harm but also by concerns about weakening mobilisation or feeding hostile narratives. Adherence to professional routines thus serves both as a genuine commitment to journalistic norms and as a discursive strategy for legitimising self-censorship grounded in patriotic considerations.

This ambiguity also appears in how newsworthiness is defined. Some journalists argue that repeated abuses, such as the use of force by Territorial Centres of Recruitment and Social Support, no longer constitute “news” because they occur too often; others claim that isolated incidents are not systemic enough to deserve coverage. Self-censorship in these middle zones can, however, be overcome by scale: respondents are more inclined to reconsider decisions when violations affect large groups or when corruption involves extreme rather than moderate overpricing. Overall, in medium-sensitivity contexts, the boundaries of patriotic journalism are negotiated through fine-grained assessments of proportionality, scale and potential harm, with professional norms and patriotic rationalisations tightly intertwined.

Conclusions

The empirical material suggests a more complex picture than the common view of patriotic journalism as simply

incompatible with professional journalism. The evaluation of information in terms of security sensitivity can actualise professional or national identity, or both, and this role activation shapes when and how patriotic journalism emerges. In high-sensitivity contexts, journalists’ decisions to limit information often align with global war-reporting norms and lawful wartime restrictions but are also explicitly framed in patriotic terms; here, patriotic journalism functions as a situationally legitimate role that temporarily suspends adversarial scrutiny in favour of solidarity and protection. In low-sensitivity contexts, professional role conceptions remain dominant, and patriotic journalism largely recedes.

In medium-sensitivity areas, such as reporting on defence corruption or mobilisation, the boundaries of patriotic journalism are most contested. Journalists use heightened verification, cautious attribution and nuanced framing both to resist pressure to silence uncomfortable topics and, at times, to rationalise self-censorship motivated by patriotic concerns. The three studies suggest that self-censorship has become a normalised part of journalistic practice in wartime Ukraine but that journalists do not necessarily perceive all instances of withholding information as a threat to media freedom; some are redefined as acceptable or necessary forms of professional responsibility.

It is reasonable to assume that once the war ends, some wartime practices will dissipate while others may persist. Practices likely to recede include routine avoidance of the criticism of defence institutions, heightened reluctance to publish without official comments, and the broad legitimisation of coordinated messaging structures such as centralised telethons. These behaviours are closely tied to acute security imperatives and are less sustainable in peacetime.

However, several practices may persist, at least temporarily: stricter verification routines, heightened awareness of operational security, more cautious attribution, and greater sensitivity to the potential societal consequences of reporting. These habits, once internalised, may continue to shape postwar journalism even in the absence of formal constraints.

More broadly, the Ukrainian case demonstrates that patriotic journalism is better understood as a context-dependent configuration of journalistic roles rather than a fixed departure from liberal norms. Perceived security sensitivity acts as a mechanism linking structural conditions with role activation, enabling journalists to oscillate between national and professional identities in ways that can both constrain and reinforce professional standards.

Please see overleaf for information about the author and references.

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Who Trusts Telegram in Wartime Ukraine? The Dynamics of Trust and the Use of Messenger-Based Social Media

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Abstract

This article describes the role of Telegram in Ukraine's wartime information ecosystem. Telegram's frequent use, in the face of considerable controversy over this platform, led us to explore the factors shaping its use and trust in Ukraine. A survey of 2,014 Ukrainians conducted in August 2024 and 17 qualitative interviews with media experts indicated that Telegram is one of the most widely used platforms in Ukraine, with 86 percent of respondents having a Telegram account. The platform's channels have become major news sources, trusted by 47 percent of the respondents. Logistic regression models indicated that Telegram is used more intensively by younger, more educated and politically engaged individuals and people who seek instant news updates, particularly on local developments. Those who are more trusting of Telegram channels tend to prefer networked news sources and to be more sceptical of traditional media. While valid concerns exist about the risks of reliance on any one source, such as Telegram channels, restricted access to this platform could undermine support for the government if its policies limit users' ability to obtain information from sources they trust. This research offers an empirical basis for informing debates about the use of social media and Telegram, specifically in the context of the Russia–Ukraine War.

What is Telegram? An Overview of Features and Functionality

Telegram, co-founded by Pavel Durov and his brother Nikolai and incorporated in the British Virgin Islands in 2013 (RIPE Network Coordination Centre, 2025), is headquartered in Dubai ("Telegram FZ-LLC," 2025). Originally launched as a private messaging app, it has evolved into a multifaceted communication platform offering private and group chats, chatbots, stories, and other social features. It is not a single channel. In fact, Telegram's unique utility lies in it being the first major messenger to introduce channels—a free one-to-many broadcast tool that enables users to instantly share information with unlimited audiences, either publicly or within restricted subscriber groups. This innovation turned Telegram into a major platform for news dissemination in the region, enabling grassroots coordination of pro-Ukrainian actors during the ongoing Russian invasion (Asmolov, 2022; Boyko and Horbyk, 2023; Canevez et al., 2024) and events such as the 2017 Navalny protests in Russia and the 2020 Belarus anti-authoritarian movement (Herasimenka et al., 2020; Herasimenka, 2022; Onuch, Sasse and Michiels, 2023; Wijermars and Lokot, 2022). Researchers specifically highlight Telegram's affordances, which facilitate such coordination by enabling anonymity, shareability, and conversability through Telegram's ease of connection with other platforms (Asmolov, 2022; Canevez et al., 2024).

Telegram also operates an advertising system called Telegram Ads, which delivers promotions directly over

its public channels. In Ukraine, it has recently become particularly popular, with major retailers, banks, e-commerce companies, as well as smaller businesses, and expert blogs using the service (Lutsenko, 2024; Trapeznikova, 2024).

While Telegram promotes itself as secure, only its optional "secret chats" are end-to-end encrypted (E2EE), while regular chats and groups are not (Green, 2024; Rosenblat et al., 2024). Telegram previously avoided publicly disclosing its financial and operational details by operating as a private entity, as private companies in the British Virgin Islands and the UAE are generally not required to publicly disclose such details. Despite these concerns, Telegram's simplicity, speed, and relative freedom from moderation have made it one of the most popular apps across the post-Soviet region and globally—including in India, Brazil, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Egypt. (*Telegram Users by Country*, 2025)

Telegram in Ukraine: Context and Controversies

Telegram's role in Ukraine has become increasingly complex. Amid criticism, its rising popularity made it deeply controversial, drawing scrutiny both domestically and internationally. Some sources estimate the Ukrainian audience of Telegram as 25 million users, who spend an average of more than 40 minutes a day on the app (Lutsenko, 2024). The 2024 arrest of Pavel Durov in France reignited debates about the accountability of Telegram (Le Monde with AFP, 2025; Stargardter and

Hummel, 2024). In Ukraine, the platform remains accessible with some restrictions within government, military, and academic institutions (Holovaty, 2024). Nevertheless, ordinary citizens, officials, and prominent politicians—including President Zelenskyy, whose official channel has approximately 700,000 followers to date (“V_Zelenskyy_official,” n.d.)—continue to rely on Telegram for personal communication or public broadcasting. At the time of writing, estimates suggested that Ukraine hosted tens of thousands to more than one hundred thousand Telegram channels, attracting an average of five to eight thousand subscribers, with the largest channels reaching audiences of over a million (Telemetrio Team, 2025; TGStat Team, 2025). These channels cover a wide range of topics, including news and media, personal blogs, music, marketing, entertainment, education, and political content. However, news and politics constitute the largest category, accounting for more than eighteen thousand channels, according to TGstat (TGStat Team, 2025).

Concerns over Telegram’s popularity focus on ownership opacity, potential surveillance (Anin and Kondratyev, 2025; Green, 2024), widespread misinformation and manipulative content on the platform, including Russian information operations (Kelm et al., 2024; Mashkova, 2025; Miskii and Sokolenko, 2024; Social Media and Toronto Metropolitan, n.d.), and the use of the platform for anti-Ukrainian recruitment (Detector Media, 2024). Nonetheless, nearly half of Ukrainians use Telegram as a primary news source (Polikovska, 2024), reflecting its duality of indispensability and risk.

In wartime Ukraine, Telegram serves as both a critical communication infrastructure and a potential vulnerability. It provides instant access to air-raid alerts, government updates, and humanitarian information while supporting grassroots initiatives such as crowdfunding and documenting war crimes (Zarembo et al., 2024). Telegram channels have become a platform for coordinating and engaging pro-Ukrainian users in “cyber resistance”, underpinning its role as a tool of participatory warfare (Canevez et al., 2024; Zarembo et al., 2024). Approximately one-fifth of Ukrainians began using Telegram only after 2022 (Zarembo et al., 2024), reinforcing its adaptability and resilience during the war. However, its same features— anonymity, speed, and minimal moderation—also make it fertile ground for propaganda and disinformation (Detector Media, 2024; Social Media and Toronto Metropolitan, n.d.; Zarembo et al., 2024).

This duality defines Telegram’s role in Ukraine’s wartime information environment. To better understand this role, the present study investigates the factors driving the use of and trust in Telegram and the value it

provides to Ukrainian users under conditions of conflict and information uncertainty.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative survey data (Goroshko et al., 2024a) and qualitative interviews. The survey was conducted from August 1–6, 2024, using both computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) methods. A random sample of Ukrainian smartphone numbers drawn from the entire territory of Ukraine, excluding temporarily occupied regions, was used to construct a sample of 2,014 respondents who completed questionnaires.¹ While full representativeness can hardly be claimed in this wartime context (e.g., the sample is expected to underrepresent people in the military), the sample is demographically representative by age, gender, education, and settlement type, permitting analysis of Telegram’s user base.

To identify key factors shaping Telegram use and trust, the study employed two logistic regression models: one predicting platform usage and another examining drivers of attitudes of trust in Telegram channels as a reliable information source on the basis of demographic, media, and political variables. The full model outputs and details of the variable measurements can be found in Chernenko and Dutton, 2025. The survey was complemented by 17 semistructured qualitative interviews conducted with media experts, journalists, and policy-makers to help contextualize and interpret the quantitative findings.

Findings and Analysis

A comparison of the survey results with the results of comparable studies conducted before the invasion reveals that Telegram (together with Viber) experienced outstanding growth in popularity, exceeding that of any other type of media (Dutton et al., 2025). Several factors contributed to its popularity, as described in the results of the model estimation below.

Reduced Consumption of and Low Trust in Russian Media Sources

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainians’ general media consumption has shifted markedly. An overwhelming majority of respondents (86.5%) reported that compared with the preinvasion years, now, they engage with more Ukrainian content and less Russian content. Only 12.1 percent indicated that their media habits remained largely unchanged, while a very small share (1.4%) stated that they now consume less Ukrainian and more Russian content (Chernenko and Dutton, 2025).

1 Due to the lack of updated census data, poststratification weights could not be constructed.

Even accounting for the social desirability bias inherent in survey research, this pattern suggests a strong perceived realignment towards Ukrainian information sources and broader societal transformations driven by the war.

This observation is in line with other findings from the survey. Only around 1 percent of respondents expressed trust in Russian sources, indicating a dramatic shift from prewar patterns when Russian content was more widely consumed by Ukrainian audiences (Dutton et al., 2025).

Popularity of and Trust in Telegram in Ukraine

Telegram is one of the most popular social media platforms in Ukraine. As shown in Figure 1 on p. 19, 86 percent of respondents have a Telegram account, making it one of the top three most widely used digital communication tools (Goroshko et al., 2024b). In terms of daily engagement, almost three quarters (74%) of all the respondents read Telegram or Viber channels at least once a day (Chernenko and Dutton, 2025). This level of engagement indicates that Telegram plays a central role as a real-time news aggregator and information hub in wartime Ukraine.

As shown in an earlier report (Chernenko and Dutton, 2025), online platforms such as Telegram and Viber are the second most preferred sources for news about war and local issues, with more than a quarter of respondents (28% and 26%, respectively) checking these sources first for such information, surpassed only by online search.

Trust in Telegram is also substantial, with almost half of the respondents (47%) reporting that they trust Telegram channels “completely” or “mostly”, while 33 percent were unsure, and 20 percent reported distrust (see Figure 2 on p. 19). Moreover, very few respondents blindly trusted Telegram, as only 3 percent reported that they ‘completely trusted’ this platform (Figure 2 on p. 19). Telegram enjoys a higher level of trust than most other online media sources do in Ukraine, with only direct conversations with friends and family and certain local or Western news sources being perceived as more trustworthy (Chernenko and Dutton, 2025).

Importantly, the use of Telegram is not exclusive. Its use correlates positively with the use of all other media sources. Specifically, having Telegram installed is particularly strongly correlated with using Instagram (0.29), WhatsApp (0.25), and YouTube (0.12) (Chernenko and Dutton, 2025). These findings resonate with the argument of the participatory use of Telegram channels in Ukraine and its networked nature that supports connectivity across multiple platforms, e.g., by enabling users to coordinate actions executed on Twitter, YouTube, GitHub, and Google Maps (Canevez et al., 2024).

Telegram Usage

The logistic regression model identifies multiple factors influencing Telegram use in general² (Chernenko and Dutton, 2025). In accordance with standard regression methodology, all reported effects are estimated while controlling for all other variables.

Who Uses Telegram?

The model results revealed the following sociodemographic factors related to the use of Telegram. Gender plays a role, with women having a 79.7 percent higher odds of using Telegram than men do. Compared with those residing in villages or smaller settlements, individuals residing in urban areas have 60.7 percent higher odds of using Telegram, most likely because of better internet access. Higher education is associated with a 44.3 percent increase in Telegram use, reinforcing the platform’s role as an information hub among educated audiences. Younger individuals are more likely to use the platform, with the odds of usage decreasing on average by approximately 33.4 percent for every 10-year increase in age. However, digital skills are also a factor: the odds of using Telegram are, on average, 21.5 percent higher for individuals who can use a VPN—a surrogate indicator of skills—than for those without this skill.

Why Do People Use Telegram?

Apart from demographics, the strongest predictor of Telegram use is the frequency of news consumption, with daily news consumers having a much greater likelihood of using the platform than those who consume news less frequently. This highlights the role of the platform in providing real-time updates from multiple sources, whether from official, informal, or local channels.

Another driver of Telegram use is war-related displacement. Individuals with experience of displacement (or of living in conflict-affected regions) have, on average, an 82.9 percent higher odds ratio of using Telegram, likely because of the effectiveness of Telegram channels in providing safety updates, evacuation alerts, and access to community support networks (Boyko and Horbyk, 2023; Zarembo et al., 2024).

Political engagement is another key predictor, as individuals who participate in online discussions about war have, on average, 73.3 percent higher odds of using Telegram, and a similar tendency is observed for those who actively follow political developments.

Other significant predictors include localism, indicated by a tendency to closely follow local news (32.7% increased odds), being sceptical of the objectivity of more traditional Ukrainian media such as television and

2 Telegram use is measured as a binary indicator coded ‘1’ if the respondent selected “Telegram” when answering the question: “Which of the following social media sites or platforms for messaging applications, if any, do you currently use or have an account or profile on?”, and ‘0’ otherwise.

radio³ (30% increased odds), and opposition to the idea of wartime social media restrictions (82.9% increased odds). These tendencies may be explained by perceptions that the platform is less moderated and provides an alternative networked information space with fewer restrictions on the provision of information.

Trust in Telegram Channels

Trust in Telegram channels as a source of information⁴ is shaped by broader tendencies to trust sources, traditional media scepticism, frequent consumption of local news and general news consumption habits (Chernenko and Dutton, 2025). A multinomial logistic regression model indicated that individuals who exhibit high levels of general trust (average levels of trust in other information sources, online and offline) are much more likely to specifically trust Telegram channels. However, an inverse relationship (28.6% lower odds, holding other variables constant) exists between reliance on major news outlets for verification of news and political information⁵ and trust in Telegram channels. This suggests that Telegram channels are used by individuals to check or verify traditional media coverage when its authenticity may be questioned.

Furthermore, individuals who oppose the idea of government-imposed wartime restrictions on social media exhibit, on average, 22 percent higher odds of trust in Telegram channels, reinforcing the perception that Telegram is viewed as a less regulated space for information exchange. Moreover, users who rely on their favourite media for verification and those who frequently follow local news are more likely to trust Telegram channels (28.4% and 22.7% higher odds, respectively), suggesting that Telegram operates not as a single source but as part of a broader networked news ecosystem.

A full description of the variables used in both models and their measurement is presented in the full study report (Chernenko and Dutton, 2025).

About the Authors

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Discussion and Conclusion

These findings underscore the degree to which Telegram plays an important role in Ukraine's information landscape. With 86 percent of Ukrainians having an account and nearly half of the respondents expressing trust in its channels, Telegram has become a major platform for news and communication since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. While it serves as a vital tool for real-time updates, safety information, and civic engagement, its ownership has raised questions about its role in disinformation and security.

This study revealed that, on the one hand, Telegram usage is driven primarily by younger, more educated, and more politically engaged individuals and by those who seek instant news updates, particularly on local developments. On the other hand, those who are more likely to oppose wartime information restrictions and be sceptical of traditional media are more likely to use Telegram. Trust in Telegram channels is also driven by scepticism around traditional media coverage and opposition to wartime restrictions, which reinforces Telegram's function as an alternative within an information ecosystem. The use of Telegram is not exclusive, as it is correlated with and complements the use of other media sources.

These findings have significant implications for policy-makers and media regulators. Efforts to counter mis- or disinformation and mitigate cybersecurity risks must be balanced against the risk of reinforcing distrust among Telegram's user base, many of whom are active and politically engaged and sceptical of traditional media coverage. Rather than outright bans or restrictions, strategies might focus better on enhancing digital literacy, raising public awareness of concerns over disinformation and security, promoting fact-checking initiatives and practices, and promoting efforts to celebrate and support the use of diverse media sources.

3 Measured as a binary indicator coded '1' if the respondent selected "Objective, do not represent positions, but provide information neutrally" and '0' otherwise when answering the question "Thinking about television and radio news in Ukraine, do the Ukrainian news media GENERALLY advocate a position, provide competing viewpoints, or objectively report the news?"

4 Measured as a three-level indicator coded as '0' for distrust, '2' for trust and '1' for 'difficult to say' category based on the respondent's answer to the question "In the context of the war, some people may think differently about the internet and other media. What is your level of trust in each of these sources of information? - Channels on Telegram"

5 Including TV, radio, or the press online or offline

Center, Michigan State University; and Emeritus Professor at the University of Southern California. Bill's most recent book is *The Fifth Estate: The Power Shift of the Digital Age* (Oxford University Press 2023).

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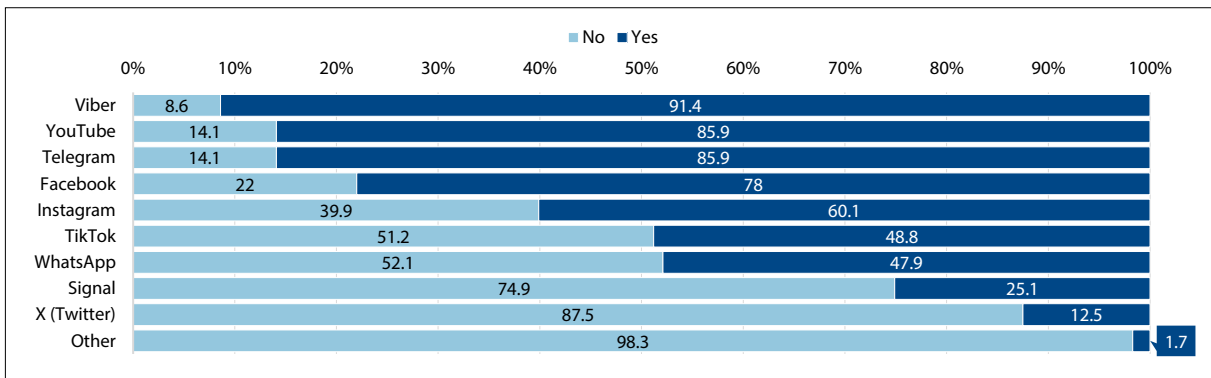
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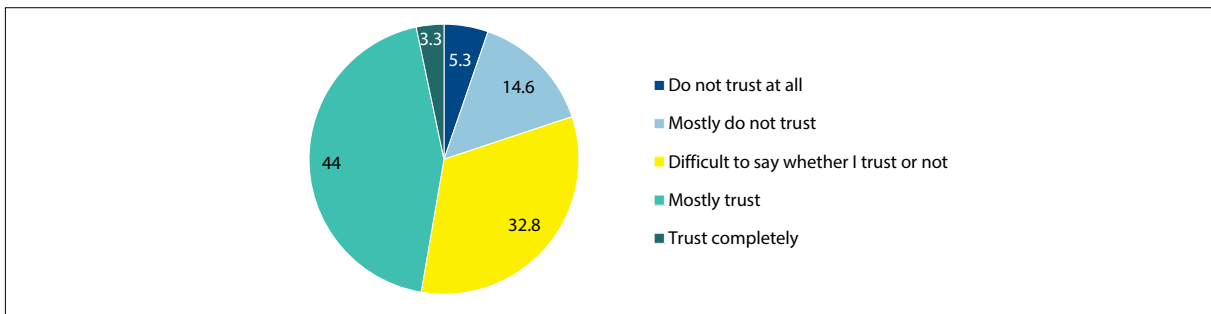
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Figure 1: Percentage of Respondents with Accounts on Various Social Media Platforms



Source: Chernenko and Dutton, 2025

Figure 2: Trust in Telegram Channels: What is Your Level of Trust in Telegram Channels? (Share of Respondents in %)



Source: Chernenko and Dutton, 2025

How Has Russian Propaganda Changed during the War? A Long-Term Battle against Ukrainian Statehood

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Abstract

The weaponisation of an adversary's political discourse is not a new phenomenon in information warfare, and Russian propaganda targeting Ukrainian society is no exception. Since the beginning of the war in 2014 and after the full-scale invasion, the Russian arsenal of information warfare has changed from "to persuade" (at any cost) to "intimidate" whatever it takes. In the earlier stages of the conflict, Russian propaganda framed the war as a "civil" one, seeking to persuade some of the Ukrainian audience. However, the kinetic full-scale war has exposed this fiction to the targeted society through the undeniable reality of an existential threat. Consequently, propaganda has shifted its focus towards destabilisation strategies, undermining Ukrainian morale and faith in victory. Russia is thus reverting to some of the old information warfare playbook but implementing it through modern digital means. This includes the use of digital proxy networks in Ukraine, which are active in anonymised channels on the social media network "Telegram." This article analyses the changes in narratives that have been spread by pro-Russian Telegram channels in Ukraine following the full-scale invasion. It discusses the complexity of Russian propaganda activity in light of the ongoing political challenges faced by Ukraine.

Introduction

In today's world, where people have access to many sources of information, greater weight is given to convincing stories. Persuasive narratives outweigh facts, while those who craft them earn influence over audiences and their attention. The discourse surrounding war is no exception. Since war is not limited to its kinetic dimension, making sense of it requires connecting it to something greater—i.e., ideas, an identity, or the belief that the enemy is an obstacle to the establishment of a better world order (Lasswell, 1927). Effective propaganda is designed to construct a coherent worldview that encourages the rejection of contradictory information (Pocheptsov, 2019) to avoid possible cognitive dissonance. In this context, narratives serve an essential instrumental function.

Narratives are not just stories or interpretive frameworks; they may resemble Erving Goffman's concept of frames (1974), but narratives also serve a political purpose. As a sequential representation of sequential events (Kafalenos, 2006, p. 2), they give meaning to a particular event (Hinchman, Hinchman, 1997) and its causality. As M. F. Dahlstrom states, narrative "describes the cause-and-effect relationships between events that take place over a particular time period that impact particular characters, "a triumvirate of character, causality, and temporality (2021). As an instrument of cognitive influence, narrative entails a situation, a disruptive problem, and a resolution that restores the situation to its previous state or establishes a new one (Antoniades,

Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin). When narratives are politically misused, their structure functions as an instrument of propaganda, used to define a problem, assign blame, and present a preferred solution to the audience. In this way, narrative embodies the very techniques that align with G. Jowett and O'Donnell's definition of propaganda as a "deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett, O'Donnell, 2014).

Russian propaganda narratives have emerged as a key weapon in its war against Ukraine. The Russian president appeals to distorted historical narratives to explain his attitude towards Ukraine and the West and to justify the war of aggression (Radchenko 2023; Nielsen, 2024; Khvostunova, 2024). These narratives are produced in large quantities and disseminated as part of the news flow, targeting various audiences. This study examines the narratives of Russian propaganda circulating in Ukraine via the Telegram social media platform. It explores the main narratives of this propaganda and whether they changed following the full-scale invasion.

Analytical Framework and Methodology

In this article, the term "narrative" refers specifically to foreign propaganda and disinformation. Disinformation is viewed as a narrower concept that involves the deliberate spread of misleading information with the intention to cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). For this reason, I avoid using the term "strategic

narrative” (Miskimmon et al., 2013), which, in the literature, is most often associated with the pursuit of political objectives.

In the context of Russian information warfare, the goal is not limited to promoting the political vision but rather to undermining resilience and destabilising Ukraine. The literature views information warfare as a means of achieving strategic goals through offensive and defensive activities in the information sphere, oriented towards self-defence (Białoskórski, 2023). However, this framework is not universally applicable because it does not account for the actions of aggressor states. In this light, the term “strategic narrative” can obscure the distinction between political communication and harmful activities. Therefore, in this study, I use the concept of narratives in the context of disinformation, which more accurately captures the true objectives of Russian information attacks.

Narratives, aims, and actions within Russian information warfare have drawn significant attention in the literature. Scholars point in particular to the continuity between Soviet-era and contemporary Russian behaviour models, including disinformation practices and themes in mass communication (Kragh, Åsberg, 2017). Other studies highlight new developments that distinguish the current Russian approach, such as the weaponisation of Western liberal values (Fedchenko, 2016) and ideological divergence between the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation (Horbyk, Prymachenko, Orlova, 2023). Despite Russia’s long-standing use of propaganda and disinformation, studies indicate that after the full-scale invasion, Russian strategic narratives (concerning the war, the enemy, and identity) have adapted to the changing political and military context, becoming more fragile but not unviable (Mamedov, 2024). A shift in Russian disinformation narratives has been documented by Polegkyi (2023). In his study, he examines how the five key narratives of the Russian media regarding Ukraine (as “civil war,” “Russophobia,” “fascism,” a “failed state,” and a “puppet of the West”) were reframed and adapted to the context of the full-scale war.

This article explores what narratives were spread by pro-Russian Telegram (TG) channels that claim to be Ukrainian and whether and how they changed with the full-scale war. The analysis examines five TG channels, focusing on their content from 2019, following the election of President Volodymyr Zelenskyi, until 2024. These channels were selected from a list compiled by the Security Service of Ukraine (Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, 2022), which identified outlets disseminating Russian propaganda in Ukraine. All five channels publish content in Russian and comment on Ukraine’s national politics and policies, often claiming to have access to exclusive “insider” information. While

the exact target audience cannot be confirmed, statistics from the website TG Stat provide information about their reach, as illustrated in Figure 1 on p. 28.

A 2025 study placed Telegram as the most popular and most trusted source of information in Ukraine (Rating Group Ukraine, 2025). According to Rating’s findings, 62% of the respondents used Telegram more than twice a week, and 57% reported trusting the information they receive on the platform. TG use was more than twice as high as that of national online media (26%) and exceeded the viewership of the unified nationwide news marathon (37%). A survey by the Civil Society Organisation Opora (2024) revealed that in 2022, it was the most popular platform in urban areas (69.6%). In 2023, usage increased to 75.5% in cities and 62.2% in rural areas. In 2024, Telegram remained the most frequently used platform in rural (71.7%) and urban areas (80.7%).

The author chooses not to disclose the names of the investigated channels to avoid promoting them. Four of the channels have anonymous administrators, while one channel is administered by a Ukrainian media correspondent who previously worked at the pro-Russian TV channel “NASH,” which was banned by the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine on 2022 February 11 (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2022). The TV Channel “NASH” was affiliated with the pro-Russian politician Y. Murayev (BBC News, 2022). When the content after 2022 was analysed, no obvious propaganda messages were detected in the last TG channel.

The study used an ethnographic approach to content analysis (Altheide, 1987), coding narratives extracted from selected posts. The coding process was inductive and involved identifying patterns, propaganda techniques, and key topics that emerged from the data. The interpretation was guided by an ethnographic understanding of Ukraine’s political context. For example, a message regarding “corrupted authorities” was interpreted as propaganda when it aligned with a broader subnarrative of a “failed state” that appeared repeatedly across other posts. Although the Security Service of Ukraine designated these channels as Russian propaganda, it was still necessary to determine this through analysis. For this reason, the author first identifies the most explicit indicators confirming that a channel was spreading Russian propaganda. Some examples are 1) the presence of messages framing the war in Donbas that began in 2014 as a “civil war”, 2) accusing narratives of pro-Ukrainian groups of “inciting hostility”, and 3) a combination of content about “total corruption” and claims of “external governance” by Western partners, together constituting the canonical narrative of a “failed state.”

Results of the Content Analysis

In the words of William Merrin and Andrew Hoskins, TG emerged as a new war front (2024). Its decentralised and participatory structure, anonymity, and minimal moderation create favourable conditions for the rapid spread of disinformation and propaganda and for their impact on politics (Berdynskykh, 2020). TG became particularly prevalent during the 2019 Ukrainian presidential election, when the public was eager for “insider” and backstage information about political gossip and endeavours. Some anonymous channels leaking correspondence from Zelenskyi’s party attracted particular attention in Ukrainian society (Horon, 2025).

The investigated anonymous TG channels position themselves as insider resources that reveal the actual actors behind political processes (Channel 1). They claim to offer readers “reality, not illusion” (Channel 2), disclose “secrets” (Channels 2,4), and operate as a “people’s voice” (Channel 3). Additionally, these channels promote one another and other channels from the SBU list of Russian propaganda sources, presenting them as providers of truthful and exclusive information. The investigated content, which combines rapid reporting of events, mainly with a negative tone, is diluted with some “positive” messages to create the illusion of balance. Channel administrators often add their own thoughts to publications, which includes making emotional comments or placing the necessary emphasis. However, this self-proclaimed “objectivity” of pro-Russian TG channels is a way to legitimise an imposed picture of reality in which Ukraine was portrayed as a state lacking agency, controlled by external forces, with a “corrupt and hypocritical” government, and “no future.”

The posts were grouped into broader themes based on propaganda messages, including “war and peace,” “corruption,” “Western partners,” and “media and freedom of speech.” Some meaningful units employed specific propaganda techniques, such as name-calling (e.g., labelling some pro-Ukrainian groups as “radicals,” “nationalists,” “puppets,” or “Sorosites”), the distortion of facts, the creation of fake news, whataboutism, transfer, and plain folks.

To illustrate how the narratives found align with propaganda’s functions, Table 1 on p. 28 outlines the key narratives from 2019 and their evolution following the full-scale invasion.

Narratives from 2019 to 24 February 2022

A common tendency across the investigated TG channels is their systematic interpretation of current events through the prism of evaluating the Ukrainian government. In 2019, Zelenskyi gained unprecedented support in the presidential elections (Hrushetskyi, 2024). The election results were seen by the public as a call for

renewal and reform in governance (Lutsevych, 2019), especially following significant corruption scandals in the military involving associates of then-President Petro Poroshenko (Kushnir, 2019). During this period, Poroshenko himself became a primary target of Russian propaganda until 2022.

The channels accused him of igniting the war, dividing society, spreading hatred, breaking the law, and all the sins that led Ukraine to a tough spot (Channel 5, 9 February 2020; Channel 4, 3 September 2020). Poroshenko was labelled as “an unprincipled opportunist whose goal is simply to make money” (Channel 4, 2 September 2020). The sources featured accusations of his attempts to avoid criminal responsibility through contact with the United States, undeclared companies, and concealing from a public agreement on amnesty for Donbas militants (Channel 4, 1 August 2019, 3 September 2020, 16 August 2019).

Following the high level of public support for Zelenskyi after the 2019 elections, propagandists refrained from overt criticism during the initial months of his presidency. Additionally, he promised to end the war during his election campaign, although he did not detail how or under what conditions. However, as time passed and the authorities became entangled in their first scandals, the channels’ rhetoric began to shift. At first, Zelenskyi was portrayed as a person deceived by corrupt advisers and officials. However, after he refused to accept the Russians’ terms regarding the Donbas, Crimea and Minsk agreements, the narratives reversed. Zelenskyi was later depicted as being “like Poroshenko” and as a “war party” (Channel 5, 17 February 2022; Channel 3, 14/01 2022). He was accused of continuing the previous government’s trajectory, to which TG sources attributed societal division, linguistic conflict, and the persecution of political opponents.

The topic of corruption holds a special place in this information warfare. The names and institutions mentioned in this discourse include the fifth president of Ukraine, Poroshenko, and the former prosecutors general, Yuriy Lutsenko and Ruslan Riaboshapka, former Minister of Justice and now Ukrainian Ambassador to the U.S., Olha Stefanishyna (after 2022), former head of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, Artem Sytnyk, as well as the Security Service of Ukraine, the Ukrainian army, the U.S. Department of State, and President Zelenskyi, and former U.S. President Joseph Biden. The channels also included many other names that are not well known to the public.

Notably, discussions about corruption also include reposts of investigations and news from various media outlets. The challenge arises from the way corruption cases are presented to the Ukrainian public. This discourse is instrumentalised by Russian propaganda to

promote a narrative that Ukraine lacks agency and is non-European in nature. Additionally, such propaganda seeks to sow doubt about all decisions made by Ukrainian authorities, including military actions.

The National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and its former director, A. Sytnyk, have become critical targets of these propaganda campaigns. Three of the five investigated channels repeatedly claimed that the NABU is a “tool of Western pressure” (Channel 2, 30 February 2021; Channel 5, 3 October 2020) against the Ukrainian government while simultaneously portraying it as a politicised tool of Ukrainian authorities to crack down on competitors (Channel 4, 1 August 2019). One source suggests that the NABU is ineffective because it is controlled by the FBI, which lacks familiarity with Ukrainian legislation (Channel 4, 21 August 2020). Additionally, the channels accuse Sytnyk of engaging in illegal wiretapping, taking luxury vacations, and using American lobbyists and the IMF to keep his position (Channel 4, 21 August 2019, 8 August 2019, 1 September 2020).

These attacks on individuals are accompanied by attacks on institutions. On the one hand, a narrative of “external control” over Ukraine is being imposed; on the other hand, a belief is crafted that state bodies do not work in the best interests of citizens. In this way, disinformation attempts to undermine trust in both the domestic political system and partnerships with the West.

The propaganda channels consistently portrayed Ukraine’s political development following the 2014 Revolution of Dignity as the root cause of all subsequent problems. In alignment with official Kremlin narratives, the Maidan was described as a “coup” (Channel 3, 06/01 2022), and the authorities that emerged afterwards were characterised as self-interested and motivated by personal or economic gain rather than the national interest. This delegitimising narrative served as one of the bases for interpreting the war, with its continuation or escalation being attributed to the supposed incompetence of Ukrainian leaders.

This logic extended into the discourse on war. In particular, the Ukraine–Russia negotiations were presented through a set interpretive scheme: Ukraine was accused of sabotaging the Minsk agreements and being unable to reach an understanding with Moscow. These claims were supported by portraying the West as an unreliable player that benefits from Ukraine’s suffering and uses the “Ukrainian case” instrumentally in global politics (Channel 2, 19 October 2021). In contrast, figures such as Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan were idealised as sovereign leaders capable of resisting Western pressure (Channel 2, 24 October 2021).

Another narrative that complemented the war discourse portrayed Ukrainian authorities as hypocritical.

Channels repeatedly asserted that Kyiv “trades with Russia” while publicly condemning it (Channel 2, 5 October 2021; 13 October 2021). These alleged contradictions were used to emphasise Ukraine’s supposed “guilt” in the conflict and further delegitimise the government.

Before the full-scale invasion, Russian propaganda sources mainly promoted the idea that Ukraine was responsible for the outbreak of the conflict and had failed to end it. These messages echoed the classic formula of the Russian information campaign before 2022, along the lines of denying their aggression (Zubchenko, 2022), framing the war as an internal “civil conflict” (Channel 1, 15 November 2019, 4 September 2019; Channel 3, 7 April 2021) in which responsibility allegedly lies with the Ukrainian government.

Propaganda sources claim that the government uses the war narrative to distract society from “real problems,” such as corruption, abuse of power, and restrictions on freedom of speech. For example, military developments in Donbas were framed as deliberate attempts to “draw attention from the West,” rather than as responses to Russian aggression (Channel 2, 26 October 2021). The warnings about the possibility of a full-scale invasion were dismissed as artificially manufactured by the United States for its own political purposes (Channel 1, 16 February 2022; Channel 2, 15 February 2022). Simultaneously, Russia was portrayed as a powerful neighbour against whom Ukraine had no chance to win, reinforcing a narrative of undermining resistance.

The analysed sources systematically instrumentalised the democratic principle of free speech. Imposing sanctions on pro-Russian TV channels in 2021 (President of Ukraine, 2021) was reframed as “censorship” and political pressure. Any attempts by the state to regulate the information space, including during the COVID-19 pandemic or in the wake of the publication of the SBU list of disinformation sources, were portrayed as political attacks on journalists (Channel 4, 1 September 2020; Channel 2, 7 October 2021, 1 February 2021).

A recurring rhetorical strategy employed by these channels was the claim of “double standards.” They asserted that authorities were supposedly protecting “grant-funded media” while persecuting “the opposition” (Channel 2, 30 October 2021). The Channels denied any links to Russian actors and claimed that the accusations against them were fabricated and politicised. At the same time, they promoted inversion narratives, alleging that Ukrainian authorities and “Western lobbyists” were manipulating TG for their own political goals. In summary, the discourse surrounding freedom of speech was used as a tool to delegitimise Ukrainian institutions, undermine trust in regulation, and normalise pro-Russian messaging as a valid alternative perspective or truth.

Narratives from 24 February 2022 to 2024

After the full-scale invasion, four pro-Russian Telegram channels continued their delivery style, but one stopped posting overt propaganda. While the core themes of their narratives remained largely consistent, some specific topics became even more prominent. The narratives increasingly focused on shifting responsibility for the invasion away from Russia, fostering demobilisation and a sense of futility within Ukrainian society, and amplifying feelings of despair. Moreover, the channels intensified their efforts to turn Ukrainian audiences against the West.

On the night when Russia launched a full-scale war, one of the channels wrote, “Putin announced the deployment of troops to Donbas. Putin has decided. Now there will be coercion to peace” (Channel 2, 24 February 2025). Subsequent messaging developed a narrative that deflected responsibility for the outbreak of the war away from Russia. While Ukrainian authorities faced criticism, the primary blame was increasingly shifted towards the West. One channel, for instance, claimed that the invasion was a predictable consequence of Western arms deliveries to Ukraine (Channel 2, 07 April 2022). Additionally, they argued that “there would have been no war had Zelenskyi implemented the Minsk agreements” or even asserted that “all wars are ignited by Western intelligence services” in pursuit of their own interests (Channel 2, 12 July 2023, 01 February 2024). Through this reasoning, Russia was gradually removed from the causal chain. The result is a distorted narrative in which the aggressor disappears, while those resisting aggression are reframed as the actual instigators, redirecting the audience’s hostility towards those who are actually defending themselves.

The channels created an information environment in which Ukraine seemed trapped in a state of hopelessness, abandoned and betrayed by those with whom it strived to align. Since 2022, there has been a noticeable rise in messages about the West’s betrayal, along with growing war fatigue and anti-Ukrainian sentiment in the West (Channel 2, 19 March 2024, 12 March 2022, 30 March 2024). One channel posted a conspiracy theory motivated by the West’s latent goals: “to transform the Ukraine case into a bloody wound for the Ukrainian people” (Channel 2, 24 February 2022). Another channel claimed that “a strong Ukraine is a threat to the West; we were raised for slaughter” (Channel 1, 25 June 2022).

This narrative group does not stand alone. Instead, the narratives form a repertoire of variations spanning different topics. The theme of “Western betrayal” is linked to issues such as resource pressures (e.g., “the West withholds funds to control the Office of the President” (Channel 2, 19 November 2024)), mobilisation (e.g., “the West pushes Ukraine to lower the mobilisa-

tion age and engage women” (Channel 2, 04 December 2024)), and even the onset of the war (e.g., “the war began because the West supplied weapons” (Channel 2, 07 April 2022)).

Collectively, these messages create a coherent propaganda narrative that serves two primary functions: undermining trust in Western partners and demobilising Ukrainian society by instilling a sense that resistance is futile and betrayal is widespread. Additionally, they delegitimise the Ukrainian state by portraying it as dependent, externally controlled, and coerced into mobilisation. This narrative depicts Ukraine as isolated, powerless, and lacking strategic agency. It constitutes an emotionally charged but misleading framing intended to weaken societal resilience and erode public confidence during wartime.

The narrative corresponds with the group of narratives aimed at undermining the will to resist. Various TG channels either minimised Ukraine’s capacity for resistance or portrayed such efforts as futile. Russian soldiers were depicted as polite individuals who posed no harm to civilians, while Ukrainian forces faced allegations of sheltering within residential areas, purportedly compelling Russian forces to “respond with fire.” Other propaganda claims suggested that the Ukrainian government was disseminating false information, distributing weapons to unfit individuals, and killing civilians (Channel 2, 27 February 2024; 24 February 2024). When the genocide committed by Russian forces in Bucha became publicly known, the channels depicted it as an “information campaign” of the Ukrainian government (Channel 2, 16 September 2022, Channel 1, 25 November 2023).

TG channels constructed an image of the Ukrainian state as the primary source of threat to itself, simultaneously framing Russia as a “rational” actor whose military action was merely a “response” without intentionally attacking civilians. This propaganda strategy not only aimed to discourage the audience but also to shift their emotional perspective from resistance against an external adversary to a sense of distrust and fear directed towards their own government.

Another trend portrays peace as disadvantageous to Ukraine and the West. A prominent example of this narrative appears in the messaging surrounding the Istanbul negotiations. Various Telegram channels conveyed that President Volodymyr Zelenskyi was being pressured to sign agreements with Russia that would entail ceding control of the Donbas region and Crimea. These channels asserted that Zelenskyi had refrained from accepting these terms because of the influence of what they termed “grant-fed recipients,” or “grantoedy,” who allegedly “intentionally created the conditions for the war to begin” (Channel 2, 27 September 2022).

Another “insider” claim suggested that Western actors were leveraging their “satellites” in Ukraine, including organisations such as the NABU or groups labelled “Sorosites,” to pressure Kyiv to return to the negotiating table (Channel 1, 02 November 2022). This framing positioned diplomacy as an externally imposed process rather than a decision made by a sovereign nation. Despite the inherent contradictions between claims that a Western-provoked war is underway and warnings that “the West is forcing Ukraine to negotiation” (Channel 2, 24 November 2023; Channel 1, 23 November 2023), there is an observable, consistent pattern. This pattern reflects the propaganda narrative that Ukrainians seek peace but are misled by both their authorities and Western powers.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to examine whether the spread of pro-Russian propaganda in Ukraine changed after the full-scale invasion and how it evolved. Despite the overall consistency of key thematic blocks, their functional purposes have been adapted to wartime conditions.

Before 24 February 2022, the examined channels predominantly worked to normalise pro-Russian interpretations of Ukrainian politics and the war itself, advancing frameworks such as the notions of “external control” and “Ukraine’s culpability for the war”. After the invasion, as is typical of wartime disinformation, TG channels crafted narratives intended to undermine Ukrainian morale on the home front, sow discord, and erode the collective will to resist, as this analysis also shows.

Rather than resulting in a thematic break, the full-scale war prompted a reorientation of existing narratives towards three primary functional objectives: 1) obscuring the responsibility of the aggressor for the war while shifting blame onto Ukraine or Western nations, 2) demotivating resistance by cultivating hopelessness and a sense of futility, and 3) redirecting the audience’s hostility from Russia to the Ukrainian government and its Western allies.

All analysed periods demonstrate the narratives’ inconsistency, often within the same channel. This inconsistency is typical of disinformation and, as O. Polegkyi described, reflects not a strategic logic but the use of “tactical narratives,” which imply illogical and

emotionally charged messages designed not to persuade but to disorient, exhaust, and manipulate perceptions (Polegkyi, 2023). The identified contradictions confirm that disinformation does not aim to construct a coherent ideological framework. Its objectives instead lie in inducing cognitive disarray and undermining political agency.

Furthermore, the narratives identified primarily do not directly mirror Kremlin rhetoric. There is almost an absence of overt messages promoting the notion of “brotherhood” between Ukrainians and Russians or the denial of Ukraine’s right to exist. Instead, the propaganda employs indirect interpretative frameworks that erode perceptions of Ukrainian statehood, depicting Ukraine as lacking sovereignty, having been betrayed by the West, and governed by hypocritical elites without a promising future. Prior to and following the invasion, the authorities are portrayed as deceitful, corrupt, and ineffective, and the nation is portrayed as a victim of them.

After 2022, research revealed a noticeable qualitative strengthening of anti-Western narratives: a narrative of deliberate betrayal, which allegedly caused, then prolonged the war, and then forced Ukraine to make peace. This narrative strategy complements the broader demoralisation efforts, suggesting that resistance is futile not only because of Ukraine’s inherent “weakness” but also because of the perceived abandonment by its Western allies.

Overall, the real effect of this disinformation and propaganda is questioned. The resilience of democratic beliefs, episodes of public mobilisation to protect institutions (particularly anti-corruption institutions), and support for European integration indicate that Ukrainian society at large does not passively absorb these messages. However, how effectively these channels are at achieving their disinformation goals, who their actual audience is, and how much they influence the audience’s psychological state are unknown.

This study is limited to an analysis of five TG channels commenting on the national agenda. It does not include regional media content or examine the effects on different recipient demographics. Future research could enhance these findings by incorporating analyses of regional channels and investigating how diverse groups perceive, internalise, or reject these narratives.

About the Author

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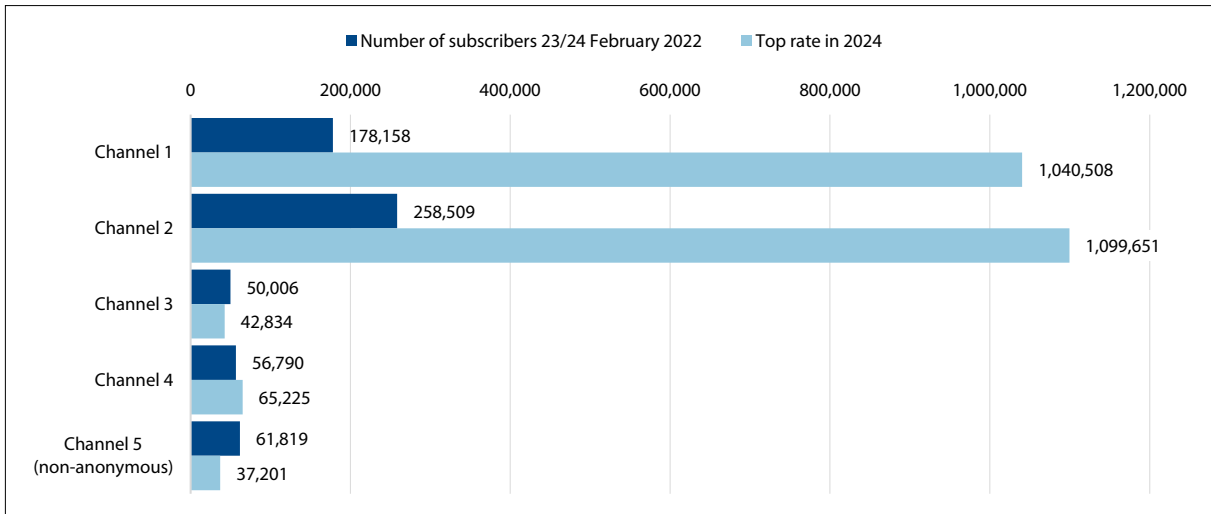
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Figure 1: Telegram Channels Analysed



Source: Data (TG Stat, accessed 1 December 2025)

Table 1: The List and Evolution of Key Narratives since 2019

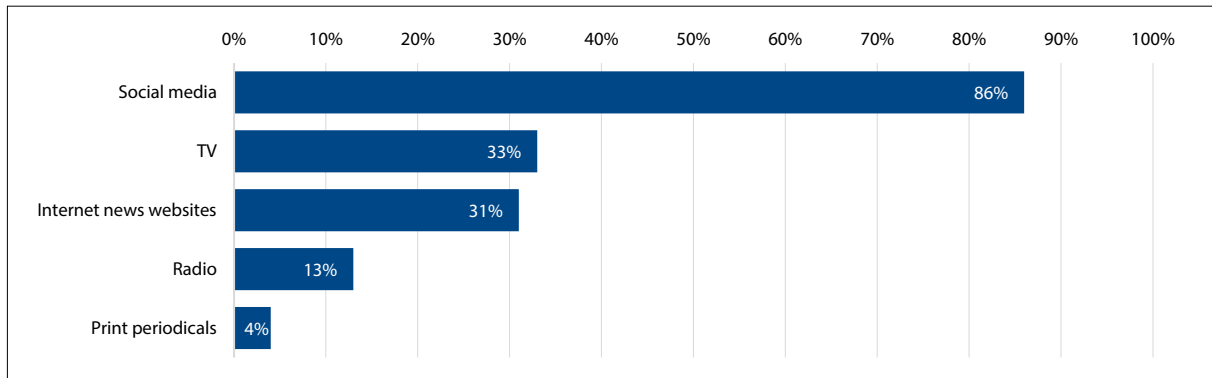
| Functional categories | Disinformation Narratives 2019–2022 | Disinformation Narratives 2022–2024 |
|---|--|--|
| Justifying the war/diffusion of responsibility for the conflict | Former Ukrainian authorities are responsible for the conflict. Ukraine undermined the Minsk agreement. Ukrainian authorities are incapable of reaching a deal with Russia. The war is “civil,” or it is hard to define the conflict. Authorities incite hatred in society. | Ukraine provoked the invasion. The West provoked the invasion. Russia is coercing Ukraine into peace. Ukraine is a pawn in Western geopolitical games. |
| Discouraging resistance | Hypocritical Ukrainian authorities. Full-scale war is impossible. No one (few) will defend Ukraine in case of a full-scale war. The government uses the war to distract from real problems. Kyiv doesn’t care about Crimea/Donbas. Ukraine has no chance to win. | The Ukrainian army is harming/hiding behind civilians. Ukrainian resistance is futile. Russian troops are humane and restrained. The Ukrainian authorities instrumentalise Russian war crimes. Partners have abandoned Ukraine. The West is coercing Ukraine into peace. Coercive mobilisation |
| Delegitimising Ukraine’s statehood | Ukraine is governed from the West. Ukraine is a non-sovereign actor. | The West is putting pressure on Ukraine through financial, political, and administrative means. |
| Delegitimising Ukrainian authorities and institutions | Former Ukrainian authorities are a “war party.” Corruption and hypocrisy among politicians. Some politicians and anti-corruption bodies are Western tools of influence on Ukraine. “New” Zelenskyi has started to act as “old” Poroshenko | Current authorities act like a “war party” (meaning the previous government). The military is extremist. Corruption persists. |
| Anti-Western framing | Unreliable West. Russia and Turkey are sovereign actors. Ukraine is used like a puppet for political purposes by the West (including interference in U.S. elections) | The West betrayed Ukraine. Western aid is an empty promise. Europe is tired of the war in Ukraine. The West gathers kompromat on Zelenskyi. Western interests prevent peace. |
| Weaponising freedoms | Sanctions against pro-Russian media are censorship. Restrictions on freedom of speech in Ukraine and repressions against journalists. Telegram remains the last island of truth. | The Ukrainian government is authoritarian. Media regulation is repression. Restrictions on freedom of speech in Ukraine and repressions against journalists. Telegram remains the last island of truth. |

Source: the author’s compilation.

OPINION POLL

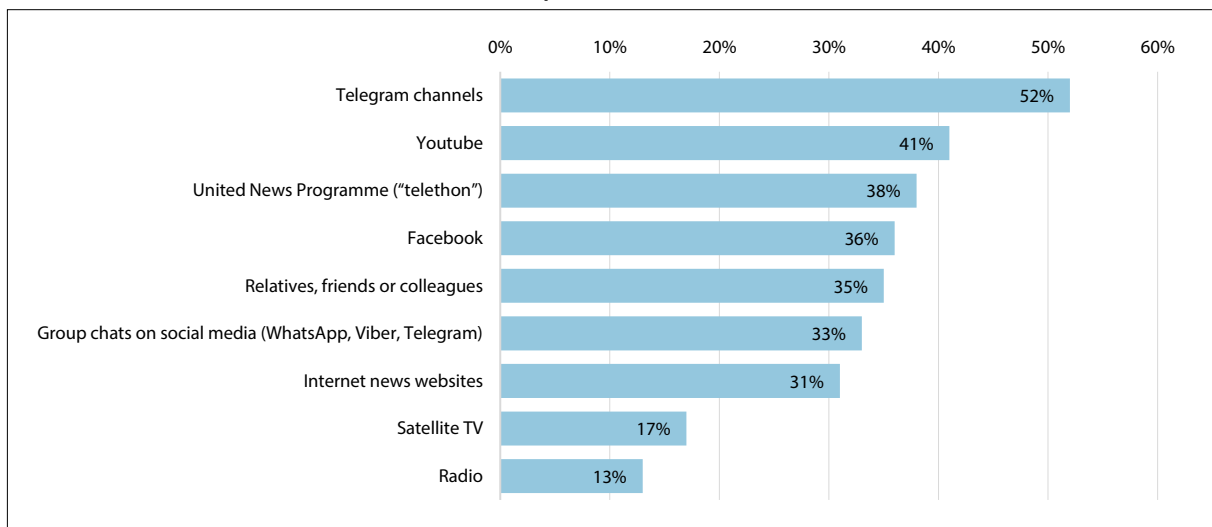
Use of Journalistic and Social Media in Ukraine (2024/25)

Figure 1: Monthly Use of the Media To Get News
(Answers in %, Closed Question, Multiple Answers Possible, 2025)



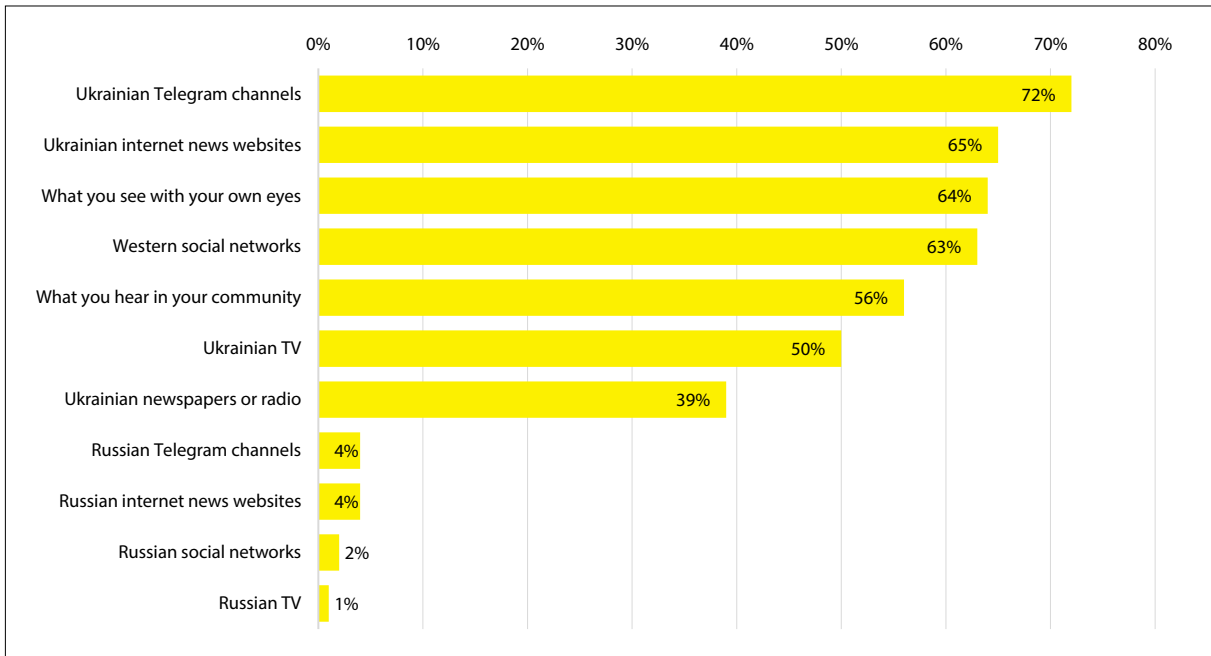
Source: Internews Ukraine: *Ukrainian Media: News Consumption and Trust in 2025*, <https://internews.ua/en/media-research>

Figure 2: From Which Sources Do You Usually Receive Information about Daily News?
(Answers in %, Closed Question, Multiple Answers Possible, 2024)



Source: Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, Centre of Political Sociology (2025): *Media Consumption in Ukraine (2024) – Nationwide public opinion survey from 3 to 12 March 2024, v. 1.0, Discuss Data*, <https://doi.org/10.48320/492C1A49-860A-4F2A-B4B2-1195512D6CD6>

Figure 3: Which of the Following Sources Do You Rely on Most Often When Searching for Information about the Military Actions with Russia? (Answers in %, Closed Question, Multiple Answers Possible, 2024)



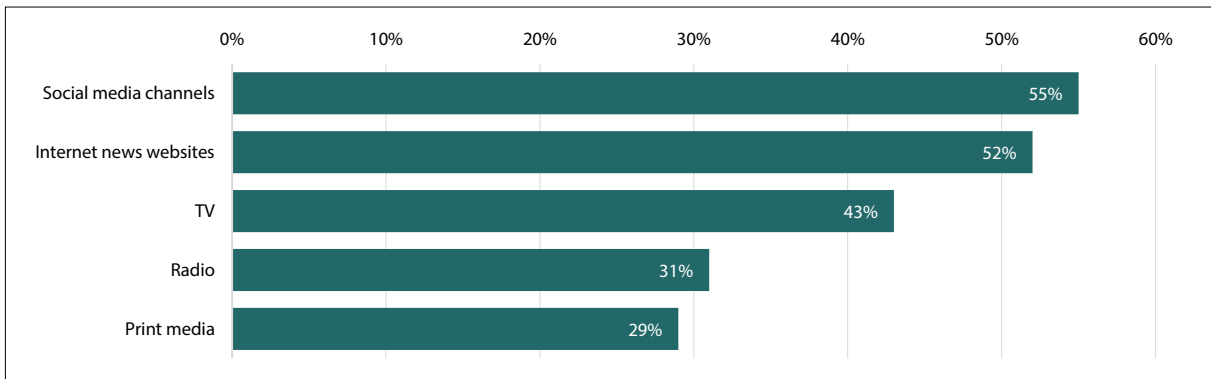
Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) (2025): *Opinions and Views of the Population of Ukraine: February-March 2025 (KIIS Omnibus 2025/02-03)* – Data from a nationwide public opinion poll conducted by KIIS in February-March 2025, v. 1.0, *Discuss Data*, <https://doi.org/10.48320/6A0FA12F-9127-4034-BF09-938DF2BFB227>

Table 1: The Three Most Popular Sources of News by Type of Media (2025)

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| TV | 1+1 (15%), ICTV (8%), STB (7%) |
| News in foreign languages | BBC (8%), CNN (3%), New York Times (3%) |
| Ukrainian internet news websites | Ukr.net (5%), Ukrainska Pravda (3%), TSN (3%) |
| Telegram channels | Truha Ukraine (5%), TSN News (2%), Suspilne News (1%) |

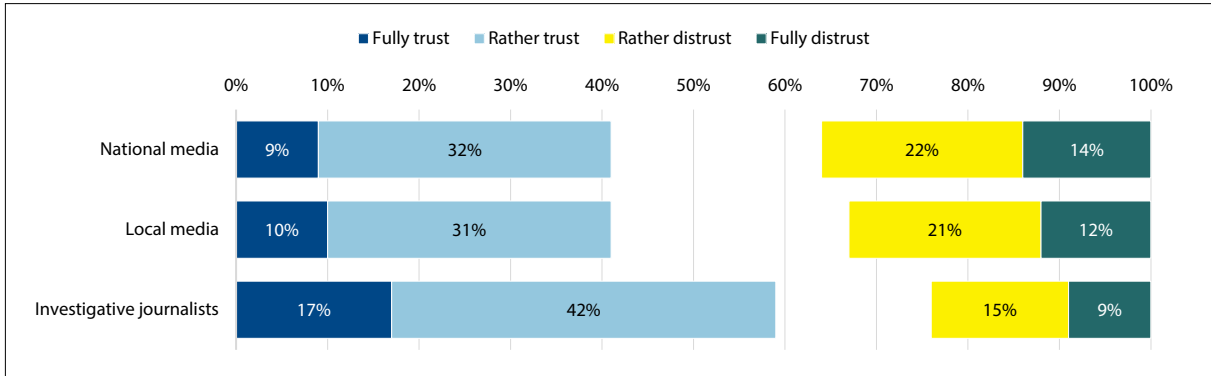
Source: *Internews Ukraine: Ukrainian Media: News Consumption and Trust in 2025*, <https://internews.ua/en/media-research>

Figure 4: Trust in Media Sources of News (% of Those Who Somewhat Or Fully Trust, 2025)



Source: *Internews Ukraine: Ukrainian Media: News Consumption and Trust in 2025*, <https://internews.ua/en/media-research>

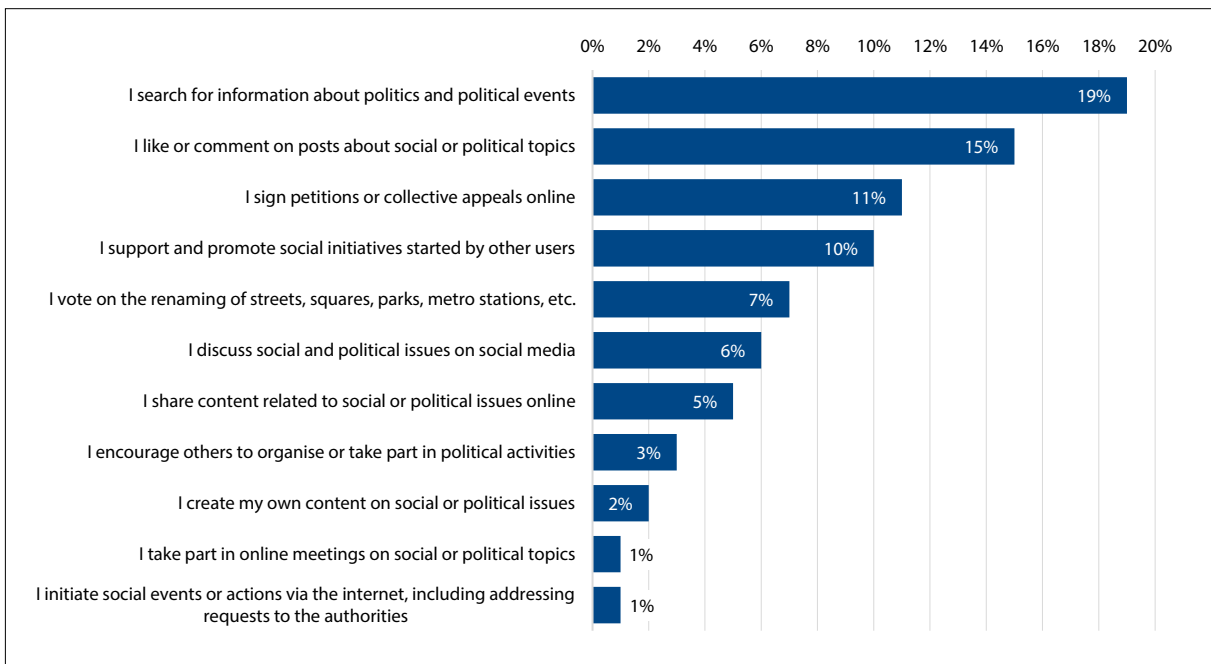
Figure 5: To What Extent Do You Trust ...
(Answers in %, 2024)



Note: Missing answers comprise "hard to say" and "no answer".

Source: Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, Centre of Political Sociology (2025): Media Consumption in Ukraine (2024) – Nationwide public opinion survey from 3 to 12 March 2024, v. 1.0, Discuss Data, <https://doi.org/10.48320/492C1A49-860A-4F2A-B4B2-1195512D6CD6>

Figure 6: What Kinds of Social or Political Activity Do You Engage in Online?
(Answers in %, Closed Question, Multiple Answers Possible, 2024)



Source: Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, Centre of Political Sociology (2025): Media Consumption in Ukraine (2024) – Nationwide public opinion survey from 3 to 12 March 2024, v. 1.0, Discuss Data, <https://doi.org/10.48320/492C1A49-860A-4F2A-B4B2-1195512D6CD6>

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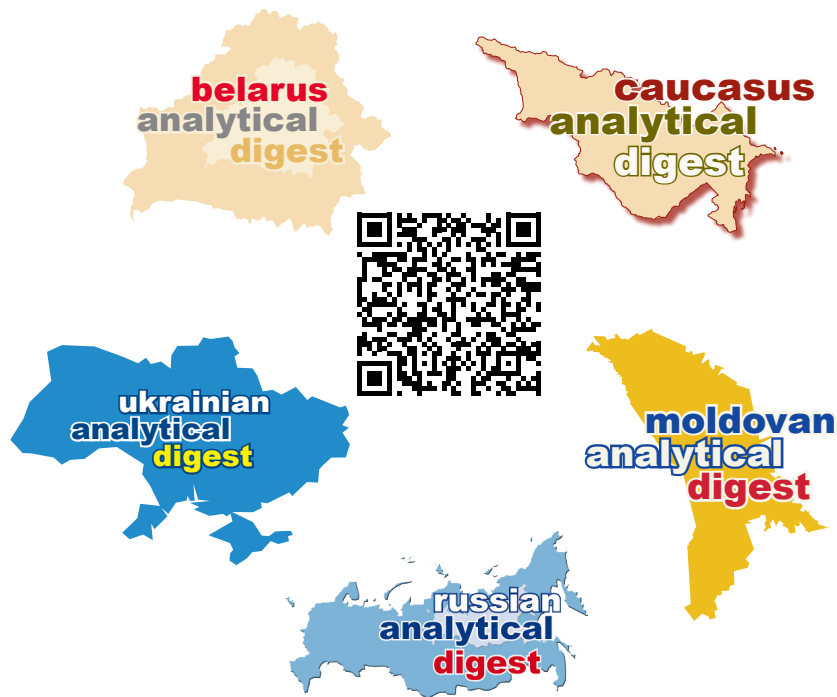
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