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THE UKRAINIAN JOURNALISTS' WORK ON THE FRONTLINE TERRITORIES AS A COUNTER TO RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

The article analyses the peculiarities of journalists' work during the Russian-Ukrainian war in the frontline, occupied or de-occupied territories. Civilian local journalists in Ukraine from February 2022 to the present period have been working in conditions of constant shelling, lack of electricity, mobile communications and the Internet. Hostile propaganda narratives and disinformation are circulating in the information space, which is refuted by Ukrainian journalists.

The study interviewed 13 journalists from different regions of Ukraine (Kharkiv, Kherson, Chernihiv, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk regions) that have been occupied by the Russian Federation or are constantly shelled by the Russian Federation as frontline or border areas. Civilian journalists in cities inform the local population about the course of hostilities, humanitarian affairs, stories of city residents, etc. If a media outlet has left the occupation or a dangerous city due to shelling, journalists continue to inform their audience remotely, creating projects on various social media platforms, in particular to counteract enemy propaganda in the Ukrainian information space.

Ukrainian journalists consider it their mission to inform their audience during the war. Working in difficult conditions, media outlets and journalists have turned to social media and messengers to inform their audiences about the news. In frontline towns where there is no connection or jamming of Ukrainian radio and television signals, and where the Ukrainian post office does not work, some editorial offices distribute newspapers themselves. In the case of Mariupol, a city under siege, including an information blockade, local journalists joined forces with volunteers and patrol police to print and distribute news leaflets.

Russian propaganda is countered through documentaries presented by Ukrainian local TV journalists. In cities, journalists record events, record eyewitness accounts, and analyse the period of siege or occupation.

Key words: *journalistic work, propaganda, information aggression, Russian-Ukrainian war, social media.*

Problem statement. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the work of Ukrainian journalists in the frontline territories and regions bordering Russia has been complicated by many factors.

Firstly, the Russian army shelled TV and radio signal transmitters, jamming and broadcasting Russian propaganda messages. Secondly, the shelling of power plants, mobile operators' equipment and Internet providers created a need for the production of periodicals (leaflets, newspapers). Thirdly, Russian propagandists created a large number of communication channels on social media, including the popular messengers Viber and Telegram, and a large number of messages with propaganda messages. Fourthly, during the temporary occupation in Kherson, Chernihiv, Izyum (Kharkiv region) or in the occupied cities of Donetsk (Mariupol) and Zaporizhzhia (Berdiansk) regions, one could observe the distribution of newspapers, leaflets with propaganda symbols, billboards with slogans. Fourthly, Russian journalists systematically produced

fake television reports or articles about conspiracy theories about secret laboratories that allegedly create viruses, "fighting" mosquitoes, etc.

The work of local journalists in Ukrainian frontline or occupied or de-occupied cities is important because they cover facts and events, and observe, analyse, and counteract enemy propaganda. They must quickly navigate the information space, publish information in different types of media, use different communication channels, and take care of their own safety.

Analysis of recent research. Currently, there is a wide range of research on military journalists. working in the conflict zone, they face numerous challenges. The most important of these is the risk of being injured or even killed (either intentionally or accidentally). Lisoski and Henrichsen [1] note that while these risks have always been part of the job of war reporters, modern military strategies make it even more difficult for correspondents to gather information. In addition, when covering military conflicts, journalists often face the problem of objectivity or,

in other words, maintaining a balance between journalistic and personal values [2]. However, there is a gap to be filled in the work of civilian journalists who are based in frontline zones or in occupied or de-occupied territories.

The differentiation between traditional and alternative media during social movements was also explored, which is reinforced by the mutual attention of journalists. In other words, a significant social movement can serve as a critical event that increases mutual monitoring among journalists [3].

The research after the full-scale invasion of 2022 reveals the features of journalistic storytelling that contributed to the overly simplistic narrative of Ukraine as a divided country before the full-scale invasion, and the new narrative also benefited from these inherent features of journalistic coverage. The authors of the study, R. Horbyk and D. Orlova, argue that Ukraine's wartime public diplomacy relied heavily on effective transmedia storytelling. Ukrainian journalists and communication specialists have mastered the memetic warfare of various formats on different media platforms [4].

In studying the transformation of Russian propaganda, R. Horbyk et al. identify the following elements of propaganda: centralised organisation, strategic nature and the desire for influence. Taking into account various Soviet and Russian doctrines on propaganda, they noted the practice of propagandists «a practice where certain information, such as a fact, allegation, interpretation, or narrative, is continuously “fed” to the target until it is fully advanced to its perception and accepted, possibly as one’s own (compare with “planted inference”)». The researchers also highlight the peculiarities of the Russian style of propaganda, such as its covertness, artificiality, negativity and destructiveness [5].

Consider other studies on the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2014. Fengler S. and others studied the coverage of events in Ukraine since the beginning of the war. Russia dominated the news agenda of all the newspapers studied, with a constant stream of news about the conflict. The authors emphasise that the media tried to contextualise the events, and meta-coverage of the media's role in the crisis has become a hot topic in many countries with developed media systems [6].

The work of journalists in Ukraine was also studied in 2014 through monitoring of mainstream and alternative media. Oliver Boyd-Barrett [7]. identifies 10 key narratives that together form the battlefield in the information war, problematic beliefs, assumptions and presumptions that these media invite their audiences to accept. It looks at one of the narratives:

the events that took place in Crimea, Odesa and eastern Ukraine between February and October 2014.

The experience of Ukrainian journalists, especially in frontline areas, under siege, occupation or de-occupation, since the full-scale invasion of 2022 and the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, is different and has peculiarities that are worth paying attention to.

The aim of the study is to identify the peculiarities of the civilian journalist's work in the frontline zone under shelling, in a city under siege or in the de-occupied territories since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine from February 2022 to June 2024 in the context of information aggression and propaganda.

To realise this goal, the following tasks are necessary:

- 1) to study the working conditions of journalists during the war;
- 2) to analyse the methods of Russian information aggression and propaganda communications in the frontline, occupied or de-occupied territories, which also impact the work of Ukrainian local journalists.

The research was conducted using the method of observation and media monitoring, which helped to identify some of the peculiarities of the dissemination of Ukrainian news in the frontline and occupied or de-occupied territories. The case study method was used to analyse the activities of local media in the frontline or occupied territories. The survey method was used to collect journalists' responses about working conditions and information influence, enemy propaganda and information aggression. The survey involved 2 journalists from Kherson region, 3 journalists from Kharkiv region, 2 journalists from Chernihiv region, 1 journalist from Zaporizhzhia region and 5 journalists from Donetsk region. A total of 13 journalists were interviewed. The survey was conducted anonymously. The journalists work in the editorial offices of newspapers, TV channels, news websites, and city press centres.

Jamming signals to block television and radio is traditional in the border, frontline and occupied territories of Ukraine. However, since 2022, journalists have also reported jamming of mobile communications and Ukrainian providers. For instance, in Berdiansk, Zaporizhzhia region, "Russian invaders jammed mobile communications and the Internet" (Respondent 8). In Mariupol, Donetsk region, mobile and internet towers and a TV tower were shelled, so the city was not only under a complete military siege, but also in a humanitarian catastrophe without food, heating, electricity, water, and, most importantly, an

information blockade. "These days of the city's siege are scary, when people used rumours. The main task of a journalist is to keep informing under any circumstances. I was very offended by my colleagues who stopped coming to work and responding when there was still at least some connection" (Respondent 11). Journalists in Mariupol survived like ordinary citizens and used old radio stations, they searched for Ukrainian news on medium waves, but said that Russians jammed the Marathon News and interrupted with their own Russian or Donetsk news.

In the border areas of Chernihiv region, Russian aircraft also bombed Ukrainian TV towers and internet service providers. Residents received only Russian or Belarusian news via satellite, while Ukrainian TV channels were jammed. A journalist from Kherson added: "Russians were given free access to Russian satellite television. However, in the autumn of 2022, it was possible to use Ukrainian satellite television Viasat, but for a fee. Residents received Ukrainian news through this satellite channel, which was not jammed by the Russians" (Respondent 1).

Russian fakes were also created in the occupied territories of Ukraine. One of the journalists talked about a fake about biolabs: "In Kherson, Russian propagandists tried to shoot a fake video about some bacteria at the Institute of Agriculture" (Respondent 2). There were also fakes about NATO biolabs at the Azovstal metallurgical plant in Mariupol, as a Mariupol journalist described: "When I left Mariupol, someone started writing to me asking if I had seen any news about the biolab. The fact is that because of my work, I have been everywhere at Azovstal: on the roof, at the blast furnace, near the converter, the rolling mill, and all the laboratories that monitor the quality of steel products. But there are no laboratories there. I was shocked to hear such wild news and that someone could believe it. I am a person who was there and can refute these fakes" (Respondent 9). Journalists also spoke about the problem that the border regions of Ukraine use satellite TV dishes to receive news and "consume Russian entertainment content" (Respondent 7).

In the Kharkiv region, journalists work with border villages that regularly come under fire. The Ukrainian post office does not operate there, and Ukrainian radio and television do not work due to shelling and the destruction of TV towers. Therefore, some journalists take their newspapers there on their own. The National Union of Journalists of Ukraine has released a documentary film "On the Brink. The story of the unbreakable spirit of a frontline newspaper editor". In times of war, it is important not only to record and

document, but also to disseminate reliable information to the Ukrainian audience, which suffers from enemy jamming and Russian propaganda on the radio waves. The newspaper's editor personally delivers his newspaper to frontline villages in Kharkiv region, coming under the sights of snipers. Residents have long been without electricity, and in some villages there is no mobile phone service, and Ukrainian television is jammed, so the newspaper is an important source of information, especially for the elderly. It is also interesting that it is postmen who used to work for the Ukrainian Post (which no longer operates there) and sellers in local shops who help deliver periodicals to readers. Kharkiv journalists also noted that in the de-occupied towns and villages, large editions of Russian propaganda newspapers such as Pravda were found in abandoned Russian dugouts or torture chambers, in particular in the town Izium (Respondent 5).

In 2024, the Ukrainian government began to combat the Russian signal at the border. In March 2024, the government already allocated UAH 137.6 million to the State Service for Special Communications (for the Concern for Radio, Radio and Television Broadcasting) to block hostile propaganda in nine regions – Volyn, Rivne, Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkiv, Vinnytsia and Odesa [8]. And in July 2024, the Cabinet of Ministers allocated an additional UAH 16.1 million to block the spread of Russian propaganda in Donetsk, Mykolaiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions [9]. In April, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that Ukraine was preparing its own technical developments to block Russian TV signals and access to Ukrainian media in communities bordering Russia, "It is worth remembering that Russian propaganda is followed by at least destabilisation and, at worst, an attempted occupation. At all levels, we and our partners must work together to counteract this" [10].

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, journalists identified features in the information space that confirmed the outbreak of war:

- 1) news about the accumulation of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine,
- 2) information about hidden mobilisation in the "DPR",
- 3) the arrival of a large number of foreign journalists, as it was in 2014.

Mariupol, Donetsk region, was under a complete siege from 2 March to 20 May 2022. Journalists did not have technical access to electricity and the internet, but some of them teamed up with volunteers and police at the Khalabuda hub and issued leaflets with

news about Ukraine, the city and enemy losses. "The head of the patrol police had a starlink, which helped us to receive information. We published leaflets with news and delivered them to major sheltered locations" (Respondent 12).

Due to the shelling and technical problems with broadcasting or timely publication of newspapers, journalists began publishing news in Telegram channels in groups or in their own publics. Text or photos or videos can be quickly uploaded to this messenger, and in case of poor connection, social media users can also quickly download and update the channels. This is why this messenger has become even more popular among the Ukrainian population and among journalists. "In 2 days, the city's telegram channel grew from 10,000 to 100,000 subscribers, meaning that people were reading official information," says one of the journalists from Mariupol about the changeover in late February 2022. (Respondent 13).

But also at the beginning of the war, a large number of channels with pro-Russian content were created on Telegram at the local level in Ukraine, in every city. And local journalists spent more time checking information inputs and publishing materials to counter disinformation.

In 2024, a bill to ban Telegram was discussed in the Ukrainian information space [11], and the Security Service of Ukraine also blocked pro-Russian propaganda Telegram channels [12].

Propaganda is transformed in social media, cinema, and documentaries [13]. To counter Russian propaganda, Ukrainian journalists document the changing nature of the war and produce documentaries. For example, Kherson journalists presented the films *Navala* [14] and *Unconquered Kherson* [15]. The National Union of Journalists of Ukraine created a documentary film "On the Brink" about the work of a local newspaper editor in Kharkiv region [16] One of the first documentaries to be released since the start of the full-scale invasion was *20 Days in Mariupol* by Mstyslav Chernov, as well as other films by Ukrainian journalists about the siege of Mariupol [17].

The journalists we surveyed worked and continue to work in the media. And if some cities remain under occupation or constant shelling, they continue to cover local news, but from the government-controlled territory of Ukraine. For instance, this is a network of websites that have tangential *city* endings or social

media projects aimed at countering propaganda media in cities under occupation.

Conclusions. Ukrainian journalists in the front-line, occupied or de-occupied territories face various difficulties in their work. On the one hand, there are technical barriers such as the lack of electricity, mobile and internet connections, destroyed TV towers and editorial offices, and burnt equipment. Therefore, journalists have moved to the government-controlled territory of Ukraine and continue their activities, publishing news for their local audience. Most journalists replicate the news in the media's Telegram channel or in their own journalistic Telegram channel. It should be noted that local websites of cities that are currently under occupation or are near the frontline continue to operate, and new journalistic projects aimed at local audiences are emerging in the information space.

TV journalists record events and create documentaries about their cities. Reliability, on-the-spot recording of events, and the collection of eyewitness accounts make journalists' documentaries convincing. For instance, the film *20 Days in Mariupol* won an Oscar.

On the other hand, newspaper publishers have problems delivering the press to frontline towns and villages because the Ukrainian post office has left. However, people in those regions have no electricity and no stable mobile or internet connection as a result of Russian shelling. Therefore, the local press, delivered by editors in person, is an important and only reliable source of information.

In Mariupol, which was under siege for almost three months and had no mobile or internet connection from March to May 2022, local journalists, together with volunteers and patrol police, created and distributed news leaflets in crowded places (sheltered areas, water queues, theatre downtown).

Local media and some local journalists created their own Telegram channels and expanded their activities on other social media platforms.

The journalists observed the enemy's information aggression and propaganda and countered it with their work: first, they reported and labelled fakes, second, they published reliable information and spent time checking a large number of messages on social media, third, they looked for technical opportunities to inform the population, fourth, they created documentaries about the cities, and fifth, they recorded eyewitness statements.

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Мельникова-Курганова О. С. РОБОТА УКРАЇНСЬКИХ ЖУРНАЛІСТІВ НА ПРИФРОНТОВИХ ТЕРИТОРІЯХ ЯК ПРОТИДІЯ РОСІЙСЬКІЙ ПРОПАГАНДИ

У статті проаналізовано особливості роботи журналіста під час російсько-української війни на прифронтових, окупованих чи деокупованих територіях. Цивільні місцеві журналісти в Україні з лютого 2022 року по сучасний період працюють в умовах постійних обстрілів, відсутності електрики, мобільного зв'язку та інтернету. В інформаційному просторі циркулюють ворожі пропагандистські нарративи та дезінформація, яку спростовують українські журналісти.

Під час дослідження було опитано 13 журналістів з різних регіонів України (Харківська, Херсонська, Чернігівська, Запорізька, Донецька області), які зазнали окупації РФ або постійно обстрілюються з боку РФ як прифронтові чи прикордонні території. Цивільні журналісти в містах інформують місцеве населення про перебіг воєнних дій, гуманітарних справ, історії мешканців міста тощо. Якщо медіа виїхало з окупації або небезпечного міста через обстріли, то журналісти продовжують інформувати свою аудиторію дистанційно, вони створюють проекти на різних платформах в соціальних медіа, зокрема з метою протидії ворожій пропаганді в українському інформаційному просторі.

Українські журналісти вважають своєю місією, що під час війни мають інформувати свою аудиторію. Працюючи у складних умовах, редакції медіа та журналісти перейшли в соціальні медіа та месенджери, і там повідомляли свою аудиторію про новини. В прифронтових містах, де нема зв'язку або відбувається глушіння сигналу українського радіо та телебачення, де не працює українська пошта, деякі редакції самотужки розповсюджують газети. На прикладі міста в повній осаді Маріуполя, зокрема в інформаційній блокаді, місцеві журналісти об'єдналися із волонтерами та патрульною поліцією, друкували та поширювали листівки з новинами.

Протидія російській пропаганді відбувається за допомогою документальних фільмів, які презентують українські місцеві тележурналісти. В містах журналісти фіксують події, записують свідчення очевидців, аналізують період осади або окупації.

Ключові слова: журналістська робота, пропаганда, інформаційна агресія, російсько-українська війна, соціальні медіа.