SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 56/15

Project manager: Per Ståhlberg

Project title: Propaganda and management of information in the Ukraine-Russia conflict: From nation branding to information war.

1. Purpose of the project

The purpose of this project has been to study the management of meaning and information in times of political, economic, social and cultural turmoil. With an empirical focus on Ukraine in the aftermath of the so-called Euromaidan revolution in late 2013, the project has aimed to analyse new types of actors engaged in the information war with Russia, and to understand the ways in which meaning and practice is formed at the intersection of state politics, corporate business and civil society activism. The study has been designed with a multi-disciplinary, and a multi-methods approach.

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

The study has been concerned with *agency, media forms* and *stories* of information management and asked questions, such as: Who are the involved agents? What are the media forms utilised in information management? What are the communicated messages or stories, and how can we explain why they are formed the way they are?

The most important results are:

First – a unique qualitative data set consisting of interviews, field notes and ethnographic material (documents, photos, web pages, press clippings, videos, etc.) from an extremely turbulent period of Ukrainian history. We have been able to follow actors already from before the crises and the war with Russia-backed separatists started in 2013. The material is unique in the sense that it is a historic documentation of an important development in Ukraine and Eastern Europe generally.

Second – a thorough and broad mapping of the agents involved in the management of meaning in Ukraine among political administration, journalism and media professional, PR and advertising, NGOs, academy. The mapping also covers the internal relations between the agents and their role in the management of meaning in Ukraine, especially related to the formation of information policy, nation branding, soft power, etc. Our results show that lines between many of these agents are often blurred, including the boundaries between

corporate entrepreneurship and political administration (there are plenty of examples of personal bonds between the PR business and political administration, for example). With this study we broaden the perspective compared to previous research, which has often been state-centric, and where the point of departure has been on the ways in which state actors—governments intelligence services and state-run media outlets—have sought to control information. Our results emphasise the manifoldness of communication, the negotiation between various discourses, and between individual and collective agents.

Third – a deeper understanding of the role that agents from political, corporate and informational power play in the formation of a country's information policy, with specific bearing for how information policy is formed in Eastern Europe and its historical contexts. Previous research has often been manipulation-centric and has focussed on the deceptive side of information management; for example, the phenomenon of so-called fake news, or to focus on manipulations of opinions (e.g., RT, the Russian government-funded international television network; the US election of Trump). We have broadened the perspective and added a meaning-making analysis of the event, acknowledging the spectrum of interpretations across audiences. As is obvious, organisations that seek to counter propaganda and heavily slanted journalism with accurate facts have not been entirely successful, giving birth to concepts such as factual resistance, etc. A meaning-making perspective can help explain why facts alone are not always enough. In addition, the project contributed to knowledge transfer towards junior scholars, as it allowed three Masters students to write their theses within its framework, and helped collecting data related to a specific case study around the Eurovision Song Contest as it was arranged in Kyiv in May 2017.

3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

We believe that several things make our study a unique contribution to the field ofresearch:

Contrary to most research on propaganda in Eastern Europe, which mainly focus on Russian propaganda and persuasion, we have had a focus on information management and policies in Ukraine. Research on Russian propaganda, information management and 'fake news' is of course a framework for our analysis, but the analytic focus is on Ukraine (rather than on the Russian actors).

Our analysis has substantially broadened the understanding of the intertwinement of political, corporate and civil society information management during critical times. We have also attempted to sidestep 'contentious concepts' like propaganda, nation branding, soft power and public diplomacy—or for that matter fake news and information war—as

analytical tools. We regard these concepts as stakes in the game of attention and influence. With this measure we have tried to avoid getting stuck into a rigid terminology loaded with normative assumptions and linked to rather obvious problematisations. This intervention allows us to reconceptualising the field of information management towards more strongly symbolic-oriented academic perspectives. Thus, our analyses include actions and practices of meaning management that occasionally seem to be nonsensical, playful or unserious, rather than thoroughly organized and strategically planned.

We have unique empiric material, building on ethnographic data (interviews, observations, photographs, branding material and other forms of documentation) from early 2013 to 2018. And while other literatures takes their point of departure in the events following Euromaidan, we can trace the events back to their roots in activities before the revolution and the Russian aggression. This also means that we have been able to explore the field from another entry point, as our initial interest was in branding activities and the media, rather than in international relations, political communication and governance.

The Ukraine crisis does not represent the most typical of perilous situations. Rather, it is a unique case in many ways. However, as we have argued, the particularity of the situation in Ukraine has explanatory power and presents opportunities to highlight ambiguities and contradictions of contemporary information societies in troubled times. Thus, it is a 'telling case' of a turbulent situation when crucial information is managed in many forms and orchestrated by several different agents, from state agencies and departments to corporate businesses, but also by civil society organisations and grassroots individuals.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

Our findings provoke further questions of comparative nature, to be followed up in future research:

How is it possible to form information policy in times of deep national crisis? Against the background of the findings of the project, this question can be posed to other countries in Eastern Europe (as well in other parts of the world). It concerns exactly how unique the Ukrainian case is (if at all) compared to other Eastern European countries, which may have other historical legacies in terms of information policy. Estonia, for example, differs historically from Ukraine in the sense that Estonia do not have oligarchs, and the boundaries between the political and media elites might be sharper there.

What role do governmental administration, corporate institutions and civil society actors play in the formation of the 'informational state'? Do other Eastern European countries have similar intertwinement of these societal spheres as Ukraine, or can we see other

patterns and other interdependencies elsewhere in Eastern Europe?

How are various domestic actors responding to external aggression and propaganda? What are the possible differences between Eastern European responses to external aggression and Western European (Asian, Africa, South-American) responses? Do countries in different parts of the world respond in similar ways, or are there diverging patterns of responses?

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

We cannot really see any differences between the contribution to Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe and the contribution to other international research. We persistently argue that knowledge of the ways in which communication practice is played out in Eastern. Europe does shed a light to international communication theory and the understandings of global media and communications. Empirically, the project of course contributes to the area studies knowledge about Ukraine, but it is our strong belief that the Ukrainian case is instructive for the understanding of general media and communication theory, which is, for example, indicated by the fact that the international hich -profile publisher MIT Press wishes to publish our work.

6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Monograph

Bolin, Göran and Per Ståhlberg (Forthcoming, 2021). *The Management of Meaning in Turbulent Times: Information Policy, Agency and Media in Ukraine*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press

Articles and chapters

Bolin, Göran, Paul Jordan and Per Ståhlberg. 2016. "From Nation Branding to Information Warfare: The Management of Information in the Ukraine–Russia Conflict". In Mervi Pantti (ed), *Media and the Ukraine Crises: Hybrid media practice and narratives of conflict*. New York: Peter Lang

Bolin, Göran and Per Ståhlberg. 2019. "The mediatized nation. Identity, agency and audience in nation branding campaigns". *InMediaciones de la Comunicación*, 14(2), 187-207. https://doi.org/10.18861/ic.2019.14.2.2926 [OPEN ACCESS]

Bolin, Göran and Per Ståhlberg. 2020. "The PowerPoint Nation: Branding an Imagined Commodity". *European Review, 1-12*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798720000496 [OPEN ACCESS]

Bolin, Göran & Galina Miazhevich (2018): 'The Soft Power of Commercialized Nationalist Symbols: Using Media Analysis to Understand Nation Branding Campaigns', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21(5): 527–542.

Couldry, Nick, Clemencia Rodrigues, Göran Bolin, Julie Cohen, Gerard Goggin, Marwan Kraidy, Koichi Iwabuchi, Kwang-Suk Lee, Jack Qiu, Ingrid Volkmer, Herman Wasserman, Yuezhi Zhao (with Olessia Koltsova, Inaya Rakhmani, Omar Rincón, Claudia Magallanes-Blanco and Pradip Thomas) (2018): *Media and Communications. Rethinking Society for the 21st Century. Volume 2: Political Regulation, Governance, and Societal Transformations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 523-562.

Ståhlberg, Per. 2017. Från marknadsföring till propagandakrig. *Ikaros, tidskrift om människan och vetenskapen*. Nr. 2: 37-39. http://www.tidskriftenikaros.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/st%C3%A5hlberg.pdf [OPEN ACCESS]

Ståhlberg, Per, and Göran Bolin. 2016. "Having a soul or choosing a face? Nation branding, identity and cosmopolitan imagination." *Social Identities*, 22 (3), 274-290.

Voronova, L. (2017). Gender politics of the "war of narratives": Russian TV-news in the times of conflict in Ukraine. *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies* 9(2): 217–235.

Voronova, L. (2020). Between Dialogue and Confrontation : Two Countries — One Profession Project and the Split in Ukrainian Journalism Culture. *Central European Journal of Communication*, 13(1(25)), 24–40. https://doi.org/10.19195/1899-5101.13.1(25).3 [OPEN ACCESS]

Voronova, L. (2020). Conflict as a point of no return : Immigrant and internally displaced journalists in Ukraine. European Journal of Cultural Studies, 23(5), 817–835. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419869351

Voronova, L. (2020). Dialogic spaces in the situation of conflict: Stepping stones and sticking points. In S. Maltby, B. O'Loughlin & K. ParryL. Roselle (Eds.). (Authors), *Spaces of War, War of Spaces* (pp. 205–247). New York,: Bloomsbury Academic. http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501360282.ch-012

Voronova, L & Widholm, A (2019) RT: Strategic narratives and soft power in a transnational media age. In: Kern-Stone, R & Mishra, S (eds) *Transnational Media: Media Nationalism and Transnationalism in a Globalized World*. John Wiley & Sons.

Yurchuk, Y., & Voronova, L. (2020). Challenges of Ongoing Conflict Research: Dialogic Autoethnography in Studies of Post-2014 Ukraine. In Jeppesen, S & Sartoretto, P (eds) *Media Activist Research Ethics* (pp. 249–268). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44389-4_12

Yurchuk, Yuliya. 2017. Reclaiming the Past, Confronting the Past: OUN-UPA Memory Politics and Nation-Building in Ukraine (1991-2016), in: *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*, ed. Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies.

Yurchuk, Yuliya. 2017. Global Symbols Local Meanings: The "Day of Victory" after Euromaidan. In: *Transnational Ukraine? Networks and Ties that Influence contemporary Ukraine*. Ed. Timm Beichelt and Susann Worschech, Stuttgart: ibidem, pp. 66 - 89.

Yurchuk ,Yuliya. 2017. Monuments as Reminders and Triggers. A contemporary comparison between memory work in Ukraine and the US, *Baltic Worlds* 3, p 12-17). http://balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Baltic-Worlds-3-2017-uppslag.pdf [OPEN ACCESS]

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Yuliya Yurchuk and Alla Marchenko. 2017. Intellectuals in times of troubles: Between empowerment and disenchantment during the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan. In: *Traitors, Collaborators and Deserters in Contemporary European Politics of Memory. Formulas of Betrayal*, ed. Narvselius and Grinchenko, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies, pp. 141-168.

Törnquist-Plewa, B., & Yurchuk, Y. (2019). Memory politics in contemporary Ukraine : Reflections from the postcolonial perspective. *Memory Studies*, 12(6), 699–720. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017727806

Minchenia, A., Törnquist Plewa, B., & Yurchuk, Y. 2018. Humour as a Mode of Hegemonic Control : Comic Representations of Belarusian and Ukrainian Leaders in Official Russian Media. In *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia* (pp. 211–231). https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004366671_011

Umland, A., & Yurchuk, Y. (2017). Introduction: The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in Post-Soviet Ukrainian Memory Politics, Public Debates, and Foreign Affairs. *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, 3(2), 115-128.

Yurchuk, Y., & Umland, A. (2018). Introduction: Essays in the Historical Interpretation of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, 4(2), 29-34.

Conferences

All four participants in the project have presented papers at many conferences in the disciplines of media studies, anthropology, journalism studies and history, as well as in transdisciplinary contexts. Below is only a few of the most important. One conference (first in the list) is co-arranged by the project and the Swedish Institute and consisted both of scholarly panels with international speakers and an equally international out-reach program consistiong of diplomats and political administrators from Eastern Europe. Organisers were Ståhlberg & Bolin and Andreas Åkerlund (Department of History, Södertörn University)

Public diplomacy in conflict: Nordic, Baltic and East European Perspectives. Swedish Institute and Södertörn University, Stockholm 2-3 May 2019. [co-arranged by the project and the Swedish Institute]

"Having a soul or choosing a face? Nation branding, identity and cosmopolitan imagination"

presented at the ICA 66th Annual conference "Communicating with power",Fukuoka, Japan 9-13 May 2016. (Per Ståhlberg and Göran Bolin)

"New Actors of Information Warfare: The Ukraine-Russia Conflict", Presented at the 6th ECREA conference, Prague, 9-12 November 2016 (Per Ståhlberg and Göran Bolin).

"The Privatization of Information Management and Propaganda: New Communications Agents in the Ukraine-Russia Conflict", presented at the preconference "Data and the Future of Critical Social Research", at the ICA 67th Annual conference "Interventions: Communication Research and Practice", San Diego, USA 24-29 May 2017. (Göran Bolin)

"Eurovision Song Contest in a state at war: Soft power and the Ukraine-Russia conflict". Presented at the 15th EASA biannual conference, Stockholm 14-18 August 2018. (Per Ståhlberg)

"The Powerpoint Nation: Branding an Imagined Community", presented at the ICA 69th Annual conference, Washington, DC, USA, 24-28 May 2019. (Bolin)