



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

Registration number, Östersjöstiftelsen: 2019-0007

Project manager: Roman Horbyk

Project title: Connecting soldiers: Media ecologies and materialities on the East Ukrainian frontline

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

The project has become a significant and highly noticeable research activity that continues to generate significant interest. In terms of measurable, tangible benchmarks it led to several published and soon-to-be published works, a research network of its own, as well as a significant media interest and public outreach. These results are more specifically reported in the respective section of the report. In terms of results as takeaways or key lessons, they can be summarized as following.

1. The project registered the arrival of mediatized battlefield empirically and in relation to concrete set of actors, factors and cases. Within this context, we observe the integration of warfare and portable devices, including mobiles, smartphones, and tablets, whose origins were civilian, running on various commercial technologies and applications. These devices have transformed into crucial components of the combat assemblage, at times even directly as weapons/elements of weapons, as vital links within the operational framework of warfare. The incorporation of mobile devices into the combat assemblage represents a significant paradigm shift in warfare. These devices, originally designed for civilian purposes, have now become essential tools on the battlefield, enabling instantaneous communication, coordination, and the acquisition of vital information. By leveraging the power of these devices, military forces gain a competitive advantage in manoeuvring and decision-making, rendering the mobile device a linchpin within the contemporary operational environment. The contemporary battlefield, characterized by its profound mediatization, represents a convergence of robust communication networks or assemblages. Through this deep mediatization, we come to realize that this assemblage or network stands as the primary means of modern military engagement. It could even be argued that the supremacy of the network plays a decisive role in determining the outcome on today's battlefield, with the mobile device assuming a pivotal position within it.

2. However, due to the hybridization of civilian and military domains through mobile communication, wherein both civilians and soldiers operate within the same network, the civilian population finds itself particularly vulnerable and exposed to aggressive doctrines. These doctrines may include coercive measures such as mobile communication checks or forced mobile blackouts, which underline the urgent necessity to recognize mobile communication as a fundamental human right and to consider the targeting of civilian mobile communication infrastructure as a grave violation of the laws of war. This integration of civilian and military spheres carries inherent risks and challenges. As the same network is shared by both civilians and soldiers, the civilian population finds itself in



a precarious position, exposed to the consequences of military actions and subject to potential abuses. Aggressive tactics, such as enforced mobile blackouts practiced by the Russian military, serve as stark reminders of the need to recognize mobile communication as a universal human right.

3. The fully hybridized civilian/military nexus of this war, if compared with high modern industrial wars of until about 1945, suggests that integration of such binaries is the modus operandi of late modern societies, in contrast to specialization/differentiation in classical modern societies. This integration can be defined as the main meaning and content of mediatization, and the media and technology serve as the chief integrator in this process. Inevitable consequences of this integration are, at the same time, intense *humanitarianization* of mobile communication, whereby mobile communication becomes vital for the civilians' survival and, by virtue of that, acquires characteristics of a human right, and *militarization*, whereby mobiles are increasingly used by the militaries as weapons/weapon elements. This creates a completely new and unknown situation, where the rhetorical positions of governments and companies trying to draw a clear line between civilian and military uses, are no longer tenable. The risks and consequences of this situation must be considered by all involved actors with utmost urgency.

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

The project's contribution to the international research frontline consists of bringing to it the empirical knowledge of an actual frontline, so to speak. The project made a breakthrough in spreading awareness of the uses that mobile communication devices have in modern warfare. The broad use of the publications within the project testifies to the interest towards it. For example, the *Digital War* article already has over 3,500 publisher website views and four citations while many more citations are on their way in the soon-to-be-published articles. It is already included into several university courses as mandatory reading, following only six months after its publication. The international community of researchers but also practitioners (evident in interest in the project from Swedish Defence Research Agency and Swedish Defence University that actively use the publications and invited me to comment on their reports) became aware and sensitized to the ambiguous role of mobile communication in war, which will increase preparedness for potential wars but also other crisis situations. Leading scholars with significant academic names and international reputation, such as Andrew Hoskins and Axel Bruns, paid attention to the project and praised it while also citing its publications in own work.

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

The project highlighted the role of Eastern Europe as one of the most innovative and dynamic regions in the world, where new technologies, tactics and methods are constantly created, innovated and tested. It highlighted the dynamism and creativity of the Ukrainian military and civilians. Moreover, this project sheds light on the grassroots nature of the war, revealing a reality where a significant portion of the state's efforts are spearheaded by a grassroots movement akin to guerrilla warfare. It is a remarkable phenomenon where civilians, junior officers, and enlisted personnel carry out much of the work that is



traditionally associated with a proactive and potent state. In this landscape, a myriad of resources including funds, equipment, expertise, and creativity are invested by dedicated soldiers, their families, and supporters, reflecting the profound commitment and resilience of the Ukrainian people. The interplay between mobile communication hardware and the intricate network of actors in this context demonstrates a symbiotic relationship where technology becomes an enabler of strategic synergy. It acts as a conduit for the flow of information, ideas, and initiatives, fostering a collective spirit of innovation and adaptability. This dynamic fusion of military and civilian realms, facilitated by mobile devices, encapsulates the essence of this research project, shedding light on the multifaceted dimensions of warfare in a rapidly evolving digital age. Through an exploration of this military-civilian nexus, we gain profound insights into the complex tapestry of conflict, transcending traditional dichotomies and revealing a more nuanced understanding of the interdependencies at play. The research not only underscores the indispensable role of technology but also provides a captivating narrative that celebrates the ingenuity, resourcefulness, and resilience of those on the front lines. Ultimately, it engenders a comprehensive appreciation of the Eastern European region as a crucible of innovation, where the fusion of technology and human agency reshapes the very fabric of warfare. Thanks to these factors, the project also contributed to de-Westernising media studies by centering the region of Eastern Europe, often seen as provincial, as well as to decolonising East European and Eurasian studies, traditionally and historically Russo-centric, by putting the main onus on Ukraine and Ukrainians' agency.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

The project had to be adjusted because of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as I had to separate the periods of 2014-2022 and 2022-present, and formulate an additional research question on how these war phases differ. Apart from this, an interesting subset of theoretical questions concerns the replacement of specialization with integration in late modernity (which I included in the main results).

But I have also started developing completely new research questions based on the results of the project. Particularly, the role of commercial organizations and privately owned manufacturers and infrastructure services seems very interesting. The broad use of mobiles in the warzone disrupts the closed nature of the military as state institution, introducing corporate actors to the frontline concatenation. Of course, smartphone use involves also social media companies and their culture of connectivity, dataveillance and algorithmically coded sociality (prone to manipulation by third parties) as a factor in war. Accordingly, the boundaries collapse between the state (the military), the corporate, the private and even the intimate, creating a unique interconnected re-figuration of social situations and networks around war. War communication becomes part of the profit-generating mobile telephony and social media business, and that business in its turn supplies the military with a combat tool, which a soldier can use both to kill the enemy and to talk to his or her kids minutes later. In this light, I am right now developing a new set of research questions that grew out directly from this study on the uses of mobile communication on the frontline, dealing with the role – never neutral and not always pro-Ukrainian – that Western tech giants, IT and



social media companies play in this war. This will form the basis for one or two publications on the concepts of algorithmic solidarity and algorithmic imperialism I am thus proposing, and potentially a new research project application. Apart from that, thanks to the project I have formed vital research collaboration with scholars from Swedish Defence University, where I am collaborating to research on the intimacy at the frontline, and Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), whom I am assisting with comments on their research into information warfare and have been recently included in their research application for a potential new project.

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

Monographs

1. I have contracted a monograph with a provisional title “How to Win the Information War” with Lexington Books, subsidiary of Rowman and Littlefield. The manuscript I am currently working on is to be submitted by 1 August 2023 and the publication can be expected during 2024. It will be broader in scope but include the use of smartphones in the war as one of the three-four key themes.

2. A further monograph very specifically dealing with the particular use of smartphones in the war has been submitted to Routledge and is under review. In case it is turned down, there is also interest from other publishers. If accepted, the monograph is to be written between 1 August 2023 and 1 June 2024.

Chapters

1. Horbyk, R. (2023). Mediatisation of war and the military: Current state, trends, and challenges in the field. In: Bolin, G. & Kopecka-Piech, K. (eds). *Contemporary Challenges in Mediatization Research*. London: Routledge, 111-128.

2. Boyko, K. & Horbyk, R. (2023, out very soon). Swarm Communication in a Totalizing War: Ukraine’s Wartime Communication. In: Mortensen, M. & Pantti, M. *Media and the Ukraine War*. NY: Peter Lang.

Articles

1. Horbyk, R. (2022). “The War Phone”: Mobile Communication on the Frontline in Eastern Ukraine. *Digital War*, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-022-00049-2>



2. Horbyk, R. (2022). The Unexpected Weapon: Hybridisation of Civilian and Military Mobile Phone Use in the Russo-Ukrainian War. *Danyliw Seminar conference paper*. <https://www.danyliwseminar.com/roman-horbyk-2022>

3. Horbyk, R. The Visual Regimes of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Submitted to *Media, War and Conflict*.

4. Horbyk, R. The Mediatized Battlefield: Mobile Communication in Warfare as Weapon and Human Right. Submitted to *Mobile Media & Communication*.

Popular publications

Two articles, by France24 and Euromaidan Press, are due soon.

Those already published include:

“The smartphone goes to war. How digital technology is changing the battlefield”, *Oko Press*, 23 April 2023 (in English, Poland), <https://oko.press/digital-war-ukraine-smartphone>

[The same article in Polish]: Smartfon idzie na wojnę, *Oko Press* (in Polish, Poland) <https://oko.press/smartfon-idzie-na-wojne>

”Experternas fyra scenarion: Så kan ukrainska kartan ritas om”, *Göteborgs Posten*, 20 July 2022 (in Swedish, Sweden). <https://www.gp.se/nyheter/varlden/experternas-fyra-scenarion-sa-kan-ukrainska-kartan-ritas-om-1.77199627>

“Olga Rudenko and the Kyiv Independent Are Giving the World a Window Into a Devastating War”, *Time*, 11 May 2022 (in English, US). <https://time.com/collection/next-generation-leaders/6174883/olga-rudenko-kyiv-independent/>

“Mobile phones have changed the rules of war. Ukrainians are using that to their advantage”, *ABC News*, 8 June 2022 (in English, Australia). <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-09/mobile-phones-are-changing-the-way-war-is-fought-in-ukraine/101085610>

”Ukraine conflict and the weaponization of smart phones”, *ABC News*, 23 April 2022 (in English, Australia). <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/sundayextra/ukraine-conflict-and-the-weaponization-of-smart-phones/13849196>

“Forskare: Journalister och kulturarbetare kommer att bli offer för förföljelse” [Researcher: Journalists and Culture Professionals To Become Victims of Persecution], *Dagens Nyheter*, 24 February 2022 (in Swedish, Sweden). <https://www.dn.se/kultur/expert-i-kiiv-journalister-och-kulturarbetare-kommer-bli-offer-for-forfoljelse/>



Horbyk, R. (2021). Mobile Phone: Connecting Soldiers? *Baltic Rim Economies* 2/2021.
<https://sites.utu.fi/bre/mobile-phone-connecting-soldiers/>

Conferences

The project results have so far been presented at 14 different conferences between 2021 and 2023, and at least two more are planned and accepted later in 2023. These include such top conferences as ICA (three papers in 2022 and 2023), ECREA (2021 and 2022), IAMCR (2022), ASN (2023), ASEEES (2021 and planned for 2023), BASEES (2022 and 2023), ICCEES world congress (2021), NordMedia (2021 and planned 2023).

I will single out five presentations that involved preparation of a full-fledged paper, which doubles down as conference paper publication.

1. *Hybrid War, Hybrid Peace: Mobile Communication at the East Ukrainian Frontline*, presented at ICA annual conference in Paris, May 2022, when it was also awarded a Top Paper Award in Mobile Communication section. It was referenced by the ABC report.

2. *The Unexpected Weapon: Hybridisation of Civilian and Military Mobile Phone Use in the Russo-Ukrainian War*, Danyliw Research Seminar in Ukrainian studies. It is quite likely the single most prestigious and competitive event in Ukrainian studies, organized annually at University of Ottawa.

3. *Ukraine's Mediatized Battlefield and the New Doctrine of Mobile Communication Warfare*, ASN annual convention. In this paper, I problematize the simultaneous humanitarianization and militarization of mobile communication. This is one of the project's key results.

4. *The Kalashnikovs of the Information War: Mobile Phones and Communication Rules of the Eastern Ukrainian Frontline*, BASEES, April 2022. In this paper I addressed the broad audience of area studies scholars, presenting the early version of the article later published by *Digital War* but also the first insights after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

5. *Weaponized media vs. mediatized weapons: mobile communication on the frontline in eastern Ukraine*, ECREA conference, October 2022, Aarhus. It was presented with a significant attendance and to a positive reaction of top international scholars, such as Axel Bruns (the author of the concept "produsage") who was present.