

Aleksandra GALUS

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

ORCID: 0000-0002-7081-4187

Yuliia NESTERIAK

Taras Shevchenko Kiev National University

ORCID: 0000-0002-5955-7693

Digital media in a contemporary conflict – example of Ukraine¹

Abstract: The ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia provides many examples of using media, including technologically new ones, to conduct information warfare. The article focuses on the issue of the importance of digital media in the context of war in eastern Ukraine and socio-political protests (2013/2014) that preceded the armed conflict. This article analyzes the methods of instrumental usage of digital media by Russia as the dominant entity in conducting aggressive information warfare against Ukraine as well as civic actions on the Ukrainian side aimed at counteracting Russian propaganda. The results show that, in the times of the mediatization of war, different entities tend to actively use both traditional media present in the digital space and social media. In addition, this work systematizes the conceptual apparatus related to the discussed issues. The article is based on the analysis of case studies (mainly Russian RT and Ukrainian, social initiative StopFake), content analysis, analysis and criticism of literature, and examination of source studies. The article complements the current debate on the conflict between Ukraine and Russia by highlighting the role of digital media in the context of information warfare and by showing that digital media, especially social media, can be a platform adopted not only by state actors, but also for citizens.

Key words: civil society, digital media, information warfare, Russia, social media, Ukraine

Introduction

The crisis in Ukraine that has continued from 2014 until today, referred to as the international geopolitical struggle and simultaneous-

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ly an armed conflict and humanitarian crisis (Pantti, 2016, p. xii), shows how important digital media can be. In November 2016, the International Criminal Court (ICC) ruled that the war in eastern Ukraine is the “international armed conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation” (*13 тисяч...*). News about Ukraine have been published on the Internet on a regular basis by the majority of traditional media, and information spreads in the social media as well, together with ordinary citizens who express their opinions. The world showed their peak interest in the conflict in late 2013 and early 2014, when in Kiev anti-government protests started.² With the annexation of the Crimea Peninsula by the Russian Federation, which has not been recognized by the international community, a conflict unrolled in Ukraine with not only regional but also global consequences (Pantti, 2016, p. xii). The war in the east of Ukraine, with the estimated death toll of 13 thousand, including about 3.3 thousand civilians (*Death Toll...; 13 тисяч...*), provides many examples of the use of digital media for the purpose of information warfare, including the dissemination of a tampered content.

The research goal presented in the article is to analyze the role played by digital media in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and socio-political unrests preceding the beginning of the war in the east of Ukraine. Yet another goal is to gather concepts pertaining to the subject. The article verifies a hypothesis that digital media are not only instrumental in the hands of policy makers as a part of the information warfare, but they are also used by citizens who, through their activity in the social media, are involved in the conflict. Digital media generally include traditional media which simultaneously operate in the digital space as well as social media. Such a distinction of digital media follows the conviction of Andrew Chadwick, an authority in the field of political communication, that it is necessary to develop a holistic approach to old and new forms of communication, since both depend on each other (Chadwick, 2013, p. 4). The objective of the research is met by analyzing two case studies – the activity of the Russian television RT (formerly Russia Today) and a civil initiative of StopFake.org. In addition to qualitative case studies, the article uses content analysis and a technique of examination and evaluation of literature, supplemented by the analysis of source publications. This leads to a better understanding of the essence

² Based on the popularity of the word “Ukraine” in 01.01.2013–30.09.2019 by Google Trends.

of the information warfare and the influence of digital media on the example of the current armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Digital media in a contemporary conflict

The conflict in Ukraine and problems related to it in the digital space are examples of contemporary challenges faced by governments and ordinary citizens. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010, pp. 3–6) believe that, at times of mediatized wars, mass media have become an integral part of any conflict, since they affect the perception of events by the general public, political decisions, and ultimately the way in which historians render the developments. A British journalist David Patrikarakos (2017, pp. 1–17), in his book *the War in 140 Characters*, argues that in the digital age, information published has become a weapon which is by no means less powerful than artillery. This creates new opportunities and new challenges as well. In a broad sense, media are a key element of any conflict, and a “mediatized” conflict refers to the active involvement of mass media in a conflict (Panti, 2016, p. xiv). It has been indicated that while analyzing the issue of conflict, a rapidly changing media environment should be taken into consideration. The same applies to new information technologies and social media (Gilboa et al., 2016, p. 654). New media technologies have brought changes to the media content, institutions and the public, as well as the model of communication (Krzysztofek, 2006, p. 1).

Digital media are usually defined as any form of content presentation and use (e.g. audiovisual, graphic, text), which is stored, reproduced, distributed and edited with the use of digital means or processing equipment (Grabowski, 2016, p. 30). Therefore, digital media is a very broad concept which includes digital television, digital radio, web portals, press, radio and television available on the Internet, social portals, blogs, ebooks, video on demand, computer games and many more. Technology used to convey the content is one of the most popular reference points while classifying the media, which is the basis of the division of media into “old” (traditional, i.e. chronologically earlier – press, radio, television) and “new” (Internet).³ Although many authors use the term

³ The term “new media” is still considered vague, which might be the result of a wide interest in the transformation of media and the diversity of perspectives (politi-

of “new media,” “digital media,” “online media” or “electronic media” as synonyms, some believe that the category of “digital media” (or “hypermedia”) focuses on their technical aspect and the “technological” understanding of new media stresses their digital nature. The digital nature is a precondition to refer to them as “new” media. However, it does not automatically mean that they are also interactive and/or virtual. Taking into account the above-mentioned terminological nuances, the article uses “digital media” as synonymous to electronic versions of press, radio, television, web portals and social media which meet requirements of new media: digital nature, interactive mode, hypertextuality, web-based availability and virtual character (Lister et al., 2009, p. 13).

The majority of researchers agrees that Ukraine is involved in a hybrid war, or “such an activity of one of the parties which incorporates a variety of military and non-military methods, forms and measures” (Skoneczny, 2015, p. 40). Already mentioned David Patrikarakos, in his interview for Radio Svoboda, describes the impact of information dissemination by Russians on the inhabitants of Eastern Ukraine by referring to it as “a successful Russian criminal intelligence operation” (*Почм у Twitter...*, 22.10.2019). The author has noted that “similar information impact and diversion are not limited to borders, since it is not the history of conflicts between states, it is the history of the fight for human thoughts. The conflict in Ukrainian Donbass is an example that shows the power of propaganda” (*Почм у Twitter...*). Contrary to common beliefs, not the Russians but Americans have created the concept of a “hybrid war,” based on the experience of the US Army in Afghanistan, Iraq and in the course of their fight against terrorism (Skoneczny, 2015, p. 40). In each of these conflicts, researchers have emphasized the importance of mass media, and in the case of the most recent conflicts, the importance of new media, social media included. Many actions during the Russian hybrid war against Ukraine, as it has been proven, concerns the digital information space. The new media environment has been defined by Andrew Chadwick (2013, p. 4) as “hybrid media system,” means a combination and interaction of new and old media forms, as well as a broad spectrum of actors who want to control the flow of information and include their own goals in the media related agenda. Preparation,

cal science, media science, psychology, sociology, etc.). According to Jakub Nowak, “digital media” refers to news and information and the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) (See: Nowak, 2011, pp. 13–19).

security of information and the dissemination of a specific strategic narration via the media was essential both in the course of the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and during later stages of the Russian aggression on the territory of Eastern Ukraine. When in 1994 Winn Schwartau defined a relatively new concept of “information warfare,” other terms appeared in parallel, e.g. virtual war, web-based warfare, cyberwar or cyberterrorism, which described contemporary conflicts (Grabowski, 2016, p. 30). Although in a different way, all of these concepts take account of the technological and information aspects.

It is now thought that the information warfare and its extreme forms, such as the web-based war and information and psychological war, can be used to reach the goals of the state in international, domestic, and regional politics, and ensure a geopolitical advantage (Darczewska, 2014, p. 7). These objectives may apply to the protection, use, damage, and destruction of information or entire information resources, but also to contradict information in order to gain some benefits or even a victory over the enemy (Liedel, Piasecka, Aleksandrowicz, 2012, p. 15). Information warfare methods include: psychological operations, propaganda, misinformation, manipulation, and cyberattacks on social media. Information (tampered or not) transmitted via the media, in particular those that are technologically “new,” are important elements of a modern conflict, primarily because of an easy access to the content, visual appeal, interactive mode and the possibility of user participation. It is worth noting that digital media are also a source of fake news, i.e. fraudulent news that spread through the network often without any special interference of state actors. The example of Ukraine shows the way in which digital media have become a space for key socio-political events and have been repeatedly used as a tool of the information warfare and as a tool in the hands of citizens.

Digital media and the crisis in Ukraine

It is believed that digital media play a vital role not only during armed conflicts (De Franco, 2012, pp. 16–20), but also social unrests (Bastos, Mercea, Charpentier, 2015, p. 320), during which individual parties confront their arguments and compete for influence. Ukrainian revolutions, separated by a decade, constitute an excellent example of the media en-

vironment transformation. The Orange Revolution of 2004 was rather an “analogue” event that attracted interest primarily of traditional media, since Internet portals, such as *Ukrainian Truth* (“Українська правда”), were at their early stage. The pro-European and anti-government protests in Kiev started in autumn 2013 with an entry on Facebook made by a journalist Mustafa Nayyem “Let’s be serious. Who is ready today by midnight to come to Maidan? Likes do not count. Only comments under the post: ‘I am ready.’ If more than a thousand people gather, we will organize ourselves.”⁴ Within an hour, over 600 people declared their interest to participate, so the same evening, i.e. 21 November, the first gathering was organized. It attracted more than 1,000 people, and this started the riots in the Maidan⁵. In the later stages of protests, digital media played a tremendously important role. They served as one of the main sources of information and a tool for the coordination of protests and the mobilization of millions of Ukrainians (Onuch, 2015, p. 170).

The Ukrainian crisis of 2013–2014 started with riots against the suspension of the Association Agreement with the European Union by the then President Viktor Yanukovich. Later, the riots transformed into an anti-government revolution. The most brutal fights between rioters and the militia took place in February 2014, which caused the largest number of deaths.⁶ Since the conflict exacerbated, the special Berkut units were liquidated and president Yanukovich left the territory of Ukraine. The peak of a long preparation for the occupation of the Crimea Peninsula was in March 2014, when Russia used the maximum reluctance of Ukraine to defend their territories and took over Crimea. As a result of

⁴ Original in Russian: “Ладно, давайте серьезно. Вот кто сегодня до полуночи готов выйти на Майдан? Лайки не считаются. Только комментарии под этим постом со словами “Я готов”. Как только наберется больше тысячи, будем организовываться.” <https://www.facebook.com/Mustafanayyem/posts/10201177280260151>, 11.09.2019.

⁵ Riots that started on 21 November 2013 in the Maidan and continued until spring of 2014 and also involved other cities in Ukraine. In public discourse and scientific literature, they are usually referred as “the riots on the Maidan,” “Euromaidan” (especially in initial phase of protests, i.e. in autumn 2013) or the “Revolution of Dignity” (*Uprising in Ukraine...*).

⁶ In total, as a result of protests in Ukraine at the turn of 2013 and 2014, over 100 people were killed (so-called Heavenly Hundred Heroes), who received the Gold Star Medal as a postmortem award by the decree of the President of Ukraine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141121235214/http://www.president.gov.ua/documents/18477.html> (15.09.2019).

an attack on the unit stationed in Simferopol, one Ukrainian soldier died which gave Arsenyi Yatsenyuk, the Prime Minister of Ukraine, a basis for considering that the Russia-Ukraine conflict evolved from a political to a military level; the issue attracted a broad media coverage (Ochmann, Wojas, 2016, p. 90).

Then, Ukraine experienced pro-Russian riots in the eastern part of the country. Shortly after, separatist quasi-states were proclaimed: the Donetsk People Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) supported by Russia. The most important events of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict include, among others, the Power Keg of Illovaisk, the recapture of Sloviansk by Ukrainian forces, clashes in Mariupol, fights near Kramatorsk, battle for the Donetsk Airport, shutdown of Il-76 aircraft of the Ukrainian Army in Luhansk, shutdown of a passenger MH17 aircraft of the Malaysia Airlines, battle of Marianivka, fights near Donetsk, Krasny Luch, Luhansk, and again near Mariupol (Flikke, 2015, pp. 6–45; Lakomy, 2015, pp. 14–24 VDC). The conflict in the eastern Ukraine has been closely followed by traditional and new media around the world. Very often they have decided to prioritize information about the conflict in their agenda.

Information warfare and “traditional media” in digital space

The essence of the information warfare was revealed by the Crimea operation and the subsequent armed conflict in the east of Ukraine. The annexation of the Crimea Peninsula involved Russian-speaking citizens in Ukraine, who had been previously subjected to a psychological brain-wash by the media (Darczewska, 2014, p. 6). The practice of the Russian information warfare combines traditional tools (e.g. subversive campaign activities of Cold War) with modern technology (e.g. investment in digital media focusing on Russian and foreign audiences or use of Internet forums and social media to spread pro-Russian narration) (Batorowska, Klepka, Wasiuta, 2019, p. 207). Therefore, the phenomenon of information warfare is not a Russian invention. It is a modification and adjustment of the tool to match needs of propaganda and psychological war previously conducted by the USSR. Batorowska, Klepka and Wasiuta (2019, p. 205), authors of *Media jako instrument wpływu informacyjnego i manipulacji społeczeństwem (Media as an instrument*

using information and manipulation to influence the society) believe that the manipulation of information in mass media is a necessary condition of a hybrid war. Recipients of such activities in the information space are not only political and military actors but also civilians; the latter are a target of the attack and/or medium to convey the content (Grabowski, 2016, p. 32). In case of the Crimea annexation, kinetic methods, e.g. maneuvers with equipment, originally were less important than the creation of information chaos and thereby making it difficult for Ukrainian and the international community to respond (Grabowski, 2016, p. 32). In the digital space, state propaganda mixes with news and content generated by users.

In the context of the Ukraine conflict, an example of a medium used in the information warfare is the “RT,” being an international television, previously known as “Russia Today.” It was founded by the Russian Government in 2005 and it is owned by the Russian International Information Agency (RIA Novosti). The RT publicizes news, documentaries, talk shows, theme programs and podcasts, and the television station itself tries to promote its image of a medium that *questions more*, which in practice means that it provides narration other than the prevailing one in Western media (Widholm, 2016, p. 108). The RT Channel is available in over one hundred countries across the world by satellite and/or by cable, whereas the RT website with news and programs is available in six languages (Russian, English, Spanish, Arabic, German and French). RT is also actively involved in social media (Facebook “RT” – 5.6 million likes, “RT на русском” [RT in Russian] – 1.6 million, RT America – 1 million, group in Vkontakte “RT на русском” – 1.2 million subscribers, YouTube – 3.7 million subscribers) and it offers customers an application for mobile devices⁷. Taking into account the range of the RT and the size of communication channels, it is no longer possible to consider the RT as a “traditional” television that can be examined in isolation from communication over the Internet. This confirms the Chadwick’s claim that “old” and “new” media are interrelated.

The majority of researchers describes the RT as the Kremlin’s propaganda outlet (Nelson, Orttung, Livshen, 2015, p. 1; Yablokov, 2015, p. 301), based on the analysis of media content. A comparative study on

⁷ RT on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/RTnews/>, <https://www.facebook.com/RTAmerica/>, RT on Vkontakte: https://vk.com/rt_russian, RT on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/RussiaToday>, 30.09.2019.

the media broadcast of protests in Ukraine by BBC World, Al Jazeera English, CNN International and the RT shows that the RT strongly differs in their communication from other media by presenting the Ukrainian society mobilization of 2013–2014 as a nationalist anti-Semitic and fascist movement (Robertson, Chiroiu, Ceder, 2019, p. 58). More often than other stations, the RT emphasized violence and used suggestive pictures. A similar message about the conflict in Ukraine prevailed in the content disseminated through the RT over the Internet. Subsequent events (annexation of Crimea and armed conflict in the east of Ukraine) were broadcast by the RT in digital space in accordance with the policy of Russia. Examples are many, from general criticism of new broadcast by western media and undermining their credibility to more specific measures, such as blurring the responsibility (e.g. in relation to the shutdown of MH17 aircraft) (Widholm, 2016, p. 119). The promotion of non-knowledge, according to some researchers, is one of the elements of the information warfare. The alternative narration is designed to replace western criticism of the Russia’s communication with strategic narration based on an inverted logic which was much more favorable for the Kremlin (Widholm, 2016, p. 119). Not only does the RT promote the Russian state ideology, it also fuels skepticism and undermines public confidence, which extends beyond the classic propaganda. The RT narration can be captured by summarizing fifteen most popular RT news marked “Ukraine” that were publicized on YouTube during the protests in Ukraine and the initial phase of the armed conflict in the east of Ukraine.

Table 1

Headlines of most popular RT news on YouTube (2013–2014)

| Date | Page views | Title (original) |
|-------------|-------------------|--|
| 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 25.01.2014 | 3216 thousand | <i>Violent video: Ukraine rioters brutally beat police, storm local admin building</i> |
| 22.01.2014 | 1168 thousand | <i>Video: Ukraine police filmed beating rioters as violence escalates in Kiev</i> |
| 26.08.2014 | 1065 thousand | <i>In search of peace: Putin & Poroshenko shake hands at key Ukraine talks</i> |
| 22.01.2014 | 1046 thousand | <i>Cops on fire as Molotov cocktails flare, flash and bang over Kiev</i> |

| 1 | 2 | 3 |
|------------|---------------|--|
| 23.05.2014 | 1012 thousand | <i>Dramatic footage: Insider video shows Ukraine helicopters firing at own troops</i> |
| 05.09.2014 | 951 thousand | <i>Deadly Thunder: Exclusive close-up this of hail missile launcher in action (Ukraine, 4.05.2014)</i> |
| 17.07.2014 | 936 thousand | <i>RAW: Moment of MH17 Malaysia Airlines plane crash in Ukraine caught on camera</i> |
| 03.05.2014 | 847 thousand | <i>South-East Ukraine: Crisis Diary (Unique Documentary Shot by Ordinary People)</i> |
| 22.07.2014 | 767 thousand | <i>GRAPHIC: Ukraine tank smashed, crew killed by rebels in Donetsk outskirts</i> |
| 10.05.2014 | 567 thousand | <i>Fast & Furious in Ukraine: APCs speed up, ram barricades</i> |
| 30.05.2014 | 562 thousand | <i>Ukraine's 'Road of Death': GRAPHIC aftermath of Donetsk airport approach gunfight</i> |
| 20.02.2014 | 546 thousand | <i>Graphic Kiev footage: Bloodshed, death & tears as Ukraine caught in chaos</i> |
| 19.05.2014 | 497 thousand | <i>Video: Russian troops re-deploy to base after Ukraine border drills</i> |
| 12.07.2014 | 446 thousand | <i>RAW: Massive explosion destroys Road Bridge paralyzing traffic in Eastern Ukraine</i> |
| 06.07.2014 | 368 thousand | <i>Uncut Chronicles: Ukraine, June 2014 (Raw Video Timeline)</i> |

Source: Own materials based on RT YouTube archive.

According to the table, the RT news is full of violence and brutality as regards issues discussed, and the same applies to images presented. The use of such terms as “violent video” “bloodshed, death and tears,” “cops on fire” or “rioters” instead of neutral “protesters” is to fuel the atmosphere of conflict, which corresponds with conclusions of the studies on the narration used by the RT regarding Euromaidan. Secondly, headlines represent the Ukrainian side in negative light and the recipient learns details regarding “Ukraine helicopters firing at own troops,” “Ukraine tank smashed, crew killed by rebels” or “massive explosion destroys Road Bridge paralyzing traffic in Easter Ukraine” after a bridge was detonated. Video footage that has been the most popular (number of views) includes raw materials with controversial images, such as the shutdown of the MH17 plane of the Malaysia Airlines.

Suggestive images, alternative narration and the undermining of confidence to the opponent are elements of propaganda, understood as “in-

fluencing people to adopt beliefs and attitudes that correspond to those of the propagandist” (Jowett, O’Donnell, 2012, pp. 6–7). According to existing analysis of RT news and the most popular video on YouTube, we may conclude that the RT – being a media financed by the Kremlin – fits into the Russian narration about the conflict in Ukraine and meets conditions of propaganda broadcast. The RT, which broadcasts in several languages, focuses on the international audience and diversifies the use of the content (not only by satellite or cable TV, but also on the Internet – on website, through application and social media). The RT is not the only medium which during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is used by the Kremlin as a tool of the information warfare. It is worth noting that media controlled by the Russian government will receive more than 1.3 billion euro from the budget in 2020, i.e. about 300 million euro more than in 2018, of which the largest part is channeled to the RT (according to draft budget, the television station is going to receive 325 million euro).⁸

The RT is just one example of how digital media can be used as a tool of the information warfare. It has been indicated that the most common strategies used to disintegrate Ukraine in the national Russian media focused on underestimating, scoffing and dehumanizing⁹ events, examples of which can be found in the said RT headlines. After narrowing the search criteria to Ukraine, the database of the “EU vs Disinfo” Project contains 2709 entries in the context of the Russian manipulation in the media.¹⁰ The main sources include international branches of Sputnik, Channel Rossiya 1 which publicizes in YouTube such programs as *60 minutes*, Channel One, which includes *Time (Время)* and others. We should also closely examine media and news agencies operating in the digital space, such as Sputnik, RIA Novosti and TASS. So far, Ukraine has failed to create a strong and systematic alternative counteracting the Russian propaganda and promoting its own narration. A counterweight to the above, the Ukraine Today channel was established in 2014 with the aim to “counteract the information warfare fought in Ukraine by the Russian propaganda media after the invasion” (*English-language*

⁸ *Figure of the week: 1.3 billion*, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/figure-of-the-week-1-3-billion/>, 22.10.2019.

⁹ “EU vs Disinfo”, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/denigrating-ukraine-with-disinformation/>, 30.09.2019. The “EU vs Disinfo” project is a part of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force.

¹⁰ “EU vs Disinfo”, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>, 30.09.2019.

news...) It was, however, closed in 2016 in connection with the changes on the media market.

Resistance to the Russian propaganda is also supported by the Multimedia Platform of Ukraine, established by the Ukrainian Ministry of Information in October 2015, based on the national radio and television channel of Bank Television and information agency of Ukrinform (*Мультимедійна платформа...*). The main goal of the platform, which includes UATV Channel (available in 5 languages: English, Arabic, Crimean, Russian, and Ukrainian) and Ukrinform is to provide complete and true information about events in Ukraine. Currently, Ukrinform is one of major sources of information about Ukraine in the Internet. Each day, the website publishes over 300 news and reports in several languages. In addition to the above mentioned languages, it is also available in Chinese, French and German, and original pictures can be used according to conditions laid down by the Agency (*Про нас*). In response to current information challenges, Ukrinform has correspondents in all regions of Ukraine, in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Canada, Moldova, Germany, Poland, Russia, and in the US.

Social media

The RT and similar broadcasters attract followers in social media as well, since they offer Internet users the possibility of posting comments and likes. Social Media means web-based applications developed around ideas and Web 2.0 technologies that enable to exchange content generated by users, collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter), social network sites such as Facebook or Russian Vkontakte (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010, p. 6161). In general, social media are treated as a form of interactive digital media that are available online, provide their users an opportunity to create and share content. Although the traditional TV still prevails in both countries concerned (*Media Ownership Monitor...*; *Media Landscapes: Russia*), social media have largely grown in popularity in the past decade. Currently, the most popular *social media* in Ukraine are Facebook (more than 11 million users) (*Facebook users in Ukraine*) and Instagram (over 9 million). The Russian Vkontakte lost Ukrainian users (from about 70% to about 30% between January 2017 and January 2019) since Russian websites, in-

cluding Vkontakte, were blocked in Ukraine in 2017.¹¹ In Russia, Vkontakte is the most popular (41 million users), followed by Odnoklassniki (27 million), Instagram (16 million) and Facebook (21 million) (*Social media marketing...*).

It has been known that the information warfare is fought by state actors in social media as well. Social media measures include fake web pages, blogs, articles, posts, trolling, spamming, generation and dissemination of memes, hashtags, massive reporting to administrators that page content does not conform with the point of view of the user, gossiping, phishing using false profiles, information noise around a particular topic to divert attention from important events and a number of other manipulative activities (NATO, 2016a, p. 104; NATO, 2016b, pp. 18–20). During the Donbass war: Russians disseminated photographs of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians to intimidate and create a negative image of the Ukrainian army, exaggerated tensions and conflicts in the external policy and even fabricated information (e.g. “doctor from Odessa” – false doctor Igor Rozovsky who described on Facebook inhumane acts by Ukrainians) (Grabowski, 2016, pp. 43–44). The “Doctor Rozovsky” post in Russian language on Facebook appealed to readers’ emotions and historical sentimental feelings (e.g. “in my city such things did not have place even during the worst period of the Nazi occupation”). It was made available over five thousand times and caused a heated discussion on Vkontakte (*Inside Putin’s Campaign...*). The activity of Russian trolls and Russian disinformation have become so important in the context of Ukraine that the European Union launched the “EU vs Disinfo” Project (majority of tampered content in the database is spread through social media) and NATO developed a classification of Russian trolls supported by many examples (“EU vs Disinfo”; NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, *Internet...*, pp. 97–106).

In relation to the ongoing information warfare, the engagement of citizens in the Russia-Ukraine conflict through their activity in social media, such as Facebook, Vkontakte, Twitter etc., seems to be particularly important. The activity can be considered as an attempt to oppose criminal propaganda of the Kremlin. Ukrainian activists see social media mainly

¹¹ Although Vkontakte has been blocked by the decision of the President Petro Poroshenko in May 2017, there are ways to bypass the block via the Virtual Private Network (VPN), <https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/05/19/ukraine-bans-its-top-social-networks-because-they-are-russian>, 20.09.2019.

as the “liberation technology” that can be used for information purposes, mobilization and networking (Pospieszna, Galus, 2019, p. 13). The role of citizens is illustrated by their use of hashtags #Euromaidan (Ukr. #Євромайдан, Rus. #Евромайдан) during the Maidan riots, and the establishing of popular pages on Facebook *Євромайдан SOS* and *Euro-maidan Press*, which disseminated organizational information, legal support, medical aid, and current news.¹² Citizen journalists who publicized results of their investigations on the Internet caused heated discussions on the international arena. They published pictures and information about the presence of Russian military equipment and soldiers in Ukraine using online tools and resources. Similar initiatives include, for example, the famous report by NGO Bellingcat developed in cooperation with the Atlantic Council, entitled *Hiding in plain sight: Putin's war in Ukraine*. The report has inspired a popular documentary available on YouTube VICE *Selfie Soldiers* (2 million page views) in which a journalist Simon Ostrofsky follows one of Russian soldiers using social media.¹³

Another important civic initiative, which also makes use of opportunities offered by social media, is StopFake.org, which is a platform to expose fake news and false information about Ukraine created mainly by Russian sources.¹⁴ This fact-checking project, created in 2014 by teachers and students of journalism at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy in response to the current problems faced by Ukraine.¹⁵ Currently, StopFake.org is available in 13 languages (including Polish) and effectively uses the support of foreign donors (including Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of public diplomacy competition).¹⁶ The community of StopFake.org uses Facebook (65 thousand followers), Twitter (36.4 thousand followers), YouTube (27.9 thousand subscriptions), V Kontakte (24 thousand followers), RSS (51.5 thousand subscriptions),¹⁷ as well as Facebook groups for people involved in fact checking, i.e. verification of the accuracy of information. Key areas of StopFake.org

¹² Site: Євромайдан SOS na Facebooku <https://www.facebook.com/EvromaidanSOS/>, 29.09.2019.

¹³ Selfie Soldiers: Russia Checks in to Ukraine, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zssIFN2mso>, 30.09.2019.

¹⁴ StopFake.org, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/main/>, 30.09.2019.

¹⁵ StopFake.org, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/about-us/>, 30.09.2019.

¹⁶ StopFake.org, *Annual Report 2016/2017*, Kiev, bdw, p. 6.

¹⁷ The current data (September 2019) from StopFake.org profiles in social media.

include identification and exposure of fake news about Ukraine, seminars on how to prevent anti-democracy propaganda and disinformation and how to verify information, promote media literacy and research on media. “13 online tools that help you verify the authenticity of photographs” was the most popular article in 2016.¹⁸ Users can also express their doubts as to the accuracy of news in digital media by using “report fake news.” Most often news verified as false information originate from Sputnik, RT, Rossiya Segodnya, and RIA Novosti.

Figure 1. Example of a post on Facebook StopFake.org



Source: StopFake.org fanpage on Facebook, post of 5.10.2019, <https://www.facebook.com/stopfakeukraine/>, 30.09.2019.

¹⁸ StopFake.org, op. cit., p. 14, original version: <https://www.stopfake.org/en/13-online-tools-that-help-to-verify-the-authenticity-of-a-photo/>, 01/10/2019.

The post of “There was no request made to acknowledge guilt by Ukraine” is an example of an action on Facebook to promote an article entitled “False: The Dutch Parliament calls for the acknowledgment of guilt by Ukraine due to the MH17 shutdown,” available on StopFake.org. Entries about false news from the web page are translated into other languages, and content appears also in the form of short (10-minute) videos on YouTube, which later are made available on other StopFake.org social media. Additionally, they publish monthly *Your right to know* (Твое право знать) which is available in printed and electronic forms.¹⁹ Materials about false news are translated into other languages, and the content appears also in the form weekly episodes on YouTube, which later are made available on other StopFake.org social media.

StopFake is an example of the use of social media by representatives of the civil society in Ukraine who, through digital media, try to counteract propaganda, disinformation and fake news about Ukraine. StopFake is also involved in education (seminars, education materials). An initiative of this type creates an opportunity to attract attention of a wider audience to the problem of Russian influence in the digital space and the question of the ongoing information warfare, for example in press articles about or involving StopFake.org in CNN International, New York Times, Politico, Washington Post, Radio Svoboda, Les Observateurs, Radio Praha, Radio Poland, TVN24 and other.²⁰ According to Yevhen Fedchenko, one of StopFake.org founders and editor-in-chief, the problem of manipulated information and the threat posed by Russia have started to be discussed only after the recent presidential elections in the USA and the scandal of Cambridge Analytica, while Ukraine has been facing similar challenges since at least 2014.²¹ The StopFake.org initiative can be regarded as universal – extending beyond the Russia-Ukraine context of the information warfare – since it has been disseminating information about mechanisms used to manipulate information, providing readers with tools to verify information and using social media.

Although Ukrainian civil society initiatives, which use social media to counteract Russian propaganda, have been growing in popularity and reaching increasingly diverse audiences (in different countries), they cannot match the scale of activities implemented by Russia with much

¹⁹ StopFake.org, <https://www.stopfake.org/ru/tvoe-pravo-znat-24/>, 01.10.2019.

²⁰ StopFake.org, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

²¹ Interview with Yevhen Fedchenko, Kiev, 26.01.2019.

larger resources engaged. The mere fact that such bottom-up initiatives exist indicates that the modern spectrum of information warfare extends beyond institutionalized effort made by state actors, although obviously they still play a key role. On the basis of arguments set out in the article we may consider that we have proved the hypothesis which assumes that digital media are used by both political decision makers as an element of information warfare and citizens who through their activity – especially in the area of social media – take part in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Summary

Currently, the fight for human minds goes beyond strategic actions and national narration, including daily news in the press, radio, and television presented in the Internet. Immense volume of information is also publicized in social media where content is generated not only by the media and institutions but also (or primarily) by ordinary users. Digital media are conducive to information chaos and they are used as channels for propaganda and disinformation campaigns. The example of information warfare and broad use of digital media is the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Extensive actions set against Ukraine by Russian propaganda have already been acknowledged by researchers and experts from outside the world of science. This article broadens the current debate on the crisis in Ukraine by highlighting the role of digital media and drawing attention to the fact that although Russia is a dominating party in the offensive information warfare, the response to the warfare should be made not only by Ukraine as a state but also to some extent by Ukrainian citizens. We should remember, however, that to tackle the Russian propaganda efficiently, citizens need to develop a high level of awareness and skills in using media.

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Media cyfrowe we współczesnym konflikcie – przykład Ukrainy

Streszczenie

Trwający konflikt rosyjsko-ukraiński dostarcza wielu przykładów wykorzystywania mediów, także tych technologicznie nowych, do prowadzenia walki informacyjnej. Artykuł koncentruje się na problemie znaczenia mediów cyfrowych w warunkach wojny na wschodzie Ukrainy oraz w okresie protestów społeczno-politycznych z przełomu 2013/2014 roku, które poprzedziły konflikt zbrojny. W artykule dokonano analizy sposobów instrumentalnego wykorzystywania mediów cyfrowych przez Rosję jako podmiot dominujący w prowadzeniu agresywnej walki informacyjnej przeciwko Ukrainie oraz działań obywatelskich po stronie ukraińskiej, których celem było przeciwdziałanie rosyjskiej propagandzie. Wskazano, że w czasach mediatyzacji wojny, poszczególne podmioty aktywnie korzystają zarówno z tradycyjnych mediów, które są obecne w przestrzeni cyfrowej, jak i z mediów społecznościowych. Ponadto, w pracy dokonano usystematyzowania aparatury pojęciowej związanej z dyskutowaną problematyką. Artykuł oparty jest o analizę studiów przypadku (przede wszystkim działalności rosyjskiej telewizji RT i ukraińskiej, społecznej inicjatywy StopFake), analizę treści, analizę i krytykę piśmiennictwa oraz badanie opracowań źródłowych. Praca uzupełnia aktualną debatę na temat konfliktu zbrojnego pomiędzy Ukrainą i Rosją poprzez zwrócenie uwagi na rolę mediów cyfrowych w kontekście walki informacyjnej oraz ukazanie, że media cyfrowe, szczególnie media społecznościowe, mogą stanowić platformę działania nie tylko dla aktorów państwowych, lecz również obywateli.

Słowa kluczowe: media cyfrowe, media społecznościowe, Rosja, społeczeństwo obywatelskie, Ukraina, walka informacyjna