

УДК 394+304(358)

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.17721/UCS.2024.2\(15\).10](https://doi.org/10.17721/UCS.2024.2(15).10)

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CULTURAL PRODUCTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA: CASE STUDY OF OCCUPIED TOWN

B a c k g r o u n d . Since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion, major transformations in the media consumption of Ukrainians have occurred. Social media platforms are utilized as means of informational warfare and play a major role in the cultural production of everyday content on both local and nationwide levels. The logic of content production on social media platforms fosters the constitution of the so-called 'digital public sphere', and in this way affects the Ukrainian public sphere overall.

The goal of this article is to explicate the potential uses of social media platforms as sources of research, that allow to observe the cultural production on the occupied territories, and in this way foster the creation of policies for the re-integration.

The research objectives are to identify established social media informational infrastructures in the occupied town of Berdiansk and explore the utilized principles of cultural production of the image of the city, through the concept of the digital public sphere.

M e t h o d s . Case studies, content analysis, netnographic study, narrative, and textual cultural analysis, interdisciplinary analysis of metadata and statistic data available online, and cultural history approach – reconstruction of the logic of material devices, and functioning of virtual spaces overall.

R e s u l t s . Two simultaneous and mutually exclusive informational infrastructures are established, Ukrainian and Russian. Both are creating mutually exclusive but intersecting images of the city, framing ongoing events as either occupation or 'liberation'. The images of the city are constituted via the cultural production of everyday content on social media platforms. This cultural production follows the logic of attention economy.

C o n c l u s i o n s . Russian informational military units and occupational administrations actively utilize social media platforms as an instrument of informational warfare, to reinforce and legitimize their presence. However, at the same time, social media affordances foster the emergence of new practices of resistance from the Ukrainian side. The openness of the network environment allows Ukrainian citizens under occupation to stay in touch with the Ukrainian media sphere, and vice versa. The digital public sphere allows us to research the transformations occurring under occupation. New forms of social and cultural production emerge within a network environment of social media platforms, particularly within a situation of a full-scale war.

K e y w o r d s : social media platforms, cultural production, informational warfare, temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, digital public sphere, social media affordances.

Background

Since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion, major transformations in the media consumption of Ukrainians have occurred. According to reports, social media is currently the main news source for Ukrainians, and the main social media platform on both sides of the frontline is the "Telegram" messaging app. "Telegram" experienced a rapid growth of popularity, going all the way up from 20% of Ukrainians in 2021 to 60% of Ukrainians in 2022 and currently reaching up to 78.1% of Ukrainians using Telegram in 2024 (Civil Network OPORA, 2024).

Social media platforms as a form of new media are characterized by a networked model of operation, which fosters horizontal and decentralized production of many-to-many communications, with major possibilities of interactivity and participation. New media stands in opposition to old, or "traditional" media (TV, radio, newspapers, etc.), which are characterized by a one-to-many broadcast model with centrally established institutional gatekeepers (editors, censors, producers, etc.), and are usually subject to government regulations (Lesage & Simone, 2019).

In the context of the current Ukrainian media landscape, the "Telegram", as an instance of new media may be framed in opposition to the state-controlled United News Telethon as an instance of old media. As numbers of the abovementioned research on media consumption show a clear tendency that TV audiences are decreasing and people are turning to social media platforms for socially and politically relevant information, concerns are raised within the Ukrainian public sphere over the freedom of speech and anonymity in social media which may be abused to spread propaganda and disinformation. Debates are ongoing on whether this messaging app should be banned completely, or at least regulated to some extent. The opposition of

decentralized horizontal network logic and centralized vertical broadcast logic of media production remains a relevant and puzzling social and political question, both in the context of the contemporary Ukrainian public sphere in particular and in terms of theoretical conceptualizations of media and communication studies overall.

The sociocultural significance of social media platforms is in the abovementioned peculiarity of their functioning, which fosters a specific mode of cultural production. Within the context of the mediatization of cultural practices (Pavlova, 2022), social media platforms are constitutive of virtual environments, within which cultural production occurs. These virtual environments foster the formation of particular discursive spaces where individuals may engage in the process of articulating their needs and exchanging opinions, which is reflected in the emerging concept of the digital public sphere. However, within virtual environments of social media, the communication process occurs according to specific affordances provided by a particular social media platform and accordingly to the logic of the attention economy. As Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2023) puts it, cultural production on social media is shaped by media affordances that are "mainly the portability, replicability, and scalability of [digital] content". The particularity of the cultural production on social media is characterized by the production of digital content which is perceived by individuals on a routine everyday basis. Therefore, digital content may be used for all kinds of sociocultural research, for instance via methods of online ethnography and content analysis. In the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, social media are utilized as a means of informational warfare for the achievement of various sociopolitical purposes, which highlights the necessity of its thorough research.

The use of social media for sociopolitical purposes may be explored through the concept of affordance, which may be defined as "actual and perceived possibility for action that emerge from the interaction between users and a platform" (Ronzhyn et al, 2023). To grasp the peculiarity of the present-day situation, it is worth starting with an overview of scholarship on new media, and a brief exploration of particular social media affordances, which characterize the political potential of Telegram as a social media platform.

The peculiarity of Telegram as a platform is in its hybrid functionality, with elements similar to a messaging app, internet forum, and news feed reel at the same time, which makes it an easy-to-use convenient tool for mass communications. Moreover, Telegram has no suggestions algorithms, and the user initially has access to the full functionality of a platform and is entitled to create and consume content by himself. This radical empowerment of the user combined with anonymity and the absence of strict moderation policies is characteristic of the specific affordances of Telegram, which allow for the emergence of communication communities and various cultural practices based on this platform and foster the consequent use of Telegram for political purposes. Telegram channels which are a hybrid broadcasting tool of informational exchange that allows for a few-to-many communications, may be utilized for spreading socially and politically relevant information. What is more, Telegram provides the possibility to facilitate discussion, either by commentaries section or within chat groups, allowing for convenient many-to-many communication. These are affordances of this platform that foster its use for sociopolitical purposes.

The research on the political use of new media has been developing since the late 20th century by scholars like Manuel Castells, Jürgen Habermas, Christian Fuchs, and others. The research entered a new phase after the events of the Arab Spring in 2011, during which, social media platforms played a major role in the organization of mass protests (Ahmad, 2022). Moreover, it was actualized within the context of Euromaidan events in 2013, where social media also played a major role in the organization of civil society (Onuch, 2015; Surzhko-Harned & Zahuranec, 2017). The research on the political use of Telegram specifically, so far has been focused on its use by various marginal and extremist groups, namely: far-right (Schulze et al., 2022; Urman, & Katz, 2020), ISIS (Yayla, & Speckhard, 2017; Yilmaz, & Farangiz, 2022), and antivaccine conspiracists (Raquel & Taiane, 2024; Spitale et al, 2022). However, the research also covered the use of Telegram by various antiauthoritarian initiatives, that were active for instance during protests in Belarus and Russia (Kuznetsova, 2023; Sulzhitski, 2022), and Hong-Kong (Urman et al, 2021).

However, the present situation is of complexity and novelty, as social media platforms are utilized simultaneously by state, military, and civil actors within the context of an ongoing full-scale war. This fact may be framed through the notion of "communicative militarism" (Dyer-Witheford & Matviyenko, 2019), which highlights the nature of contemporary cognitive-informational warfare, during which commercial social media platforms are utilized for political and military purposes. Within context of Russo-Ukrainian war, this topic had been covered by research of Zubchenko (2022a, 2022b, 2023), who analyzed the way that the image of the city is constituted under circumstances of occupation via social media platforms. Head chief of The Main Directorate of

Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine Kyrylo Budanov stated that Telegram is a threat to Ukrainian national security, but at the same time is a way to exert informational influence on Ukrainians living in occupied territories (The Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security, 2024). With due regard to this pragmatic description of ambivalent social media affordances, this article aims to explore and explicate the principles of cultural production on the social media platforms as an instance of informational warfare within the context of Russian occupation. A particular case study will allow us to trace strategies and tactics employed in the cultural production of the online content related to the occupied city's image on social media.

Methods

Case studies – research of the principles of a cultural production within a particular instance of social media platform channels thematically focused on the nowadays occupied town of Berdiansk.

Content analysis – exploration of multimedia content posted over the social media channels.

Netnographic study – analysis of established online communities via these social media platforms.

Narrative, and textual cultural analysis – in-depth evaluation of the underlying narratives which are embedded within cultural texts, shared over social media.

Interdisciplinary analysis of metadata and statistic data available online.

Cultural history approach – reconstruction of the logic of material devices, and functioning of spaces overall.

Results

One of the principles of thematic differentiation of Telegram channels is the initial thematic focus of a certain channel on a particular urban location, usually ranging from a small micro-district to a whole city. This focus usually covers any relevant area of social and political news, which is more often than not combined with entertainment content. Before the war, such channels were created rather sporadically, either by grassroots initiatives for the sake of convenience in horizontal communication or by actors interested in further converting audience attention into commercial profit.

This practice was immediately employed by Russian psychological-informational warfare units, as pro-Russian Telegram channels were being created to exert informational control on the newly occupied territories. However, simultaneously with that process, new pro-Ukrainian channels were emerging, and various pre-war channels continued to exist. This caused the chaotization of the informational landscape, which was omnipresent during the first stages of full-scale invasion. As time went on, informational infrastructures came to solidify by the formation of separate ecosystems of interconnected channels. To explore the peculiarities of the formation of informational infrastructures, a case study is chosen to focus on currently active (as of November of 2024) pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels that are thematically centered on the town of Berdiansk, which was occupied back in the February of 2022.

As the contents of Telegram are not indexed in regular search engines, and the built-in search engine within Telegram does not provide exhaustive results, the initial stage of research for existing channels was conducted via the TgStat service, which provides a set of commercial information, which may also serve as an indicator of the sociopolitical significance of a certain channel. Search had been conducted over metadata, only along publicly open

and available channels, with at least a thousand subscribers. The search was conducted over the channel name and channel description by keywords "Бердянськ" and "Бердянск" – Ukrainian and Russian spelling of the name of the town respectively. Two searches resulted in a total of 70 results.

Among them, 38 channels were dedicated to commercial services within the town, such as bulletin boards of announcements and advertisements for various services of tourism, shopping, hotels and restaurants, job vacancies, logistics, etc. This highlights the role of Telegram, as a social media platform, in social, cultural, and particularly economic activities. This topic however goes beyond the scope of this research, which is focused on the sociopolitical dimension of social media.

Further analysis and selection allowed us to pinpoint 11 Russian and 6 Ukrainian socio-politically significant channels that are thematically focused particularly on the town of Berdiansk. The list of channels is given with metadata in the following format: link and name of the channel, date of creation, number of subscribers, number of posts for the past month, average ad post reach (- average number of views per post without forwards to other channel's views), and citation index (channel credibility indicator calculated based on channel mentions, as well as forwards and mentions of channel posts in other Telegram channels). The data is constantly changing, so the given numbers are rounded. The data is relevant as of November 2024.

List of pro-Russian channels:

1. [@berdyansk_ru](#) – "Главное в Бердянске" – created 07.03.22, 55k subscribers, 760 posts for month, average ad post reach – 8.5k, citation index – 131.
2. [@brd_nash](#) – "Бердянск наш" – created 18.04.22, 34k subscribers, 1400 posts for month, average ad post reach – 9.7k, citation index – 123.
3. [@berdyanskiy1](#) – "Бердянск. Новости" – created 27.09.18, 31k subscribers, 300 posts for month, average ad post reach – 15k, citation index – 145.
4. [@o_brd](#) – "Бердянск.Актуально" – created 21.04.22, 22k subscribers, 600 posts for month, average ad post reach – 8.5k, citation index – 82.
5. [@glava_brd](#) – "Бердянск. Официально" – created 24.03.22, 19k subscribers, 500 posts for month, average ad post reach – 6.5k, citation index – 151.
6. [@brd_zavtra](#) – "Бердянск ZaVtra" – created 09.03.22, 13k subscribers, 850 posts for month, average ad post reach – 4k, citation index – 296.
7. [@berdyanskru](#) – "Бердянск.py" – created 13.03.22, 11k subscribers, 250 posts for month, average ad post reach – 2.7k, citation index – 118.
8. [@berdyansk_srochno](#) – "Срочно Бердянск!!" – created 08.12.22, 3k subscribers, 600 posts for month, average ad post reach – 1k, citation index – 17.
9. [@berdyansknewsru](#) – "Лента новостей Бердянска | Z" – created 18.08.22, 1.7k subscribers, 1100 posts for month, average ad post reach – 450, citation index – 15.
10. [@razzzvorot](#) – "Разворот" – created 16.11.23, 1.7k subscribers, 1000 posts for month, average ad post reach – 500, citation index – 11.
11. [@berdyansk](#) – "БЕРДЯНСКИЙ МАЯК" – created 12.11.22, 1k subscribers, 600 posts for month, average ad post reach – 150, citation index – 18.

Citation analysis of the abovementioned channels allows us to identify the ecosystems of the informational infrastructure of Russian occupation and explore the principles of clusterization, segmentation, and thematic differentiation of channels.

The channel "Главное в Бердянске", cites publications from the cluster of similar informational Telegram channels of other occupied towns of Zaporizhzhia region, which are the following channels: [@tokmak_ru](#) – @ "Главное в Токмаке", [@melitopol_ru](#) – "Главное в Мелитополе", [@polohy_ru](#) – "Главное в Пологах", [@energodar_ru](#) – "Главное в Энергодаре". All of these channels were created on the 7th of March, 2022, all have typical names and channel links, typical channel photos in a unified style design, and a unified channel description with the same feedback contact. It is safe to conclude that these channels are constitutive of a cluster. Channel dedicated to the town of Melitopol, has the highest amount of over 100 thousand subscribers as the biggest occupied town of the region and may be considered to be the center of this cluster.

Furthermore, every channel of this cluster also often cites a similar channel dedicated to the city of Kherson – [@hercon_ru](#) – "Главное в Херсоне и области". This is a center of another, a similar neighboring cluster of channels devoted to occupied towns of the Kherson region, among which are [@newkahovka_ru](#) – "Главное в Каховке и Новой Каховке", [@Genichesk_ru](#) – "Главное в Геническе", [@skadovsk_rus](#) – "Главное в Скадовске", [@chernobaevka_ru](#) – "Главное в Чернобаевке". A similar principle can be traced: these channels cite each other, and cite the center channel of a neighboring regional cluster.

Moreover, channels from both of these clusters were actively citing following currently inactive Telegram channels: [@ahtirka_ru](#), [@balakleya_ru](#), [@bakhmach_ru](#), [@brovar_ru](#), [@berezany_ru](#), [@chuguev_ru](#), [@gluhov_ru](#), [@krasnodon_ru](#), [@krasnyluch_ru](#), [@kramatorsk_ru](#), [@kharkov_ru](#), [@kupyansk_ru](#), [@konotop_ru](#), [@krasnograd_ru](#), [@krivoirog_ru](#), [@izyum_ru](#), [@iirpen_ru](#), [@slavyansk_ru](#), [@rovenki_ru](#), [@romny_ru](#), [@rubezhnoye_ru](#), [@mariupol_ru](#), [@severodonetsk_ru](#), [@shostka_ru](#), [@sumy_ru](#), [@priluki_ru](#), [@pervomaisk_ru](#), [@novomoskovsk_ru](#), [@nosovka_ru](#), [@nikopol_ru](#), [@nicolaev_ru](#), [@novgorodseversky_ru](#), [@lozovaya_ru](#), [@lyubotyn_ru](#), [@ochakov_ru](#), [@obyxov_ru](#), [@owruch_ru](#).

These channels have the same typical name and link and are making typical standardized publications. This network covers cities and towns over Kyiv, Kharkiv, Zhytomyr, Sumy, Chernihiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk regions. This geographical diversity roughly corresponds to the vector of advances of the Russian military during the first stage of full-scale invasion. It is worth noting, that this network of channels was extensively covered in a journalist investigation by Texty Media (Drozdova et al., 2022). These channels were created almost simultaneously at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, mimicked local channels, made identical publications, and stopped their activity in April-May 2022, presumably along with the withdrawal of the Russian military during that period. Accordingly, after that only channels in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions remained active.

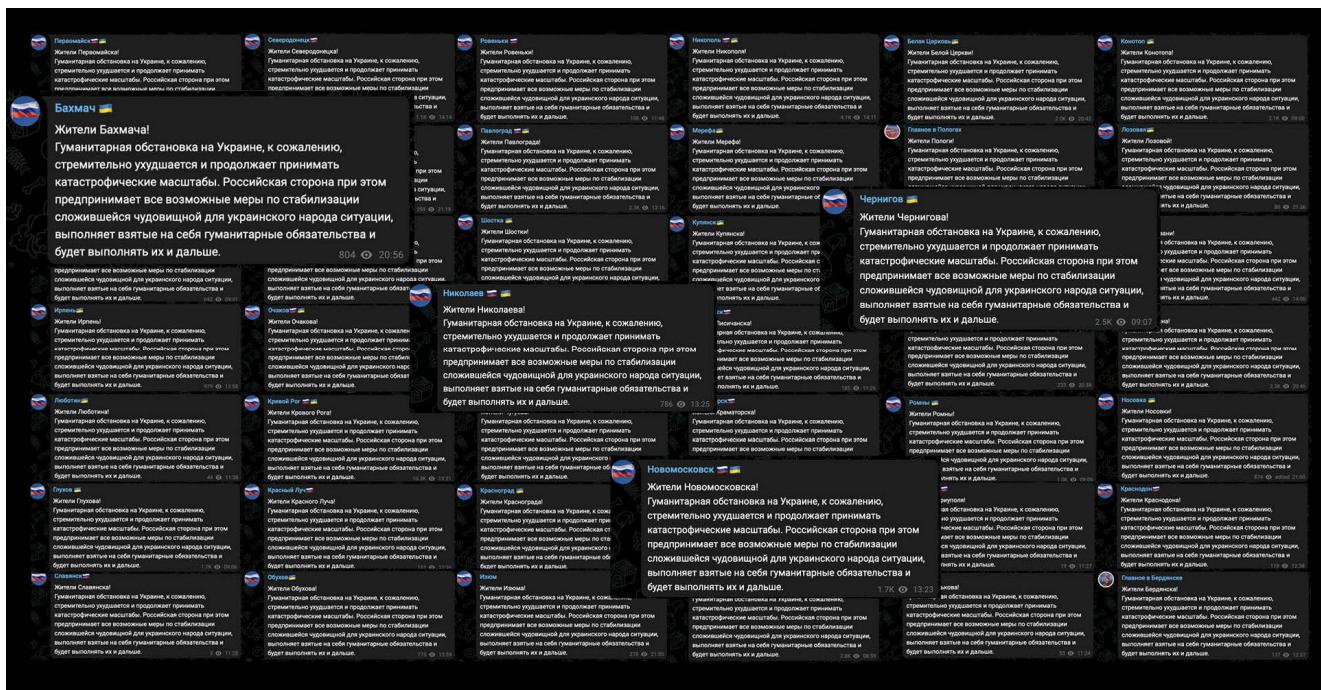


Fig. 1. Collage compiling identical messages in the abovementioned channels. Courtesy of Texty.org.ua

In addition to those channels, "Главное в Бердянске", like other channels in these two active regional clusters, also cites the channels of the major (2.8 million subscribers) Russian telegram news media @readovkanews – "Readovka", also its branch focused on the topic of war @readovkaru – "Объясняет Readovka", and its two regional branches focused on Zaporizhzhya and Kherson regions: @vzaporozhye_ru – "ВЗапорожье.ру" and @hersonka_ru – "Херсонка.ру". It can be assumed that all the listed channels make up a single ecosystem of channels managed by the system Russian media conglomerate "Readovka".

At the beginning of the war, channels were being mass-created for each town or city. However, with the withdrawal of the Russian military and stabilization of the frontline, this ecosystem abandoned channels of the uncontrolled cities and created a clearly defined segmentation by regions. An interesting point is that the channels of this network dedicated to the towns of the Donetsk region, in particular, Mariupol, were also abandoned even though the city was also occupied. The channels of this network are now localized only in Zaporizhia and Kherson regions, while separate channels were created for Mariupol, which is a part of the informational infrastructure of the occupied Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

A different trend can be observed with the channel "Лента новостей Бердянска | Z", as the search revealed a number of similar news channels across southeastern Ukraine, with the same cover, same name and description with links to the website and VKontakte group: @khersonnewsru, @newsharkovru, @drnewsru, @melitopolnewsru, @zrnewsru, @lugansknewsru. A rather small channel 'Срочно Бердянск!' is also part of the regional cluster with typical news channels for the Zaporizhzhia region, which includes: @srochno_zaporozhye, @srochno_melitopol, and @srochno_energodar. However, these channels are small informational aggregators that only repost news from other

sources and do not create their own original content, so they are of little value for further research. Nevertheless, the principle of regional segmentation is evident.

Moving on, the next cluster may be observed around the channel "Бердянск. Официально" which is the official channel of the occupational administration of the city. It cites channels "Бердянский район. Официально" – the official channel of the occupation administration of the Berdiansk district, and the channel «Ответы "Бердянск. Официально"» – the channel where social administrative information and responses to citizens' appeals are published.

The situation with the "Бердянск Наш" channel is the most illustrative. It is a channel that produces the biggest number of publications among other channels. It is the center of the cluster with small thematic channels with up to a thousand followers, which inter-cite each other, thus forming an information bubble. This bubble includes the following channels: @dikoepole_info – "Дикое Поле" – a nationwide news aggregator, @RU_front – "Russian Media Front" – ideological articles on political topics, and @dnes_info – "Днесь" – news of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Those are the identifiable clusters of channels, however, all the Berdiansk channels mentioned in the initial list are interconnected to some extent. Their citations often coincide, they cite each other and the same regional and nationwide channels, in this way constituting not a cluster but rather an ecosystem of channels.

First of all, all the listed channels of the city of Berdiansk cite each other (or simply reprint the news without a link) and the channels of other occupied cities of the Zaporizhzhia region. The channels of the occupational administration of the region and municipal authorities are quoted, numerous regional branches of Russian ministries, political parties, and personal channels of political figures. One of the nodal channels with the highest number of mentions is the channel of the gauleiter of Zaporizhzhia region, Yevhen Balytskyi.

Channels of regional conventional media are cited: the regional television channel "3a!TB", the newspaper "Запорожский Вестник", and the radio station "Свободный Бердянск". Moreover, there are numerous channels dedicated to regional news, such as: "Запорожское Агентство Новостей", "Первый Запорожский", "Запорожский Фронт", "Запорожские Вести", and "На самом деле в Запорожье". The latter is a part of a large cluster of news channels with typical name, "На самом деле в ...", which are thematized on regional centers: Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Kherson, Donetsk, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, Odesa, and Kyiv. The channel dedicated to Kharkiv has the largest number of subscribers – 100,000. All of these regional channels, in turn, refer to propaganda Telegram channels of news media on a Russian nationwide scale – an extremely large segment of Telegram, in which many channels range from zero subscribers to multi-million audiences.

Citation analysis of all the Berdiansk channels allows also us to find sub-themed thematized channels. For instance, there is an actively cited telegram channel "Бердянск студенческий", which is the official channel of the so-called "Azov State Pedagogical University" (occupied and renamed Berdiansk State Pedagogical University), which actively creates publications on the topic of youth policy. There, in turn, are cited numerous regional branches of various state-sponsored civil organizations, such as: "ЮГМолодой", "Движение Первых", "Народный Фронт", "Волонтеры Победы", "Молодая Гвардия Единой России", "Общественное движение "Волонтеры-медики"", "Общественная организация Делай!", "Российское общество – Знание", "Волонтерская Рота Боевого Братства", "молодежная организация – Студотряды Запорожской области", "Российские Студенческие Отряды", "Всероссийский студенческий корпус спасателей", "Мы вместе с Россией", etc. All of those channels are actively referred to by the monitored channels. The activity of the mentioned organizations presumably constitutes the youth and social policy as one of the major cornerstone topics of Russian propaganda.

An informal content analysis of publications within pro-Russian Berdiansk channels allows us to conditionally identify the thematic segmentation of publications in the studied channels. One of the main uses of Telegram is to spread news. Local, regional, Russian-wide, and world news are published simultaneously. Sometimes there are completely fictitious news stories copied from news sites in other regions of the Russian Federation. The same publications are often repeated in different channels, either directly quoted or slightly edited. One of the major topics is the assistance for the 'new regions' by 'old regions' of the Russian Federation and their cooperation is often mentioned. Separately, in the local news, we can distinguish the topics of administrative messages: appeals of the administration to residents, communal announcements, comments on the work of municipal services, ambulances, police, Federal Security Service anti-sabotage measures, etc. Social policy is a closely related topic to administrative messages: the specifics of the functioning of Russian bureaucratic institutions, existing social assistance programs, etc., are noted. Another commonly employed topic of publications is youth policy: news about local sports competitions, news about educational institutions, civic events, activities of the abovementioned state-funded civil organizations, etc. What

is more, these civil organizations play a major role in the production of news on a local level, by organization of commemorative rituals, volunteer events, lectures and seminars, etc. Military topics also can be into a separate, major category and play a significant role: civil organizations report on how they collect aid for the army, daily reports from the Russian Ministry of Defense, general news from the zone of "special military operation", and announcements of contract service in the Russian army are published.

The comments section under posts (where available) is actively moderated. Comments are consistently left by the same people. For example, an analysis of some user accounts that left comments as locals under the posts of the "Главное в Бердянске" channel revealed that they often change their usernames (from Igor to Vladimir, for example) and at the same time comment on events on behalf of residents in the comments of a similar channel dedicated to Belgorod. In the comments section of the "Бердянск Наш" channel, several regular users actively leave not only comments but also post additional content under each post.

Each channel has its patterns of publication, for example, channel "Главное в Бердянске" has a distinct formula, where every day a publication with an amount of ambulance rides for the past day is posted. However, the most clear-cut formula for constructing everyday life is observed in the channel that produces the largest number of publications per month – "Бердянск Наш". Every day, in clearly defined time intervals, the channel publishes good morning, afternoon, evening, and night wishes, horoscopes, weather for the day, interesting facts, recipes, information about this day in history and today's holidays, footage of the city itself, etc.

List of pro-Ukrainian channels:

1. @brdVP – "Бердянськ Сьогодні/Бердянск Сей-час" – created 26.02.22, 36k subscribers, 600 posts for month, average ad post reach – 7.7k, citation index – 144.
2. @berdyansk_occ – "Бердянськ в окупації" – created 07.04.22, 17k subscribers, 260 posts for month, average ad post reach – 5.4k, citation index – 61.
3. @brd24_official – "BRD24 – Бердянськ 24" – created 10.01.19, 9k subscribers, 230 posts for month, average ad post reach – 2.8k, citation index – 27.
4. @brdnews – "Бердянськ online +ua" – created 30.01.17, 9k subscribers, 100 posts for month, average ad post reach – 2.3k, citation index – 76.
5. @brdwar – "Війна. Бердянськ. Україна" – created 22.03.22, 3.4k subscribers, 36 posts for month, average ad post reach – 1.3k, citation index – 27.
6. @berdmisk – "Бердянська міська військова адміністрація" – created 06.09.2022, 2.2k subscribers, 460 posts for month, average ad post reach – 724, citation index – 65.

The search also reveals three channels of resistance movement in Berdiansk:

@brdprotiv – "БПА | БЕРДЯНСЬКА ПАРТИЗАНСЬКА АРМІЯ" – created 16.04.22, 6.8k subscribers, 33 posts for month, average ad post reach – 1.3k, citation index – 88.

@zradnyky_brd – "Зрадники Бердянська" – created 19.04.2022, 5k subscribers, 0 posts for month, average ad post reach – 0, citation index – 16.

@brdsop – "Бердянське Сопротивлення" – created 26.04.2022, 1.4k subscribers, 1 post for month, citation index – 22.

"БПА" mainly publishes news from the front and footage of hostilities, "Зрадники Бердянська" actively documented collaborators at the beginning of the war, but is now inactive, "Бердянське Сопротивлення" occasionally publishes succinct author's notes on the occupation. These resistance channels are important, but cannot be accounted as active producers of everyday content.

It is worth noting, that all of these channels have been gradually losing subscribers and decreasing in number of publications for the past year at least. Analysis of the citations revealed that all of these channels, refer to each other, thus constituting a pro-Ukrainian ecosystem of Berdiansk channels. Moreover, these channels refer to a network of pro-Ukrainian channels.

In terms of personalities, the channels of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Valerii Zaluzhnyi, and the channel of the advisor to the mayor of Mariupol, "Андрющенко Time", are cited. Among the state institutions, the Security Service of Ukraine, the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, and the Ministry of Reintegration are quoted. News from the all-Ukrainian news channel "ІнсайдерUA" was cited, as well as several Zaporizhzhia city channels and channels announcing the distribution of humanitarian aid to internally displaced persons in Zaporizhzhia region. Channels of resistance movements are also quoted – "Жовта Стрічка", "Гнила Черешня", "Маріуполь.Спротив", "АТЕШ" and "СПРОТИВ". In some cases, there are references to various analytical and news channels, such as "DeepState", "OSINT Бджоли +", etc.

An informal content analysis of two active news channels "Бердянськ Сьогодні/Бердянськ Сейчас" and "Бердянськ в окупації" showed that both channels have a well-established formula of daily content with clearly defined sections. Good morning wishes, the main news of the day, congratulations on holidays, administrative announcements on admission to the displaced Berdiansk schools and university, letters from the occupation and regular readers, notes about Berdiansk residents at the front, reposts of resistance movements, reposts from national news channels, reports from the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine on the situation at the front, etc. As for everyday life in the occupied city, photos and videos from readers under occupation are published, exposing materials about collaborators are published, and the news from the abovementioned pro-Russian channels are reprinted with relevant incriminating comments.

Discussion and conclusions

Telegram, as a social media platform, is one of few informational sources that are easily accessible, and allow people living under occupation to keep track of what is going on in the Ukrainian media sphere, and vice versa. Therefore, it presents a valuable source of research for scholars in media and communications, as the described situation is of particular acuteness, where two parallel informational infrastructures are established, and simultaneously constitute two mutually exclusive images of a city and society. What is more, the social media affordances of Telegram give the possibility not only to study the transformations occurring under the occupation situation but to exert informational influence upon and keep contact with Ukrainians living under occupation. However,

it is worth noting that this would require a certain level of media literacy and conspiracy from people living under occupation, as phone checks are nowadays an often-employed counter-sabotage measure.

In the vast majority of studies on the political use of social media platforms (Kuznetsova, 2023), three sides are covered: both contesting parties and neutral ones. However, this is not the case, as the current informational landscape is completely polarized on two opposing sides. The present situation is characterized by the simultaneous co-existence of two parallel informational infrastructures which contest the image of the city by creating mutually exclusive interpretations, framing the situation within Berdiansk either as "liberation", or as "occupation". Interestingly, some channels from opposing sides interact with each other in various ways, which may be thought of as informational warfare. For example, Ukrainian resistance channels may reprint news for pro-Russian channels with incriminating comments, use publications and comments in a certain channel as material for OSINT, or even engage in debates within the comment section. For example: "Зрадники Бердянська" and "Бердянський Ждун" – two similar channels which are devoted to the publication of personal information about pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian (ex-)residents of Berdiansk, thus manifesting the process of othering and reinforcing mutually exclusive images of the city and its residents.

However, employed tactics may vary from channel to channel. For example, there are Russian channels that directly position themselves as channels of the occupying authorities and publish mainly bureaucratic information with government administrative announcements, but at the same time, there are also news channels that have a more particular and nuanced policy for the production of everyday publications. Worth noting, that a significant role in the entertainment content is played by the culture of Russia, the USSR, and Orthodox Christianity. Moreover, these channels engage in what may be idiomatically called a discourse of "liberation", in which the Ukrainian past of the city is framed as corrupt, and the reunion with Russia is an unquestionable good. On a regular basis publications are made that positively highlight the ongoing reforms, cover various events and activities of civil organizations, explore social assistance programs, assure the proper work of communal and emergency services, share information on the functioning of Russian social policies, and cover the anti-sabotage work of Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. The news is presented in a way, that Zubchenko (2022a) characterizes as the construction of "artificial everyday life", i.e., where news is filtered through interpretative frameworks that construct a completely simulated virtual image of a city, a 'Potemkin village', in this way legitimizing the established status-quo. This serves the purposes of normalization of the present situation and depolitization of society. However, at the same time, tactics are also employed for mobilization of another part of society, with the publication of propagandistic materials that foster participation in the mentioned state-controlled organizations and encourage them to join the Russian army.

Most of the pro-Ukrainian channels are losing subscribers or maintaining a stable number. This can be explained by the repressive counter-sabotage measures of Russian authorities, but a more general explanation is that

these channels do not provide up-to-date relevant socio-political information about everyday life in the city. In opposition to Russian normalization, Ukrainian channels frame the existing situation as a situation of extreme crisis. Their function is rather one of creating a virtual locus of solidarization and community of Berdiansk residents, who are unable to express their beliefs under the circumstances of occupation. This indicates the role that the digital public sphere may play, creating a possibility of expression of alternative opinion when all the conventional media are controlled by repressive state authority. They create a space to share personal memories and pieces of evidence of occupation, allowing the production of solidarity, by sharing thoughts and prayers of people living under occupation, in this way providing a sort of psychological support for people, creating a sense of solidarity and conviviality despite the dreadful situation. Moreover, new practices of civic participation and resistance emerge, fostered by social media affordances. For instance, people may contact Ukrainian intelligence services and anonymously share valuable information on the positioning of Russian military personnel, etc.

Worth noting, that in comparison, the observed during the research pro-Ukrainian infrastructure of Telegram channels is much smaller than the Russian one. The Russian informational warfare is way more active and focused on the employed by state-controlled media, as social media platforms are one of the main tools of information influence that are actively used by the Russian authorities in general and the occupational administration, in particular, to construct an image of everyday life normality, spread propaganda, legitimize themselves, etc. It can be observed that Russia is actively conducting informational warfare via Telegram on a massive scale. Preliminary citation analysis of just local channels situated in Berdiansk showed that they are inscribed within numerous vast ecosystems of interconnected Russian pro-state propagandistic channels. They target not only residents of occupied cities but also cities that remain under the control of Ukraine. However, a vast majority of the propagandistic channels target nationwide audiences, therefore not restricting themselves to a particular territoriality. Social media platforms are a major tool of informational warfare that functions according to their distinct logic, for instance, some informational occupational channels were created before the actual physical occupation, or some even exist even though the covered city never was and is not under Russian control.

The fact that pro-Russian regional channels of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia region are closely intertwined whilst remaining relatively separate from regional channels of Donetsk and Luhansk, hints that the occupational information infrastructure is not unitary, and is produced and controlled by a whole array of different actors and different media conglomerates. There is no immediate unity of Russian propaganda in the network environment but rather there are numerous various initiatives, reproduced by various actors, such as information and psychological military units, Russian special services, state-controlled media conglomerates, and occupational administrations, which are all actively working to create the informational environment and to spread propaganda within a network environment. It can be concluded that the Russian informational occupation is heterogeneous, and there is a tendency for mass replication of telegram channels, i.e.,

not just single channels are created, but entire clusters of interconnected channels that form full-fledged ecosystems of channels. These ecosystems may be also described as information bubbles or echo chambers, where the same narratives are constantly repeated by different channels in different formulas, in this sense 'reverberating' within a network environment, where the plurality of voices is intentionally imitated.

Analysis of the use of telegram channels described above to form a diverse space of interconnected propaganda distribution networks, we can conclude that the traditional understanding of clear centralized propaganda is dynamically changing and adapting to the dynamic development of new media, social platforms on the Internet, and the emerging network society. The emphasis is shifting from the centralized dissemination of a single ideological narrative to establishing control over the rapidly changing information landscape of the networked society. The significant organizational potential of social media platforms is used by authoritarian regimes for their purposes, to imitate the channels of communication between the government and society, to mobilize certain segments of society, and to demobilize others. In the context of the war and massive blocking of official propaganda information resources, Russia is adapting a single centralized propaganda machine, and through a kind of a 'swarm' tactic, initiates the process of multiple dissemination of propaganda via micro-narratives through the system of horizontal interactions of the network society. However, the network environment is not politically engaged in itself, and at the same time is actively utilized by the opposing side.

Within the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, social media platforms are utilized as informational warfare. The digital image of the city (Tormakhova, 2022), in this sense also becomes a battlefield. In the studied case of the occupied Berdiansk, it is evident that major transformations are occurring in this image. Since the moment of occupation, numerous networks of media channels dedicated to the town of Berdiansk have been emerging and establishing a certain image of the town.

Within the established informational infrastructures emerges the virtual environment within which users may engage in discussions, share information, and exchange opinions, which is essentially a definition of the digital public sphere. As all kinds of social practices and the culture itself are increasingly mediated by digital platforms, the possibility arises to engage in and research the cultural landscape within the network environment. Within network environments, the cultural production of digital content occurs: news, entertainment content, discussions, administrative announcements, i.e., all kinds of informational exchange that are possible within social media. Therefore, the digital public sphere as a concept of cultural studies appears intrinsically valuable in research, as new practices of cultural production and civic participation emerge within the network environment. Moreover, these new emergent practices are employed by various participants of the network environment, and in this way constitute the cultural production within social media.

Within the context of the mediatization of cultural practices (Pavlova, 2022), as social media is increasingly integrated into the mundane practices of day-to-day life, the publication of everyday media content in informational channels essentially becomes the process of cultural

production. Cultural production occurs within the digital public sphere, which is easily accessible to a vast majority of the population. Social media affordances foster the creation of digital content which is characterized by timeliness, and the perceived immediacy of the mundane creates a sense of authenticity for the recipient of the content. This specificity is exploited by Russian PSYOP forces, who are using social media to exert cultural influence over the occupied territories. It may be concluded that the employed strategy is to saturate the network environment with a plurality of pro-Russian informational channels with varying degrees of formality and content policies, thereby overtaking the network environment under control. Channels produce everyday digital content within which certain narratives are implicitly inscribed, thereby legitimizing the Russian authority and normalizing the established status quo.

In contrast, the Ukrainian channels constitute a much smaller and less coherent network that is slowly decreasing in numbers. It may be explained with anti-sabotage measures and the fact that pro-Ukrainian channels do not publish everyday relevant local news. The function of pro-Ukrainian channels is in the constitution of the contest over the image of the city, and maintenance of a solidarization locus, which allows people under occupation to keep in touch with the Ukrainian public sphere, remaining under necessary secrecy.

It may be concluded that social media constitute the digital image of the city via the production of everyday content. With the researched case of an occupied town, the studied media content is used to exert cultural influence and establish control over the emergent digital public sphere. The publication of digital content is essentially a process of cultural production on social media. Therefore, social media appear as valuable sources for research, as they provide the possibility to study the transformations occurring under occupation, and in this way to project the development of re-integration policies.

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Отримано редакцією журналу / Received: 14.11.24
Прорецензовано / Revised: 22.11.24
Схвалено до друку / Accepted: 25.11.24

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КУЛЬТУРНЕ ВИРОБНИЦТВО В СОЦІАЛЬНИХ МЕДІА: СИТУАЦІЙНИЙ АНАЛІЗ ОКУПОВАНОГО МІСТА

В ступ. З початку поєномасштабного вторгнення відбулися значні трансформації в медіаспоживанні українців. Соціальні медіаплатформи використовують як засоби інформаційної війни. Вони відіграють значну роль у культурному виробництві повсякденного контенту на локальних та загальнонаціональних масштабах. Логіка виробництва контенту на соціальних медіаплатформах зумовлює встановлення так званої "цифрової публічної сфери" для впливу на публічну сферу України загалом.

Мета статті – експлікувати можливості використання соціальних медіаплатформ як джерел для дослідження, що дозволяють спостерігати культурне виробництво на окупованих територіях, і таким чином сприяти створенню політик реінтеграції.

Дослідницьке завдання – ідентифікувати встановлені в соціальних медіаплатформах інформаційні інфраструктури, що локалізовані в окупованому місті Бердянську, та з'ясувати принципи культурного виробництва образу міста, зокрема через поняття цифрової публічної сфери.

Методи. Кейс-стаді, аналіз контенту, онлайн-етнографія, наративний і текстовий культурний аналіз, інтердисциплінарний аналіз метаданих та статистичної інформації з мережі, підхід культурної історії – реконструкція логіки матеріальних носіїв та функціювання віртуальних просторів загалом.

Результати. Одночасно існують дві взаємопротилежні інформаційні інфраструктури – українська та російська. Обидві створюють взаємовиключні, але взаємопроникні образи міста, фреймуючи повсякдення як стан окупації, чи так званого "освобождення". Образи міста конституються засобами культурного виробництва повсякденного контенту в соціальних медіаплатформах. Культурне виробництво йде за логікою економіки уваги.

Висновки. Російські інформаційні війська та окупаційні адміністрації активно використовують соціальні медіаплатформи як інструмент інформаційної війни задля утвердження та легітимації своєї присутності. Однак, водночас з цим, афорданси соціальних медіа зумовлюють появу нових практик спротиву окупації з боку українських громадян. Відкритість мережевого середовища дозволяє українським громадянам під окупацією зберігати зв'язок з українською медіасферою і наспаки. Цифрова публічна сфера зумовлює можливість дослідження трансформацій, що відбуваються в умовах окупації. Ноє форми соціального та культурного виробництва виникають у межах мережевого середовища соціальних медіаплатформ, особливо в умовах поєномасштабної війни.

Ключові слова: соціальні медіаплатформи, культурне виробництво, інформаційна війна, тимчасово окуповані території України, цифрова публічна сфера, афорданси соціальних медіа.

Автор заявляє про відсутність конфлікту інтересів. Спонсори не брали участі в розробленні дослідження; у зборі, аналізі чи інтерпретації даних; у написанні рукопису; в ухваленні рішення про публікацію результатів.

The author declares no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; in the decision to publish the results.