

Book review: *Media and the War in Ukraine*

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Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, now in its third year, has been described as the most heavily mediated war of our time. The coverage of the war by media reporters has been supplemented by a sprawling wartime ecosystem of social media content generated by Ukrainians – government officials, activists, volunteers, military and casual users. Indeed, observers of the war positioned outside Ukraine have experienced the grinding combat between Russian troops and Ukrainian servicemen, the occupation of parts of Ukraine's East, South and North predominantly through mediated means. At the same time, Ukrainians, displaced by Russian aggression within or outside Ukraine, remaining in their places of residence or fighting on the frontline, have also been experiencing an intensely mediated war, consuming and producing embodied knowledge about drone and missile attacks, power cuts and fundraising for life-saving medical equipment. Reckoning with the role of media technologies, infrastructures and practices deeply embedded in the war is therefore high on the scholarly agenda. The edited volume *Media and the War in Ukraine* makes an early and necessary contribution to this effort.

Edited by Mette Mortensen and Mervi Pantti, the book is a follow-up to a previous volume from the series, *Media and the Ukraine Crisis: Hybrid Media Practices and Narratives of Conflict*, published in 2016 following the Russian occupation of Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine. Following Russia's full-scale invasion, the new book serves as an updated analysis of media and the war in Ukraine "in the rapidly changing media ecology and the reordered geopolitical context". How does it fair?

After the introduction chapter focusing on the idea of 'information war', the volume divides its contributions into four sections, covering media and platform infrastructures, open-source intelligence, everyday media practices during wartime, and, finally, news reporting and geopolitics. The 10 chapters provide a wide-ranging overview of how the war in Ukraine is framed by

journalists and how media are used in practice by actors responding to the war and participating in it, through both national and global lenses.

One of the book's core strengths is the focus on both traditional and social media: in Chapter 1, Kateryna Boyko and Roman Horbyk focus on ordinary social media users and soldiers, and Chapter 6 by Tom Divon and Moa Eriksson Krutrök covers meme-making TikTok influencers, while in Chapter 8, Johana Kotišová examines mainstream reporting and fixer practices. Another core advantage of the volume is the attention given to diverse actors, infrastructures, and mundane practices circumscribing the media's role in the Russia-Ukraine war. Between governments, platforms, civic volunteers and the military, journalists and OSINT enthusiasts, the chapters showcase the complex interplay between the governance of infrastructures (e.g. Chapter 3 by Pantti and Matti Pohjonen analysing platform responses to content moderation challenges posed by the war), the management of (dis)information and news flows, and the lived emotional experiences of those involved in the constant content and documentation streams of participatory warfare, as aptly described by Kotišová and by Andrew Hoskins in the afterword.

Media and the War in Ukraine reflects an important change in naming the object of study (referring to the war as a war, and not a 'crisis', as in the previous 2016 volume), and is well balanced in terms of gender representation and disciplinary variety. Where it falls short is in offering only a limited focus on Ukrainian viewpoints, data and analyses. The chapters cover a wealth of geographies: Chapter 4 by Jamie Matthews examines UK news coverage of the war and the role of open-source analysts; Chapter 5 by Marc Tuters and Boris Noordenbos looks at the use of OSINT in pro-Russian propaganda; and Chapter 9 by Antal Wozniak and Zixiu Liu focuses on Indian media coverage of Russia's invasion (though with little focus on India-Ukraine relations). Yet only a subset explicitly use Ukrainian (or Russian) media spaces as their field and Ukrainians as their informants. Chapter 1 by Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg relies on extensive fieldwork in Ukraine for their rich analysis of information governance practices in the country at war and in Chapter 2 Boyko and Horbyk investigate the (social) media practices of Ukrainian military and civilian actors. Otherwise, only Chapters 6, 7 and 8 partially engage with Ukrainian voices and content, pointing to a lack of engagement with the vast data generated by Ukrainian media users and producers and with their unique lived experiences.

A perhaps bigger issue is the glaring lack of Ukrainian scholarly perspectives in the volume. Only *one* chapter (Ch. 2) is co-authored by Ukrainian academics, with both currently working outside Ukraine. In addition, the chapters (with a few exceptions) cite next to no Ukrainian sources in their

reference lists, and most of the Ukrainian references cite mainstream media reports, not academic research. The distinct lack of Ukrainian voices among authors and citations in the book, despite growing amounts of scholarship from Ukraine, serves as a powerful illustration of the pervasive 'epistemic imperialism' in how the Russia-Ukraine war has been studied, reported on and interpreted. In their critique of such 'Westspaining' in international relations scholarship and more broadly, which privileges Western voices and theories, Hendl et al. (2023) call for an urgent rethinking of "the structural changes warranted across academia" in order to eradicate the "coloniality of knowledge production" (Hendl et al., 2023, 171) about the war in Ukraine.

Media and the War in Ukraine is an extremely timely publication and is positioned to appeal to a wide readership due to quality research insights, the reputation of its editors, and the series. The inclusion of Ukrainian voices and views is therefore particularly urgent in the context of evident epistemic injustice in the hybrid information space around the war. As Burlyuk and Musliu (2023) point out, when examining scholarship on Ukraine's existential struggle with Russian aggression, it is always worth asking who produces (or is able to produce) knowledge about the war and who is left out; who should be able to "speak loudly" and who "ought to remain silent" (Burlyuk and Musliu, 2023, 606).

References

Burlyuk, O., Musliu, V. (2023) The responsibility to remain silent? On the politics of knowledge production, expertise and (self-)reflection in Russia's war against Ukraine. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26(2023), 605–618. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-023-00318-x>.

Hendl, T., Burlyuk, O., O'Sullivan, M., & Arystanbek, A. (2023). (En)Countering epistemic imperialism: A critique of "Westspaining" and coloniality in dominant debates on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 45(2), 171–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2288468>.