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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Zakharchenko, A. (2023). Scholars' Attention to Ukraine: the Same Problems as in the Mass Media. *Ukrainian Analytical Digest*, 2, 9-10. https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000637349

All in all, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine opens many opportunities for social scientists with Ukraine expertise to meaningfully integrate into the discipline's search for new theoretical paradigms, jump on the bandwagon of contemporary methodological trends, overcome divisions with traditional Ukrainian studies and generate new collaborative interdisciplinary and cross-/trans-regional research. Those who study Ukraine should grasp these opportunities in order to move from the periphery toward the core of political science.

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Scholars' Attention to Ukraine: the Same Problems as in the Mass Media

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000637349

Introduction

There are two main problems with scholarly research on Ukraine, and they are roughly the same as the problems with the attention to our country from the mainstream world media.

The first of these is common to most other non-leading countries: most publications remember them only when something extraordinary happens there. For example, the largest war in Europe since World War II.

The second problem is more specific: Russian strategic narratives, or, in other words, Russian propaganda, can infiltrate scientific articles. After all, scientific journals are also media. They disseminate information about the real world, and therefore they can also set an agenda or present one's own interpretation of events.

The First Problem

Taking as an example my own field, communication studies, the first problem is very pronounced. Research in this area has largely revolved around the phenomenon of Ukrainian activism. In other words, foreign researchers have paid little attention to the peculiarities of the Ukrainian media system, the mediatization of Ukrainian society, censorship and self-censorship, and other similar topics. Although there have been several important works by Ukrainian researchers published in international journals (for example, Orlova, 2016, Fedirko, 2020 and others), there exist far more extensive bodies of work on the following topic areas:

The Revolution of Dignity, and the role of media and social media in the self-organization of citizens. There are studies in this area based on the principles of political science, communication science, sociology, linguistics, and other disciplines. The surge of these studies occurred at a time when the world was still pinning its hopes on social media services, considering them to be a driver of democracy. Accordingly, the focus of scholars at that time was on how horizontal self-organization helped to overcome dictatorships. However, this surge of attention was not too high, as it was overshadowed by the study of the Arab Spring, which occurred chronologically earlier.

The study of Ukrainian resistance to Russian armed and information aggression since 2014. To a large extent, attention was also focused on activism. This included volunteers who used social media to provide soldiers with medicine and military equipment as well as civil society organizations that have learned to effectively counter Russian propaganda, substituting themselves for the state structures that are supposed to take care of this. However, there has also been intensive study of the Russian propaganda itself, its features and effectiveness. Ukraine acted as a "testing ground" for observation, and it was on the basis of Ukrainian material that it became possible to find out how to effectively resist this propaganda.

The third, somewhat less popular area of research was feminist activism: some communication researchers drew attention to the fact that the #янебоюсьсказати (#IAmNotAfraidToSayIt) flash mob in Ukrainian social media took place a year earlier than the similar global movement under the slogan #metoo.

The Second Problem

As for the second problem, the presence of a Russian imperial perspective on events in Ukraine in academic articles, two factors contribute to this.

Firstly, the activity of Russian scholars with an imperial outlook, both those who still work in Russia and those who have settled in Western universities. Without a doubt, this is not about origin or ethnicity; I personally know many people from Russia who have a very democratic

outlook and support Ukraine. However, the imperial machine has a significant impact on people worldwide, especially those in the Russian information space.

Secondly, many scholars, as well as journalists and politicians, are still accustomed to perceiving Eastern Europe through the prism of Russia. For a long time, they considered Russia to be the most interesting country to study in the region; the majority of their budgets were allocated for its study, they had personal contacts with Russian functionaries, and therefore they borrowed many views on this part of the world directly from Russians. For these reasons, many continue to perceive Russia as dominant in the region, and Ukraine as a failed state. Even if there are no imperial influences, one can often see a lack of understanding of the Ukrainian context among Western researchers, and a tendency to draw conclusions about Ukraine based on American or British logic, etc.

The presence of Russian narratives in scholarly articles is not fictional. Sometimes it is quite obvious, as in (Baysha, 2017), who studied the 'rhetoric intervention' of the Ukrainian 'nationalists' in the East of Ukraine. Sometimes, though it is no less harmful, the narratives are less pronounces, as in (Roman et al., 2017), in which the defense against Russian propaganda and debunking Russian myths are called 'bias' of Ukrainian media in the war coverage.

Conclusion

Both problems can be overcome if we pay closer attention to the Ukrainian context. After all, there is a lot of talk about: the fact is that right now in Ukraine, many new meanings are being created that will influence the development of society on a global scale. And it is the Ukrainian resistance that offers an opportunity to completely renew the focus of research interests in the humanities.

Recently, the fashion for fighting fake news in global communication research has passed, a trend developing after 2016, when the West was shocked by the Trump election and Brexit. Once again, research focused on the future, not the present, is becoming trendy—for example, those focused on artificial intelligence-mediated communication. But I would advise not forgetting about the present. The war in Ukraine shows that we need to learn the lessons we have missed in the fight against propaganda, especially in the context of current and future global conflicts. And the current conflict, which is still localized in Ukraine, is far from over and may affect many more people before it is resolved.

There are several new themes that are worth paying attention to and exploring in the Ukrainian case study. The first is the "new connectivity" of citizens in the context of a war that affects the entire country rather than a limited conflict: in these conditions, people have expanded their self-organization and engagement in resistence. Secondly, the power of strategic narratives: attention to this phenomenon decreased after the 2010s when they did not help to win in Afghanistan, but the Ukrainian experience shows that high-quality strategic narratives can work wonders in times of war. Thirdly, we should pay attention to the structure of propaganda, which is far from being limited to fake news: disinformation constitutes a first, basic level of destructive information influence, with much more complex information operations possible.

Here are my tips on how to make the image of Ukraine in scientific research more reliable and independent of Russian influences:

For Western scholars: involve Ukrainian researchers in working groups that study Ukrainian realities.

Also for them: to separate the study of Russia from the study of other Eastern European countries. If it is not possible to open a separate center for Ukrainian studies, then at least do not use the traditional term "post-Soviet countries" but study Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and other neighboring countries together with Poland, Slovakia, etc.

For Ukrainian scholars, it is important to actively engage with global platforms to publish their materials. Otherwise, if you do not do so, it is more likely that your place will be taken by Russians with an imperial outlook.

About the Author

Artem Zakharchenko holds a PhD in social communications. He is currently affiliated with the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Institute of Journalism and the NGO 'Communication Analysis Team – Ukraine' (CAT-UA).

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