# Looking Back to Look Forward: Ukraine's Evolving Use of Digital Space for Resistance and Public Diplomacy, 2014-2022

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**Abstract:** This study considers how the communication strategies used by Ukraine since it was invaded by Russia in February 2022 are contextualized by its response to the Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine 8 years earlier. Survey data and interviews with Ukrainian citizens in 2015 reveal a civil society with distrust of media, well-developed information literacy, a willingness to play an active role in finding

credible information, and a strong spirit of self-reliance resulting from distrust of their government and Russia. Ukrainians' early recognition of the importance of digital information space in challenging Russia's sophisticated disinformation tactics enabled their under-developed public diplomacy to rapidly evolve after the 2022 invasion and contributed to their success in soliciting support and exhibiting resistance in the war against their long-standing adversary.

**Keywords:** disinformation, civil society, volunteerism, social media, communication

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*Retour sur l'avenir : l'évolution de l'utilisation de l'espace numérique par l'Ukraine pour la cyberrésistance et la diplomatie publique, 2014-2022*

**Résumé :** Cette étude examine comment les stratégies de communication utilisées par l'Ukraine depuis son invasion par la Russie en février 2022 sont contextualisées par sa réponse à l'invasion russe de la Crimée et de l'est de l'Ukraine 8 ans plus tôt. Les données d'enquête et les entretiens avec des citoyens ukrainiens en 2015 révèlent une société civile qui se méfie des médias, une maîtrise de l'information bien développée, une volonté de jouer un rôle actif dans la recherche d'informations crédibles, et un fort esprit d'autonomie résultant de la méfiance à l'égard de leur gouvernement et de la Russie. La reconnaissance précoce par les Ukrainiens de l'importance de l'espace d'information numérique pour contester les tactiques sophistiquées de désinformation de la Russie a permis à leur diplomatie publique sous-développée d'évoluer rapidement après l'invasion de 2022 et a contribué à leur succès à solliciter un soutien et à faire preuve de résistance dans la guerre contre leur longue date adversaire.

**Mots-clés :** désinformation, société civile, volontariat, médias sociaux, communication

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## Introduction

Much attention has been directed at the communication strategies used by Ukraine since Russia escalated its invasion in February 2022. While the physical battles in this war rage unabated with horrible loss of life and property, Ukraine has seen success in the war of public opinion, remaining in the news well beyond the typical life cycle of a story about a foreign war, and garnering the support of foreign governments, celebrities, the Ukrainian diaspora, as well as its own citizens. Ukraine has achieved this despite an enemy with a robust program and history of sowing disinformation. Their strategic use of communication in digital information spaces has helped them control the narrative of the war, and effectively procure funding, weapons, humanitarian aid, and international goodwill.

Both state and nonstate actors have engaged in digital information initiatives to respond to the 2022 invasion. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky shares powerful daily video updates to Ukrainian citizens (Kramer, 2022), and convenes

virtually with strategic audiences like the US Congress (Zurcher, 2022) and the 2022 Grammy Awards (Andrews, 2022) to both humanize his nation and cast an inclusive lens against a shared Russian threat (Bubich, 2022). The Ukrainian government's creative digital information efforts include deploying a website[1] for Russian families to track down soldiers (who they often did not know were in Ukraine) who have been killed or captured (Schreck, 2022); later, they created an "I want to live" hotline to encourage Russian conscripts to surrender (Boffey, 2023). On the non-state side, anonymous social media platform Telegram has served as a space for receiving rapid information updates (Allyn, 2022), coordinating "distributed denial-of-service" (DDoS) attacks (Jones, 2022; Toulas, 2022), and soliciting donations from the international community (Toulas, 2022). Pro-Ukrainian groups have used Facebook to contact the mothers of Russian prisoners-of-war (POWs) (Epstein, 2022), Twitter to gather donations (Adams, 2022), Google reviews of Russian restaurants to surreptitiously inform Russian citizens of the invasion (Gronholt-Pedersen, 2022), and e-commerce to sell themed merchandise to support the war effort (e.g., Saint Javelin, n.d.).

How has a country that is much smaller than Russia and was not particularly well known to much of the world before 2022 been able to use communication to achieve this level of support and resistance? To answer this question, this study draws on survey data from Ukrainians in 2015 that reflect communicative phenomena underlying Ukraine's socio-cultural-political condition(s). We combine these elements into a cohesive narrative that depicts their foundational role in the efficacy of Ukraine's 2022 digital communication and resistance, and that identifies the development of these foundations into international public diplomacy that addresses the resource needs of a war-time society. This retrospective view that 'looks back in order to look forward' allows us to reflect and perceive more deeply how those elements contributed to Ukraine's response to the ongoing war with Russia.

## 1.   Historical Context

Ukraine has fought Russian aggression in some form for hundreds of years (Subtelny, 2009). Although Ukraine declared its independence in 1991 amidst the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia remained heavily involved in its affairs, as democratic reform struggled to take root.

In 2014, Ukrainians responded to then-President Viktor Yanukovych's refusal to follow his country's wishes to sign a political and trade agreement with the European Union—an agreement which Russia strongly opposed—by occupying the main square (the Maidan) of the capital, Kyiv. Citizens engaged in months of protests and civil disobedience until Yanukovych abdicated power and fled to Russia

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[1] https://www.200rf.com

(Leshchenko, 2014). Russia quickly responded to this 'Revolution of Dignity' by illegally occupying Crimea and fomenting unrest in parts of eastern and southern Ukraine.

Ukraine's fighting on that front was heavily supported by the voluntary engagement of individual citizens, which remained high after the Maidan (Krasynska & Martin, 2017). However, the ongoing war was not a prominent fixture in global politics or media until February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion and sent thousands of additional troops and tanks into Ukraine. While it was widely expected that Russia, with its much larger army, would quickly conquer Ukraine, this has not been the case, and the war is ongoing over a year later.

## 2.   Roots of Social and Digital Media in Ukraine

While conflict in Ukraine is nothing new, upheavals in the 21st century were impacted by digital media. After decades of state control of traditional media outlets while a Soviet republic, followed by "authoritarian-democratic" media control in the years after independence, internet penetration in Ukraine meant citizens were able to turn online for broader and less censored sources (Goldstein, 2007; Semetko & Krasnoboka, 2003).

This trend reflects the internet's function as a "liberation technology" in societies seeking democracy (Diamond, 2010). Internally, the digital sphere provides tools for transparency; facilitates activism by enabling independent communication and mobilization; promotes collective identity; and creates a sense of community (Harlow & Guo, 2014; Lysenko & Desouza, 2010, 2012, 2015). Externally, it provides the means to influence and interpret media coverage of social movements (Harlow & Kilgo, 2021; McLeod, 2007).

At the time of the Revolution of Dignity, social media such as Facebook, VKontakte (a Russian platform similar to Facebook), and Twitter had found their way to Ukraine. In fact, the EuroMaidan movement started online with a Facebook post inviting anyone dissatisfied with Yanukovych to come occupy the Maidan in protest (Leshchenko, 2014). The growth and success of the Maidan occupation reflect how social media can allow dissenters to be nimbler than authorities, at least initially (Bright, 2009). By "help[ing] civil society actors access and circulate information in unprecedented ways" (Kaun & Uldam, 2018, p. 2197), digital technology and social media afforded Ukrainians a way to "strengthen an emergent civil society" (Diamond, 2010, p. 70) of people opposed to governing authorities (Semetko & Krasnoboka, 2003).

Much of Ukraine's meeting of Russian aggression in information space has been in countering politically motivated disinformation. While the Russian state has long dictated what is said in its national press and in the media of territories it controls

(Golovchenko et al., 2018), in recent years it has pioneered new strategies that combine and coordinate conventional and unconventional warfare practices in a 'hybrid warfare' that includes disinformation campaigns (Hoffman, 2007). Disinformation refers to intentionally inaccurate information (Erlich & Garner, 2021; Golovchenko et al., 2018). Its goal is to corrode the health of a society by breaking down civic trust in societal norms and institutions, amplifying extremism and polarization, and destroying the factual basis on which citizens learn about and form opinions on public affairs (Erlich & Garner, 2021), at which point it is easier for the state to do what it wants without blowback. This has been referred to as a "4D approach: dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay" (Snegovaya, 2015). Disinformation campaigns work when persuasion won't, the logic being that if people's minds cannot be changed, it may prove useful to confuse or overwhelm them with false or contradictory information (Erlich & Garner, 2021).

These types of false claims are possible to spread due to the deeply networked societies of today's digital age (Hwang, 2019). For example, Russia has successfully spread disinformation using paid internet "trolls," specialized employees tasked with assuming identities on various social media, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and promoting pro-Putin, pro-Russian state views (Mueller, 2018; Silverman & Kao, 2022). Newer developments enlist the use of automated bots to perform similar tasks. Once disinformation appears online, its spread may be extended by people unaffiliated with Russia, algorithms, and other characteristics of online searches (Canevez, 2023).

## 3.   Roots of Volunteerism in Government Mistrust

The proliferation of social media in Ukraine has allowed non-state actors (i.e., ordinary citizens) to figure prominently in resisting Russian aggression. While this is in part enabled by the affordances of social media (Golovchenko et al., 2018; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017), it is also a function of the cultural context of Ukraine's civil society. Volunteerism has consistently shown more substantial and enduring importance, influence, and impact in Ukraine's war efforts than is commonly recognized in contemporary societies worldwide (Smith et al., 2016), providing a good example of the role of culture in transboundary conflicts (George & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017).

Groups of volunteers—that is, those engaging in effort that is neither required nor compensated—often have long-term global historical and societal impacts, even more so than non-government organizations (NGOs) and non-profits (Smith et al., 2016). While some scholarship has highlighted the challenges and problems facing Ukraine's civil society progress (Ghosh, 2014; Minakov, 2015), there is evidence that it is emerging as a socio-political force within the country. As is often the case in countries where the civil society opposes a hostile government, many volunteer groups in

Ukraine do not formally register with or identify themselves to the government, which makes it difficult to record their existence (Krasynska & Martin, 2017) while in fact volunteer groups are at the heart of Ukrainian society. Historically, official social institutions in Ukraine could not necessarily be trusted, with the result that "informal organizations and citizen networks play a crucial role in most spheres of everyday life" (Krasynska & Martin, 2017, p. 424). This makes sense since all that volunteer organizations need to be effective is flexibility, focus, and commitment from a small number of people (Stewart, 2009) "to form and begin to act: no money, no other resources, no…recognition or permission at all is required" (Smith et al., 2016). Thus, while unregistered groups are often labelled as 'informal,' they can and often do have formalized organizational structures. This was the case during EuroMaidan, where informal groups had rules, roles, processes, and were networked with other 'informal' organizations (Krasynska & Martin, 2017). Ukrainian culture is very comfortable with this kind of formal informality, as informality "is a prevalent social norm, and one that is central to dealing with an antagonistic government" (Krasynska & Martin, 2017, p. 422). As a result, the lens of Western culture tends to underestimate Ukraine's civil society strength and breadth (Krasynska & Martin, 2017).

The cultural expectation that loose networks of ordinary citizens will keep life running in Ukraine is an essential part of the national identity, and the role of social media in an uprising or resistance cannot be understood without acknowledging this fact. Ukrainians have excelled at thinking on their feet and solving their own problems well before social media. The ability to communicate digitally via social media gave them a way to increase those abilities, and played a vital role in creating and sustaining the cohesive infrastructure of their communities (Krasynska & Martin, 2017). Thus, we believe that Ukraine's use of social media to resist Russia's invasion is rooted in part by the nation's understanding of each citizen's responsibility to civil society, often expressed through volunteerism that creates "an active, virtual, pro bono workforce" (Krasynska & Martin, 2017, p. 198).

## 4.   Roots of Public Diplomacy

To examine Ukraine's perception of itself in the eyes of the world, and its hopes for whether and how its government would manage that relationship, it is helpful to think in terms of place branding, the use of the image of a particular place as an interface for the relationship between its relevant stakeholders, such as those who represent the place formally, its citizens, its visitors, and others (Fernández-Cavia et al., 2018).

All branding "is really communication; it is about the proposition and management of representations that ultimately relate to identity" (Fernández-Cavia et al., 2018, p. 3). Place branding too is identity-driven, expressing certain values and narratives of the place. This focus on values and emotions, more than factual arguments, helps make the branded place salient so people think more of it and regard it as important (Willie, 2007). While this is often pursued as a strategy for encouraging

tourism, it also serves the important role of allowing the local society to identify an image for itself and for external audiences to identify with that expression of the place (Fernández-Cavia et al., 2018). In this sense, it is a transactional process that includes both the community and external stakeholders.

Thus, it is not surprising that digital media have further developed the place branding process, by infusing it with the ability for people to search and explore geographically remote places and create and share personally relevant content about them (Willie, 2007). This elevates the role of creators of User Generated Content and other social media users in the creation of place identity (Skinner, 2008), to the extent that anonymous volunteer contributors often play a key role in forming the identity of places, at times becoming unofficial communicators for them.

Until the events of 2022, Ukraine seemed to lack a clear identity in the eyes of much of the rest of the world. A 2010 content analysis of Ukrainian tourism websites revealed that two of the top search terms were "Soviet" and "Russian" (Iarmolenko & Schneider, 2010), reflecting a blurring of Russia and Ukraine in people's minds. Similarly, a survey of US college students at 5 geographically-diverse universities revealed "significant lack of respondent awareness about tourist characteristics of Ukraine" and "negative perceptions…that Ukraine is still strongly associated with Russia, USSR and the communist past" (Iarmolenko & Schneider, 2011, p. 5), for which the study's authors recommended "destination re-imaging" (p. 6).

Through the 2010s, Ukrainians use of digital technology and social media was growing (Golovchenko et al., 2018), raising the question of whether and how place branding was occurring for their country, particularly in the face of disinformation. Much was made about the essential role that digital technology played in the various revolutions of the "Arab Spring" that occurred in this decade, not just in organizing protesters, but also in getting the word out about the countries involved to the rest of the world (Lysenko & Desouza, 2014; Seib, 2012). As a result, the conceptualization of public diplomacy was expanding from something engaged in by elites behind closed doors to faster, technologically facilitated outreach connecting many types of people (Seib, 2012). Involving connectivity and media monitoring (Lysenko & Desouza, 2010), this perspective could make possible a way for Ukraine to better control the narrative about themselves in international eyes.

## 5.   Research Questions, Method and Procedure

We seek to answer three research questions that probe the underlying roots of Ukraine's 2022 digital resistance, connecting thinking about a) social and digital media in Ukraine; b) mistrust of the state; and c) perceptions of public diplomacy. These questions are, respectively:

1. What does Ukrainian's relationship to digital information and media more broadly in 2015 suggest about preparation to engage in conflict in digital information spaces?

2.  What do levels of trust in the government in 2015 suggest about Ukrainian volunteerism?

3.  What do Ukrainians' opinions and perceptions of Ukraine's relationship with international actors in information space suggest about the nation's capacity to create and leverage a network of international allies?

### Method

This research draws on both qualitative and quantitative data. The former emerged from inductive analysis of interactions that occurred during travel in western Ukraine in June 2015 by the first author. Interviews and site visits with activists, volunteers, and patients and staff at a military hospital were conducted to gain insight into Ukrainian attitudes and behaviors pertaining to media, government, and diplomacy in the wake of the Revolution of Dignity and the Russian occupation of Crimea. Complementary quantitative data were gathered via an online survey, as described below.

### Procedure

A survey was circulated in Ukraine in August 2015. Respondents were recruited during a 2-week trip to multiple cities and towns in Western Ukraine, and included lodging hosts, guides, relatives, interview subjects, and the audience at a public talk. Willing parties were provided links to a Qualtrics site where the survey was hosted in both an English and a Ukrainian language version.

The first page of the online survey instrument was an informed consent form with study details including the first author's academic affiliation and IRB approval. Participants indicated their agreement to participate by advancing past this page to the questionnaire. Participants could skip any questions they wished to, and for some items, including demographics, approximately 40% of cases were missing. However, it was often the case that respondents answered items later in the questionnaire after skipping a block of questions; therefore, considering the modest sample size, data were only discarded if fewer than 50% of items were completed. For variables where there were substantial numbers of missing cases, the sample size for the item is reported, and the percentages do not include the missing cases.

Using a snowball sampling method, the people recruited in person were asked to share the links and encourage their friends, family, and co-workers to take the survey as well. In addition, the links and a request to participate were emailed to people in other regions of Ukraine not visited in person; these recipients were either existing acquaintances or leads provided by members of the American and Canadian Ukrainian diaspora. (The emails and the survey clarified that the survey was only intended for people living in Ukraine at the time.)

Responses were collected via Qualtrics for both versions for approximately 6 weeks. At that point, new responses had stopped coming in and the survey was closed. A total of 108 people completed the survey, 95 in Ukrainian and 13 in English.

## 6.  Sample

Of respondents who answered the demographic questions at the end of the survey, 55.4% were female and 44.6% were male (n = 65); 90.2% lived in a city and 9.8% lived in a village outside of a city (n = 61).

More than a third (36.1%) reported having attended an institution after high school, such as a vocational or technical school or university, 26.3% reported completing high school, and 2.8% said they completed secondary school (n = 65). These relatively high rates of educational attainment are consistent with statistics for the country (e.g., UNESCO, n.d.).

In terms of annual income, 37.1% reported earning 60,000 hryvnia or more a year, 27.4% earned less than 20,000 hryvnia, 21% made between 20,000 and just under 40,000 hryvnia, and 14.5% earned 40,000 to just under 60,000 hryvnia (n = 61). Thus, while our sample mostly lived in cities and were educated, this broad range of incomes suggests that the high percentage of people from cities may be more a function of internet penetration in 2015 than affluence.

All regions of the country were represented, with 39.3% of respondents from Western Ukraine, 39.3% from Central, 11.5% from Northern, 6.6% from Southern, and 3.3% from the Eastern region, closest to the fighting (n = 61). Of the 59.3% who chose to answer the question, 35.2% speak Ukrainian as their primary language at home, 13% speak Russian, 8.3% speak both Russian and Ukrainian equally, and 2.8% speak some other language (n = 64). 100% use the internet and 97.2% use social media. Of those who use social media, 85.7% report doing so at least once a day.

## 7.  Measures

### 7.1.  *Measures for Ukrainian Relationship with Digital Media and Information*

To measure distrust of media, survey respondents were presented with a list of media channels: domestic and international TV, radio, and newspapers; social media platforms Facebook, VKontakte, Twitter, and YouTube; and other digital spaces in the form of blogs and government websites. Respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale the extent to which they trust each media channel for information about politics, news, and current events, and for information about the government. Participants were also given open-ended opportunities to answer, "What do you believe is the best/the most inaccurate media source for information about current events in Ukraine?"

We also asked participants to indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale how important various aspects of online information sources are when deciding whether to trust them. The 17 verification cues and strategies include items such as whether websites have up-to-date information; provide information that is consistent with what the viewer already thinks; have a sales or persuasive pitch; have high ratings; and use a source the viewer has heard of before.

### 7.2. Measures for Trust of Government

Ukrainians' trust in their government was measured by asking them to indicate their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale with nine statements, including "you can generally trust the people who run our government;" "most public officials can be trusted to do what is right without our having to constantly check on them;" and "quite a few of the people running our government are not as honest as the voters have a right to expect."

### 7.3. Measures of Ukrainians' Perception of International Actors in Information Space

Survey measures were also used to assess Ukrainians' opinions about their country's priorities in combatting disinformation in the digital information spaces, as well as their perceptions of how the people and government of the United States understand Ukraine. To measure Ukrainians' views on a major source of Russian disinformation, trolls, respondents used a 5-point Likert scale to indicate how much they believed online trolls who spread disinformation were a threat to their country; were paid agents of Russian president Vladimir Putin and the Russian government; and were a worthwhile target for the Ukrainian government's time and effort trying to challenge or stop them.

Respondents were also asked how much they want their government to "rebut and dispute lies about Ukraine that appear online," "carefully monitor information being shared online about Ukraine that is not accurate," and "fight an 'information war' in the media with pro-Russian parties." Answer choices were "This should be a top priority," "This would be a good idea if possible," "I don't think the government should be involved in this," and "I have no knowledge or opinion about this." Respondents used these same choices to indicate how much they wanted the government to engage in the more proactive strategies of "promoting a positive image of Ukraine to English speaking countries" and "actively trying to learn what the American people know and think about Ukraine."

A series of items were used to measure Ukrainians' opinions about American people and the U.S. government. Respondents used 7-point semantic differential scales to indicate how much Americans do or don't care about what is happening in Ukraine, are ignorant or informed about Ukraine, do or don't have identifiable opinions and beliefs about Ukraine, and do or don't trust Russia. The same measurement scale was used to assess Ukrainians' perceptions of whether the US

government does or does not understand the situation in Ukraine, does or does not make clear to Ukrainians their views and policies about Ukraine, has or has not been generous to Ukraine, does things for Ukraine to help or to make themselves look good, and does or does not trust Russia.

## 8.   Results

### 8.1.   A Digital Information Literate Society

In our first research question we asked *what does Ukrainians' relationship to digital information and media more broadly in 2015 suggest about preparation to engage in conflict in digital information spaces?* In the simplest terms, Ukrainians' relationship with the media is to not trust it and seek corroboration through multiple sources. Respondents reported a general level of mistrust for many popular information sources (the highest mean trust on a 5-point Likert scale was 3.7, or between "some" and "quite a bit"), with higher regard given to international information sources (radio, television, and newspapers) and popular social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook than domestic television, radio, and newspapers. Particularly mistrusted were government websites and Russian social media platform VKontakte (see Table 1 and 2), which at that time was experiencing increasingly heavy-handed oversight of its posts by the Russian government (Meaker, 2022).

These results were comparable whether the information was about politics and news more broadly or about the Ukrainian government more specifically. A general mistrust of many media sources while prioritizing international sources (and platforms that have a substantial amount of international content) produces the sense of a society that is critical of the information sources they are most regularly exposed to (i.e., domestic sources). The relatively high number of respondents answering survey items about international newspapers and Facebook suggest a citizenry that actively seeks media channels it views as worthwhile information sources.

Distrust of media is also evident in responses to the two open-ended questions. When asked to name the best media source, 5 responses said one "does not exist;" two other responses expressed similar scepticism by listing "personal information" as the best 'media' source. The news website "Ukrainska Pravda" was cited most frequently (13 mentions), followed by Facebook (8 mentions, plus 3 additional Facebook responses containing qualifications like "certain pages" or "from known people").

The most common response when asked to name the most inaccurate source was some variation of Russian media generally (e.g., "all Russian media; they lie nonstop;" "the majority of Russian mass media;" 9 mentions). There were 8 mentions of "television" generally, 4 responses that said "all" or "most" media sources, and

multiple mentions of specific media organizations with ties to Kremlin propaganda (Channel Inter, 4; Vesti media group, 4; RT, 3).

**Table 1.** Trust of Information Sources about Politics, News, and Current Events

| TRUST OF INFORMATION SOURCES ABOUT POLTICS, NEWS, CURRENT EVENTS | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How much do you trust this source for info about POLITICS, NEWS, and CURRENT EVENTS? | Mean | SD | N who report using | not at all | a little | some | quite a bit | a lot |
| *VKontakte* | 1.88 | 0.98 | 58 | 46.60% | 25.90% | 20.70% | 6.90% | 0.00% |
| *Government websites* | 2.58 | 0.95 | 65 | 13.80% | 30.80% | 40.00% | 13.80% | 1.50% |
| *Domestic TV* | 2.66 | 0.96 | 65 | 10.80% | 30.80% | 44.60% | 92.00% | 4.60% |
| *Domestic radio* | 2.82 | 1.06 | 61 | 11.50% | 24.60% | 41.00% | 16.40% | 6.60% |
| *Blogs* | 2.90 | 1.02 | 67 | 10.40% | 20.90% | 41.80% | 22.40% | 4.50% |
| *Twitter* | 2.96 | 1.13 | 53 | 15.10% | 13.20% | 37.70% | 28.30% | 5.70% |
| *Domestic newspapers* | 3.01 | 0.94 | 74 | 6.80% | 17.60% | 48.60% | 21.60% | 5.40% |
| *YouTube* | 3.13 | 0.94 | 71 | 5.60% | 15.50% | 45.10% | 28.20% | 5.60% |
| *Facebook* | 3.35 | 1.01 | 77 | 2.60% | 19.50% | 29.90% | 36.40% | 11.70% |
| *International radio* | 3.40 | 1.05 | 57 | 8.80% | 5.30% | 33.30% | 42.10% | 10.50% |
| *International TV* | 3.45 | 0.93 | 64 | 3.10% | 7.80% | 42.20% | 34.40% | 12.50% |
| *International newspapers* | 3.71 | 0.88 | 75 | 2.70% | 4.00% | 29.30% | 48.00% | 16.00% |

**Table 2.** Trust of Sources about the Government

| TRUST OF SOURCES ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *How much do you trust this source for info about THE GOVERNMENT?* | **Mean** | **SD** | **N** | **not at all** | **a little** | **some** | **quite a bit** | **a lot** |
| *VKontakte* | 1.90 | 0.9 | 51 | 39.20% | 37.30% | 17.60% | 5.90% | 0.00% |
| *Government websites* | 2.54 | 0.95 | 63 | 15.90% | 28.60% | 42.90% | 11.10% | 1.60% |
| *Domestic radio* | 2.54 | 1.02 | 57 | 15.80% | 33.30% | 35.10% | 12.30% | 3.50% |
| *Domestic TV* | 2.55 | 0.99 | 62 | 11.30% | 41.90% | 32.30% | 9.70% | 4.80% |
| *Blogs* | 2.68 | 1.05 | 63 | 14.30% | 27.00% | 38.10% | 17.50% | 3.20% |
| *Domestic newspapers* | 2.69 | 0.9 | 71 | 8.50% | 33.80% | 39.40% | 16.90% | 1.40% |
| *Twitter* | 2.70 | 1.04 | 49 | 14.90% | 25.50% | 36.20% | 21.30% | 2.10% |
| *YouTube* | 2.84 | 1.09 | 62 | 12.90% | 24.20% | 33.90% | 24.20% | 4.80% |
| *International radio* | 3.06 | 1.1 | 53 | 11.30% | 15.10% | 37.70% | 28.30% | 7.50% |
| *Facebook* | 3.14 | 1.12 | 72 | 8.30% | 19.40% | 33.30% | 27.80% | 11.10% |
| *International TV* | 3.27 | 1.04 | 60 | 6.70% | 11.70% | 41.70% | 28.30% | 11.70% |
| *International newspapers* | 3.31 | 1.01 | 71 | 5.60% | 12.70% | 36.60% | 35.20% | 9.90% |

To further investigate Ukrainians' relationship with media and digital information circa 2015, we measured the perceived importance of a variety of information verification practices on a 5-point scale. Results suggested a high level of overall information and digital literacy (See Table 3), such as a high regard for pursuing more than just one opinion when it comes to believing information online (M = 4.06). This generally positive practice was privileged over verification practices that are more superficial, such as the ease of a website's use (M = 2.00) or its appearance (M = 2.20). Other more endorsed practices include looking for evidence about the source's credentials (M = 3.67) and recognizing if there is a commercial or persuasive component to the site (M = 3.58).

This high degree of information literacy is echoed in responses to the 'best media source' question: rather than listing a media outlet or channel, 5 responses mentioned verification behaviours, such as using multiple sources, forming one's own opinion from synthesizing them, and tracing claims to primary sources.

**Table 3.** Information Trust and Verification

| INFORMATION TRUST AND VERIFICATION | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **When you are deciding whether to believe the information you find online, how important is it that…** | **N** | **SD** | **Mean** |
| *...you get more than just one opinion* | 64 | 0.77 | 4.06 |
| *...there is information about the source or author's education or training* | 64 | 1.01 | 3.67 |
| *...it does not try to convince you to do something or buy something* | 64 | 1.08 | 3.58 |
| *...the information on the website is up-to-date* | 64 | 1.16 | 3.36 |
| *...the information is well written and you see no typing mistakes* | 64 | 1.04 | 3.27 |
| *...you have heard of the source or information creator before* | 63 | 0.94 | 3.17 |
| *...you have heard good things about the information source or website creator* | 63 | 1.11 | 2.98 |
| *...the information on the website is the same as information on other websites* | 64 | 1.04 | 2.84 |
| *...others recommend it* | 64 | 0.88 | 2.80 |
| *...people you know, such as friends and family, believe the website or information source* | 64 | 1.09 | 2.73 |
| *...there are high ratings, positive comments, or good reviews* | 62 | 1.08 | 2.68 |
| *...the information you find is similar to what you already think* | 63 | 1.02 | 2.67 |
| *...the website seems safe and secure* | 64 | 1.17 | 2.55 |
| *...an expert (like your doctor, teacher, etc.) believes the site* | 63 | 1.09 | 2.49 |
| *...a lot of other people use the website* | 63 | 0.97 | 2.38 |
| *...the website looks good* | 64 | 1.14 | 2.20 |
| *...the website is easy to use* | 64 | 1.17 | 2.00 |

### 9.   Volunteerism and Government Mistrust

In research question 2 we asked *what do levels of trust in the government in 2015 suggest about Ukrainian volunteerism?* The respondents in our sample reported low trust of their own government across a variety of measures. Mean levels of agreement with positively worded items never exceeded 2.29 on a 5-point scale (Table 4), and none of the negatively worded items had a lower mean score than 4.04 (Table 5). This low level of trust is consistent with the 4 responses to the 'most inaccurate medium' question that mentioned websites and press releases originating from the Ukrainian government.

**Table 4.** Trust of Government (Positively Worded).

| TRUST OF GOVERNMENT (POSITIVELY WORDED) | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | Mean | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
| *Most public officials can be trusted to do what is right without our having to constantly check on them.* | 80 | 1.58 (.776) | 44% | 29% | 5% | 1% | 1% |
| *Most government officials try to serve the public interest, even if it is against their personal interest.* | 80 | 1.71 (.732) | 34% | 37% | 7% | 2% | 2% |
| *Those we elected to public office usually try to keep the promises they have made during the election.* | 80 | 2.03 (.886) | 24% | 35% | 17% | 3% | 1% |
| *You can generally trust the people who run our government* | 81 | 2.21 (.945) | 20% | 32% | 22% | 6% | 1% |
| *When government leaders make statements to the Ukrainian people via the media, they* | 80 | 2.25 (.849) | 16% | 33% | 26% | 5% | 0% |

| | N | Mean | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *are usually telling the truth* | | | | | | | |
| *Most of the people running our government are well-qualified to handle the problems that we are facing in this country.* | 80 | 2.29 (.766) | 12% | 36% | 29% | 3% | 0% |

**Table 5.** Trust of Government (Negatively Worded).

| TRUST OF GOVERNMENT (NEGATIVELY WORDED) | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | Mean | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
| *Unless we keep a close watch on them, many of our elected leaders will look out for special interests rather than for all the people.* | 79 | 4.43 (.742) | 41% | 33% | 3% | 1% | 1% |
| *Quite a few of the people running our government are not as honest as the voters have a right to expect.* | 80 | 4.14 (.817) | 27% | 41% | 7% | 5% | 0% |
| *It often seems like our government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves rather than being run for the benefit of all people.* | 79 | 4.04 (.920) | 25% | 38% | 11% | 3% | 2% |

An environment where the state is not and cannot be relied upon to look out for the public interest is where a strong sense of volunteerism and civic self-determination can flourish. Volunteerism in Ukrainian civil society existed long before Russia's 2015 occupation of Crimea (and in turn Russia's 2022 escalation of the war) (Foster, 2022, Ghosh, 2014). Volunteerism and grassroots civil activity were an instrumental part of the Maidan resistance; interviews with activists revealed how "the EuroMaidan

protests operated as a decentralized conglomeration of independent coordinating movements that united people according to their interests, skill sets, ideology, and even industrial sectors" (Krasynska & Martin, 2017, p. 441).

This same "capacity for civil society [that] existed and emerged when needed" (Krasynska & Martin, 2017, p. 441) was evident from interviews conducted in Ukraine in 2015. A military hospital in Lviv serving wounded soldiers relied on a supply closet of donated blankets, sheets, and towels; citizen donations also extended to food (Vdovychenko, 2015) A group of Ukrainians in their 20s had intentionally created a thriving commune whose residents formed "a voluntary mutual aid movement to strengthen local communities and youth hubs in remote areas and settlements" (P. Didula, personal correspondence, 2015). Volunteers made and sold crafts to raise money for food and supplies they would personally shuttle to troops across the country by car. They extended their productivity by setting up de-facto looms in parks and squares so passers-by could stop for any duration of time to weave scraps of fabric into camouflage netting to cover soldiers or vehicles on the front (M. Koronenko, personal correspondence, 2015). These examples are consistent with distrust of the government, illustrating Ukrainians' familiarity with and competence at handling matters for themselves. The self-empowerment, history of mistrust, and broad information literacy characteristic of Ukrainian society in 2015 were the seeds of the successful and far-reaching civil society engagement with the enemy via digital information spaces that emerged in 2022.

## 10.  Ukraine's Relationship with International Actors and Information Space

In research question 3 we asked *what do Ukrainians' opinions and perceptions of Ukraine's relationship with international actors in information space suggest about the nation's capacity to create and leverage a network of international allies?* Ukraine operates in the context of a contentious information space driven by the actions of Russia, their principal foreign aggressor. Earlier we saw evidence of that in general distrust of media and high information literacy. Also indicative of this is Ukrainians' broad agreement that internet 'trolls' are more than simply an online nuisance, they are a legitimate threat to Ukraine and an active arm of the Russian state designed to sow confusion in and about Ukraine (see Table 6). Although responses were more distributed about what the Ukrainian government should do regarding trolls, more than half of our sample disagreed that nothing can be done to combat them. This suggests that the Ukrainians surveyed believe the Ukrainian government can and should play an active role in battling these malicious actors in digital information spaces.

**Table 6.** Responding to Trolls

| RESPONDING TO ONLINE TROLLS | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | Mean | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
| *Trolls who comment and post on web pages and social media are a threat to Ukraine* | 67 | 3.82 (.94) | 13.8% | 13.8% | 13.8% | 30.8% | 30.8% |
| *Putin and the Russian Government pay trolls to spread lies and create confusion online* | 65 | 4.38 (1.00) | 4.6% | 0% | 9.2% | 24.6% | 61.5% |
| *There is nothing that can be done about Internet trolls, so government leaders should not waste time trying to argue or stop them.* | 66 | 2.72 (1.40) | 19.7% | 37.9% | 16.7% | 16.7% | 9.1% |

Participants in our sample further supported the idea that the Ukrainian government should take a more active role in digital information spaces, largely prioritizing that the government should "rebut and disprove lies about Ukraine" online (60.9% of respondents stated this should be a top priority, Table 7). Similarly, over 90% of respondents opined that the government should prioritize or at least consider monitoring online information about Ukraine (Table 7). There was also fairly general support for fighting an active 'information war' against pro-Russian parties (69.6% of responding participants, Table 7).

Perceptions of mistrust of Russian information sources (e.g., Russian media and VKontakte, Tables 1 and 2), perception of Russian trolls as a legitimate threat to Ukraine (Table 6), and desire for the Ukrainian state to play a more active role in digital information space confrontations (Table 7) characterize a citizenry with a well-established notion of a foreign threat and the importance of digital information in meeting that threat.

That being said, respondents in our sample appeared to have more complicated ideas about Ukraine's relationship with the United States. When asked about the Ukrainian government promoting a positive image of Ukraine to English speaking countries, over 95% of respondents supported the idea, but they were notably less supportive of their government trying to learn what Americans thought or knew about

Ukraine (42.0% of respondents did not think the government should be involved in this) (Table 8).

**Table 7.** Opinions on Government Digital Information Strategies

| OPINIONS ON GOVERNMENT DIGITAL INFORMATION STRATEGIES | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How much you would like/not like the government of Ukraine to… | N | This should be a top priority. | This would be a good idea if possible. | I don't think the government should be involved in this. | I have no knowledge or opinion about this. |
| …rebut and disprove lies about Ukraine that appear online | 69 | 60.9% | 30.4% | 4.3% | 4.3% |
| …carefully monitor information being shared online about Ukraine that is not accurate | 69 | 42.0% | 49.3% | 4.3% | 4.3% |
| …fight an 'information war' in the media with pro-Russian parties | 69 | 34.8% | 34.8% | 17.4% | 13.0% |

**Table 8.** Opinions on Government's Approach to Ukraine's Public Image

| OPINIONS ON GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH TO UKRAINE'S PUBLIC IMAGE | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How much you would like/not like the government of Ukraine to… | N | This should be a top priority. | This would be a good idea if possible. | I don't think the government should be involved in this. | I have no knowledge or opinion about this. |
| …promote a positive image of Ukraine to English speaking countries | 69 | 49.3% | 46.4% | 2.9% | 1.4% |
| …actively try to learn what the American people know and think about Ukraine | 69 | 10.1% | 37.7% | 42.0% | 10.1% |

Furthermore, Ukrainian responses about how the American public perceives Ukraine (i.e., their care, ignorance, or opinions) also reflect ambivalence, with these three metrics hovering around a mean of 3.6 on 7-point semantic differential scales (Table 9). Perceptions about the United States' government leaned more towards a positive impression of their generosity, understanding, clarity of policy, and a genuine desire to help, but not overwhelmingly so, hovering just above 4 on 7-point scales (Table 10). The government is therefore viewed as a bit more informed and involved, but Ukrainians did not appear to sense particularly strong positions about Ukraine from either. It is worth noting that the trip to Ukraine in 2015 was in part intended to investigate in-person nation branding efforts engaged in for public diplomacy, but the lack of such initiatives at the time made this impossible.

Where respondents do report a clear sense of valence on the part of the American public and government, however, is with respect to mistrust of Russia. The fact that Ukrainians perceived both the American public and government as mistrustful of Russia (Tables 9 and 10, "Trust ↔ do not trust Russia") allows for a Ukrainian-American connection to be established, based on a shared sentiment with the respondents themselves. Ambivalence about whether to learn more about American views notwithstanding, the narrative of a common enemy finds purchase between Ukraine and the United States from the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2014-15.

**Table 9.** Perceptions of US People's Understanding of Ukraine

| PERCEPTIONS OF US PEOPLE'S UNDERSTANDING OF UKRAINE | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The US People… | N | Mean | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| …Don't care about ↔ Care a great deal | 63 | 3.37 | 11.1% | 22.2% | 12.7% | 36.5% | 9.5% | 6.3% | 1.6% |
| …Are ignorant ↔ Are informed about Ukraine | 63 | 3.65 | 6.3% | 17.5% | 23.8% | 23.8% | 19.0% | 4.8% | 4.8% |
| …Don't have ↔ Do have opinions and beliefs about Ukraine that I could identify | 62 | 3.60 | 8.1% | 21.0% | 16.1% | 27.4% | 17.7% | 4.8% | 4.8% |
| …Trust ↔ do not trust Russia | 62 | 5.31 | 0.0% | 1.6% | 4.8% | 22.6% | 19.4% | 35.5% | 16.1% |

**Table 10.** Perceptions of US Government's Understanding of Ukraine

| PERCEPTIONS OF US GOVERNMENT'S UNDERSTANDING OF UKRAINE | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Government of the United States… | N | Mean | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| *…Has done nothing* ⮂ *Has been generous* | 65 | 4.17 | 6.2% | 10.8% | 15.4% | 47.7% | 7.7% | 6.2% | 6.2% |
| *…Doesn't understand* ⮂ *Understands the situation in Ukraine* | 65 | 4.31 | 6.2% | 7.7% | 16.9% | 29.2% | 21.5% | 16.9% | 1.5% |
| *…Does not make clear* ⮂ *Makes clear to Ukrainians their views and policies about Ukraine* | 65 | 4.38 | 4.6% | 9.2% | 7.7% | 26.2% | 29.2% | 20.0% | 3.1% |
| *…Does things for Ukraine to make themselves look good* ⮂ *because they want to help* | 65 | 4.09 | 1.5% | 16.9% | 21.5% | 29.2% | 16.9% | 7.7% | 6.2% |
| *…Trusts* ⮂ *Does not trust Russia* | 65 | 5.43 | 0% | 3.1% | 3.1% | 24.6% | 12.3% | 30.8% | 26.2% |

## 11. Discussion

Russia's aggressive and blatant escalation of the war against Ukraine in 2022 shocked the world, and almost immediately, the ferocity and determination of Ukraine's response did as well. What was speculated in Western media to be an invasion that would depose Ukrainian President Zelensky within 48 hours continues over a year later, with Russia having sunk enormous economic, military, and political capital into what appears to be a floundering operation.

### 11.1. Exploiting and Evolving the Shared Enemy Narrative

Ukrainian defensive efforts across state, military, and civilian sectors deserve principal credit for the country's ongoing success in resistance. War is, after all, fought first and foremost by those on the frontlines. However, a critical component of that effort was and continues to be image-work and outreach conducted by both the state and civil society in support of those battles. War takes resources. The ability to procure support in the form of food, clothing, armour, and weapons gathered from

international actors (both state and non-state) was a fundamental contribution of effective communication strategy.

To also battle an intentional, organized disinformation machine is another front, one that requires resources as well. While this study's findings show Ukrainians in 2015 saw value in engaging on this front, they also expose a disconnect in which they wanted their government to promote a positive image of their country to English speakers but were not as enthusiastic about them using resources to clarify what Americans think and know about Ukraine. This dichotomy could represent inexperience with managing the public image of their nation—a lack of awareness of the need to understand one's target audience for effective diplomatic messaging. It could alternately (or additionally) be reluctance based on pride, reflecting that the respondents have little taste for 'trading one master for another' by overemphasizing American perceptions in their nation's trajectory. Certainly, it is at least in part a function of pragmatics: in 2015, effectively fighting on the physical front did not leave resources for fighting on the virtual one.

Regardless of its root cause, this approach to public diplomacy is one aspect of the Ukraine response that had to evolve between 2015 and 2022. Success on both fronts of the hybrid war in 2022 have been in no small part due to the online communicative efforts of Ukrainians and pro-Ukrainian allies. As we argue, the groundwork for wielding the digital information sphere as a critical component of the war effort in 2022 was evident back in 2015. But while the foundations were present for a common enemy, critical to Ukraine's digital resistance was being able to brand themselves better to Western allies, taking a page from their president's mastery of social media as a space to challenge Russian narratives about Ukraine. This type of place branding was critical to constructing a network of international allies: imagery of the sunflower, e-commerce efforts like Saint Javelin, and pithy and powerful expressions of defiance ("Russian warship, go f*ck yourself") pushed the Ukrainian resistance and the country as a brand.

The fact that so many of these emerged through co-creation of formal and informal actors likely contributed to their success in cementing Ukraine's identity in the eyes of the world. It's not possible to know what exactly Ukrainian citizens had in mind in 2015 when they recorded their response to the survey item about "actively learning what the American people think and know about Ukraine," but if it was traditional, formal market research, things move too quickly and cost too much for this now, just as they did in 2015. How public diplomacy has evolved, instead, is engagement with and collaboration with target audiences as an artifact of the networked digital world that exists today, where a phrase uttered by a grandmother on one continent can be recorded and shared around the globe, taking on new life and meaning in the process. Ukraine has been highly effective at recognizing and pursuing such possibilities.

Indeed, it was a full society effort to exploit the window of having a shared enemy that necessitated this marketing effort that we theorize sought to overcome the perception of ambivalence with regards to key Western actors, namely the United States. To his credit, President Zelensky mobilized his marketing expertise to exploit this window and craft the Ukrainian resistance as a brand, casting the Russian spectre as a threat not just to his nation but to the entire world (Simon Shuster, 2022). In doing so, he produced a network of alliances with greater resources than the relatively meager holdings of Ukraine at the time (drained by ongoing confrontations with Russia over the past seven years). It became less important that states and their people had a sophisticated notion of Ukraine and more so that in this moment a common enemy could bind them to a common cause.

## 12.  Civil Society Wielding the Digital Information Space as a Weapon

This engagement with the international world via digital media channels and social media was of course not confined to the state, as Ukraine's civilians took to online communication means to conduct their own outreach. Pre-established sense of responsibility for the self-determination of a nation, likely and ironically stemming from the perceptions of a state they cannot rely on, enables the sense of capability: they can play an active role in their nation's survivability. Awareness of the importance of meeting threats in the digital information world identifies an arena of contestation and confrontation increasingly vital to a full-scale defensive war effort. Widespread digital literacy enables those actors to move comfortably and with knowledge of their own capacities in this arena of contestation. Widespread feelings of self-determination and a sense for where a fight needs to be held and how to wage it maximize broad participation, which Stephan and Chenoweth (2012) identify as a critical aspect of social and civil resistance movement success.

Ukrainian civil society and a network of pro-Ukrainian actors throughout the world were well-prepared to wield digital communication channels and digital information as a sword and shield in response to Russia's 2022 escalation of the war against Ukraine. A variety of measures from 2015, at the onset of this war, tell a story that connects social, cultural, and personal conditions, perceptions, and behaviours that scaffolded Ukraine's efficacy in resistance at the civil society level.

### Conclusions

Using survey data collected in 2015, we set out to answer three research questions about the socio-cultural-political conditions of Ukraine with the benefit of a retrospective lens. This lens allowed us to tie together these conditions into a cohesive narrative with two angles: first, that the foundations for an effective resistance carried largely by grassroots efforts in digital information spaces were laid in the form of

widespread information literacy, a sense of volunteerism motivated by common distrust in the government, and a relationship with digital technology that portended its identification as a space of resistance and alliance buildings; and second, that the crucial step in bringing these factors to bear as a force of resistance was the communication and marketing of Ukraine and its defence to a network of international allies. Making this step has enabled Ukraine to foster and develop a networked approach to resource acquisition to fuel its ongoing resistance to Russia's invasion and occupation, the foundations of which we argue were present but in need of the growth of an outward view to be truly effective in this time of war and crisis.

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