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THE BATTLE OF ILOVAISK IN UKRAINIAN DIGITAL POLITICAL DISCOURSE

In the digital times, texts about a war may be written with some new techniques. The evidences of locals, posts of volunteers, experts may be used more often, thus the public dialogue may be more diverse and balanced. Meanwhile, free discussion about the war in the digital times is can be a problem. So it is important to understand, how the new possibilities are used to shape the discourse, and how the process of public discussion is generated. Battle of Ilovaisk — the turning point of the war in Donbas (Ukraine) — was chosen for this research. The materials of two Ukrainian leading news sites (Ukrainskaya Pravda and Livyi Bereh) were content analyzed for three months (August — October 2014). Reprints were predominantly used as a way of news gathering (Facebook accounts were cited in 62% of cases) in the digital discourse about the battle. The average number of positions in a publication is 1,4 (a typical text contained only one mention of a political subject). Some new non-official participants were included to the public discussion (like Semenchenko, battalion Donbas commander, or, Tymchuk, an expert), but other sources, which could be newsworthy as well, were rarely mentioned. Free and opened public discussion is a crucial thing for the democracy during the war and conflicts, however, the illusion of online media as forum of ideas, accessible for everyone is formed in the discourse. And having in mind an increasing number of people who prefer to get news online, we should raise a question about the future of the democracy in the reality of fast, rarely checked and incomplete information.
Key words: digital political discourse, Ukraine, war journalism, online journalism, Donbas war.

Introduction

Battle of Ilovaisk was the turning point in the war in Donbas (Ukraine). On the 18th of August the battalions «Donbas» and «Dnipro-1» occupied the larger part of the town. However, Ukrainian soldiers couldn't take control of the whole town and later asked for the reinforcement. On the 24th of August (Ukrainian Independence Day) Oleksandr Zakharchenko, a separatist leader, announced the offence operation. Russian troops invaded Ukrainian territories, and in Ilovaisk Russian soldiers and the pro-Russian separatists

surrounded Ukrainian battalions. On the 26th of August negotiations between the ATO commander and Russian general staff were held. On the 28th of August Russian president Putin proposed to organize «the green corridor» for the Ukrainian troops. On the 29th of August «the green corridor» was heavily shelled by the pro-Russian forces. Only some of the Ukrainian soldiers managed to break through the encirclement. According to Ukrainian prosecutor general's office data, the casualities of Ukrainian forces in the battle were 366 killed, 450 wounded, 300 warriors were captured, and 84 are considered missing (Ukrinform, 2017). After the Ilovaisk Ukrainian military regrouped into a defensive position and Minsk agreements-1 were signed.

Ukrainian journalists as well as Ukrainian society were not ready for the war. Ukrainian mass media didn't have enough special war reporters. It was also unclear how to write about Donbas in the situation of information war. Several approaches existed in Ukrainian political discourse. For example, Russia denied the fact of invasion, despite multiply evidences, which was presented by Ukraine, NATO, international community and etc. It should also be mentioned that Ukrainian journalism in 2014 and today has a variety of problems, which are influence its independence and quality. Poor financing, non-transparent system of media ownership are among them. However, Ukraine does have independent mass-media predominantly on the Internet. And new media instruments and especially social networks had a leading role during the Euromaidan, which was the trigger-event for the fateful changes in the Ukrainian modern history (the president Yanukovych escape to Russia, Crimean annexation, the war in Donbas, the pro-European vector in the foreign policy, reforms in the different spheres etc.).

During Euromaidan and afterwards, in Ukraine social networks were predominantly used by the opinion leaders to spread relevant information within our society. Ukrainian people started communicate with Minister of Defence through FB, Donbas Battalion commander asked the Minister for the reinforcement trough FB and so forth. After the Ilovaisk tragedy, Minister of Defence blamed FB-users for the defeat. Ukrainian mass-media in the situation acted basically as re-translators of the social networks discussion. So, the coverage of the battle can be an important case for the analysis of democratic processes within digital political discourse, as well as interrelations of new media and traditional media in the coverage of war.

War, the political discourse and the democracy

Qualitative and independent information in the times of war is extremely important (Aday, Livingston, Hebert, 2005), whereas international practice gives us examples of several limitations and challenges «to the values and the professional practices of the press» (Narasimhan, 2005). For instance, war reporter Knightley, speaking about the Vietnam war, distinguishes several typical features of information about a war: «identification with one or the home side of the conflict; military triumphalist language; an action-oriented focus; a superficial narrative with little context, background or historical perspective» (Lee, S. T., Maslog C. C., Kim, H. K., 2006).

However, some recent changes in the political communication and shaping the political discourse should be taken into account as well. In the «hybrid» media system (Chadwick, 2013) the balance between traditional and new media has been breaking, and direct channels of communication (social networks, messengers) are used more often to «shape political discourse». Mass media in such a reality generate news more rarely, just using posts of popular politicians as a news occasion and reprinting them. However, voices of common people remain unheard, even in highly digital environment, where diverse voices of all the societies are available. In A Case Study on the Sewol Ferry Disaster Kim and Lee argue, that news journalists: rely on the officials citizens and victims are more used as news sources in a limited format. This is significant because it means that news creates a public sphere that mostly serves the officials, not citizens or the victims (2017, p. 479). This diversity is important to challenge «information hegemony» (James Lull), where government and big business have a constant attention from mass media, whereas alternative sources used rarely. As a result a society gets «a limited information flow» (Kim, Lee, 2017, p. 478–479) and «News sources have the power to transfer information to viewers who then see the world through the sources' eyes» (Kim, Lee, 2017, p. 478–479).

Jeremy Iggers said that new technologies has been changing newsrooms' routine since the end of 20 century: and nowadays journalists usually don't have a lot of time to work at the scene and check information, use press-releases and reprints. The number of journalists at the editorial offices declines, whereas the norms of texts, which should be produced per day, increases (Iggers, 1999). The interconnection between cost-cutting, digitalization and quality on journalistic texts was set: journalists give preference to political sources, recycle press-releases and other texts. Thus, according to the research «the democratic potential of Web 2.0 seem exaggerated» (Van Leuven, Bergles, 2013, p. 20).

Thus, in digital reality with «weak» mass media and «crisis of journalism» elite sources still prevail in the political discourse. Dealing some financial, organizational and other obstacles, journalists sometimes violate professional standards, ignoring balance (including only one side of a conflict, based on an elite source), accuracy (not checking information because lack of time and resources to get on the scene), etc.

And nowadays in war journalism we have the same problems. These problems may be more severe because of some specifics of this type of reporting. For instance, dealing with war correspondence, journalists have less of time for their own investigations and «simply follow events» (Aday, Livingston & Hebert, 2005), the coverage of events may be episodic (Aday, Livingston & Hebert, 2005). Thus, the same problem with professional standards emerges: they can't provide some important details and evidences to report about the whole picture, because of danger, lack of information. Of course, the same preference to official sources (McGoldrick, A., 2006) or elite sources (politicians and high ranked military) is provided in the discourse, while soldiers and civilians are ignored (Lee, S. T., Maslog C. C., Kim, H. K., 2006). Thus,

audiences often get a kind of distorted reality. For instance, during the Iraq war the balance between pro-war and anti-war positions during the Iraq war wasn't kept, thus «the media's performance did not live up to the democratic standards most journalists hold themselves to» (Danny Hayes, Matt Guardino, 2010, p. 86). The border between patriotism and objectivity becomes fragile, and «a national ethos» is widely exploited, despite globalization and international scope of the public nowadays (Narasimhan, 2005).

The influence of governments should also be taken into account: there are a lot of examples of special actions, which were held in order to limit information about a war (Hoskins, A., O'Loughlin, B., 2015). Katz and Liebes (2007) write about a practice, when during the Gulf War I journalists «were kept away from the fighting, forced to report from General Schwarzkopf's regular briefings» (p. 159). Michael Griffin (2010) says that the military monitored journalists articles, the texts also were reviewed by a military official before being published (p. 33). Self-censorship is also may be a case (Nygren et al., 2018). Sometimes such called «embedding of journalists» is an only option to get information on the scene. This method have been exploited since the Gulf War II, and there reporters were not able to choose events for coverage: journalists were free to report what they could see from a front-line tank or helicopter, and, inside, to experience the morale of being a member of the crew (Griffin, 2010). Other forms of government and military officials influence are «sequestering (Grenada and Panama), the use of pools (Gulf War), deception (Gulf War), escorts (Gulf War), «televised spectacles» (Somalia), news blackout (Haiti), limited embedding with Army units (Bosnia), or gag orders (Kosovo)» (Cortell, Eisinger, Althaus, 2009, p. 660); equipment confiscation, «changing of the stuff» at some mass media and journalism centers closure (Crimea) (Galeotti, 2015, p. 75).

And, of course, the «environment of hybrid war» (Pysmenskyy, 2017, p. 155), manipulations, which emerge form «decentralized sources» (Schmidt, 2014, p. 73) should be taken into account.

Thus, in digital times there is still a strong need for war correspondents who will serve as public's «eyes and ears on the battlefield and in the halls of policymakers» (Aday, Livingston & Hebert, 2005), however, we should take into account several limitations of war coverage. War — is usually a complex topic, and several actors can try to influence the image of war in the discourse. Meanwhile, new technologies can help journalists to solve some problems.

In the discourse, local bloggers, citizen journalists (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013) may be included and, as a result, coverage from the zones, where reporters can't be present may be added (see the Guardian and Baghdad blogger Salam Pax case). Information and data can be transmitted instantly from the battlefield (Cortell, Eisinger, & Althaus, 2009, p. 660), mobile apps may be implemented (Alper, 2014). so in some cases censorship and pressure may be omitted. According to Richard Pendry, nowadays in Ukrainian case «more news sources are... available to professional reporters» (Pendry, 2017). There are also citizen journalists, who can challenge traditional journalists' practice (for the Donbas war Bellingcat can be an example).

Thus, using the case of Ilovaisk battle coverage by Ukrainian online news media, we will be able to discover the peculiarities of political discourse forming in the digital times.

Let's set the research questions:

• What political subjects (sources) are used in the texts about battle of Ilovaisk? Are they diverse or represent only «elites» (politicians, their representatives, high-ranked officials)?

• How many political subjects (sources) are used per a news item? Is there any difference in sources selection during the battle's «hot» phase?

• What ways of news gathering are exploited? Is there a special journalist on the scene?

Two Ukrainian news sites: Livyj Bereh and Ukrains'ka Pravda were chosen for the research. The sites are independent and publish predominantly hard news in 2014. Both sites got high marks for their professional standards. Livyj Bereh — is the project of Gorshenin Institute, which provides research in political, economic and social spheres. It isn't connected with any Ukrainian politician, businessman or oligarch. The site was founded in 2009. Ukrains'ka Pravda was founded in 2000 by famous Ukrainian journalist Heorhij Gongadze.

The period of the research is 18th of August (the day of Ilovaisk invasion by the Ukrainian battalions) — 18th of October 2014. All texts (news, interviews, features) about the battle were collected and analyzed.

At first political subjects/nes sources were discovered: the number of sources in each text, the origin of the source (official, military, journalist etc.) and the way of gathering information (correspondent at the scene, reprint, briefing etc.). After that, links in every text were analyzed: internet news are produced with the high speed, so some professional standards (balance, completeness) can be reached after the publication with the help of hyperlinks.

Battle of Ilovaisk coverage (Livyj Bereh and Ukrains'ka Pravda)

According to the professional journalistic standards, journalists should use a variety of sources (in the case of the war — not only the government or military officials, but soldiers, locals, experts as well). Some information about the current military operation can be closed for some time, but after the operation, journalists must act like watchdogs of the democracy and reflect the full picture. And, of course, the background is crucial: online journalists can connect the current event with past ones. Let's start with the quantity of sources.

Table 1

The number of political subjects (sources) in the texts

	1	2	3	4 and more	total
UP	69	24	13	7	113
LB	58	36	13	9	116

Table compiled by the author.

More than the half of the texts has only one source, however, according to the theory of journalism, a balanced journalistic text should contain three and more positions (pro, contra and neutral). Of course, such events as war can be unpredictable and develop at a fast pace, but journalists should add background after the «hot phase is over».

So let's devide our data into two phases: the hot one (the first one between the beginning of the invasion and the shelling of the «green corridor» 18–29 of August; and the second one between 30th of August and 18 of October).

Table 2

The number of political subjects (sourses)in the texts during the two phases

	date	1	2	3	4 and more
UP	18–29 of August	36	13	7	2
	30 August–18 October	33	11	6	5
LB	18–29 of August	28	23	7	5
	30 August–18 October	30	13	6	4

Table compiled by the author.

Thus, there is no increase in the number of texts with two and more sources in the second phase. On *Livyj Bereh,* we can even see a decline in the number of texts with two positions compared with the first «hot» phase.

Next, the ways of gathering information were discovered.

Table 3

The ways of gathering information

	UP	LB
Reporter at the scene	7	36
Reprints, other mass media	38	25
Social networks	72	59
Press releases	34	25
Not identified	5	4

Table compiled by the author.

Citations from social networks (predominantly FB) were the most popular on the both sites. And the text about the war could contain the FB quote as the only source. Taking into account the specifics of FB posts, one can question the quality of such a text: fact checking is not obligatory for FB writing, a post is usually created with emotions and high expression and, of course, it is usually not balanced, neutral, accurate, reliable etc. On the other hand, we should pay attention to the specifics of modern news industry. Social networks are much faster and contain first-hand information. So these factors are more significant for news media professionals, than the professional standards.

'Reporter at the scene' has the second position on Livyj Bereh, but Ukrainskaya Pravda used its' own reporters quite rarely. Of course, for a mass media having a war reporter can be problematic: this correspondent must be trained.

And in August 2014 Ilovaisk wasn't the only hot spot in Donbas. Although a mass media can use a reporter for interviews and reports not only in a war zone. The reporter is able to check information from official sources, to seek balance, to add context. Unfortunately as a rule Ukrainian mass media give preference to other forms of gathering news.

Usually reprints from other mass media and press releases are the leading forms for getting information. So journalists don't see an event with their own eyes and use evidences provided by others.

Now, let's have a look at the origin of the political subjects, used in the texts. At first we differentiated official sources, volunteer battalions, journalists and experts, activists and common people (soldiers, their relatives, witnesses). Here we have an explicit disbalance:

Table 4

The types of political subjects

	UP	LB
Official sources	89	98
Battalions	43	51
Mass media and experts	34	36
Activists, common people	17	30
Other	6	1

Table compiled by the author.

The official political actors and institutions, like Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Internal Affairs, National security and defense council of Ukraine etc., are the leading ones. Thus, the officials have the possibility to explain their positions and to repeat the key messages in the discourse. Ukrainian government, parliament and the president are presented in social networks and journalists don't have any problem collecting information. Government's and local authorities' press services are also active on the internet. So social networks and the internet don't reduce, but on the contrary increase the presence of the official sources in the discourse.

However, the battalions' presence in the journalistic texts can be also explained by FB being popular among Ukrainian journalists. Meanwhile, here we also can see a misbalance. One battalion has more mentions, than others. Some battalions were not cited at all.

Table 5

The battalions' mentions

	UP	LB
Battalion Donbas	9	14
Commander of Donbas Battalion Semenchenko	32	32
Battalion Shakhtars'k	1	2
Battalion Dnipro 1	0	2
Commander of Dnipro 1 Battalion Bereza	1	1
Total	43	51

Table compiled by the author.

Commander of Donbas Battalion was a key speaker, having the biggest number of mentions in comparison to other opinion leaders (no one — even the president or ministers of defense / internal affairs — was cited so much). We can explain this attention to Semenchenko and Donbas battalion by their active presence on FB. Semenchenko refreshed his posts for several times every day, he reported about fighting, criticized military officials, asked for reinforcement, called society for a strike. He was popular among the FB public, he was able to attract everyone's attention, so journalists cited his expressive posts to make their own materials clickable. Thus, Semenchenko can be perceived as an alternative voice, although journalists didn't seek for his voice, they just retranslated his messages and didn't look for anyone else.

One more example of such a popular person on FB is an expert Dmytro Tymchuk, however, the number of his mentions is much more lower.

Table 6

The most popular political actors

	UP	LB
Semenchenko	32	32
Poroshenko	6	10
Tymchuk	10	3
Lysenko	18	2
Avakov	6	9
Herashenko	4	9
Heletei	8	6

Table compiled by the author.

As we see, the Ukrainian news sites demonstrate a high reliance on FB posts, meanwhile this is not lead to the increase of alternative voices.

Conclusions and discussion

Generally, any traditional practices of political discourse shaping aren't challenged in the digital times. In the «forum of ideas», which should be presented in the political discourse, especially during war or other conflicts, there is still a lack of diversity.

As a rule, journalists use one source of information to report about the battle. And some peculiarities of war reporting are influence this: big amount of information and elite sources capability to generate messages via social networks. These posts' recycling was more convenient for digital reality of Ukrainian newsrooms, that direct reporting from the scene. However, there is a difference between the two media outlets. During the «hot phase» Livyj Bereh published texts with two sources more often. However, in the next phase, where free and diverse discussion must be crucial for adequate social opinion forming, texts with the only source prevailed.

This may be explained by the ways of news gathering usage: social networks' posts reprinting, other mass media and press-releases recycling prevailed. Thus, here we can see the transformation of the mass media techniques, were direct messages about the war or the conflict aren't the case

anymore. For instance, only one news outlet had the reporter on the scene (not the classical journalist, but universal photo-reporter, who additionally posted blogs and added commentaries of locals and soldiers).

And. of course such techniques influences political subjects (sources) selection. Officials dominated during the coverage, which is typical for war reporting and for the modern digital political discourse as well. However, for Livyj Bereh, which had the reporter on the scene, common people and activists were used nearly two times more often, than in Ukrainskaya Pravda. This is one more evidence for the significance of this way of reporting for political discourse, which may be more diverse and balanced.

It's also possible to see, that in digital environment, were potentially every person with smartphone may be an information source, the process of news sources and political actors selection remains unequal. Journalists not use sources, which are more close to the event and may speak about this without the professional standards violation. Some opinion leaders can reach mass media agenda, but journalists don't look for them specially. In order to be included in the social dialogue, they must promote themselves through the web, using traditional mass media strategies (conflict, intrigue, emotions etc.). Mass media just follow popular personalities (Semenchenko, but not other battalion commanders, Tymchuk, but not other experts). So there is still a lack of diversity, but it could be solved by the opinion leaders themselves. Public recognition of a person is crucial for online media, because an internet-text must be clickable.

In the digital political discourse, for online news media velocity and a tendency to follow social networks agenda and statements of officials are both more important, as balance and completeness. Electronic mass media try to catch all the significant and interesting newsbreaks and in a majority of cases don't try to achieve the balance with time.

The practice of recycling information has been becoming more common. Electronic media try to publish as many news items as possible, that's why the difference between the direct evidence and bright post, written far away from the battle scene isn't matter anymore.

Free and opened public discussion is a crucial thing for the democracy, however, the internet media create an illusion of forum of ideas, accessible for everyone. And, having in mind an increasing number of people who prefer to get the news online, we should raise a question about the future of the democracy in the reality of fast, rarely checked and incomplete information.

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БИТВА ЗА ІЛОВАЙСЬК В УКРАЇНСЬКОМУ ЦИФРОВОМУ ПОЛІТИЧНОМУ ДИСКУРСІ

Резюме

У цифрові часи тексти про війну можуть бути написані із урахуванням нових можливостей. Свідчення місцевих жителів, дописи волонтерів та експертів можуть використовуватися набагато частіше, тож суспільний діалог може стати більш різноманітним та збалансованим. Тим не менше, вільне обговорення війни в цифрові часи може мати й проблеми. Тож важливо зрозуміти, як нові цифрові можливості використовуються для того, щоб формувати дискурс, і як відбувається процес суспільного діалогу. Битва за Іловайськ — поворотна точка у війні на Донбасі (Україна) — була обрана для цього дослідження. Використовувалися матеріали двох українських провідних новинних сайтів («Українська правда» та «Лівий берег»), контент-аналіз здійснювався упрождовж трьох місяців (серпень–жовтень 2014). Передруки як спосіб збору інформації переважали у цифровому дискурсі про війну (дописи із Фейсбуку цитувалися у 62 % випадків). Середня кількість цитованих точок зору в публікації — 1,4 (типовий текст містив згадку тільки про одного політичного суб'єкта). Деякі неофіційні джерела були включені у процес суспільного діалогу (як Семенченко, командир батальйону «Донбас», або Тимчук, експерт), але інші джерела, які могли б бути важливими для цього ж діалогу, згадувалися вкрай рідко. Також рідко використовується ексклюзивна інформація — від кореспондентів на місці події. Медіа надають перевагу клікабельним дописам, відтак перевірка інформації відходить на другий план. Вільне і відкрите публічне обговорення є дуже важливим для демократії під час війни чи конфліктів, тим не менше, ілюзія мережевого медіа як форуму для ідей, доступного для кожного, формується у дискурсі. Якщо зважати на зростання аудиторії, що надає перевагу мережевим новинам, варто поставити питання про майбутнє демократії у реальності, що формується за рахунок інформації, яка поступає швидко, рідко перевіряється і, як правило, є неповною.

Ключові слова: цифровий політичний дискурс, Україна, воєнна журналістика, мережева журналістика, війна на Донбасі.

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БИТВА ЗА ИЛОВАЙСК В УКРАИНСКОМ ЦИФРОВОМ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОМ ДИСКУРСЕ

Резюме

Во времена цифровых технологий тексты о войне могут быть написаны с учетом новых возможностей. Свидетельства местных жителей, посты волонтеров и экспертов могут использоваться намного чаще, а общественный диалог может стать более разнообразным и сбалансированным. Тем не менее, свободное обсуждение войны в цифровой реальности может иметь и проблемы. Поэтому важно понять, как цифровые возможости используются для того, чтобы формировать дискурс и как происходит процесс общественного диалога. Битва за Иловайск — поворотная точка в войне на Донбассе (Украина) — была выбрана для этого исследования. Использовались материалы двух украинских ведущих новостных сайтов («Украинская правда» и «Левый берег»). Контент-анализ проводился на протяжении трех месяцев (август–октябрь 2014). Перепечатки как способ сбора информации преобладали в цифровом дискурсе о войне (посты из Фейсбука цитировались в 62 % случаев). Среднее количество цитируемых точек зрения в публикации — 1,4 (типичный текст содержал упоминание об одном политическом субъекте). Некоторые неофициальные источники были включены в процесс общественного диалога (как Семенченко, командир батальйона «Донбасс», или Тимчук, эксперт), но другие источники, которые могли бы быть важными для этого же диалога, упоминались крайне редко. Также редко использовалась эксклюзивная информация — от корреспондентов на месте событий. Медиа отдавали предпочтение кликабельным текстам, а проверка информации уходила на второй план. Свободное и открытое публичное обсуждение является очень важным для демократии во время войны или конфликтов, тем не менее, иллюзия сетевого медиа как форума для идей, доступного каждому, формируется в дискурсе. Если принять во внимание рост адуитории, которая отдает предпочтение сетевым новостям, необходимо поставить вопрос о будущем демократии в реальности, которая формируется за счет информации, поступающей быстро, редко проверяемой и, как правило, неполной.

Ключевые слова: цифровой политический дискурс, Украина, военная журналистика, сетевая журналистика, война на Донбассе.