

Social media logic and emotional mobilization: A study of Zelensky's twitter communication during 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict

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Abstract

Modern wartime propaganda is increasingly influenced by social media. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has opened up a cyberwar of discursive gaming beyond the military front. The president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, has used Twitter as a crucial tool for communicating with the world. This choreographed propaganda mechanism has helped foster a conducive atmosphere for gaining international support, and at the same time makes Zelensky's Twitter communication practice a classic case for studying the dynamic relationship between social media and emotional mobilization. Therefore, this paper cuts through the theoretical lens of mediatization and analyzes the tweets posted by Zelensky throughout 2022 using a combination of content analysis and textual analysis. It is found that (1) a narrative of compassion becomes one of Zelensky's key strategies for mobilizing global public emotions. Ukraine in Zelensky's discourse is not a dehumanized "other" without any subjectivity. Instead, Russia's aggression is directly portrayed as a trauma to the flesh and blood for the West. (2) the emotions disclosed in Zelensky's tweets are generally positive. He refuses to immerse himself in the grief of Ukraine's loss, preferring instead to use a rigid tone to unite the population at home, with impassioned words calling for resistance. (3) Zelensky is consciously constructing an ideological alliance that believes deeply in Western values such as liberal democracy and is resisting restrictions on Russia in every way. He continually emphasizes Ukraine's political and cultural identity as a future member of the European Union and presents an international image of solidarity through performative Twitter engagements with world heads of state on Twitter. Despite these findings, this study unexpectedly finds that Zelensky's practice shows more features of mass communication than

that of social media, whose logic is supposed to prompt him to employ stronger emotion when it comes to controlling public opinion. He is a solemn president dedicated to public diplomacy rather than a politician who makes a big deal out of the trivial details of the war. This leads to the conclusion that even in the war scenario of the 2022 crisis, Zelensky's emotional mobilization strategy was actually relatively restrained and conservative.

Keywords

2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Zelensky, Twitter communication, wartime propaganda, emotional mobilization

Extended abstract

Contemporary political communication can no longer ignore the structural condition - the mediatization of society. As Stig Hjarvard (2013: 4) summarizes with the concept of "duality", the media has become an integral part of other institutions' operations while also achieving the degree of self-determination and authority that forces other institutions to submit to their logic.

Modern warfare has become a battlefield where information itself is weaponized (Singer & Brooking, 2018: 19). The 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict is a war that not only relies on military "hard power", but also on strategies to exploit emotional "soft power". Zelensky well understood that it was impossible to fight Russia alone in the face of its military might. Obtaining continuous aid from the international community became an urgent priority of Ukraine government. Therefore, Zelensky used social media as a tool to mobilize the global public and gain support for aid.

Zelensky's personal account, which is at the core of the wartime propaganda, became one of the most important channels for releasing official information and obtaining international aid (Yarchi, 2022). His communication practice has transformed him from a president with the lowest approval rating to a "true leader" who has won global respect.

Great attention has been paid to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict within Chinese academic circles. Many studies on social robots and disinformation have been undertaken, but few of them have shown any academic interest in Zelensky. Although Israeli (Yarchi, 2022) and

Slovak (Nisch, 2023) scholars have conducted research on Zelensky's practice on Twitter, emotional mobilization has not been the focus of their scholarly analysis.

Zelensky's Twitter communication will have a direct impact on the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government and its access to global aid. How does social media, or the interference of mediatization, shape his communication practice? What is the response from the general public? This study will try to provide insights into these questions.

[Reference]

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