CENTRE FOR DEMOCRACY
AND RULE OF LAW

Social media's impact on the Ukrainian news and publishing space

after the full-scale invasion

Condensed report of the CEDEM's research conducted by The Fix

2023

Purpose and approach of this research

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has extended beyond the physical battleground, extending into the realm of information warfare, including on social media platforms. Referred to as the "first TikTok war" by international media, this is the first war in which social media is present at such a scale.

Social media is a critical information source for Ukrainians. A 2023 OPORA survey found that 77.9% rely on social media for their news consumption. Specifically, 71.3% obtain news from Telegram, 66.2% from YouTube, 55% from Facebook, and 29.5% from Instagram[1].

However, access to news related to the full-scale invasion has been limited in various ways – including blurring of sensitive content, limiting the reach of accounts seen as violating rules, and outright censorship[2]. This has impeded Ukrainians' access to critical information in a rapidly changing security environment. Given these circumstances, the significance of effective policy-making and collaboration with the media cannot be overstated.

Effective policy-making and collaboration with the media are paramount. This report takes a retrospective look at the media landscape since the start of the full-scale invasion, aiming to identify platforms' successful strategies and areas of improvement to enhance information accessibility of vulnerable groups.

Disclaimer

This study is a review of various case studies. Further research would benefit from a proactive position of social media companies – both in accounting for the process of transforming their policies and giving access to data on the decisions made.

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[1] https://www.oporaua.org/polit_ad/mediaspozhivannia-ukrayintsiv-druqii-rik-povnomasshtabnoyi-viini-24796

2 For reasons of brevity, the terms "censorship" or "limiting access to information" may be used interchangeably throughout the document. Unless otherwise specified, they should be seen as referring to the full range of measures, including but not limited to reducing reach (i.e., so-called shadow bans), blocking accounts, taking down specific items, blurring content, adding "sensitive" labels, and others

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1. Executive summary

Social media policy has limited Ukrainians' access to information since February 2022

- Social media can be unpredictable for Ukrainian media – despite assurances of lax treatment, there are cases of posts being blurred or deleted, sometimes without explanation (especially on Facebook and Instagram)
- As a result, many outlets engage in self-censorship, preferring not to post problematic content to avoid possible repercussions
- Multiple outlets cited facing an onslaught of reports, resulting in strikes against their page. They believe many reports come from Russian bots
- Some social media actions have resulted – directly and indirectly[3] – in limiting the reach of media, and hence Ukrainians' access to information

Regional media are especially vulnerable – due to their content, location and limited resources

- Regional media from the East of Ukraine (e.g., Vchasno and 6262), are especially vulnerable – being closer to the frontlines, they more frequently post content that can be considered "sensitive"
- Geo-location often wrongly assumes they are in occupied territory. As a result, features like advertising are limited to comply with sanctions
- Smaller media lack resources and bandwidth to deal with strikes or blocks – making them especially likely to self-censor

Media often lack basic information about how to avoid and resolve social media blockages

- Media struggle from a lack of information on how to manage potential social media restrictions – information is often lacking or low-quality
- Most platforms do not have dedicated staff to reach out to (media often try to find unofficial connections, with varying success)
- Response times might be very long (especially for Meta products), further encouraging self-censorship

Social media can improve available information, create more effective comms channels, white-list reliable media and boost local representation

- Platforms can relatively easily improve transparency on guidelines (e.g., via FAQs, examples of "dos" and "don'ts")
- Many media suggested establishing automated support channels (e.g., bot-based helplines) for addressing quick questions. Communication can also be improved with regular calls or trainings, updates on algorithm changes
- Whitelisting reliable media, to speed up issue resolution and create a higher threshold for bot attacks, would help especially smaller, frontline media
- Platforms should increase local representation and ensure their voice is heard when setting policy or resolving disputes

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3 Direct includes removing, blocking and blurring content. Indirect is algorithmically reducing account reach

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2. Research methodology outline

A. Summary of research and data-gathering activities

The methodology for this study includes a combination of the following tools:

1. Open-desk research of publicly available sources (papers, reports, etc.).

2. Structured interviews with media managers, interviews with industry experts, NGOs, think tanks, and social media platform staff to obtain diverse perspectives.

3. Market analysis utilizing tools like Semrush, Social Blade and SimilarWeb to gather quantitative data on website traffic and other relevant metrics.

B. Categorization of media outlets

# of followers by social media account, rounded to nearest thousand (data gathered March-2023)

Category	Outlet	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube	Twitter	Telegram	TikTok	Total*
Large national, multimedia	Hromadske	748K	95K	887K	1,022K	99K	106K	2,957K
	Ukrayinska Pravda	800K	112K	798K	908K	159K	74K	2,851k
	Telebachennya Toronto	205K	124K	816K	65K	116K	33K	1,359K
	Ukrinform	94K	7K	639K	335K	41K	...	1,116K
	Suspilne.media	481K	56K	409K	14K	313K	...	1,273K
	NV.ua	636K	66K	138K	105K	48K	7K	1,000K
	Liga.net	316K	22K	<1K	338K	51K	<1K	728K
	Shotam	369K	171K	15K	48K	5K	89K	697K
Specialized/ niche national media	Ukrainer	263K	197K	323K	56K	...	49K	888K
	The Village Ukraine	155K	213K	2K	14K	14K	28K	426K
	UkraineWorld	126K	8K	6K	284K	...	<1K	425K
	The Ukrainians	82K	83K	26K	8K	1K	...	200K
	texty.org.ua	114K	14K	<1K	18K	...	...	146K
	Hromadske Radio	55K	5K	23K	54K	1K	...	139K
	The Babel	58K	6K	1K	1K	64K	<1K	131K
	Platfor.ma	67K	8K	...	15K	1K	...	91K
Regional media	Krym Realii	348K	38K	356K	75K	16K	...	834K
	Dumskaya.net	152K	47K	31K	7K	92K	430K	760K
	Novyny Donbasa	216K	...	173K	215K	8K	...	612K
	Tvoe Misto	21K	16K	44K	<1K	...	2K	342K
	Nakipelo	57K	8K	43K	6K	7K	14K	137K
	6262.com.ua	42K	29K	4K	2K	3K	...	81K
	OstroV	15K	...	10K	51K	...	...	77K
	Gwara Media	10K	4K	7K	4K	1K	26K	54K
	QIRIM.News	45K	2K	<1K	4K	...	...	52K
	Most	15K	1K	3K	4K	4K	...	28K
	Vchasno	8K	...	<1K	...	10K	...	19K
Content creators	Valeriia Shashenok	...	123K	...	...	...	1,300K	1,423K
	Zupynylosya	96K	26K	439K	3K	...	...	565K
	Geek Journal	29K	23K	341K	44K	13K	...	451K
	Klyatiy Rationalist	21K	11K	287K	21K	3K	<1K	344K
	Oleksandr Aronets	90K	129K	...	70K	16K	...	306K
	Tokar.ua	58K	2K	68K	5K	5K	...	138K
	Yaroslava Kravchenko	17K	73K	...	...	...	...	90K
	Marharyta Rivchachenko	...	29K	...	...	...	...	29K
	Mariia Malevska	...	18K	...	...	...	...	18K
	Jane Bezpala	...	5K	<1K	...	...	13K	19K
Total		5.81M	1.77M	5.89M	3.80M	1.09M	2.17M	20.5M

3. Traffic dynamics during the full-scale invasion

A.   General overview of traffic dynamics (incl. by media type)

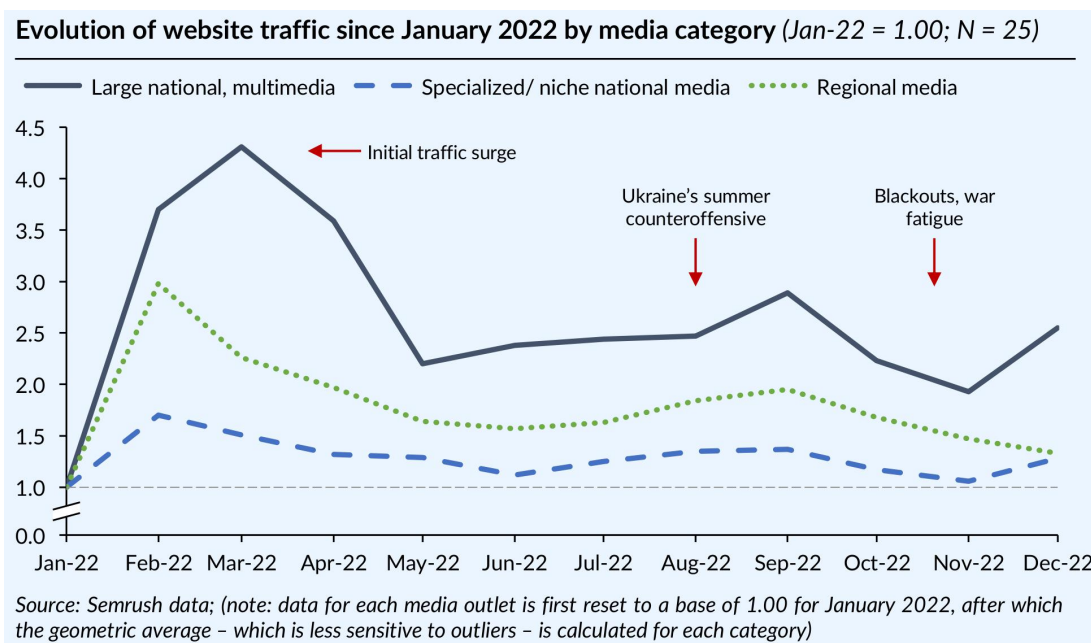During the initial months of the full-scale war, most media outlets experienced a notable rise in both website traffic and social media traffic. News organizations saw a surge in visitors seeking real-time updates and information related to war. However, as time progressed, a subsequent drop in traffic became apparent.

The experience of different types of media, however, was quite diverse (see table

below). Major outlets had the resources to adapt to changing narratives and audience demand for information. Yet many niche and regional outlets struggled due to relocation of operations, staff security issues, more pronounced regional blackouts, etc., leading to reduced content production and lower traffic.

Evolution of website traffic since January 2022 by media category *(Jan-22 = 1.00; N = 25)*

Source: Semrush data; (note: data for each media outlet is first reset to a base of 1.00 for January 2022, after which the geometric average – which is less sensitive to outliers – is calculated for each category)
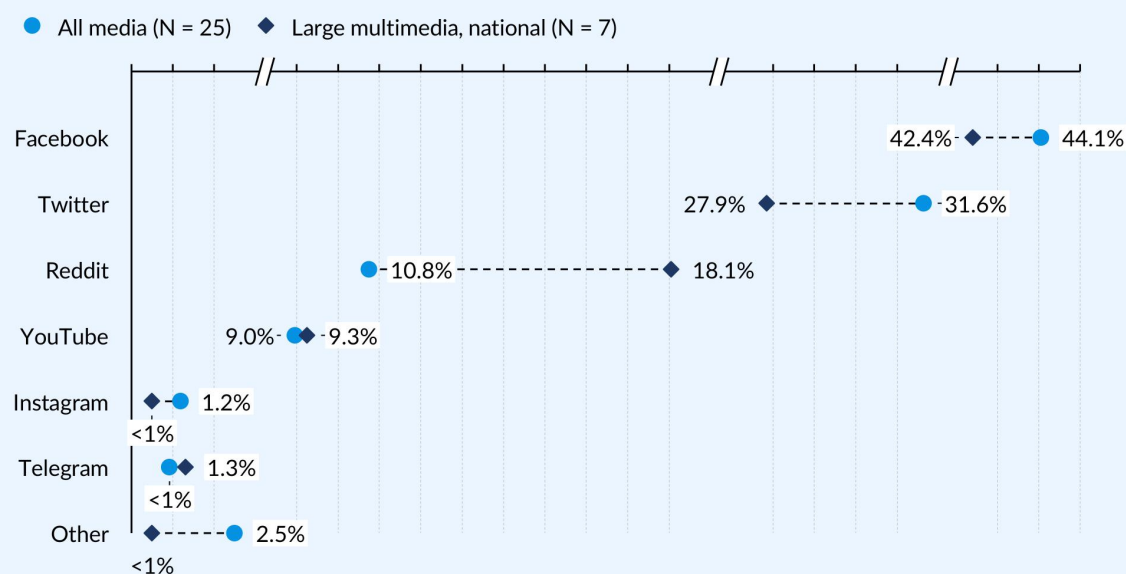
B. Social media following

Social media has played and continues to play a major role both in how Ukrainians consume news and how publishers attract traffic to their websites. Facebook is without doubt the leading platform – it is both the biggest traffic driver among social media (over 44% of traffic, on average, across all social media), and currently has the second-biggest aggregate following across media surveyed (just behind YouTube).

Top social media platforms driving traffic to Ukrainian outlets *(% of social media traffic)*

● All media (N = 25)   ◆ Large multimedia, national (N = 7)

Facebook   42.4% ◆ - - - - ● 44.1%

Twitter   27.9% ◆ - - - - - - - - - ● 31.6%

Reddit   ● 10.8% - - - - - - - - - - - ◆ 18.1%

YouTube   9.0% ● ◆ 9.3%

Instagram   ◆ ● 1.2%
    <1%

Telegram   ● ◆ 1.3%
    <1%

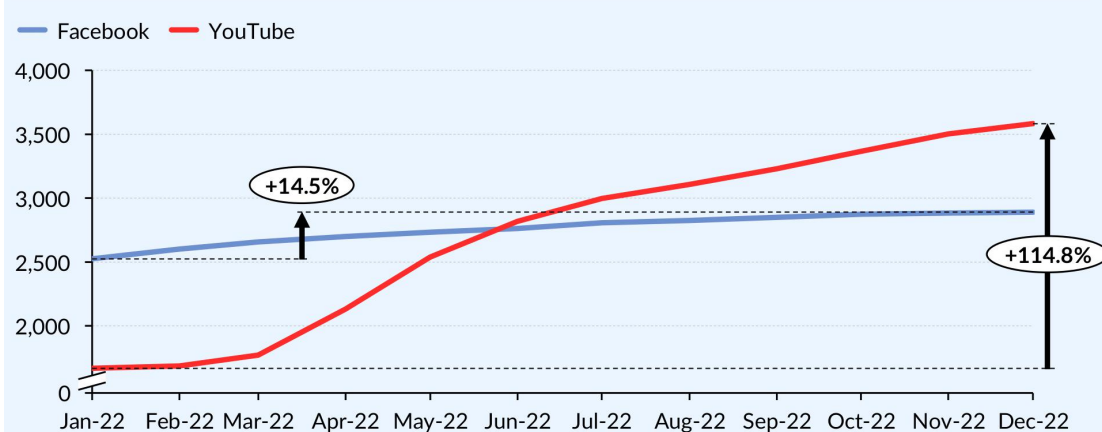Other   ◆ - - - - - ● 2.5%
    <1%

Source: SimilarWeb data as of May 2023; large outlets considered are – Hromadske, Ukrayinska Pravda, Ukrinform, Suspilne, NV, Liga, Shotam); figures may not add to 100% due to rounding

However, Facebook's position is eroding, especially after the full-scale invasion. Faced with limitations on Facebook, Ukrainian publishers – especially larger ones with more marketing resources – pushed to develop alternatives, such as Reddit.

The depth of Facebook's erosion as a news source is also visible from the relative decline in followership vs. YouTube. Indeed, publishers had by far the biggest following on Facebook in January 2022, but while other platforms grew substantially, Facebook essentially stood still – growing merely 14% vs. YouTube at over 114%.

Total number of followers for selected publishers – Facebook vs. YouTube *('000s; N = 12)*

── Facebook   ── YouTube

4,000
3,500
3,000
2,500
2,000
0

+14.5%

+114.8%

Jan-22 Feb-22 Mar-22 Apr-22 May-22 Jun-22 Jul-22 Aug-22 Sep-22 Oct-22 Nov-22 Dec-22

Source: SocialBlade; Note: this includes only media with presence and quality data on both YouTube and Facebook (UP, NV, Hromadske, TV Toronto, Ukrinform, Shotam, Ukrainer, Krym Realii, The Village, UkraineWorld, Tokar, Ostrov)

C. Analysis of traffic dynamics – publisher interviews and observations

Ukrainian media outlets mostly saw similar dynamics on their social media accounts as they did for their websites – an initial surge in activity followed by a more or less notable decline. Those who did not experience a decline (mainly smaller media) had mostly "missed the bump" of increased audience interest.

Most media outlets cited two types of reasons driving their poor performance on social media: audience-based issues and social media-based issues.

Sources of traffic declines identified by Ukrainian publishers *(N = 35)*

# of publishers who said they experienced the following

Social media-based issues	19
Audience-based issues	14
Not applicable	9

Audience-based issues

o News fatigue and selective avoidance
o Blackouts – loss of connectivity
o Loss of audience on occupied territories
o Loss of audience because of blocks of social media in Russia

Social media-based issues

o Unfavorable nature of algorithm
o Account shadowban
o Posts downgrade
o Page downgrade

Source: Deep dive interviews with publishers and content creators (April – June 2023)

While audience-driven factors (news fatigue, poor connectivity, etc.) played a major role in the decline, social media-based challenges also contributed. For instance:

● Algorithms are unfavorable towards war-related content. The Village Ukraine highlighted that when their content focus shifted to war-related topics, which did not align with the Facebook algorithm preferences, they experienced a loss of audience. Hromadske noted that social media growth was generally positive but emphasized that some videos with a massive number of views were not being recommended on YouTube, which hindered audience acquisition.

● Shadow-banning accounts and downgrading of posts and videos directly impact reach decline. For example, Babel stated that they noticed a drop in traffic on Facebook after certain content blocks, which led to the downgrading of their posts.

Liga.net observed low engagement with their posts on Instagram, which, after extended communication with Instagram support, was attributed to post blocks and an unfavorable algorithm towards war-related content.

● Media also struggled with blocks of ad accounts or paid content. Sloviansk media 6262 had their Meta ad account blocked in the first months of the full-scale invasion. As the issue remains unresolved, it hampers their ability to promote their content. Hromadske Radio stated that they encountered blocks on some of their advertised posts about demining activities and safety. It means that some information with real security implications may have been blocked from Ukrainian audiences.

D. Impact of blackouts and connectivity issues

In the late fall of 2022 Ukraine began to experience a series of blackouts caused by Russia's bombing campaign against the nation's energy infrastructure[4].

Media representatives acknowledged that while it is difficult to provide definitive proof, power outages did contribute to their fluctuating website traffic and social media reach (however these would not have meaningfully impacted followership).

Both regional and national organizations reported traffic drops in October-November 2022 when blackouts hit almost all Ukraine. Regional media were affected the most. For example, Gwara and Nakipelo, both from Kharkiv, noted a significant drop in website traffic and on some social media platforms when their hometown was attacked by Russian missiles, resulting in prolonged blackouts.

In order to adapt to the challenges brought about by blackouts, Ukrainian media respectively adjusted their content strategies on social media. ShoTam highlighted that messengers like Telegram were helpful as they allowed for faster uploading in times of limited internet availability. The content itself also underwent changes, with media outlets choosing to minimize the quality of videos and pictures or focusing on posting text-based content. Liga.net explained that readers needed quicker communication that wouldn't consume excessive power and internet resources.

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4 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/25/russias-methodical-attacks-exploit-frailty-ukrainian-power-system/

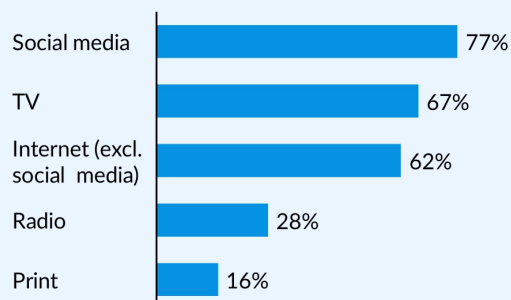## 4. Significance of social media platforms for Ukrainian audiences

A. Social media as primary publishing platform during crisis times

Ukrainians have historically received a large share of their news content via social media, especially Facebook – a trend that only became more pronounced following the full-scale invasion. The 2022 OPORA survey highlights that during the crisis, many Ukrainians turned to fast-moving platforms that could keep up with the pace of socio-political events.
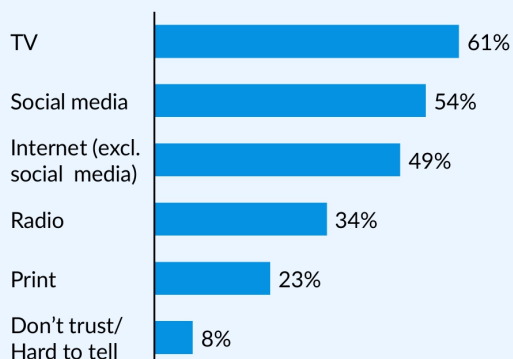
Although TV continues to be the most trusted medium, social media overtook it as a source for news content, with Telegram, YouTube and Facebook as the top three platforms. During this period, Telegram (and to a lesser extent, Viber) became go-to sources for real-time updates on news and critical information, while receiving news through messaging apps offered a more accessible and rapid alternative. However, this may present a quality problem – media representatives highlighted concerns about the spread of unverified information, particularly on platforms like Telegram.

Ukrainians news consumption habits *(% of survey respondents; data gathered in May 2022)*
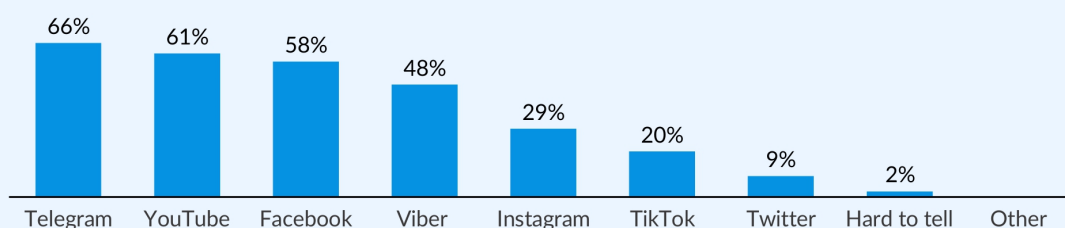
The main sources of information

Social media	77%
TV	67%
Internet (excl. social media)	62%
Radio	28%
Print	16%

Trust in different media sources

TV	61%
Social media	54%
Internet (excl. social media)	49%
Radio	34%
Print	23%
Don't trust/ Hard to tell	8%

The most read social media network

| Telegram	YouTube	Facebook	Viber	Instagram	TikTok	Twitter	Hard to tell	Other
66%	61%	58%	48%	29%	20%	9%	2%	

Source: Opora Research (https://oporaua.org/report/polit_ad/24068-mediaspozhivannia-ukrayintsiv-v-umovakh-povnomasshtabnoyi-viini-opituvannia-opori)

The most popular platforms among Ukrainian media & bloggers *(# of respondents; N=35)*

# of publishers who said X was the most important platform for them (more than 1 answer was accepted)
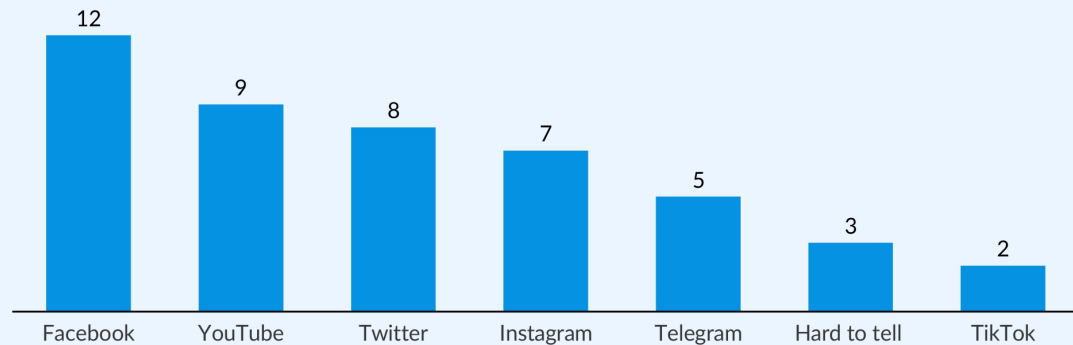
Source: Deep dive interviews with publishers and content creators (April – June 2023)

B.   Social media reactions and policy during full-scale invasion

The Digital Security Lab lawyer and expert Tetiana Avdieieva stated that, overall, social media platforms quickly reacted to the unfolding invasion and are handling the invasion better than previous crises. Lviv Media Forum analyst Zoya Krasovska noted that social media platforms, especially Meta, were eager to work with Ukrainian NGOs, although this was a rather reactive than a proactive policy.

Meta – **some of the steps and initiatives taken in information space:**

● Meta allowed users to lock their Facebook profiles and removed the ability to view information about followers of private profiles on Instagram.

● A Special operations center was established with native speakers of Ukrainian and Russian languages for content moderation and fact-checking.

● Warning labels are added on content rated false by third-party fact-checkers and labels are applied to state-controlled media publishers.

Twitter – some of the steps and initiatives taken in information space:

● Curated Moments, contextualized Trends, search prompts, event pages, and dedicated topic lists help users find reliable updates and information about Ukraine.

● State-affiliated media accounts from certain countries, including Russia, are not recommended or amplified, and links to Russian state-affiliated media are labeled.

- Government accounts of states limiting access to free information and engaged in armed interstate conflict, starting with Russia, are not amplified or recommended.

Google – some of the steps and initiatives taken in information space:

- Some Russian state-funded media channels, such as RT and Sputnik, were blocked.
- Recommendations for Russian state-funded media outlets were significantly limited.
- Thousands of channels and tens of thousands of videos related to the war in Ukraine were removed for violating community guidelines.

4. Problems with social media: cases and trends

Who's the most problematic social media to work with for media managers and bloggers? *(N=35)*

% of respondents who answered the following
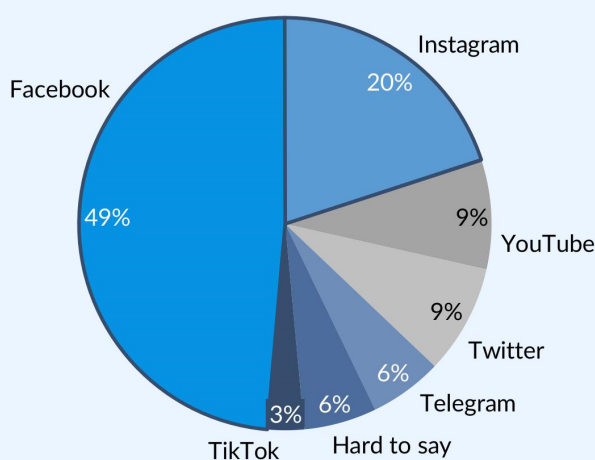
Source: Deep dive interviews with publishers and content creators (April – June 2023)

The majority of the surveyed media outlets encountered various issues with social media platforms, with Facebook being the most challenging to work with. Ukrainian media representatives stated that they had been experiencing problems with Facebook even prior to February 24, 2022.

Back then, changes to recommendation algorithms were the main concern. They prioritized content from friends and family over media outlets in users' news feeds. Nonetheless, limiting access to content became the main concern, ahead of algorithm changes, for Ukrainian media managers after February 2022.

Fellow Meta platform Instagram was seen by managers as the second most challenging. The situation on YouTube was better, although media with YouTube channels tend to be bigger and have more resources to manage potential issues. Still, all these platforms experienced similar problems, including various forms of censorship and weak communications.
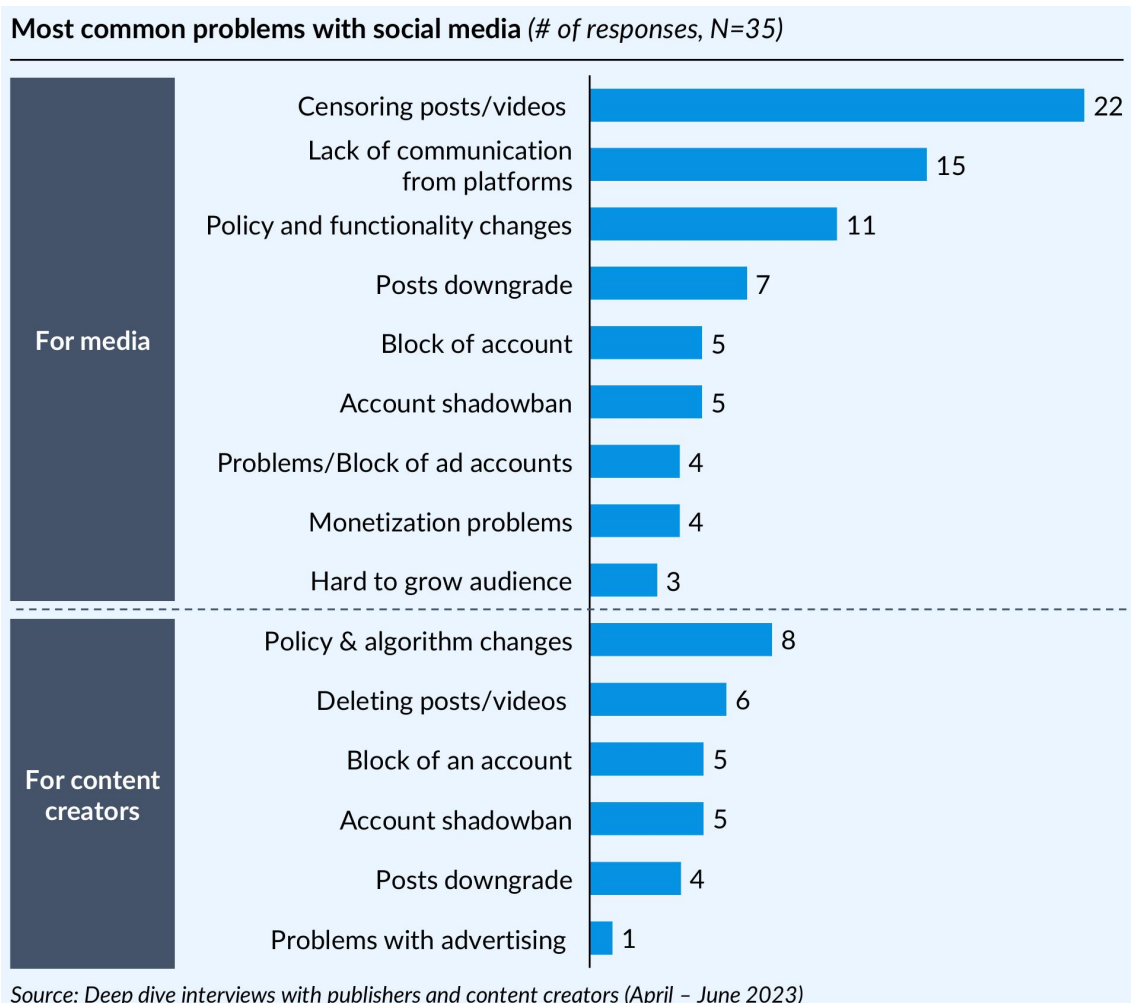
As for Twitter, challenges were mainly associated with recent policy changes and the overall inefficiency of the platform following its acquisition by Elon Musk. However, most media outlets did not consider it their primary channel, and many described Twitter as the "Wild West" of social media with minimal moderation.

In the case of TikTok and Telegram, they were not viewed as the most problematic platforms to work with, but media managers expressed concerns about the security of both apps, particularly Telegram and its ownership by former Russian citizen Durov.

There are common problems for all social media, more specifically: content censorship and lack of communication from platforms. The issues range from blurring certain videos or images to deleting whole posts, sometimes even without communicating properly why this happened.

Most common problems with social media *(# of responses, N=35)*

For media		
Censoring posts/videos		22
Lack of communication from platforms		15
Policy and functionality changes		11
Posts downgrade		7
Block of account		5
Account shadowban		5
Problems/Block of ad accounts		4
Monetization problems		4
Hard to grow audience		3

For content creators		
Policy & algorithm changes		8
Deleting posts/videos		6
Block of an account		5
Account shadowban		5
Posts downgrade		4
Problems with advertising		1

Source: Deep dive interviews with publishers and content creators (April – June 2023)

Bloggers have also voiced similar concerns about social media platforms. Censorship, including the deletion of posts and videos, is a common problem, along with policy

and algorithm changes on these platforms. Account suspensions are more prevalent among bloggers compared to media outlets. This can be attributed to the fact that media organizations have greater resources and connections to address such issues.

## A.	Most frequently censored themes and topics (incl. examples)

The main themes that are blocked, censored, or restricted, according to media representatives, are content related to war and military activities. Specifically, content about the Azov regiment and "hate speech" directed towards Russians and Putin are the most censored topics.

Concerning the posts about Azov regiment, in January 2023, Ukraine's Minister of Digital Transformation Mykhailo Fedorov stated that Meta agreed not to take down content about Azov[5]. Although in practice restrictions of some types of Azov-related content keep occurring.

As for the "hate speech" towards Russians, it is worth noting there is some distinction between such speech being directed at Russians as a national group (hate speech on the basis of protected characteristics, such as national origin, is generally prohibited by platforms) vs. Russian Armed Forces (it might not constitute hate speech because Russian soldiers are often mentioned due to their role as combatants, not their nationality).

However, most cases of blocking or deleting involved interviews in which third-parties (including the General Staff of the Ukrainian Army and other government actors), use terms like "rashist/rushist" or "occupant". Media managers said it was quite frustrating, as often they were just reposting news items, only to see posts deleted.

Blurring sensitive content was also common for Facebook and YouTube, although sometimes there seems to be no consistent view on what makes content "sensitive". Finally, content was also blocked based on copyright grounds.

Some Ukrainian media complained that they are experiencing bot attacks, which are used to appeal content, sometimes innocuous in nature. For example, Hromadske Radio complained that it has experienced blocks of content that never violated

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[5] https://imi.org.ua/en/news/meta-promised-not-to-take-down-content-about-the-azov-regiment-ministry-of-digital-transformation-i50301
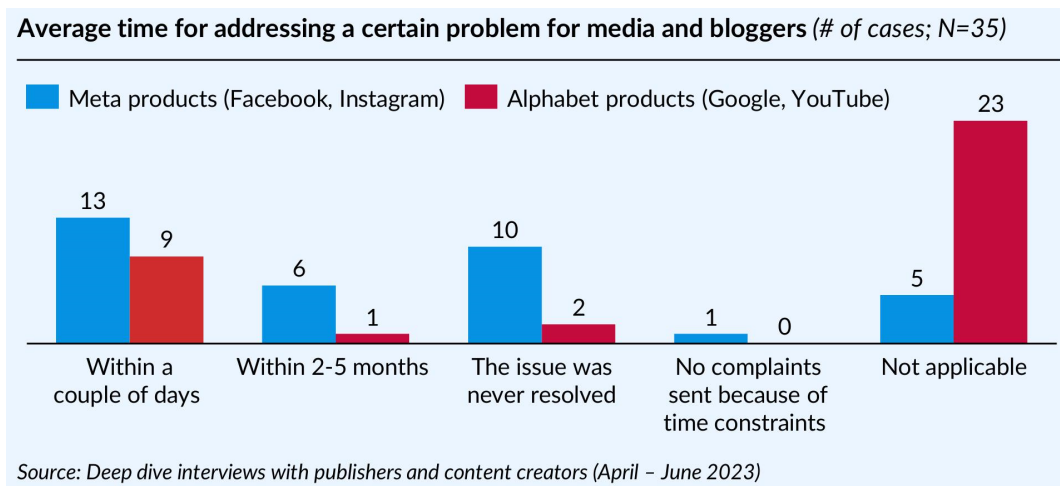
platform's community guidelines, specifically because pro-Russian bots were sending complaints.

Double standards. Regarding content blocking, media representatives also talked about the double standards of social media. Regional, niche and national media complained that they get restricted for the same content that officials like President Zelenskii or General Staff are getting a pass. For example, Most said that they once got some complaints for their post that used the word "rushist", even though it was taken from the official statement from Operational Command South.

B. General trends: communication issues

The media face difficulties in effectively communicating their issues with social media platforms. Meta products, in particular, pose challenges in terms of feedback and communication. These challenges range from a lack of explanation regarding policy changes and decision-making to inadequate resolution of the problems they encounter.

Average time for addressing a certain problem for media and bloggers *(# of cases; N=35)*

- Meta products (Facebook, Instagram)
- Alphabet products (Google, YouTube)

	Within a couple of days	Within 2-5 months	The issue was never resolved	No complaints sent because of time constraints	Not applicable
Meta	13	6	10	1	5
Alphabet	9	1	2	0	23

Source: Deep dive interviews with publishers and content creators (April – June 2023)

While Meta generally manages to resolve problems within a couple of days, this is typically the case with major national media outlets that have dedicated managers or personal connections with social media platforms.

What is concerning is the significant number of cases where issues remain unresolved since the start of the full-scale invasion. This is particularly common among regional media, especially those from the East of Ukraine, such as Vchasno and 6262, whose problems have persisted since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

Worryingly, some media outlets choose not to file appeals or complaints due to the significant amount of time it takes. For example, OstroV argues that with time-sensitive content any appeals are irrelevant by the time they are addressed.

C. Meta: the most common problems, cases and trends

The two main Meta platforms, Facebook and Instagram, have been problematic for journalists, although the former considerably more so. Ukrainian media complained about various types of censorship, poor communication, post downgrades, policy and algorithm changes, blocking of accounts (and business accounts) and monetization problems.

Snowballing effect of tough censorship. The most common complaint regarding Facebook and Instagram is the frequent blocking or strikes. Content censorship has various consequences, such as shadowbans or account deletions. For instance, major national media organizations such as Ukrainska Pravda and Telebachennya Toronto had their accounts blocked and had to go through the process of restoring them.

Meta algorithm is ill-adapted to war realities. According to several media outlets, Meta was ill-prepared for the war in Ukraine. Despite rolling out some initiatives, the algorithm still prioritizes lighter content generated by friends and family. Most media organizations experienced blockage and downgrading of military and war-related content, including evidence of Russian war crimes and related artwork. For instance, Liga.net, while investigating a drop in Instagram engagement, received a comment from the platform stating that the decrease was due to the "heavy" content posted on their page, and they were advised to post less war-related content.

Furthermore, Facebook's algorithm does not prioritize quick updates, which is crucial during a rapidly changing situation. As mentioned by Babel, they refrain from posting urgent updates on Facebook as such posts, like air raid alerts, are unlikely to be seen.

Ambiguous rules and lack of communication. Media outlets often find it challenging to overcome content blocks and censorship, primarily due to the lack of communication and support from real human representatives of the social media platforms. While media acknowledge their responsibility for violations that may lead to strikes, they also highlight

the deeper miscommunication resulting from policy changes and community guidelines, which are not adequately communicated by the platforms. Furthermore, unlike Facebook, which offers some avenues for communication, on Instagram direct human interaction is nearly impossible, at least in the experience of Ukrainian media managers.

Regional media are especially at risk. Regional media face many challenges with Facebook and Instagram, particularly due to their limited resources. Without dedicated personnel (e.g. social media managers) they struggle to understand the algorithms and constantly evolving policies and have difficulties in communicating with platforms.

Some outlets located in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions often mistakenly fall under sanctions restrictions (linked to the unrecognized DNR/LNR), leading to content restrictions and blocked ad accounts. Vchasno and 6262 highlight the prolonged restrictions they have faced since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

Media outlets in southern regions of Ukraine face different issues. They encounter blocks and restrictions imposed by Russia on their social media platforms, along with frequent DDoS attacks originating from Russia, targeting their websites.

D. Alphabet: the most common problems, cases and trends

Alphabet products, such as Google and YouTube, have proven to be less challenging for Ukrainian media compared to Meta (Facebook). Censoring and blocks are less common than on Facebook. YouTube prohibits graphic violence; however, it seems that the platform has an exemption to their policies.

Media outlets have observed that content that gets blocked on Facebook is often not blocked on YouTube. For example, NV stated that the same video that was deleted on Facebook for containing "hate speech" (words like "moskal") was not blocked on YouTube. YouTube Shorts has been a valuable tool for driving traffic to media outlets.

Overall, communication on YouTube is considered better than on Meta. Although Google has also blocked accounts of media outlets from the east of Ukraine, the problems were resolved within a few days. However, there are some other issues on the platform.

YouTube is not designed for war-related content. Media outlets have expressed that the platform's business model prioritizes advertising-friendly, lighter content. A representative from Ukrainska Pravda explained that YouTube sees their videos as uncomfortable and not good for advertisers, which not only affects the monetization of the media but also leads to video downgrades. Also, Hromadske, despite having a high number of views on their videos, did not see them in the recommendations.

Regional media, due to the challenges of reporting from the war front and limited resources, often rely on utilizing videos from other sources while providing original text. However, YouTube's algorithm perceives such content as non-original and consequently downgrades the uploaded videos. This creates a hurdle for regional media in effectively sharing information from the conflict zones. For example, Novyny Donbasa encountered problems with certain video uploads and with their YouTube channel because the platform's algorithm is unfavorable towards videos that do not offer new visual content.

Not favorable towards regional media. Regional and hyperlocal media face significant challenges on YouTube due to limited resources and pre-invasion blocks. These factors led many regional media outlets to avoid the platform altogether. For instance, media outlets from Donetsk region ceased their YouTube activities after experiencing blocks prior to the full-scale invasion, as they cannot afford to deal with potential further blocks.

Novyny Donbasa highlighted another issue - the faulty functioning of video recommendations based on the geo-principle. The problem seems to be that the use of the geo-location tag in the video does not affect user recommendations, (i.e., viewers located in Pokrovsk are not recommended video geo-tagged "Pokrovsk") therefore, users might not come across content produced by local outlet.

E. Twitter: "The Wild West" of social media

While not so popular among Ukrainian audiences, Twitter became an important platform for Ukrainians to communicate with foreign audiences. Initially it was seen as a useful way to reach global audiences and crowdfund (many Ukrainian media launched or put more resources into English-language accounts). However, there are concerns about Ukraine-related content being downgraded following the platform's purchase by E.

Musk[6].

Policy / functionality changes and the blue check problem. The main challenge with Twitter revolves around policy and functionality changes, which left some media managers struggling to adapt. While some issues, like format or features changes, were relatively simple to address, the issue of verification was more serious. Once a sign that the user is verified, the blue mark no longer provides credibility.

Crowdfunding. Bloggers and influencers have highlighted instances where Twitter removed their posts with crowdfunding initiatives to support the Ukrainian army. For example, Artem Albul and Tokar.ua shared that their fundraising efforts were impeded by Twitter.

F. Telegram: alternative and a cautionary tale

Telegram is widely regarded as an alternative platform that offers minimal limitations on content. The primary reason why Ukrainian media utilize Telegram is the ability to provide quick updates to readers with little to no moderation. Nonetheless, concerns surrounding Telegram persist, particularly regarding its monitoring practices and potential connections with the Russian government[7]. Certain media representatives expressed fears that Telegram could be exploited to gather information about journalists.

Losing competition to low-quality channels. As content on Telegram is rarely moderated, this means that malicious content (that may be removed on other platforms) has the potential to cause more harm than the presence of high-quality independent media on Telegram[8]. A closer look at the top 100 Ukrainian Telegram channels reveals that only Suspilne.News, among all independent media outlets, is present on the list. Both national and regional media are losing out to other user-generated content channels, raising doubts about the journalistic integrity of these sources.

Copyright issues. Many channels on Telegram are republishing news, photos, and videos without permission or proper attribution. While some media outlets tolerate this

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[6] https://english.nv.ua/nation/analysis-of-code-for-twitter-algorithm-reveals-social-medium-down-ranks-tweets-about-ukraine-50314963.html

[7] https://www.wired.com/story/the-kremlin-has-entered-the-chat/

[8] https://thefix.media/2023/4/21/mapping-of-telegram-channels-in-ukraine-a-year-into-the-full-scale-war

practice, those who attempted to address the issue via formal channels found it challenging to get a response from Telegram. Instead, they were partly successful in resolving copyright disputes by directly contacting the channels involved.

Lack of communication. While most media outlets did not express significant complaints about Telegram, some have faced challenges when dealing with specific problems. For instance, Ukrinform encountered a fake double account, while Most experienced difficulties with content moderation. In these instances, there was a notable absence of any response or assistance from the Telegram platform.

G. TikTok: quick growth with some risks

Interviews with bloggers and media representatives did not reveal many issues with TikTok. On the contrary, several media outlets have praised the TikTok algorithm, stating that it is favorable to their content and enabled them to grow their accounts quickly. One reason why there haven't been many complaints about TikTok is that not many media organizations have dedicated resources to develop their presence on TikTok, unlike Facebook, which almost all the interviewed media representatives were using.
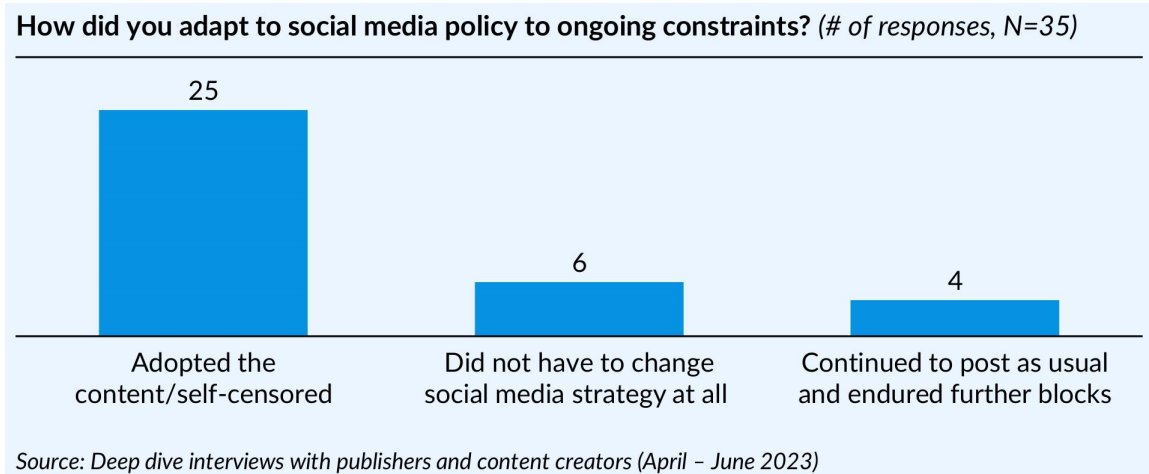
Cases of censorship and blocks. Only Hromadske among the media outlets stated that TikTok had deleted videos related to the war in Ukraine, which were tagged with hashtags like #warinukraine. Since there was no communication about the reason behind the deletions, the media can only speculate that it was due to war-related content. However, there were no similar issues reported subsequently. Blogger Jane Bezpala also mentioned experiencing some blocks, but these cases are isolated.

Algorithm that will create further echo-chambers. A concern raised by experts is that TikTok's algorithm may contribute to the creation of echo chambers. While TikTok doesn't necessarily block access to essential information, experts worry that it doesn't provide enough content about Ukraine to international audiences, including those in Russia[9]. For instance, a Norwegian company, NRK, conducted research creating two accounts with geolocations in Kharkiv and in Belgorod. The researchers noted that content about the war in Ukraine was less prominent when the Russian geolocation was selected[10].

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9 https://gijn.org/2022/07/19/investigating-tiktok-in-russia-versus-ukraine-gijn/

10 https://www.nrk.no/osloogviken/xl/tiktok-doesn_t-show-the-war-in-ukraine-to-russian-users-1.15921522

H. Deep dive – impact of platforms' decisions on Ukrainian media

How did you adapt to social media policy to ongoing constraints? *(# of responses, N=35)*

Source: Deep dive interviews with publishers and content creators (April – June 2023)

Due to the blocks and lack of communication from social media platforms, a significant number of media organizations have resorted to self-censorship as a means of avoiding further repercussions. Media organizations found themselves constrained and began adapting their content to align it with the rules set by platforms. The forms of content adaptation varied from not posting certain content to refraining to use certain language.

Self-censorship poses a threat as some sensitive content restricted by social media may serve as a testament of Russian war crimes. For example, Platfor.ma stated that it is trying to avoid blocks by not posting certain content that Meta can deem controversial and sensitive, even if it is evidence of war crimes.

6. Ukrainian CSO, public and government reactions

Ukrainian Government as a mediator. The Ukrainian government has been successful as a mediator between media organizations and social media platforms. The Ministry of Digital Transformation has urged Meta to stop blocking photo and video evidence of Russia's war crimes, as well as assisted in resolving problems related to account blocks that some media organizations faced[11]. On a policy level, the Ministry has been able to negotiate certain policy changes with social media platforms. For example, in January

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11 https://thedigital.gov.ua/news/mintsifra-zvernulasya-z-listom-do-meta-shchodo-moderatsii-ukrainskogo-kontentu

2023, Minister Fedorov announced that an agreement had been reached with Meta that the company would remove Azov from its takedown policy[12].

Public reaction and civil society initiatives. The public at large and civil society in particular have played a significant role in the discussions and responses to censorship of war-related content by both media outlets and individual users. One notable initiative was a petition addressed to President Zelenskii, specifically asking to address the issue of the account blocking by Google and Meta[13].

International organizations, such as RSF, called upon platforms like TikTok and others to modify their algorithms to prevent the spread of false and misleading content about the war in Ukraine[14]. The Digital Security Helpline "Access Now" is providing assistance to civil society, media, and journalists, accepting complaints and cases related to blockages.

Within Ukraine, the Digital Security Lab released a statement on behalf of civil society organizations, including the Center of Civil Liberties, Institute of Mass Information, Detector Media, and many others[15]. The statement expressed concerns regarding Meta's moderation of content depicting Russian atrocities in Ukraine. It highlighted the inadequate application of Meta's community standards to posts containing evidence of ongoing violations of international criminal law, international humanitarian law, and international human rights law in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine and its resulting consequences.

CEDEM, Internews Ukraine and Lviv Media Forum have been effective interlocutors between journalists and social media platforms in resolving the issues concerning blocks and censorship. The support of international media and partnering newsrooms has also been invaluable to the Ukrainian media sector.

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12 https://imi.org.ua/en/news/meta-promised-not-to-take-down-content-about-the-azov-regiment-ministry-of-digital-transformation-i50301

13

https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3591839-blokuvanna-google-i-meta-ukrainskih-akauntiv-peticia-do-zelensko go-zibrala-neobhidni-golosi.html

14 https://rsf.org/en/war-ukraine-tiktok-and-other-platforms-must-change-their-algorithms

15

https://dslua.org/publications/statement-of-the-ukrainian-civil-society-organizations-on-meta-s-moderation-of-conten t-depicting-russia-s-atrocities-in-ukrain/

7. A look ahead: What are the expectations for the coming year

A majority of media managers and content creators believe that working with social media is becoming more challenging, and they believe the situation will deteriorate further. When discussing future prospects, two strategies emerge: leaving social media platforms or adapting to the changing demands and limitations imposed by platforms.

Readiness to leave social media platforms. Some media managers are expressing skepticism about the ability of social media platforms to bring about meaningful changes and address the issues they currently face. As a result, there is a growing consideration among these outlets to potentially quit certain social media platforms altogether. Although the decision to leave would not be immediate, the intention is to gradually shift the focus towards platforms that present fewer problems or explore alternative methods to effectively reach their target audiences. For instance, ShoTam and The Village Ukraine are thinking about shifting their focus from Facebook to other alternatives.

Readiness to adopt both audiences and social media requirements. Despite the challenges and frustrations, the majority of media managers and bloggers are determined to continue their work with social media platforms. They acknowledge the need for further adaptation in terms of both content creation and understanding social media algorithms. While they recognize the current difficulties, there remains a sense of hope that social media platforms will evolve and address the issues that media professionals are facing.

8. Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to improve communication and collaboration between social media platforms and media outlets in Ukraine. By addressing the common problem of communication gaps, these recommendations seek to enhance the quality of information consumed by Ukrainians, social media content moderation practices, and relationships between the Ukrainian media market and main platforms.

1.   Local team: Recognizing the importance of understanding the sociopolitical context in Ukraine during the full-scale invasion, there is a necessity for a local office with a team of professionals working directly with Ukrainian media and bloggers. The local office should establish efficient communication channels between social media platforms

and media managers in Ukraine. This includes regular meetings, online/offline forums, and dedicated email support to facilitate effective communication. Media should be aware of the active contacts where they can get support and explanation.

2. Whitelist of media: Media managers have raised concerns about the dominance of unverified news on social media platforms. To address this, the recommendation suggests creating a whitelist of Ukrainian media, both national and local. Social media platforms should collaborate with reputable media rating organizations in Ukraine, such as the IMI and Detector Media and international initiatives like Journalism Trust Initiative, administered by Reporters Without Borders to establish criteria and guidelines for whitelisting Ukrainian media outlets. These organizations can provide expertise and insights into evaluating media credibility as they have conducted similar ratings. Social media platforms can prioritize and direct traffic to these reliable sources, ensuring the dissemination of accurate and verified information.

3. Bot-Helpline: This recommendation proposes the development of a Bot-Helpline by social media platforms in partnership with trusted organizations (i.e., CEDEM, Internews, and The Digital Security Lab). This initiative aims to address concerns raised by media representatives regarding frequent rule changes and insufficient explanations provided by social media platforms. The Bot-Helpline would serve as a resource to assist Ukrainian media in comprehending social media moderation policies. It should offer tailored assistance to Ukrainian media, taking into account the country's specific sociopolitical context. This includes providing clear examples and practices that align with current social media policy. By providing a tailored resource for Ukrainian media, the Bot-Helpline will enhance transparency, consistency, and understanding of platform policies and content moderation decisions.