

The Role of Social Media in Promoting Civic Activism in Latvian Society: Support to Ukrainian Society, Armed Forces and Refugees in the Context of Russia's War in Ukraine in 2022

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Abstract. The aim of this research is to investigate the role of social media platforms *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *Instagram* in promoting civic activism of Latvian society in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022. The theoretical part of the research includes a description of social media usage habits, communication patterns of opinion leaders and non-governmental organizations on social media, communication flow patterns, as well as civic activism trends on and off social media. The results of the study were obtained through citizen of Latvia survey, content analysis of social media publications of opinion leaders and non-governmental organizations, and semi-structured interviews with opinion leaders Reinis Pozņaks and Tomass Pildegovičs, and representatives of non-governmental organizations “*Tavi draugi*”, “*Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem*”, and “*SOS palīdzība Ukrainas armijai*”. The study identifies the role of social media in promoting civic activism of Latvian society in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022, examines potential features of slacktivism, considers the aspects of social media communication of opinion leaders and non-governmental organizations and their role in supporting Ukrainian society, armed forces and refugees. Social media, as opinion leaders and non-governmental organizations point out, have played a crucial role in mobilising the Latvian public in support of the Ukrainian society, armed forces and refugees, and have been a key communication channel to reach and inform the public.

Keywords: social media, opinion leader communication, non-governmental organization communication, civic activism, donation, Russian war in Ukraine

Introduction

Today, the society increasingly expects top officials, organisations and peers to engage in civic activism and fight for the rights of vulnerable groups, animal rights, political issues, gender equality, community welfare and other important

issues. This trend can also be observed in the objectives of global organisations. For example, the United Nations (UN) has set seventeen development goals designed to make the world a better place (ANO 2022). These goals are also increasingly evident in corporate sustainability plans, thereby reinforcing the idea that the society now, more than ever, expects everyone to be involved in these substantial issues.

With the rapid development of the digital environment, the use of social media has increased worldwide (Chaffey 2023). Therefore, it opens up more opportunities to reach large audiences. This has given rise to the concept of digital activism, which allows the public to become involved in crucial issues on social media. The advantages of digital activism are the following: the activities require fewer resources to plan, organise and implement; they can be more spontaneous and can reach a large proportion of the public (Choo *et al.* 2022). These aspects were demonstrated when Russia acted in breach of the UN's sixteenth Sustainable Development Goal "peace, justice, good governance" and launched a full-scale war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Shortly after, social media users supported the victims in Ukraine by adding Ukrainian symbols to their profile pictures, sharing posts about the war, as well as the information about donations and other support opportunities.

While it is clear that public support for the victims of this war has been strong, there have been various studies on the possibility of engaging in social and political advocacy in a social media environment with little effort, which can potentially lead to slacktivism. Slacktivism is defined as "the willingness to show symbolic support for a social cause with relatively little expenditure of resources, and at the same time the unwillingness to make a significant effort to bring about meaningful change" (Kristofferson *et al.* 2014, 1149–1166). The question is therefore whether such small-scale social media activities contribute to civic activism or create the illusion of it. Social media users may feel that sharing information, adding Ukrainian symbols to profile pictures, responding to various posts on a particular topic may be enough to suggest that an individual has engaged in civic participation. This also crystallises the research problem – potentially misleading manifestations of civic activism through small support activities in the social media environment and their relation to the Latvian public's significant civic engagement activities in the context of support to the Ukrainian armed forces, Ukrainian society and refugees from Ukraine in the aftermath of the Russian war.

There have been various studies on civic activism in the digital environment and on social media, but no study has yet been conducted on the impact of social media on civic activism in Latvian society, specifically in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the role of social

media platforms *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *Instagram* in promoting civic activism of Latvian society in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022.

The study focuses on five questions:

1. What kind of content in non-governmental organization (NGO) and opinion leader publications on Russia's war in Ukraine on social media platforms *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *Instagram* generates the greatest engagement (in form of the shares, comments, *likes*) of the Latvian public?
2. Which social media platform (*Instagram*, *Facebook* or *Twitter*) has achieved the most extensive engagement with civic activism of the Latvian public concerning Russia's war in Ukraine?
3. From which social media sources (NGOs, opinion leaders, acquaintances, etc.) does the Latvian public most often obtain the information about the Russian war in Ukraine and the possibilities to support the Ukrainian armed forces, Ukrainian society and refugees from Ukraine, and what communication flows are generated from this?
4. How can social media be used to promote civic activism in Latvian society?
5. To what extent the slacktivism (small acts of support on social media but no significant acts of support (donating funds or supporting in other ways)) is observed in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, supporting Ukrainian society, armed forces and refugees?

Methodology

The research part of the study consists of 1) identification of NGOs and opinion leaders, selection and study of the identified NGO and opinion leaders' *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *Instagram* posts on Russia's war in Ukraine and support opportunities through qualitative content analysis; 2) semi-structured interviews with the identified three NGO representatives and two opinion leaders, analysed with content analysis method; and 3) a survey to find out the civic activism habits of the Latvian public on social media in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine.

In order to find out the civic activism habits of the Latvian public in the social media environment in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022, a questionnaire with 23 substantive questions (20 closed questions and 3 open questions) and 5 demographic questions concerning gender, age, place of residence, nationality and education level was created. The substantive questions were based on the information presented in the theoretical part. The questionnaire was posted on the social networking sites *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *Instagram*, which also are a part of the research subject. A total of 233 questionnaires were collected and used for the analysis.

The opinion leaders identified by means of survey and opinion leader identification model (Bamakan *et al.* 2019, 200–222) were Reinis Pozņaks, Ralfs Eilands,

Tomass Pildegovičs and Monta Zaumane (Monta Talks Security). The identified NGOs were “Ziedot.lv”, “Tavi draugi”, “Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem” and “SOS palīdzība Ukrainas armijai”. Of these identified opinion leaders and NGOs, all were approached for an interview, with two opinion leaders and three organisations responding.

For the content analysis, 19 categories were created on the basis of the information presented in the theoretical part. To find out how opinion leaders and organisations communicated on social media in 2022 about the Russian war in Ukraine and support for the Ukrainian society, armed forces and refugees, the author set out to determine on which social networking sites the opinion leaders and NGOs posted, randomly selecting 17 to 20 posts from each, depending on how many posts about the Russian war in Ukraine and support opportunities, which the opinion leaders or organisations published between 1 January 2022 and 31 December 2022. The publications that received the most reactions, comments or shares were selected. Given that not all the identified opinion leaders and organisations communicated on all three social networking sites in 2022, the publications were analysed only from those sites on which they were active during this period. The data from the contingency analysis was analysed and summarised in charts. A total of 335 publications were analysed.

In order to find out the expert opinion on the role of social media in promoting civic activism of the Latvian society in 2022 in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two identified opinion leaders (Reinis Pozņaks and Tomass Pildegovičs) and three NGOs (“Tavi draugi”, “Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem” and “SOS palīdzība Ukrainas armijai”) in the MS Teams platform environment via video calls.

Results

The trends in Latvian civic activism before and during Russia’s war in Ukraine in 2022 were defined by the means of interviews and surveys. The interviews with opinion leaders and NGOs have shown that Latvia’s civic activism before 2022 has been sub-optimal and the public has been reluctant to get involved. However, as shown both by interviews and surveys, with the outbreak of the Russian war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the civic activism of the Latvian public has increased, with the Latvian public engaging in financial donations and humanitarian aid, volunteering, attending Ukraine support events, helping with refugee resettlement and transportation, and extending other forms of support.

In order to understand whether slacktivism is observed regarding civic activism in Latvian society in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022, each respondent’s social media activity was compared with real donation or support activities. After comparing the survey data, it was found that slacktivism was

only observed in the context of other support activities (volunteering, hosting and transporting refugees, finding work and school, etc.). This is due to the fact that other types of support require more resources, whereas, for example, donating money can take only a few seconds, indicating that the Latvian public is not always willing to make a greater effort to provide support.

Complementing the results with interviews of opinion leaders and NGOs, it has been concluded that slacktivism is not present in the civic activism of Latvian society in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine and the war as such, as in the context of this war it has been important to express one's position on social media and sharing information on donations and other support opportunities has been vital to mobilise the public. The opinion leaders and representatives of NGOs point out that slacktivism in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine rather is expressed as not sharing relevant information about aspects of the war and opportunities for donation or support, not expressing support for Ukraine and publishing information that supports Russian aggression. Therefore, any small social media activity that shows support for Ukrainian society, the armed forces and refugees is important in promoting Latvian civic activism.

The surveys showed that respondents received most information about donation opportunities on social media from the opinion leaders and NGOs, about support events on social media from the opinion leaders, many received information about other support opportunities on social media from the organisations, while most respondents learned about them from friends, acquaintances or colleagues and traditional media. Given that support activities such as net weaving, candle making and volunteering in warehouses require a collective commitment, this explains why such information is sought from those closest to the respondents of the survey.

Considering the content analysis data, it can be seen that in order to promote civic activism of the Latvian public in the social media environment, in the case of the opinion leaders, the best content is the real stories from people who have suffered from Russian aggression, the real stories from people who are engaged in civic activism in support of Ukrainian society, the armed forces, as well as the content with donations to Ukraine or assistance to refugees in Latvia. In the case of NGOs, setting specific goals works best – donations needed, targets for cash donations, specific locations for support, and other specific instructions for support. It is also important for NGOs' social media communications to show where donations are going in order to build a relationship of trust with donors and supporters.

The importance of social media communication conducted by opinion leaders and NGOs is also explained on the basis of survey data. The majority of respondents have followed opinion leaders as a direct result of Russia's war in Ukraine. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that the most important channel

for opinion leaders and NGOs in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022 to inform the Latvian public about the support needed (donations, volunteering, attending events, etc.) and to mobilise the Latvian public to participate, was social media. The findings of the research show that opinion leader and NGO social media communication has been a key component in promoting civic activism of the Latvian public in 2022 in support of the Ukrainian society, armed forces and refugees.

The sources of information from which the NGOs have obtained information about the war and the need for support before sharing it on social media are other organisations, as well as Ukrainian people in the war zone in Ukraine and in Latvia. Opinion leaders also obtain the support-related information from Ukrainian people, organisations and other opinion leaders, but information on war and security aspects comes from the media and other experts. As a result, in the context of Russia’s war in Ukraine, a multi-step communication flow is emerging, which means that information is not only passed from one source to another, but also interpersonal communication and links between them are being established (Ognyanova 2017, 1–10).

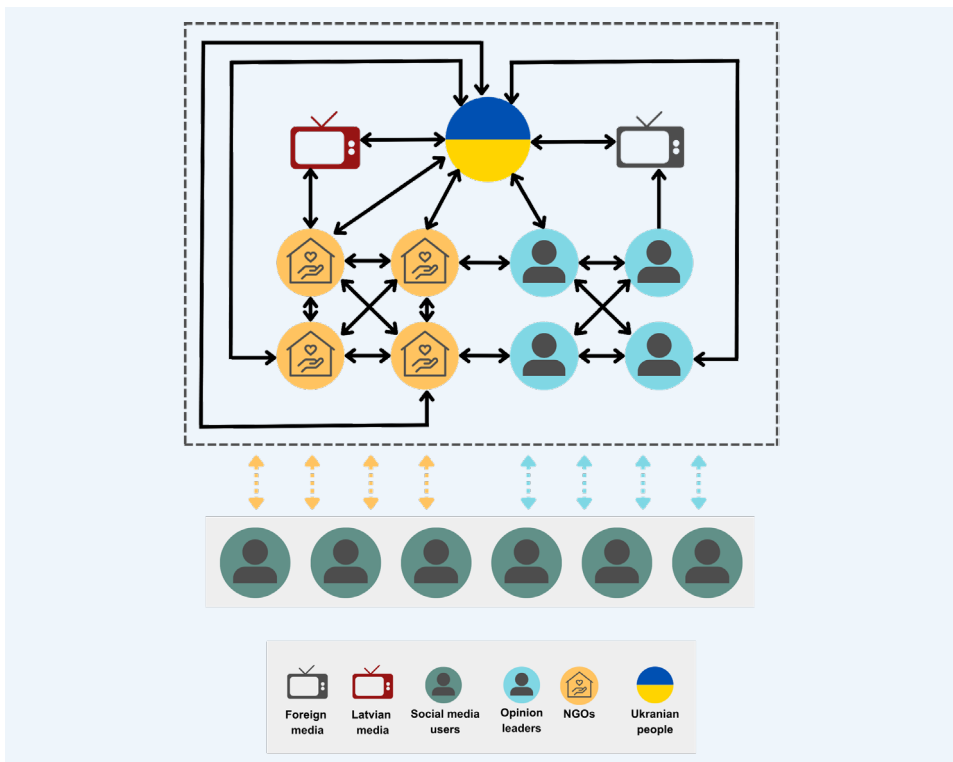


Figure 1. Identified NGO and opinion leader communication flow model in context of Russian war in Ukraine in 2022

Conclusions and discussion

After conducting research data analysis, it was concluded that opinion leaders and NGOs have been the most important sources of information on social media in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022, providing the public with information on opportunities how to donate or support Ukrainian society, armed forces and refugees, as well as informing the public about the ongoing events of Ukraine support. Social media users have not only asked the opinion leaders and NGO representatives questions in public comments, but also privately, inquiring about various aspects of the war and aid, which reinforces the importance of opinion leaders and NGOs in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine.

Besides, each of the sources has their own main role. The main role of opinion leaders in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine is to educate the public through communication, to change public perceptions or to reinforce the importance of supporting Ukrainian society, the armed forces and refugees, while the main role of NGO communication is to mobilise the public and call for active participation. In addition, community building has been identified as the most critical component of social media communication by opinion leaders and NGOs in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. A sense of community, as NGO representatives point out, is one of the main reasons why Latvian communities volunteer in support of Ukrainian society, armed forces and refugees.

After finalizing this research, it is evident that without social media communication the support of Latvian society concerning the assistance for mitigating the consequences of Russian war in Ukraine in 2022 would not be as large as it has been. Therefore, social media, especially the communication upheld by opinion leaders and NGOs, have a crucial role in order to promote civic activism in Latvian society.

This research is a contribution to communication science, specifically political and public relations communication. It is useful not only for NGOs and opinion leaders who communicate in social media environment on the aspects of war and donation/support opportunities, but also for other institutions (PR agencies, governmental institutions, etc.) that develop social campaigns which include donation or other forms of support. The current research would benefit from a longitudinal study exploring the role of social media in promoting civic activism among Latvian society in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2023, which would yield the data that could be compared to 2022 results.

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