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## The Significance of Social Media in the First Weeks Following Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine – An Exploratory Overview

**Summary:** The article describes the functions of social media in the first weeks following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Based on document analysis and on-line monitoring, it examines user practices, corporate actions, and the circulation of disinformation. The findings indicate that social media performed key informational, mobilising and aid-related functions: they enabled the organisation of refugee support, fundraising, and the exchange of reliable data. At the same time, they became a space for propaganda, manipulation, and disinformation. Social media platforms co-shaped wartime communication by deciding which content to promote or restrict, thus becoming geopolitical actors. The conclusions suggest that these media complemented the activities of public institutions and NGOs, contributing to the emergence of an incipient "fourth sector", defined here as civic online self-organisation.

**Keywords:** social media, crisis communication, Russia-Ukraine war, disinformation, digital civic mobilisation

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Modern warfare has evolved alongside media, from televised images of Vietnam (Sontag, 2003) to YouTube coverage of Iraq (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009). Today, social media have become central to setting political agendas (Gilardi et al., 2022). The importance of social media in

<sup>1</sup> This article builds upon the preliminary analyses presented in the non-peer-reviewed report *Inwazja Rosji na Ukrainę. Społeczeństwo i polityka wobec kryzysu uchodźczego w pierwszym miesiącu wojny, chapter: Znaczenie mediów społecznościowych w pierwszych tygodniach po inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę* (Firlit-Fesnak et al., 2022).



the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is illustrated, for example, by the fact that the war has been called “the first war of the TikTok era”, which is taking place online and in real time (Chayka, 2022). Traditionally, crisis response has been the domain of the state, the market, and civil society. Within this framework, social media served mainly as supportive tools for these actors (Potucek, 1999). Although commercial, social media can generate prosocial resources. The wartime context raises the question of whether they now act as semi-autonomous institutions, temporarily substituting for weakened formal organisations.

Following Kapoor, social media are understood here as “various user-driven platforms that facilitate diffusion of compelling content, dialogue creation, and communication to a broader audience. It is essentially a digital space created by the people and for the people, and provides an environment that is conducive for interactions and networking to occur at different levels” (Kapoor et al., 2017). This definition emphasises both the participatory and connective dimensions of social media, which are particularly relevant in times of crisis, when digital platforms become spaces for organising aid, expressing solidarity, and sharing information across diverse publics.

The article aims to examine the role of social media in the first weeks following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, with particular attention to user practices, corporate platform responses, and the circulation of disinformation. The author seeks to capture this “here and now” moment, analysing how social media became *de facto* crisis infrastructures. The study addresses three main research questions:

- What roles did social media play in supporting information exchange, mobilisation, and mutual aid?
- What limitations and risks accompanied the use of social media, particularly regarding disinformation, privacy, and the credibility of online communication?
- How did major platforms and corporations react to the outbreak of war and shape the digital information environment?

Given the rapidly unfolding and unprecedented nature of the events analysed, the study adopts an exploratory, descriptive-analytical approach. The analysis does not seek to produce causal explanations but instead focuses on identifying and systematising key practices, responses, and discursive patterns observable in the first weeks of the war. Although the analysis is primarily descriptive, it is guided by the assumption that during the first month of the war, social media functioned as *de facto*

crisis infrastructures that both facilitated rapid civic coordination and exposed the vulnerabilities of the digital public sphere.

## 1. Literature review

The purpose of this review is to identify the key functions and meanings attributed to social media in previous research and to highlight the analytical perspectives through which their role in crisis situations has been examined. Recent scholarship views media as infrastructures that organise social life. From this perspective, social media function as infrastructures of visibility, coordination, and emotional expression, especially in crises. Such approaches have most often been analysed in the context of natural disasters (Jayasekara, 2019; Mauroner and Heudorfer, 2016), while other crises, such as the 2015 Germanwings crash, have attracted less scholarly attention (Rodriguez-Toubes, Dominguez-Lopez, 2017). Their importance grew during the COVID-19 pandemic (Janc, Jurkowski, 2020) and in contexts of forced migration, where they became vital tools for coordination and refugee support (Alencar, 2017; Şanlıer Yüksel, 2020). They also enable fundraising for humanitarian aid, the documentation of human rights violations, and communication among citizens, institutions, and political elites, thereby fostering civic participation (Chugh, 2018; Hoffmann et al., 2022; Marino, 2015).

From an emergency management perspective, it is significant that in recent years social media have evolved from being merely a passive source of information (i.e., disseminating information on how to prepare for and respond to disasters) to an emergency management tool capable of disseminating real-time warning information, receiving requests for assistance, supporting self-organized peer-to-peer relief efforts, and enabling emergency management agencies to hear from the public (Zhang et al., 2019). At the same time, social media can only constitute one element of a more comprehensive strategy for disaster response and early warning (Mauroner, Heudorfer, 2016).

Social media perform a particularly significant function as infrastructures of direct communication, enabling users to interact in real time by commenting on posts shared by other individuals or institutions, or by forming open and closed discussion groups (De Salve et al., 2018; Oeldorf-Hirsch, Sundar, 2015). Through these mechanisms, social media facilitate not only the dissemination of information but also the creation of

spaces for coordination, emotional exchange, and collective action. The significance of social media in such activities can be understood through the logic of connective action, according to which large-scale mobilisation does not depend on strong organisational structures or stable collective identities (Lance Bennett, Segerberg, 2012). In this framework, communication itself functions as a mode of organisation, facilitating coordination through the rapid circulation of content. As a result, formal organisations are no longer a necessary precondition for mobilising large collectivities. At the same time, the relationship between civic activity and online engagement remains highly nuanced. A considerable share of online participation constitutes merely symbolic acts of involvement: commonly referred to as “slacktivism” (Morozov, 2009) or “armchair citizenship” (Gladwell, 2010), which serve primarily to enhance users’ moral comfort rather than to generate tangible social change.

Social media are also an effective tool for spreading manipulated or false information (disinformation and misinformation) (Rhodes, 2022). The manipulation of public opinion through social networks is a “critical threat to democracy” (Bradshaw et al., 2021), making it a tool of modern information age warfare (Prier, 2017), although at the same time recent research indicates that the influence of misinformation on people’s behaviour is overblown as misinformation often “preaches to the choir” (Altay et al., 2023). Lewandowsky et al. add that parties to wars attempt to gain control over information in the public domain, while stressing that these data are also necessary for individuals and institutions who are interested in engaging in humanitarian action to make informed decisions (Lewandowsky et al., 2013). It has also been shown that there is a significant correlation between social media storytelling and aid-seeking (Talabi et al., 2022). Recent studies also indicate that social media can affect the processing of traumatic experiences and the release of traumatic stress (Zasiekin et al., 2022).

In recent years, digital platforms have ceased to function merely as commercial entities and have evolved into tech titans (Matania, Sommer, 2023), key geopolitical actors whose decisions can directly affect the course of armed conflicts, national security, and the balance of power in international relations. According to research on platform governance and infrastructural power (Flyverbom et al., 2019; Plantin et al., 2018), these platforms should be viewed not only as intermediaries but as corporate infrastructures of communication and coordination. The functioning of algorithms and moderation policies constitutes a form of governance that

determines who can speak, organise, and be visible in moments of crisis. Scholars increasingly emphasise that such platforms may transform the nature of warfare by enabling state and non-state actors to manipulate narratives, conduct disinformation campaigns, and influence the perception of conflicts in real time, thereby becoming both a battlefield of information and an instrument of hybrid warfare (Gorwa, 2019; Singer et al., 2018).

By integrating the perspectives on media as crisis infrastructures, social media's ambivalent role in mobilisation and disinformation, and platform governance, the article analyses how digital platforms shaped public communication during the first weeks of the war in Ukraine.

## 2. Methodology

This article adopts an analytical-descriptive approach and is based on ongoing monitoring conducted during the first month following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The study takes the form of a documentary analysis supported by desk-based monitoring of online sources. It covers the period from 24 February to 24 March 2022, examining the actions of major global social media platforms, with a particular focus on Poland, which received the largest number of refugees from Ukraine during this period (Żołędowski, 2025). The study aimed to capture and interpret the dynamics of digital communication in real time, documenting how social media reflected both the informational and emotional dimensions of collective response as the crisis unfolded.

The analysed corpus comprises several types of publicly available materials. It consists of several dozen documents and statements issued by major social media platforms (including policy updates, press releases, and official corporate blog posts), reports and publications produced by fact-checking organisations, non-governmental organisations, and research institutes, as well as a broader body of observational material drawn from social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Telegram<sup>2</sup>, You-

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<sup>2</sup> Although Telegram is formally a messaging application, it also operates as a social media platform through its public channels and broadcast functionalities that enable large-scale information dissemination. Its hybrid nature, combining the immediacy of messaging with the reach and networking capacity of social media, makes it a relevant case for this analysis. Accordingly, its inclusion reflects the functional rather than typological approach to defining social media adopted in this study.

Tube, and TikTok). Within social media, the monitoring covered both official institutional profiles (including those of the European Union, the Ukrainian and Russian governments, Polish ministries involved in the coordination of assistance, and major cities receiving large numbers of refugees), as well as profiles of politicians and non-governmental organisations, and groups formed by private individuals for the purpose of organising and coordinating aid.

The primary units of analysis included individual documents (e.g., platform statements and reports), news articles published by online media outlets, identifiable communicative practices (e.g., crowdfunding initiatives and peer-to-peer coordination), and selected social media profiles. In the latter case, the analysis focused on recurrent practices, highly visible content, and widely circulated examples of online mobilisation rather than on the exhaustive collection of individual posts.

Additionally, data from Brand24 were used to obtain a descriptive sentiment indicator for the hashtag #Ukraine<sup>3</sup> in Polish-language social media. This indicator illustrated aggregate emotional dynamics and shifts in online discourse during the first month of the war. Data were collected daily, capturing emotional reactions and serving as a record of the moment to examine how digital communication evolved in real time as events unfolded.

Sources were identified through purposive tracing of communications from institutions such as government agencies, official press offices of platform companies, and leading NGOs involved in information verification or humanitarian support. Supplementary materials were located through keyword-based monitoring (Ukraine, war, refugee). The inclusion criteria encompassed materials that documented user practices related to organising or coordinating aid efforts, announced or analysed platform-level policy responses, or described disinformation narratives relevant to Poland and Ukraine.

All collected materials were subjected to thematic coding aligned with the research questions. Three analytical domains were distinguished:

- user practices and mutual aid,
- corporate and platform actions, and
- disinformation narratives.

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<sup>3</sup> An analysis of the hashtag #refugees would have been more appropriate, but its reception would have been heavily distorted by information on people trying to cross the Polish-Belarusian border, which was also a topic widely commented on in Polish social media.

Within each domain, convergent patterns were identified, and representative examples were extracted to illustrate key dynamics.

This study is descriptive in nature and does not constitute a systematic content analysis. Its scope is limited to publicly available materials and to the specific temporal and emotional context of the first month of the war. The intention was not to provide a longitudinal or causal explanation, but to document and interpret the dynamics of digital communication as they unfolded in real time, capturing a unique, transient moment in the digital public sphere.

### **3. User responses on social media to the outbreak of war**

In the first two months of the war, over three-quarters of Ukrainians relied on social media as their main source of information, particularly Telegram (65.7%), YouTube (61.2%), and Facebook (57.8%) (OPORA, 2022). According to the PSMM Monitoring, “only in the first six days after Russia’s attack on Ukraine, 894,949 posts referring to helping Ukrainians were published on social media (...), 43% of these publications appeared on Facebook and 38% on Twitter”. In comparison, traditional media<sup>4</sup> reported 27,085 publications on helping refugees from Ukraine during the same period (PSMM, 2022). This difference reflects not only platform dynamics but also the growing journalistic role of social media, where posts often resemble full-length analytical pieces<sup>5</sup>. They are a key source of socio-political knowledge and information exchange.

The activity of internet users on social networks had both symbolic and practical dimensions. Statements condemning Russia’s attack on Ukraine were posted on the profiles of leading politicians (President Biden, 2022) and organisations (European Commission, 2022). Social media provide a platform for politicians and institutions to quickly communicate their actions. Similar manifestations of support for Ukrainians were also carried out by so-called individual users. For example, between February 24 and March 8, 2022, more than 10 million Facebook users used the profile picture overlay with the Ukraine flag (Meta, 2022)<sup>6</sup>. At the same time,

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<sup>4</sup> I.e., in web portals, press, radio and television

<sup>5</sup> E.g., the Centre for Eastern Studies and the Institute for the Study of War post daily analyses of the war situation on both the OSW website and social media.

<sup>6</sup> For comparison, in 2016, approximately 26 million Facebook users worldwide changed their profile pictures to the “rainbow” filter as part of a global campaign sup-

more than 3 million people worldwide joined Facebook support groups expressing solidarity with Ukraine. Initially, help was organised through existing groups (such as neighbourhood groups or those formed during the pandemic), and in the days that followed, new groups were formed, specialising in helping refugees and those remaining in the country. One of the largest Polish groups was Help for Ukraine *УА Допомога Україні*, with more than 587,000 members<sup>7</sup>. Support ranged from in-kind collections to housing, jobs, and legal aid. These groups enabled rapid relief efforts, although initially they were chaotic and informally coordinated. The known limitations of the third sector, such as inefficiency, paternalism and the risk of abuse of philanthropy (Salamon, Anheier, 1998) were apparent. Despite this, they were an important complement to state and NGO activities, and their functioning can be seen as the seed of the “fourth sector” – a new digital form of citizen organising.

Another important form of actual support for the people of Ukraine, realised through Facebook, was the possibility of organising and promoting fundraising initiatives led primarily by NGOs, both international (e.g., United Help Ukraine – almost USD 4 million in a month<sup>8</sup>) and domestic (e.g., Salvation Foundation – PLN – 1.2 million in a month<sup>9</sup>, PCPM – PLN 800 thousand in a month<sup>10</sup>). An important phenomenon in this context is the “diffusion of support”, which involves the creation of networks of interaction among social media and crowdfunding portals, and the strengthening of the potential for grassroots mobilisation (Ye et al., 2023).

Social media have played a key role in documenting the scale of the armed conflict. An example of this is the Eyes on Russia project<sup>11</sup>, which aims to verify and map the actions of Russian troops based on social media data. The collected information is systematically plotted on an interactive map of the frontline<sup>12</sup>. Even before the outbreak of the conflict, analysis of

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porting marriage equality – a more universal cause. These are the only publicly available comparative data on this type of symbolic user engagement (Wang et al., 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Pomoc dla Ukrainy *УА Допомога Україні*: mieszkanie oraz inna pomoc obywatel, <https://tiny.pl/9lvfv> [31.07.2025].

<sup>8</sup> Medical aid and humanitarian relief for front line, <https://tiny.pl/96dh8n6p> – as of March 24, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Support humanitarian aid for Ukraine, [https://tiny.pl/8m\\_b8mp8](https://tiny.pl/8m_b8mp8) – as of March 24, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> PILNE: pomoc dla Ukrainy, <https://tiny.pl/8bv69g1r> – as of March 24, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Eyes on Russia, [https://tiny.pl/77x0vq\\_s](https://tiny.pl/77x0vq_s) [31.07.2025].

<sup>12</sup> The Russia-Ukraine Monitor Map, <https://tiny.pl/9b-ybbn8> [31.07.2025].

TikTok publications made it possible to identify increased activity by the Russian armed forces, including camouflage of equipment and changes in markings, indicating preparations for military action (Centre for Information Resilience, 2023). Such crowdsourced data proved valuable for tracking military movements and documenting potential war crimes. Social media also served humanitarian purposes, helping locate missing persons and document civilian losses or looting (Nazaruk, 2022).

One form of support for Ukraine was the activity of the Belarusian Telegram channel Hajun<sup>13</sup>, which published information about troop movements and missile attacks from Belarusian territory, based on recordings and reports from citizens. In the first 70 days of the war, 631 missile launches were recorded, and 33,000 messages from 10,000 people were sent during the first month (Müller, 2022). A Ukrainian Telegram chatbot gathered similar intelligence on Russian operations, demonstrating the potential of crowdsourced data while also raising concerns about verification and privacy (Burke, 2022).

#### **4. Propaganda and disinformation**

Beyond enabling communication and mobilisation, social media became a key instrument of wartime propaganda, particularly in Ukraine's efforts to shape global narratives. Twitter profiles of key institutions regularly published speeches, photos depicting both the scale of destruction and the spoils of war (e.g., tanks taken from the enemy by Ukrainian soldiers), as well as expressions of the strength and unity of the Ukrainian people. Through social media, Ukrainian politicians communicate both with world leaders and appeal to the consciences and sensibilities of individual internet users (e.g., by posting pictures of babies locked in shelters or refugees leaving their homes with their pets<sup>14</sup>).

Social media is also a space for spreading propaganda and disinformation. On the day of the invasion, there was an unprecedented increase in the number of new accounts created on Twitter, with several account networks publishing suspiciously similar content at the same time, including pro-Russian propaganda spread by inauthentic accounts. Furthermore,

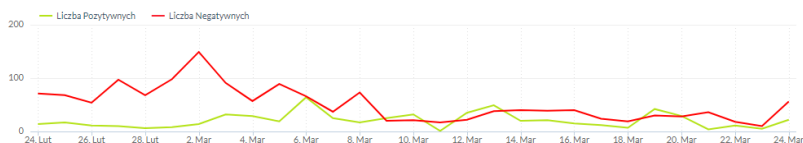
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<sup>13</sup> Hajun\_BY, [https://t.me/Hajun\\_BY](https://t.me/Hajun_BY) [31.07.2025].

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Володимир Зеленський (@ZelenskyyUa), <https://tiny.pl/69tm7j9f> [31.07.2025].

keywords related to Ukraine were used to spread spam, including a cryptocurrency scam falsely claiming to support those fighting (Indiana University Observatory on Social Media, 2022). In Poland, around 10,000 accounts actively spread disinformation, targeting especially Facebook group users (IBIMS, 2022a). Already on the very day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a massive disinformation attack was carried out on Polish social media in favour of the Russian narrative regarding the conduct of military operations in Ukraine (IBIMS, 2022b). This resulted in highly negative sentiment of posts on topics related to Ukraine and Ukrainians on Polish social media, despite the fact that social surveys indicated very positive attitudes of Poles, e.g., towards refugees from Ukraine (CBOS, 2022).

**Fig. 1. Sentiment analysis<sup>15</sup> of the hashtag #Ukraine on Polish social media from 24 February to 24 March 2022.**



Source: own work; tool: panel.brand24.pl

Further analysis showed that almost 90% of the accounts involved had previously distributed content that was sceptical of anti-COVID vaccination or outright denied its legitimacy (RCB, 2022). Similar mechanisms (a combination of anti-COVID and anti-vaccine narratives) could also be observed in other countries, such as Italy and Germany (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2022c). At the same time, it should be emphasised that in the case of Poland, these accounts had long been described by analysts as pro-Russian and/or anti-Ukrainian, while pandemic and vaccination issues later joined their original topics (RCB, 2022). During the first weeks, the main false narrative lines on social media were primarily directed at Poles and aimed at creating a sense of insecurity and concern about po-

<sup>15</sup> The author is aware that sentiment analysis applied to social media data has well-documented limitations, including context sensitivity, difficulties in detecting irony and sarcasm, and platform-specific communicative dynamics (Pang, Lee, 2008; Rodríguez-Ibáñez et al., 2023; Sykora et al., 2020). Accordingly, the sentiment chart is used to illustrate the dynamics of online discourse over time and to complement the other data analysed in the study.

tential discrimination against Poles, including in the area of social issues. These concerned in particular:

- demographic changes and the possible persecution of Poles that will occur as a result of the mass influx of Ukrainians into Poland;
- the lack of proper control of persons crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border, which may result in the entry into Poland of criminals, as well as persons who have previously tried to illegally cross the Polish-Belarusian border;
- transmission of infectious diseases by Ukrainians;
- prioritisation in access to social benefits and public services, including, in particular, health care;
- the scale of the burden on the state budget of providing support to people arriving from Ukraine<sup>16</sup>.

In the second half of March 2022, disinformation messages began targeting Ukrainian refugees, spreading false claims about threats from Poles and the Polish state, including human trafficking and territorial ambitions, in an apparent attempt to undermine trust and solidarity.

## 5. The corporate perspective

In response to the outbreak of the war and the surge in disinformation, platform companies implemented a range of measures. Meta, for instance, limited account visibility in Ukraine and Russia, removed state-controlled Russian media from Facebook and Instagram, and banned related advertisements (Meta, 2022). The company also introduced crisis-response features, such as the “Community Help for Ukraine” tab<sup>17</sup>, to facilitate access to safety information and mutual aid for displaced persons. In doing so, platform companies partially compensated for the lack of coherent and comprehensive public information provided by some states, including Poland. Meta allowed users in Ukraine to publish content inciting violence against President Putin and the Russian military (Reuters, 2022a). As a result, on March 21, 2022, a Moscow court deemed Meta “extremist” and banned Facebook and Instagram in Russia (Reuters, 2022b). Although VPN use remained legal, Russian businesses risked accusations of financing extremism if active on Meta platforms (Kommersant, 2022).

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> Community support for Ukraine, <https://tiny.pl/hjsrwx1>

Access to Twitter has also been restricted, and Russian telecommunications regulator Roskomnadzor has demanded that Alphabet stop spreading false information about the Russian operation in Ukraine on YouTube (Roskomnadzor, 2022). The RT channel, a major purveyor of pro-Russian propaganda, has been blocked in the EU since March 2, 2022 (Council of the European Union, 2022), but the material published there (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2022a) has appeared on other accounts and sites, demonstrating the low effectiveness of the ban. Nonetheless, the measures reduced Russian propaganda, although only 8-15% of posts containing links to unreliable sources were removed (Pierri et al., 2022).

In contrast, TikTok's response was limited, as the platform continued to allow propaganda and disinformation for many weeks. It is noteworthy that TikTok originates from China, which raises questions about the political context and priorities that shape the company's response to the war in Ukraine. TikTok allowed Russian government-controlled media outlets such as RT or Ria Novosti to publish content for a relatively long time, up until 7 March 2022 (Newsroom TikTok, 2022) without indicating that it came from broadcasters with close ties to the government. Furthermore, the platform does not provide tools that allow for independent monitoring of content reach or the impact of disinformation narratives. Its algorithm amplified pro-Russian content more aggressively than YouTube's, making TikTok a major vehicle of Kremlin propaganda (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2022b).

## Summary

In the first month of the war, social media played a central role in supporting information exchange, mobilisation, and mutual aid, becoming key actors in crisis management. In the long term, social media do not have the potential to replace the activities of NGOs, let alone those of the state. In the short term, however, particularly in emergency situations, actions undertaken by and through social media effectively complement those of the main societal actors. Their functions evolved dynamically in response to shifting military operations and refugee movements to Europe, particularly to Poland. The analysis shows that in the first weeks of the war, social media performed five key functions:

- complementing state actions by providing useful and reliable information to both Ukrainians and individuals or institutions seeking to engage in various forms of assistance;

- organising and coordinating grassroots relief initiatives, such as fundraising and activities aimed at supporting refugees;
- fostering a sense of strength and solidarity among and toward Ukrainians through emotional and inspiring TikTok and Instagram stories depicting the human costs of the war and the resilience of society, or, conversely, undermining this sense through Russian narratives emphasising military power and battlefield successes;
- enabling new forms of social organisation and mobilization society through crowdsourcing, data collection, and social capital generation, complementing the efforts of the state and NGOs;
- constructing pro- or anti-war narratives, including through the use of various forms of disinformation.

The findings confirm and extend previous research on the functions of social media, demonstrating their capacity to facilitate coordination, emotional exchange, and participation (De Salve et al., 2018; Oeldorf-Hirsch, Sundar, 2015). In the context of war, these affordances were intensified, as platforms originally designed for everyday communication became infrastructures for large-scale humanitarian coordination and emotional solidarity.

At the same time, the findings highlight the limitations and risks of social media use during wartime, including the scale of disinformation, the fragmented and often chaotic nature of early mobilisation, and concerns about misinformation, slacktivism, and insufficient protection of users' privacy and security.

With regard to the responses of major platforms and corporations, the analysis shows that in the first month of Russia's invasion, corporate platforms did not merely mediate wartime narratives. They effectively shaped who could speak, organise, and bear witness, thereby corroborating the claim that they have ceased to be mere commercial entities and have become "tech titans" (Matania, Sommer, 2023). Today, these platforms co-define the contemporary character of warfare: they enable state and non-state actors to manipulate narratives, conduct disinformation campaigns, and shape perceptions of conflict in real time, rendering them simultaneously a battlefield of information and an instrument of hybrid warfare (Singer et al., 2018).

The growing importance of social media in crisis situations has a dual foundation. First, it results from the weakness of institutions and, paradoxically, from the crisis of civil society itself, which has taken the form of formalised organisations functioning in some countries primarily as

service providers for the state, constituting, as Jeziarska (2017, p. 205) puts it, an “auxiliary infrastructure legitimising the existing neoliberal system”. This has led to the “separation of the third sector and the lack of strong ties with the society on whose behalf civil society is supposed to act” (Korolczuk, 2017, p. 7). At the same time, technological development has endowed social media with the capacity to take over areas previously reserved mainly for the state (e.g., crowdsourcing intelligence and collecting security-related data) or for NGOs (e.g., generating social capital). Actions undertaken by corporations and individuals on social media may form the foundation of the “fourth sector”<sup>18</sup>: a highly responsive, digitally mediated form of civic organisation (Bang Carlsen et al., 2023). This emerging sector, while dependent on corporate infrastructure and interests, is at the same time civic in nature, based on virtual rather than direct ties, and may serve as a complement to or an alternative to the state and NGOs. Such forms of organisation align with the logic of connective action (Lance Bennett, Segerberg, 2012), which highlights that large-scale mobilisation can occur without reliance on formal organisational structures or stable collective identities.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the findings can be situated within the literature on crisis communication, the mediatisation of war, and information management. The first weeks of the invasion demonstrated how social media platforms functioned simultaneously as crisis infrastructures and arenas of hybrid information warfare (Prier, 2017; Singer et al., 2018), where the coordination of humanitarian efforts, the expression of emotional and symbolic support, and strategic disinformation coexisted within the same digital spaces.

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<sup>18</sup> Given the predominantly exploratory nature of the study, the concept of the “fourth sector” is not presented as a fully developed analytical category but rather as a heuristic notion intended to capture an emergent set of practices observed during the first weeks of the war. The author is grateful to the reviewer for drawing attention to the limitations of this concept as an analytical category.

### Declarations:

- The language editing of this article was funded by the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw.
- During the preparation of the article, the author used generative artificial intelligence tools to assist with translating materials into Ukrainian and Russian, as well as for preliminary language editing and proofreading.

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### Znaczenie mediów społecznościowych w pierwszych tygodniach po pełnoskalowej inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę – ujęcie eksploracyjne

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł opisuje funkcje mediów społecznościowych w pierwszych tygodniach po pełnoskalowej rosyjskiej inwazji na Ukrainę. Na podstawie analizy dokumentów i monitoringu internetowego bada praktyki użytkowników, działania korporacji oraz obieg dezinformacji. Przeprowadzone analizy wskazują, że media społecznościowe pełniły kluczowe funkcje informacyjne, mobilizacyjne i pomocowe: umożliwiły organizację wsparcia dla uchodźców, zbiórki oraz wymianę wiarygodnych danych. Jednocześnie stały się przestrzenią propagandy, manipulacji i dezinformacji. Platformy społecznościowe współkształtowały komunikację wojenną, m.in. poprzez decyzje o promowaniu lub blokadach określonych treści, co czyni je aktorami geopolitycznymi. Wnioski wskazują, że uzupełniały one działania instytucji publicznych i NGO, tworząc załączek „czwartego sektora” – obywatelskiej samoorganizacji on-line.

**Słowa kluczowe:** media społecznościowe, komunikacja kryzysowa, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, dezinformacja, cyfrowa mobilizacja obywatelska

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