International Journal of Communication 20(2026), Book Review 210–212 1932–8036/2026BKR0009

Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg, **Managing Meaning in Ukraine: Information, Communication, and Narration Since the Euromaidan Revolution,** Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2023, 166 pp., $35.00 (paperback), open access.[1]

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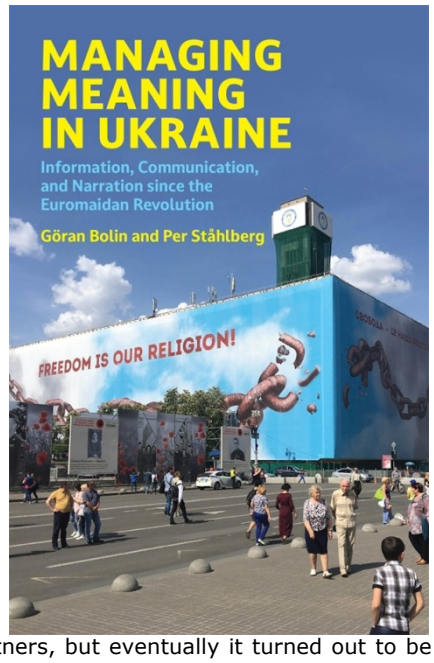


What happened in and around Ukraine since 2013–2014 has determined not just the life and fate of a major nation in Europe but also that of Russia and major European states, reaching the protracted boiling point for the whole continent in 2022. These developments have brought to the forefront of the political and societal agendas the key phenomenon and threat for the modern media ecosystem, that of propaganda and disinformation. Starting from the launching pads of Kremlin-controlled Russian-language TV programs in 2013, propaganda has by now become a threat on a global scale, which got the name of FIMI, or "foreign information manipulation and interference." Nobody was prepared, but countering Russian state propaganda and manipulations with information has first become a priority for the pro-European authorities in Kyiv. Their response—from counter narratives to outright sanctions—was innovative and often met with skepticism and criticism by Ukraine's Western partners, but eventually it turned out to be pivotal and best available practice, which has eventually been taken onboard by other capitals and the European Commission.

The book ***Managing Meaning in Ukraine: Information, Communication, and Narration Since the Euromaidan Revolution*** by Bolin and Ståhlberg, two professors of media and communication studies at Södertörn University in Sweden, is an essential reading in understanding what worked and did not work just before and in the initial stage of the Ukrainian conflict: from Euromaidan in the winter of 2013–2014 till the start of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidentship in 2019. Its scope is defined by the authors as "a study of communicative practices by actors who are framing their efforts in relation to a threat they perceive as propaganda" (pp. 10–11). The book is part of the Information Policy series, which publishes research on and analysis of significant problems in this field under the general editorial guidance of Sandra Braman, a full professor in the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University.

The authors acknowledge that their original research focus was to analyze nation-branding efforts in Ukraine, which are directed to an international audience of tourists, investors, and political stakeholders (p. 17). They were inspired by "curiosity about branding and information and meaning management and the people involved in such activities" and started with the branding efforts for the Euro-2012 soccer

[1] https://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/5577/Managing-Meaning-in-UkraineInformation

championship (p. 18), if not before. The revolutionary events, annexation of Crimea, and hidden Russian aggression, of course, could not help but influence the context and purpose of the original research aim. That, in particular, resulted in the opening chapter of the book, which compared the meaning of the concepts dealt with by the authors on the road from their study of Ukraine's nation-branding to the new reality of information war with Russia, such as *propaganda*, *revolution*, *soft power*, *public diplomacy*, *strategic narrative*, and *management of meaning*.

The next chapter of the book discusses the various domestic agents that participate in the process of managing the image of Ukraine as presented to the Western audience. It is timely to note here that its large parts are written in a style that attempts to drag the reader into following the authors in their numerous meetings and interviews in Kyiv. Fact-checkers are described through interactions with the head of a non-governmental organization (NGO) StopFake, the soft power of the now defunct Ministry of Information Policy (MIP)—through an interview with the former deputy minister. We learn about the players in managing meaning about Ukraine under Russian aggression by learning the story of a press hub, the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, while an example of a private consulting company, CFC, leads into the explanations on branding and conflict communication, including campaigns to attract foreign investors in 2010 (p. 85). For the same reason—to bring the stakeholder nearer to the reader, the book is illustrated by a number of photos taken by the authors on site.

The focus of chapter 2 lies in describing and attempting to explain the blurring of boundaries between the agents of change and meaning, their organizational forms (state, market, and civil society), and intense cooperation between the three sectors. In addition, the authors point to the blurring of boundaries in the pattern of complementarity in the activities of the stakeholders (p. 66). They search for explanations here in the Soviet traditions or in "neoliberal tendencies for outsourcing state responsibilities" (p. 55). Instead, the answer might lie in the weakness of the government facing covert aggression from its major neighbor and trade partner, a Russian-provoked civil strife, an economic crisis with high inflation and weak currency, an information space divided by competing oligarchs, and ongoing large-scale corruption. At the same time, Bolin and Ståhlberg note, although in passing, that numerous foreign charities and governments have suddenly opened to the post-Euromaidan NGOs and civil society projects access to huge American and European funding (p. 67). The aim of the donors was and is to reinforce the resilience of the nation in the face of the Russian threat, while coordination between them has never been perfect. Hence government's reliance on civil society organizations, making NGOs and corporate agents extremely prominent in the post-Euromaidan period (pp. 64–65).

In chapter 3 ("Forms and Assemblages"), the authors step back from the analysis built on interviews and bring the reader closest to their original idea by depicting nation-branding of the pre-Euromaidan Ukraine. They discuss at length the theoretical issues of specific media technologies (such as PowerPoint) and nation-branding messages that impacted the management of information. The story of public-private efforts, in 2010–2014, to attract hordes of foreign tourists and investors to Ukraine by 2022 (pp. 87–88), looks particularly bizarre against the background of what we know happened that year. The authors insist here that this experience would come of use in post-war Ukraine, but it does not sound convincing.

https://doi.org/10.65476/b7y2th48

The core of chapter 4 is an examination of how the Euromaidan became narrated as a media event, made with the help of the model by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) and a specific focus on the phases of its transformative aspects (pp. 95–103). The second case of a media event, chosen by Bolin and Ståhlberg, is the 2017 Eurovision Song Contest, held in Kyiv (pp. 104–116), wherein Ukraine was torn between seeing it as an occasion for cultural nation-branding and a platform to be used in the ongoing information war with Russia.

Chapter 5 serves as the summary and theoretical discussion of the authors' empirical analysis of the agents, media forms, and media events examined before. The authors conclude that the

> purpose of the struggle to control the management of meaning in Ukraine is not only to support Ukrainians' national identity in the face of outside aggression; ultimately, it is also to form the information dominance that is one of the two powers of the Weberian-Bourdieuan state—that is, a state that has the monopoly of both coercive power and communication power, of both physical violence and symbolic violence. (pp. 132–133)

Their view of Ukraine as an "informational state in turbulent times" today, when many think that Ukraine as a state is under an existential threat, provides optimism for further academic discussions on managing meanings in the country.

Such further discussions should be based on research that goes beyond 2019, where Bolin and Ståhlberg stopped (p. 15), and take the reader to assess information, communication, and narration processes in Ukraine since Volodymyr Zelensky became its President, since the full-scale Russian aggression began and, hopefully, since the war ends. It is also important to see that current communications and nation-branding of Ukraine are facilitated by a number of developments outside the perimeter of the book, such as heroism of its soldiers, global support in the conflict and protection of its displaced population, legal restrictions (sanctions) on Russian narratives and media platforms, etc. An important element here, perhaps, is that the national security of Ukraine has proven to be dependent on its informational and cultural security (see Watanabe, 2018).

## References

Dayan, D., & Katz, E. (1992). *Media events: The live broadcasting of history*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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