# Nothing is true? The credibility of news and conflicting narratives during 'information war' in Ukraine

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***ABSTRACT**: In international politics, the strategic narratives of different governments compete for public attention and support. The Russian government's narrative has prompted Western concern due to fears that it exerts a destabilising effect on societies in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. However, the behaviour and thought processes of news consumers targeted by contradictory strategic narratives are rarely subjected to analysis. This paper examines how Ukrainian news consumers decide where to get their news and what to believe in a media environment where 'propaganda' and 'disinformation' are regarded as major threats to national security. Data come from 30 audio-diaries and in-depth interviews conducted in 2016 among adult residents of Odesa Region. Through qualitative analysis of the diary and interview transcripts, the paper reveals how participants judged the credibility of news and narratives based on their priorities (what they considered important), not just 'facts' (what they believed had happened). The attribution of importance to different foreign policy issues was associated, in turn, with varying personal experiences, memories and individual cross-border relationships.*

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News consumption has become a security concern in the context of antagonistic relations between Russia and other states. During the conflict in Ukraine, mass media have been described as 'weapons' and the minds of audiences depicted as a battlefield that must be defended and 'won' from the unscrupulous adversary.[1] However, discussions about the threat to societies posed by Russian news content (from a Western or Ukrainian perspective) or by Western news content (from the Russian government's viewpoint) are rarely informed by substantive research into the behaviour and thought processes of news consumers. How do people decide where to get news and what to believe in an environment where incompatible strategic narratives about global affairs (Miskimmon et al. 2013) are competing for support? These questions are addressed here via a study of news consumption in Ukraine. The study is informed by the literatures on media repertoire formation and credibility. The aim is to introduce a deeper awareness of processes of reception into the debate on how states achieve (or fail to achieve) influence via strategic narratives projected internationally in the media.

The article draws empirical evidence from a 'diary-plus-interview' study, for which 30 adults from Odesa recorded their reactions to news stories onto dictaphones over a two-week period in 2016, before discussing their political views and news consumption habits with researchers. Some of the study's participants were 'West-leaning': very critical of Russia and supportive of closer ties to Europe, as advocated by the Ukrainian government. Other participants were 'Russia-leaning': they rejected their own government's legitimacy and

hoped that relations with Russia could be rebuilt, in line with the Kremlin's position. A third group were 'non-aligned' in their foreign policy preferences. Qualitative analysis of the audio-diary and interview transcripts sheds light on how (geo)political attitudes and other factors affected participants' habitual use or avoidance of various news sources. It also reveals the kind of cues or resources participants relied upon when evaluating the credibility of competing (geo)political messages.

The article begins by describing the context of this study and the clash of strategic narratives that has been so salient during the conflict in Ukraine. The research design is explained after an overview of previous research on how individuals form media repertoires and judge credibility. The diary and interview transcripts are then analysed, before the article's final section draws lessons from the Ukrainian case for research on state-led efforts to influence mass audiences by projecting narratives. The close-up study of news consumption in Ukraine at a time of 'information war' shows that individuals judge the credibility of narratives based on whether issues that matter to them are addressed, not only on whether particular 'facts' are likely to be genuine. Personal experiences, values and social connections therefore play a crucial role in strategic narrative reception.

***Strategic narratives during the crisis in Ukraine***

The events of the 'Ukraine crisis' encompass the Euromaidan protests of 2013–2014, the ousting from power of President Viktor Yanukovych, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of conflict in Donbas, where Ukrainian government forces remain locked in a standoff against separatist militias backed by the Kremlin. The struggle to define and make sense of these events has been intense (Khaldarova and Pantti 2016; Ojala et al. 2017).

Some narratives speak of a 'revolution of dignity' and Ukrainians fighting valiantly against the imperialist ambitions of their aggressive northern neighbour. Other narratives lament the 'coup' which brought 'fascists' to power in Kyiv and led to 'punitive operations' against Ukraine's Russian-speaking population. Various parties involved in the conflict have worked to project narratives which protect their legitimacy and interests. The Russian side is accused of narrating events with little regard for accuracy and frequent use of 'disinformation' (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014; Walker 2016).

The strategic use of narratives to exert non-coercive influence is a topic of growing interest in International Relations (Miskimmon et al. 2013; Roselle et al. 2014; Price 2015; Freedman 2006). Alistair Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle use the concept of strategic narrative to describe the assemblage of messages through which a state tries to construct 'a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics' that will guide other actors' behavior (Miskimmon et al. 2013, p 2). A narrative can be understood as the accentuation and emplotment of particular problems or turning points in a way that indicates causation and points to a normatively desirable resolution. In Russia's strategic narrative, for example, 'American interference' is accentuated as a problem and emplotted as the cause of instability in various parts of the world. Steps that would counterbalance the USA's ability to intervene are logically promoted within the Russian narrative as a desirable goal (Szostek 2017a). The Ukrainian strategic narrative, in contrast, problematizes Russia's behaviour as a destabilising force in global politics. Ukrainian officials emplot illegitimate Russian intervention as the cause of their country's difficulties, suggesting international pressure on Russia as a desirable solution (Feklyunina and Romanova 2017). Recent work on strategic narratives has evolved from a much broader body of research about 'soft power',

public diplomacy and international broadcasting (for example, Entman 2008; Melissen 2005; Nye 2011; Seib 2012; Sheafer and Gabay 2009). This research is largely state- and media-centric; it focuses on processes of projection more than processes of reception. Yet 'soft power' policies, public diplomacy and international broadcasting are implicitly or explicitly aimed at influencing what audiences think. Therefore, a turn towards studying the audiences 'targeted' by states in their pursuit of influence is appropriate and necessary if the mechanisms via which influence occurs are to be understood.

***Media repertoires and credibility***

To influence a mass audience, a strategic narrative must reach individuals via the media they consume and it must be assessed as more credible than other competing narratives. The processes of media repertoire formation (Hasebrink and Popp 2006; Hasebrink and Domeyer 2012) and credibility assessment therefore constitute the focus of attention in the present study.

The media repertoires of Ukrainian citizens have not previously been studied in any depth. However, research from other geographic contexts suggests that media repertoires take shape through interaction between motivational factors and structural or situational constraints (Taneja et al. 2012; Wonneberger et al. 2011; Cooper and Tang 2009; Van den Bulck 2006). The long tradition of research into the 'uses and gratifications' of media consumption (Blumler and Katz 1974; Papacharissi 2008; Althaus and Tewksbury 2000) is premised on the idea that rational individuals purposefully decide what to watch or read based on personal needs, interests or predispositions. Desire for opinion reinforcement ('cognitive consonance') is among the motives that can draw a person to particular news

outlets. This is the basis of the 'selective exposure' hypothesis which has been variously challenged (Sears and Freedman 1967; Guess 2016; Zaller 1992), endorsed (Best et al. 2005; Stroud 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2011; Johnson et al. 2011) and qualified (Frey 1986; Garrett 2009; Flaxman et al. 2016; Dvir-Gvirsman et al. 2014) on multiple occasions. Holbert et al. (2010, p 22) point out that 'selective exposure and encounters with attitude-discrepant information can coexist'. The extent of both selective exposure and selective avoidance is thought to depend on the issue involved (Stroud 2008; Iyengar and Hahn 2009); the intensity of cognitive dissonance the issue provokes (Festinger 1957; Frey 1986); and personal traits (Feldman et al. 2013; Song 2017).

Structural and situational factors which influence an individual's media repertoire include the time available for media consumption (Yuan 2011), affordability, convenience (Swart et al. 2016), and the social or family environment (Wonneberger et al. 2011). Access to the internet, cable or satellite television increases the range of sources people can follow, as does fluency in multiple languages.

An individual who encounters conflicting narratives in the media is likely to make judgements about those narratives' relative credibility. Research explaining credibility has a long history spanning several disciplines (for reviews, see Metzger et al. 2003; Self 2009; Rieh and Danielson 2007). In everyday parlance, credibility is often treated as an innate attribute of information or information sources (e.g. 'a credible witness', 'credible evidence'). However, the concept is better understood as the subjective perception that certain information corresponds to reality and that a certain information source can reasonably be believed (Gunther 1992; Choi et al. 2006; Flanagin and Metzger 2007). Individuals are said to recognise underlying 'dimensions' of credibility (Hovland and Weiss

1951; Gaziano and McGrath 1986; Meyer 1988; Thorson et al. 2010). Credibility can be attached to persons, groups and organizations, to media sources, or to messages communicated *by* persons, groups and organizations *via* the media (Choi et al. 2006). These different 'levels' of credibility are closely interlinked (Kiousis 2001; Rieh and Danielson 2007). Hilligoss and Rieh (2008) propose a framework for studying the assessment of credibility which distinguishes between (1) *construct*, or how individuals conceptualize credibility; (2) *heuristics*, which are rules of thumb people use to make credibility judgments across a variety of situations; and (3) *interaction*, or how credibility is assessed in response to specific source or content cues.

Heuristics used to judge credibility include the *civility or tone of language* used in a message (Thorson et al. 2010); *perception of persuasive intent* (Flanagin and Metzger 2007; Metzger et al. 2010); the presence or absence of *verification materials* (Freeman and Spyridakis 2004; Rieh and Danielson 2007); the *reputation or familiarity* of a particular source (Metzger et al. 2010; Hilligoss and Rieh 2008); evidence of *popularity and endorsement* by others (Metzger et al. 2010; Hilligoss and Rieh 2008; Livio and Cohen 2016; Sundar 2008); and the *visual design or appearance* of a source or message (Fogg et al. 2003; Metzger et al. 2010). *Source genre* can be a cue for heuristic credibility judgements: in Western contexts, 'official' sources and news websites seem to be considered more credible than personal websites (Flanagin and Metzger 2007), although a study in Russia found the opposite to be true among some news consumers (Szostek 2016). Observation of *consistency across sources* is another heuristic often used in credibility judgements (Metzger et al. 2010; Hilligoss and Rieh 2008).

When it comes to interaction with specific sources or content, credibility judgements are strongly affected by *issue involvement*, or the extent to which the attitudinal issue under consideration is of personal importance (Petty and Cacioppo 1979, 1986). Source characteristics have less influence on judgements about 'high-involvement' issues (Wathen and Burkell 2002). *Existing beliefs* are a related factor affecting credibility judgements at the interaction level: a message is more likely to be considered credible when it matches what the recipient already thinks, and this is particularly true of information about politics and current affairs (Metzger et al. 2010; Thorson et al. 2010). Individuals have also been found to judge the credibility of specific messages against *relevant personal experiences* (Livio and Cohen 2016; Hilligoss and Rieh 2008) and *knowledge acquired first-hand or from trusted acquaintances* (Hilligoss and Rieh 2008).

The strategic narratives projected by the Russian and Ukrainian governments deal with emotive issues of war, blame and identity in which most Ukrainians are likely to be 'highly involved'. When judging the credibility of these narratives, Ukrainian news consumers can therefore be expected to rely on their existing beliefs, first-hand knowledge and knowledge acquired from acquaintances more than heuristics and peripheral cues. However, judgements about the credibility of strategic narratives seem likely to differ in certain respects from the types of credibility judgements discussed in the existing literature. Most notably, strategic narratives make claims not only about what is *happening* (i.e. what is 'true'), but also about what *matters* (i.e. what is important or problematic). Therefore, finding a strategic narrative credible implies acceptance of values and priorities, not just confidence in 'facts'. Furthermore, the distinction between communicator-, medium- and message-level credibility is likely to be particularly blurred when strategic narratives are

judged. This is because audiences, over time, can develop awareness of the state (or other collective entity) which stands behind a given strategic narrative and of the media sources most inclined to convey or endorse it. The assessment of a strategic narrative's credibility might therefore be considered an ongoing evaluation that encompasses communicator and medium, rather than a series of judgements on separate occasions about discrete pieces of information of unknown provenance. The present study of news consumption and reception in Ukraine explores these ideas and how credibility is best understood in the saturated, polarised media environment of a country engaged in 'information war'.

***Research design***

The 'diary-plus-interview' study was conducted between August and October 2016 in Odesa, Ukraine. It was the second stage of a larger project; the first stage was a survey ($n$ = 1,000), the results of which are reported elsewhere (Szostek 2017b). The company TNS Ukraine was commissioned to help implement both stages.

An advantage of the diary-plus-interview method is that it does not restrict participant responses to categories imposed by the researcher. It offers a window on 'how particular audience groups engage in different ways with particular forms and genres of the mass media' rather than simply 'how audiences are affected by the mass media' (Livingstone 1993). As MacGinty and Firchow (2016) have argued, the 'everyday' narratives which people in conflict-affected areas use to describe their own reality can be quite different to narratives generated by elites.

Thirty participants were recruited from the adult population of Odesa and nearby villages by TNS Ukraine. Recruitment was conducted by word-of-mouth via the company's network of

local facilitators; TNS paid participants an undisclosed sum as an incentive to take part. All potential participants answered a handful of 'screener' questions before being accepted into the project.[2] They had to reside in or near Odesa and follow the news 'at least several times a week' to be accepted. Otherwise, selection of participants was based on quotas to ensure a roughly even balance between age groups, genders and foreign policy preferences ('West-leaning', 'Russia-leaning' or 'non-aligned'; see Appendix).

Odesa makes an interesting site for fieldwork for many reasons. It is Ukraine's third biggest city and falls within the territory named 'Novorossiya' ('New Russia') by President Vladimir Putin and Russian nationalists. In 2014 Odesa was the scene of fatal clashes between supporters and opponents of Euromaidan. Over 40 pro-Russian activists died when Odesa's Trade Unions building was set alight during unrest, an event described as a 'massacre' by Russian television.[3] Since then, political opinion in the city has remained deeply divided and finely balanced.[4] Ukraine is sometimes perceived as having an identity fault line that divides predominantly 'Russian-speaking' southern and eastern regions from the west and centre, where the Ukrainian language is more widely used. Odesa lies in the south of Ukraine and its residents communicate mainly in Russian – but in fact, identities there are complex (Pirie 1996), most people are at least passively bilingual, and their political views are not predetermined by the language(s) they speak.

The participants were given a guide of six questions and asked to record diary entries in audio form using either their own mobile phone (if available), or inexpensive USB dictaphones. The guide asked participants to record the context in which they consumed news (where, when and with whom), the sources from which they obtained news, a summary of the stories they considered most important, and their reaction to those stories.

Diary entries were made over the course of two weeks, generally once a day or so, although strict intervals for diary entries were not set so that participants would not feel obliged to consume news 'artificially' for the study. Interviews took place two or three weeks after submission of the diary recordings, in an office in Odesa. Each interview lasted between 40 and 80 minutes. Questions elicited the participants' reasons for using/avoiding and trusting/distrusting particular news sources; participants were also invited to voice their own narratives about Ukraine's relations with Russia, the USA and the European Union. All the audio diaries and interviews were transcribed in full by TNS Ukraine and imported into CAQDAS tool Atlas.ti for analysis.

The 'thematic analysis' method described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the transcripts. A coding frame was developed to categorise explanations for why the participants used or avoided news sources and why they regarded sources, messages or messengers as credible, or with scepticism. A preliminary set of 'theory-driven' coding categories was derived from the literatures on media repertoires and credibility discussed above.[5] During the coding process, the theory-driven categories were refined, collated or expanded as necessary to capture themes in the transcripts as clearly as possible. The Atlas.ti software greatly facilitated this process: it allows the researcher to instantly retrieve and compare extracts coded into each category, to merge, split or rename categories and to keep detailed notes on category definitions. A single researcher (the author) was responsible for all coding. Critics might question the 'reliability' of coding by a single coder. Thematic analysis is an inherently interpretive method; it does not claim to produce 'objective' knowledge of reality that can be validated through replication. However, to allay possible concerns about the trustworthiness of the interpretation, evidence of the themes

within the transcripts is presented below in the form of multiple illustrative quotations. Themes that were most prevalent across the data corpus (i.e. observed in the transcripts of multiple participants) are foregrounded.

***"Well,* mail.ru *is always first because of email…"***

Participants included many news sources in their media repertoires with little regard for the quality or qualities of the news content. Rather, they were drawn to sources by content or functions which had nothing to do with current affairs. The theme of non-news affordances driving source selection was observed in transcripts from 17 participants (Table 1). TV viewers tended to get news from whichever channel happened to be broadcasting the movie or soap opera they wanted to watch. Email accounts often drew internet users to web portals, which thus became the most convenient way of checking the day's top stories.

*[Table 1 about here]*

Non-news affordances overlapped with a second theme, habit (observed in 12 participants). The category 'habit' was used to code instances where participants reported using a news source without any clear motivation other than the fact that they always used it. Sometimes habits resulted from one-off decisions taken years ago – such as the choice of an internet browser, a homepage or the addition of a website to 'bookmarks'. The news feeds of multi-purpose web portals Ukr.net, Yandex.ua (or the Yandex browser), mail.ru and rambler.ru were cited as habitual gateways to the news even more often than social media.

Portals like Yandex.ua and Ukr.net present users with a list of top news stories and, for each story, a selection of links to external sites that have reported the story. Participants reported clicking on such links at random; there was little conscious decision-making

involved. Almost half the participants (13) mentioned spontaneous, random browsing, either online or through TV channels, when they described their news consumption behaviour (Table 2).

*[Table 2 about here]*

The themes of spontaneous browsing and non-news affordances suggest a low level of deliberation about news source selection. However, there was also evidence that certain sources were selected and avoided deliberately in line with attitudes. Seven participants were explicit about excluding news sources they particularly disagreed with (Table 3); most often these sources were TV channels with an obvious (geo)political editorial stance. Even more participants said that they avoided some sources due to 'bias' or 'lies' and preferred to use 'objective' sources – yet perceptions of what 'objective' news should look like varied hugely and were clearly shaped by (geo)political attitudes. Participants said they were selecting 'objective' sources, but in practice some of them were selecting sources associated with attitude-consistent narratives.

*[Table 3 about here]*

It was notable that the 'West-leaning' participants hardly ever reported using sources associated with the Russian state, whereas virtually all the 'Russia-leaning' participants used *both* pro-Russian sources *and* some 'mainstream' Ukrainian sources that conveyed criticism of Russia. Six of the 12 'Russia-leaning' participants said they liked to compare Russian and Ukrainian sources and opinions, whereas only two of the seven 'non-aligned' participants did so, and just one of the 11 'West-leaning' participants. The 'Russia-leaning' participants tended to believe that both Russian and Ukrainian sources were propagandistic, so

comparing both sides and 'drawing one's own conclusions' (P28, P32) was better than relying on a single side alone. All the participants in this study had access to a diverse range of news media, so none were 'obliged' to engage with attitude-discrepant narratives due to lack of media choice. However, participants were frequently forced by their social context to engage with attitude-discrepant viewpoints during *interpersonal* communication. Four of the 11 'West-leaning' participants described conversations (sometimes heated) with their friends or relatives in Russia who backed the Russian state's narrative; five of the 12 'Russia-leaning' participants similarly said that they heard (geo)political opinions contrary to their own from friends, colleagues, or even a wife in one case.

***"Prices… the exchange rate… friends in other cities. Those will be my real news sources."***

Most participants, regardless of their foreign policy preferences, felt that all news media should be approached with caution and should never be fully trusted. Almost half (14) made critical generalisations to the effect that 'the media lie, lie and don't tell the truth' (P8); 'there's no such thing as 100-per-cent truthful news' (P9); or 'journalism is a venal [*prodazhnaya*] profession' (P25). When explaining their mistrust, the participants did not point to conflicting narratives as evidence. More often, they cited the vested interests of those who financed the media and concluded that 'whoever pays the piper picks the tune' (P30, P32). Scepticism was thus triggered by the *perception of persuasive intent* heuristic, based on varying levels of knowledge about who controls the media in Ukraine and Russia (Table 4).

*[Table 4 about here]*

Eight participants – again, from across the (geo)political spectrum – made similar generalisations about the untrustworthiness of politicians. One said that he 'never believed' what politicians said, especially when they promised 'everything will be great' (P9); another said politicians 'could not be honest' (P45). Again, however, this generalised mistrust seemed to come from knowledge or experience of the political system rather than exposure to contradictory media reports. When expressing scepticism about news stories, participants recalled political promises or warnings that had not (yet) materialised, such as visa-free travel to Europe (P29, P30, P45), the sale of President Poroshenko's assets (P32), Russia 'seizing' the whole of Ukraine (P8), or Ukraine's transformation into a prosperous country (P63, P66).

When asked how they worked out 'what to believe' in such a venal media environment, most (17) participants referred to checking multiple sources; *consistency across sources* was a heuristic indicator of credibility, as established by previous research. If sources contradicted each other, participants remarked that the truth could be found 'in the middle' of the contradictory messages (P10, P11, P28, P30, P56), at 'the golden mean' (P62, P65). Logically, however, there is no midway point between Russian tanks being present or not in Donbas, or one side rather than another shooting down the passenger plane MH17. What the participants meant in practical terms by saying that they compared sources to find truth 'in the middle' was evident in the diary transcripts. Participants rarely recorded themselves actively investigating the accuracy of reports by means of comparison. They simply included lots of sources in their media repertoires as a matter of course; then if a report was duplicated across sources its credibility was enhanced. Different sources attributed blame in different directions because they had different sponsors, and it was this blame for the

overall state of affairs that participants located 'in the middle', not truth about what events had actually taken place.

For many participants, one-sided attributions of blame (or praise) were another indicator of low credibility linked to the *perception of persuasive intent* heuristic. The Ukrainian strategic narrative and Ukrainian news sources elicited scepticism among Russia-leaning and non-aligned participants partly because they were perceived as laying blame unrelentingly and exclusively on Russia for all manner of problems, some of which arguably had multiple causes (Table 5).

*[Table 5 about here]*

The fact that Russia-leaning and non-aligned participants objected to one-sided (Russia-focused) blame attribution more than West-leaning participants indicates the importance of existing beliefs in credibility assessments. West-leaning participants were generally unperturbed by unrelenting negativity about Russia which infuriated their Russia-leaning counterparts. They were also less inclined to doubt evidence that pointed to Russian misdeeds. For example, West-leaning participant P51 and Russia-leaning participant P63 both learnt about the results of the MH17 crash investigation from similar Ukrainian news sources. Whereas P51 concluded that 'all the data shows that [the missile which downed the airliner] was fired from a Russian BUK… everything shows that it was shot down by Russia', P63 was unconvinced by eyewitness testimonies presented by the investigators as evidence, arguing: 'you can find thousands of such actors'.

Existing attitudes towards Russia were likewise bound up in the participants' perceptions of 'what mattered' (as opposed to their perceptions of what had happened). It was suggested

earlier that a strategic narrative's credibility might depend not just on confidence in certain 'facts', but also on the acceptance of particular values and priorities. There is support for this idea in the fact that over three-quarters of the participants expressed scepticism about news content based not on perceived factual inaccuracies, but on the belief that the wrong issues were being addressed (Table 6).

*[Table 6 about here]*

The diaries and interviews strongly indicate that priorities, not just facts, were informing responses to narratives about international affairs. Russia-leaning participant P10, for example, said that 'of course' Russia was providing arms supplies to Donbas – thus accepting a key claim from the Ukrainian strategic narrative which is denied by the Kremlin. Yet the same participant argued that Ukraine 'shouldn't be fighting with Russia even if there are Russian troops there'. Similarly, West-leaning participant P25 raised no challenge to the claim (from Russia's strategic narrative) that Ukraine had fallen under 'foreign management'. The participant simply did not accept that foreign (Western) management of Ukrainian affairs was problematic; on the contrary, it was 'good', because Ukrainian politicians had shown that 'they can't organise themselves'. The following comment by non-aligned participant P26 clearly brings out the primacy of priorities and values in credibility assessments. Having seen on the news (the website of Ukrainian TV channel 112) that a Ukrainian MP had wished Putin 'the same fate as Hitler', P26 said (emphasis added):

> 'How does that help the people? How does it help me?... The news on that site can probably be trusted… as there are links to primary sources… But *that's not the point*.

*The point is, who is better off from that?* Who gains anything from the fact that it's true?'

Priorities and values are vital to understand the credibility of strategic narratives, but what explains people's varying priorities and values in the area of foreign policy? Personal experiences and social bonds appeared to play a major role. The incredulity and anger which Russia-leaning participants expressed upon hearing the Ukrainian strategic narrative was often linked to their own lives, memories and family ties (Table 7).

*[Table 7 about here]*

As participants responded to narratives in the media and formulated narratives of their own to explain political developments, they all made repeated references to events from their own lives, as well as to information received from personal contacts. Personal experiences and information from trusted acquaintances were vital credibility benchmarks. When the Ukrainian media or politicians reported improvements in the economy, successes in the fight against corruption, or positive results of law enforcement reform, several participants (P8, P10, P61, P63, P54) sceptically retorted that they had seen little improvement in their own finances, were still forced to make illicit payments to their children's schoolteachers, or had personally witnessed police incompetence. When the Russian media had issued graphic warnings about Ukrainian nationalists coming to 'hang or eat children', a participant recalled 'waiting and waiting for them to come, but they didn't come… none of it is real' (P45). Participants learned about the situation in Donbas from friends who had volunteered or served in the conflict, friends still living in the separatist-held territories and those who had moved from the conflict zone to Odesa (P1, P11, P14, P25, P32, P45, P66). Information from

these trusted 'first-hand' sources, combined with everyday observations of life, helped participants to construct their own understanding of the 'truth' with confidence despite their lack of faith in media reports. As participant P45 put it:

> 'For me, the news will primarily be prices, prices in the shops, energy prices, those will be my main news sources. The exchange rate will be my main news source… friends in other cities, they will be real news sources. For me, everything else is just a big game in life, [set up] so that everyone who plays, one way or another, earns money.'

***Influence via the media in international relations: Lessons from Ukraine***

This article has provided a close-up view of how news consumers in a polarised, saturated media environment form their media repertoires and assess the credibility of news they encounter. It is clear that 30 audio-diarists cannot be representative of any larger population. Indeed, the diarists are probably somewhat atypical vis-à-vis the Ukrainian population as a whole in that they follow the news more closely than average. As with any small-*n* qualitative study, the goal here is therefore not to make 'distributional claims about a variable across a known population' (Karpf et al 2015), but rather to interrogate categories and concepts that are used in analysis and to draw lessons regarding the formulation and framing of research questions. Focussing on the audience has illuminated 'elements that go into the reception process' (Jensen 1987, p 33) and 'processes that might lead to effects' (Liebes and Katz 1986, p 152). These processes would be difficult if not impossible to discover using conventional quantitative techniques such as surveys.

Regarding media repertoire formation, the study exposed a relationship between the non-news affordances of media and the reach of strategic narratives which has not previously

received much attention. The 'soft power' literature argues that movies and entertainment content can be 'attractive' to audiences and have persuasive power in their own right (Nye 2004). However, their potential role in drawing audiences to news sources that convey varying interpretations of global politics is not mentioned. The international broadcasters most frequently associated with non-coercive influence are 24-hour news channels (such as CCTV, Alhurra, Al Jazeera and RT), which do not offer obvious non-news affordances. News seems likely to reach larger audiences, more regularly, if it is embedded in a popular multifunctional platform like Russia's Yandex, or shown on channels that include popular entertainment programmes. This aspect of the strategic narrative reception process merits attention in future efforts to explain non-coercive influence.

The media repertoires of the Odesa diarists raise something of a question mark over the received wisdom that consuming news from a diverse range of sources is more normatively desirable than consuming news within a 'filter bubble' that excludes attitude-discrepant content. Among the diarists, it was predominantly the Russia-leaning participants who actively sought out different points of view – but in doing so, they accessed sources linked to the Russian state that are associated with deliberately misleading reporting. The practice of 'cross-checking' is recommended by media literacy advocates, but the Ukrainian case suggests that habitual cross-checking does not necessarily go hand in hand with media literacy, if cross-checking takes place with insufficient regard for source accuracy.

The Ukrainian case similarly disrupts the assumption that audiences support a foreign state's strategic narrative because they are 'vulnerable' to its influence activities. To describe an audience as vulnerable implies that it is excessively credulous, lacks critical thinking skills or perhaps lacks access to good quality journalism. In the present study, the

participants who sympathised with Russia's strategic narrative were no more credulous nor deprived of good journalism than their 'West-leaning' and 'non-aligned' counterparts. One cannot therefore attribute their attitudes solely to interaction between misleading Russian media content and their naivety. In fact, the 'Russia-leaning' participants did not particularly trust Russian sources and their views were shaped through exposure not only to the Russian narrative, but also to the fiercely anti-Russian Ukrainian narrative, which infuriated them. Their infuriation at the Ukrainian narrative can be traced to their personal, social connections to Russia which they valued and perceived as threatened by Ukrainian politicians who had given them nothing in return. The present study thus supports the idea that social and communication 'linkage' to a foreign state (Levitsky and Way 2010) at the individual level can play a role in strategic narrative reception. Linkage generates practical and emotional reasons for some Ukrainians to value friendly relations with Russia (Szostek 2017b), setting them at loggerheads with their government, which presents ties to Russia as thoroughly undesirable.

The present study has exposed complexities in what 'credibility' means when it is applied to narratives in the news. Within International Relations, credibility has previously been described as 'an important source of soft power' (Nye 2004, p 106), but it has usually been presented as the straightforward product of honesty and good reputation. Studying how the Odesa diarists responded to news has shown that credibility also depends on whether sources and narratives address the issues of most concern to the audience, with scepticism elicited by what gets ignored, as well as what gets said. It should not be surprising that people negotiate the meanings of news with reference to their values and experiences. Decades of work on 'interpretive communities' have shown personal experience playing a

central part in how people negotiate the meanings of other genres, including soap operas and literature (Schrøder 1994).

At present, Russia, the United States and other Western countries are all keen for Ukrainians to use 'their' media and support 'their' narrative of political events. Politicians and some journalists tend to 'fight' the opponent's narrative by vociferously criticising the opponent's misconduct. The resulting repetitive and one-sided attributions of blame risk alienating the 'unconverted' among the general population, who may perceive elites as dodging responsibility and avoiding more important issues. A lot of effort is currently directed into exposing and debunking 'fake news' in the Russian media. Yet the credibility of the Russian narrative among the 'Russia-leaning' section of Ukrainian society is not based solely on their confidence in particular facts, but also on their priorities, which cannot be debunked. The 'persuasive power' of the Russian narrative among a minority of Ukrainians comes not from propagandistic news alone, but also from people's memories of their grandparents, and this is what makes it difficult for competing messengers to overcome.

**Appendix: Participant details**

| Participant ID | Gender | Age group | Foreign policy preference |
|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | f | 50 to 59 | West-leaning |
| P3 | f | 18 to 29 | Russia-leaning |
| P6 | m | 60-plus | West-leaning |
| P8 | m | 40 to 49 | Non-aligned |
| P9 | f | 18 to 29 | Non-aligned |
| P10 | m | 30 to 39 | Russia-leaning |
| P11 | f | 50 to 59 | Russia-leaning |
| P13 | m | 30 to 39 | West-leaning |
| P14 | f | 30 to 39 | West-leaning |
| P17 | f | 30 to 39 | West-leaning |
| P19 | f | 60-plus | West-leaning |
| P25 | f | 40 to 49 | West-leaning |
| P26 | m | 18 to 29 | Non-aligned |
| P27 | f | 30 to 39 | Russia-leaning |
| P28 | f | 30 to 39 | Russia-leaning |
| P29 | m | 18 to 29 | Non-aligned |
| P30 | m | 30 to 39 | Russia-leaning |
| P31 | f | 50 to 59 | Russia-leaning |
| P32 | m | 18 to 29 | Russia-leaning |
| P45 | f | 40 to 49 | Non-aligned |
| P50 | m | 50 to 59 | West-leaning |
| P51 | m | 50 to 59 | West-leaning |
| P54 | f | 50 to 59 | Russia-leaning |
| P56 | m | 40 to 49 | Non-aligned |
| P61 | f | 18 to 29 | Russia-leaning |
| P62 | m | 18 to 29 | West-leaning |
| P63 | m | 40 to 49 | Russia-leaning |
| P65 | m | 18 to 29 | Russia-leaning |
| P66 | f | 50 to 59 | West-leaning |
| P68 | f | 18 to 29 | Non-aligned |

**Notes**

[1] See, for example, 'Turchinov ob informatsionnoy voyne: RF otrabotala formulu 'snachala prikhodyat rossiyskiye SMI, potom – tanki'', 2 September 2016, available

https://112.ua/obshchestvo/turchinov-ob-informacionnoy-voyne-rf-otrabotala-formulu-snachala-prihodyat-rossiyskie-smi-potom--tanki-335936.html; RIA Novosti 'Glazyev: SShA nachinayut 'mirovuyu gibridnuyu voynu' v ekonomicheskikh tselyakh' 8 April 2015, available https://ria.ru/world/20150408/1057389630.html; 'US Lists 10 More 'False' Russian Claims on Ukraine', 13 April 2014, available http://www.voanews.com/a/us-lists-10-more-false-russian-claims-on-ukraine/1892650.html.

[2] The screener questions asked about age, gender, place of residence, employment (people employed in politics, journalism or public opinion research were excluded from the study) and foreign policy views. The question about foreign policy views asked: 'There are different opinions about what Ukraine's foreign policy should be in the next 10 years. Which of the following positions is closest to your opinion? (1) Ukraine should continue to pursue cooperation with Western countries and distance itself from Russia; (2) Ukraine should restore relations with Russia and distance itself from Western countries; (3) Ukraine should find a balance between cooperation with Russia and cooperation with Western countries.

[3] ''There was heroism and cruelty on both sides': the truth behind one of Ukraine's deadliest days', 30 April 2015, available https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/30/there-was-heroism-and-cruelty-on-both-sides-the-truth-behind-one-of-ukraines-deadliest-days.

[4] For example, a survey commissioned by the International Republican Institute in early 2017 found that 39 per cent of Odesa residents would choose to join the European Union over the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, against 34 per cent of residents who would choose the Russia-led Customs Union over the EU. 'Ukraine Poll: Local Outlook Improves as National Pessimism Remains High', 10 April 2017, available http://www.iri.org/resource/ukraine-poll-local-outlook-improves-national-pessimism-remains-high.

[5] For example, the initial coding frame included codes for the heuristics which people used to judge credibility, identified in previous research (the presence/absence of verification materials, source reputation and so on).

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## Tables

*Table 1: Illustrative quotes for the theme of non-news affordances as an explanation for media repertoire formation*

| | |
|---|---|
| 'If there's one of those Turkish soap operas, I'm watching it beforehand, then it just smoothly switches to the news.' (P1) | 'I turn on the computer, go to mail.ru, check my email inbox. And there, right away, you've got a list of news stories.' (P56) |
| 'You turn on the TV an hour before the series. And beforehand there's a news bulletin. You're waiting, preparing to watch the film and you catch the news bulletin whether you like it or not.' (P19) | 'For me, 60 per cent comes from [file-sharing site] ex.ua. There's a news feed, it's very convenient. I choose cartoons there [for my children], and at the same time I look at the news feed.' (P45) |

*Table 2: Illustrative quotes for the theme of spontaneous browsing as an explanation for media repertoire formation*

| | |
|---|---|
| '[I watch] them all without exception, you sit and click… I don't care which channel gives me information. Google, Yandex, TV. The essence doesn't really change from that.' (P8) | 'I want to listen to news and I have 15 minutes while the kids are occupied with something. I look, on one [channel] there are adverts, on another – a show, and on the third [channel] there's news. That's where I stop.' (P14) |
| 'Sometimes I didn't look at all at what site I was reading news on. I opened Yandex, there were 10 options, [and I picked] a couple of them.' (P27) | 'You type something into the search engine and don't particularly choose. The first thing you come across, the first site that's offered, that's where you go.' (P26) |

*Table 3: Illustrative quotes for the theme of attitude discrepancy as an explanation for media repertoire formation*

| | |
|---|---|
| 'I stopped watching [Ukrainian channel] *Inter* about a year ago… Why? I didn't have the strength to watch it any more… And especially when specific pro-Russian [content] started [to appear], that was it… I thought, why clog up my brain?' (P25) | 'Since I stopped watching Ukrainian channels I only read news on the internet and I like that I don't have to read all kinds of rubbish, just the things that interest me… I took the TV and put it on top of the fridge and don't even switch it on.' (P30) |
| 'I watched [Ukrainian channel *1+1*] for 20 minutes and realised, praise God that I don't [usually] watch Ukrainian news, then I turned it off… It's all so zombified.' (P28) | 'I turn on [Russian state channel] *Pervyy Kanal*. You listen to a bit and you don't feel like listening any more… it's offensive to listen to.' (P50) |

*Table 4: Illustrative quotes for the theme of perceived vested interests among media owners as an indicator of low credibility*

| | |
|---|---|
| 'One [channel] bites [Interior minister] Avakov, another bites someone else, one praises [oligarch media owner] Kolomoyskyy, another praises [oligarch media owner] Akhmetov… The news here is all paid for, everyone should understand it...' (P6) | 'Regarding political news and their objectivity, whether Russian or Ukrainian, whoever owns the channel, they dance to his tune… I'll say it again, whoever pays the piper picks the tune.' (P32) |
| 'The TV channels belong to some oligarch, some party or some government. They are financed by someone. So the one paying, he needs them to say what he needs them to say. It's all very clear.' (P30) | 'It's clear that all our media belong to particular oligarchs and this really distorts how facts are presented. So, they naturally try to manipulate society and promote the interests of their sponsors.' (P25) |

*Table 5: Illustrative quotes for the theme of repetitive one-sided blame attribution as an indicator of low credibility*

| | |
|---|---|
| 'I'm just sick of hearing it… It's raining, it's Putin's fault. Putin is waiting for me to get constipation, if I get constipation Putin will be glad. Well, it's just… [ridiculous].' (P63) | 'News in Ukraine comes in two categories: it's great to live here, and Russia is guilty of everything, look how shitty it is over there… We haven't won yet but it's all Putin's fault and everything is bad in Russia.' (P30) |
| 'We're waiting for Russia to be blamed for Hurricane Matthew… My God, it's madness… They just whip up this hysteria.' (P65) | 'If they constantly say about a person that he's so bad, so bad, that means somebody needs him to [seem] bad.' (P45) |

*Table 6: Illustrative quotes for the theme of credibility being evaluated by issue importance rather than accuracy*

| | |
|---|---|
| 'Why are we discussing the elections in Russia… elections in Ukraine are far more important. Because nothing will change in Russia. It's a fascist country… But here, despite Maidan and despite the war, nothing has changed either.' (P51) | 'Everyone is talking about abstract things, that we'll travel to Europe without visas. But I've been hearing that for two years and I haven't gone to Europe with or without a visa… Meanwhile I've started to work twice as much for half as much money.' (P30) |
| 'They've been going on about the topic [of relations with the EU] for so long, discussing it so much… I get the feeling they want, well, to distract people from real problems, to be blunt.' (P29) | 'There's far too much information about Russia… about our war with them, our arms. Nobody gets around to the real problems… the fact that quality of life is falling every year…' (P26) |

*Table 7: Illustrative quotes for the theme of credibility being assessed with reference to personal experiences, memories and family ties*

| | |
|---|---|
| 'A programme about a military dynasty was broadcast… which gives viewers a positive image of a Russian officer [thus violating Ukrainian legislation]. Strange, my grandfather was a Russian officer. So, what of it?' (P10) | 'My father works in the port and until 2014 the work was fine because the port mainly worked for Russia… A paper came from Kyiv ordering to stop, to ban Russian ships... I lost my job, he lost his job… There should be removal of all the sanctions and a return to economic cooperation.' (P65) |
| 'I have loads of relatives in Russia, and now it turns out we have a political crisis… Am I not supposed to talk to anyone, even though the people there are absolutely decent, normal people? … Well it's nonsense.' (P32) | 'A visa regime with Russia? What? It's totally absurd! So, to visit my grandmother's grave I must go to the Foreign Ministry and ask for permission, dear Foreign Ministry, can I go and place some flowers [on granny's grave]? My God!' (P61) |