

***Managing Meaning in Ukraine: Information, Communication, and Narration since the Euromaidan Revolution* by Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2023, 166 pp., ISBN 9780262374576**

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What role does Ukraine's national branding play in securing support during the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022? While the question might seem self-evident, it underscores the critical importance of strategic communication and crafting a national image as potential game-changers in times of war and crisis. Ukraine's image on social and traditional media has played an essential role in mobilizing global solidarity, organizing fundraising campaigns, and garnering support in the realm of public diplomacy. However, this image was not built overnight or in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg, in their book *Managing Meaning in Ukraine: Information, Communication, and Narration Since the Euromaidan Revolution*, offer a comprehensive analysis of Ukraine's strategic communication efforts since its Independence, with a particular focus on the messaging crafted after the Revolution of Dignity.

Examining Ukraine's trajectory over the eight years leading to the 2022 invasion, the authors highlight the role of non-state actors in shaping perceptions both nationally and internationally. By delving into the evolution of Ukraine's informational strategies, Bolin and Ståhlberg provide profound insights into the workings of modern informational states and the fragmented nature of storytelling in today's hyper-mediated world. While the connection between strategic communication post-2014 and the latest events in Ukraine is undeniable (something that Bolin and Ståhlberg also mentioned in the introduction), the scope of this book extends beyond the construction of a Ukrainian brand. It explores the strategic efforts of various actors in building nation branding across post-Soviet states. As the authors aptly state, "*This book is about Ukrainian preparations for a worst-case scenario, the fruits of which can now be watched on screens all over the world.*" (p. 11)

Using the lens of representation theory and Stuart Hall's work, alongside Bourdieu's field theory, this book begins with a theoretical framing of information work in Ukraine during pivotal historical events. Bolin and Ståhlberg selected a particularly productive time frame for their analysis—from 2013 (encompassing the Revolution of Dignity and the annexation of Crimea) to 2019 (a few years before the full-scale invasion). Through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and media analysis, they explore how Ukraine's image was crafted for the global stage. Crucially, their research on meaning-making is rooted in a broader understanding of Ukrainian history and key events, such as the Revolution on Granite and the Orange Revolution. For a more nuanced analysis of Ukraine's contemporary communication landscape, it is essential to consider these historical milestones. Understanding Ukraine's representation at Eurovision after the Revolution of Dignity, for example, requires a grasp of the context from 2004, just as the influence of the Revolution on Granite can be seen in shaping the two subsequent revolutions in Ukraine.

This book consists of an introduction and five chapters, each one discussing different aspects of building messages for Ukraine's representation and branding campaign. As stated by the authors, the aim of this book is *"to analyze the management of meaning in Ukraine and to discuss how information policy is formed at the intersection of state politics, corporate business, and civil society activism"* (p. 13) and they use a qualitative approach to achieve this aim.

The first chapter focuses on key theoretical concepts the authors explore for the analysis. They critique the traditional understanding of "propaganda" and "information warfare", trying to underline the nuances of how meaning is constructed and managed in strategic communication. The authors propose a focus on *"the management of meaning through stories, narratives, images"* and the interplay between various actors in shaping perceptions, setting the stage for the broader analysis of Ukraine's communication strategies.

The second chapter focuses on the diverse actors involved in shaping Ukraine's narratives, including government officials, PR professionals, journalists, and civil society activists. It highlights the contributions of non-state actors in managing Ukraine's image both domestically and internationally, particularly during times of crisis and conflict. As they argue, *"These new actors bring professional ideas and work routines from their fields of origin, which impact the practice and expressive character of what has been termed information warfare."* (p. 14)

In Chapter 3, Bolin and Ståhlberg move from actors to forms of information management and explore the media platforms and technologies used to construct and disseminate narratives. From social media to traditional broadcast channels, the authors analyze how fragmented messages are shaped, circulated, and remediated. They also have quite an interesting discussion about the PowerPoint presentation and its role in understanding key strategic messages in the country branding, as they *"have become integrated into the contemporary media milieu in workplaces and in pro-*

*professional life, just as personal and niche media have become part of the everyday lives of citizens in Ukraine and elsewhere.”* (p. 94)

Chapter 4 explores events, such as the Eurovision Song Contest and the Revolution of Dignity, and analyzes how narratives about Ukraine were constructed and leveraged for global attention. The authors discuss how these events were used to project-specific messages to international audiences, blending cultural diplomacy with strategic communication. This chapter's conclusion shortly illustrates how even choosing a design for football team shirts for the European soccer championship can be a part of public diplomacy.

The final Chapter 5 synthesizes the findings and examines the broader implications of Ukraine's approach to information management. The authors reflect on how the diffusion of power among state, corporate, and civil society actors has transformed the nature of informational states. They argue that Ukraine's experience offers valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of communication and nation branding in the modern world. Bolin and Ståhlberg also highlight the theoretical distinction between the management of information and the management of meaning and point to decentralized information management in the case of Ukraine, where a lot of non-state actors were involved in strategic communication. They argue that the decentralized and collaborative model reflects a new form of informational state, where state and non-state actors work together to construct and disseminate narratives.

In a broader discussion, this book also focuses on the implications of the study for nation branding and public diplomacy. Specifically, Ukraine's case highlights how nation branding evolves in the context of crisis and conflict. Strategic communication became not only a tool for reputation management but also a means of survival in the face of external aggression. Authors believe that Ukraine's approach offers lessons for other states navigating the complexities of modern information warfare and public diplomacy.

As argued by Bolin and Ståhlberg, *“The construction of the national history of post-Soviet Ukraine in terms of its three revolutions can thus be said to build on a longer history of narrativization of historical events.”* In this perspective, the research they conducted not only explored nation-branding events in Ukraine but also positioned them in a broader context. This book is important for further research on branding the country in times of war – theoretical concepts applied by authors, their ethnographic work, and interviews are fundamental for understanding the process of building the image of Ukraine after the full-scale invasion.

Finally, this book can be an efficient guideline for studying national branding in times of conflict – using the case studies from Ukraine; it compiles the best practices for creating meaning and building the image of the country in turbulent times. This research underlines the importance of this image for future political debate and country positioning, building on a theoretical model of encoding and decoding of

messages. The authors pointed out that it is “*equally important to know how communication is organized and who has the mandate to organize it, irrespective of whether this mandate is given or appropriated. Appropriation, however, cannot be achieved out of the blue. There must be some kind of reference point that legitimizes the speaker’s authority to speak in the name of the state. This is why it is so important that nation branding campaigns have at least a small amount of funding from the state budget, as this link to the state administration is constitutive for the mandate and the power to speak in the name of the social whole*” (p.133).

Bolin and Ståhlberg challenge the way the image of Ukraine was built step-by-step since its Independence. Furthermore, this process of making meaning is still ongoing – gaining support for Ukraine during the war is also a part of nation branding that was started more than 30 years ago. As this book studied how key events in Ukraine were communicated and constructed in narratives, affective images, discourses, and news snippets spread out over a variety of media platforms, it also provides a framework for understanding contemporary strategic communication efforts in Ukraine.

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