

DOI: 10.51480/1899-5101.16.2(34).607

GÖRAN BOLIN & PER STÅHLBERG (2023): *MANAGING MEANING IN UKRAINE: INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION, AND NARRATION SINCE THE EUROMAIDAN REVOLUTION*, THE MIT PRESS, 166 PP., ISBN: 9780262374576, DOI: 10.7551/MITPRESS/14147.001.0001

The book *Managing Meaning in Ukraine. Information, Communication, and Narration Since the Euromaidan Revolution* written by Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg is very timely coming approximately a year after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The book doesn't focus on the ensuing events, but rather on the communication approach of Ukrainian-Russian relations during the previous decade. This enables the authors to seek answers about how and who narrated these relations in terms of meaning, technology, and communication channels.

The time frame of the research covers the Euromaidan revolution in 2013, followed by the annexation the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation a year later in 2014 and all ensuing events until 2019.

The main objects of the research are the management of both information and meaning after the Euromaidan events as the authors emphasize: "*Ukraine was perceived as almost invisible to the rest of the world and in need of a recognizable "face" and that "an urgent need for information management was expressed"*" (3,7). Indeed, the 2010s were fruitful in terms of communications strategies and innovations in information and meaning management, especially in the context of huge leaps in ICTs.

The book is based on more than six years of field research, 2013-2019, on branding, propaganda, and information and meaning management in Ukraine. The main research method is serendipity, since the study started just before the unexpected Euromaidan events and the authors state: "*It was not possible to demarcate a stable research field, and there was no way to plan exactly where and when to observe, who to meet, and what material to study*" (p. 16). However, the research framework is a little vague and based on improvisation. The common conclusions and tendencies found in the unstructured interviews are described to bring out specific results. The analysis builds on interviews with mass media representatives, PR consultants, political administrators, and brand designers but also on branding material, including the design of logotypes.

The main aim of the book is “to analyse 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. ... We argue that information management and policy must be understood as stories or narratives told by a plurality of agents—journalists, PR professionals, political administrators, and many others” (p. 13). Also, the authors emphasize the shift of power in the mass communication processes as PR professionals, the voluntary sector and user-generated information are turning into influential information sources. They bring to the table new channels, new content, and points-of-view during what is described by Bolin and Ståhlberg as “information warfare”.

The book’s structure consists of an introduction, five chapters, notes, references, and index with an aggregate of 166 pages. The book follows the typical research approach comprising a broad theoretical framework, followed by research analysis, and conclusions.

The methodology of describing historical events and thus seeking and explaining crossing points with communication approaches and meaning is quite appropriate for the research topic and helps the reader understand better and follow the steps and reasons for the research decisions. This is most visible in Chapter 1, as the authors explain the main terms starting from “revolution” and drawing comparisons between the Euromaidan Revolution and other historical events. The term “propaganda” is also explained and related to contemporary events and expressions such as disinformation, fake news, and information war. This way enables the authors to seek the semiotic meaning of the terms and how it relates to current information policy. The term “nation branding” is also explained as well as the views of the newly available means of communication, as a “*repertoire of available media has increased manifold*” (p. 34). The terms “meaning”, and “narrative” are also explained through the synergy of the literature review and historical facts, as well as “information management” and “meaning”, emphasized by the authors as “management of meaning”. The chapter introduces the reader thoroughly and deeply to the main phenomena.

The second chapter is dedicated to the managers of meaning. Alongside the government authorities as official information sources, there are more parties “*there are a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, and branding agencies involved in forming images and communicating information about Ukraine to international publics*” (p. 48). Next, the authors move on to the Ministry of Information Policy (MIP) in Ukraine as the official source of information and the way traditional media are used as “soft information power” narrating stories and shaping public opinion: “*The project of embedding journalists is, in this sense, a kind of outsourcing of the management of meaning to commercial media organizations*” (p. 54). The chapter describes the role of NGOs is and how they not only serve as a soft power but also through their activism they support the

government, although their trust in it is very low. The authors describe the use of public relations (PR) companies for communication purposes as well as the effect of technological advancement. This approach outlines the key players in communications and their roles in the processes of meaning dissemination and interpretation. The authors conclude that: *“What we see in Ukraine is not only a blurring of boundaries between organizational forms—between state, market, and voluntary organizations. It is also a blurring of boundaries between types of meaning-making activities—that is, what exactly the various organizations are working with”* (p. 66).

The third chapter is dedicated to information content, its creators, tools, and channels used for dissemination. The authors outline the importance of the meaning to influence a bigger proportion of the audience. The authors use examples to *“show how narratives and textual components circulate between media technologies and media forms in the contemporary landscape of mass, niche, and social media”* (p. 73). The principles of contemporary information circulation are explained and their crossing point with ‘information and meaning management’ in Ukraine during the research period. The case studies prove the authors’ hypotheses about the new means of communication and their effects. I would agree with their conclusion that *“Today, mass, niche, and personal media exist side by side and in symbiotic relationships with one another, not least in the area of news reporting and information dissemination...”* (p. 93).

In the fourth chapter, Bolin and Ståhlberg examine the messages themselves. They decided to analyse the media coverage of the Euromaidan Revolution as well as the 2017 Eurovision song contest. Alongside the conducted interviews, the chapter focuses on case studies analysis, which deepens and broadens the research and leads to more punctual conclusions. The narration and meaning in the messages are the chapter’s main focus, but also the context, political and societal factors. Besides culture (the Eurovision example), a sports case is also analysed to examine the meaning sent with channels beyond traditional and new media. This enables the authors to prove the functionality of information management in the context of their research.

In the last chapter, which serves as a conclusion, the authors summarize the results of their study. They emphasise the multiplication of both media technologies and communication genres. Messages, images, and narratives are disseminated across and between platforms, converging and complementing each other, and the audience has a growing role in the mass communication process. The authors stress the importance and definition of narrative, especially in crisis situations as those observed in the book. The authors conclude there are two important parts of strategic narratives: rhetoric oriented towards the goal fulfilment of the messages; and effects of how narratives are scripting behaviour. The role of the state as an information source is described, but also there are many more parties

involved in narration and information and meaning management. The authors conclude: “*The way Ukraine is presented domestically as well as to others around the world makes this particular story of three revolutions in the twenty-first century a semiotically, organizationally, and technologically complex and interpretatively challenging phenomenon. Whether it will also revolutionize the informational state remains to be seen in future research and analyses.*”

Besides being a timely publication, I think the book *Managing Meaning in Ukraine. Information, Communication, and Narration Since the Euromaidan Revolution* written by Göran Bolin, and Per Ståhlberg is valuable for providing a deep analysis of events prior to the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022. The book gives readers the bigger picture and helps to understand the underlying processes from a communication perspective. The authors describe the processes of information and meaning management in a multidisciplinary approach, which reflects the importance within the field of communication of both new key players and platforms. It will be interesting to see further development of this research for the events after 2019 as well as a mirrored analysis and a comparative to international and Russian approaches to communication strategies, and information and meaning management.

Ivan Valchanov

UNIVERSITY OF NATIONAL AND WORLD ECONOMY, SOFIA, BULGARIA