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Digital war diaries: Witnessing the 2022 Russian War against Ukraine

Svitlana Kot [ID], Alina Mozolevska [ID] and Olha Polishchuk [ID]

Department of Philology, Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University, Mykolaiv, Ukraine
Corresponding author: Alina Mozolevska; Email: alina.shkurat@gmail.com

Abstract

Digital media have changed the ways people mobilise and act collectively in times of crisis. During the Russian aggression against Ukraine, they have been at the forefront of war coverage giving users the possibility to share experiences of wartime reality. To critically engage in the mediatisation of the current war in the context of war witnessing, this article aims at studying the war diaries shared on media during the Russo-Ukrainian war. More precisely, this study focuses on the analysis of Facebook and MyWar platform digital war diaries that were triggered by Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine 2022. The article seeks to understand the main tools for experiencing and constructing wartime reality and war trauma. The experimental work presented here provides one of the first investigations into how wartime witnessing of Russian aggression is happening and how it is shared in the contemporary space of digital media and fosters intellectual discussion about the dynamics of digital participation while witnessing and narrating war experiences.

Keywords: war diaries; testimonies; social network; digital media; Russo-Ukrainian War

Introduction

The war in Ukraine, which began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbas, and particularly its nationwide escalation since 24 February 2022, is not only leading to significant shifts in the geopolitical landscape of Europe and the world but also causing widespread and massive disruptions in the personal geographies and histories of millions of people. As the Russian invasion extends further into Ukrainian territory, leaving deep scars of aggression, we witness thousands of stories of violence, loss, displacement, and resistance actively emerging, being shared, posted, and recirculated through both new and traditional media. The existential experience of living the war is transformed into content processed in real time by millions on various social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. Besides social media, there is a growing body of both open-access and restricted-access databases and online archives of oral and written war testimonials, which play a critical role in documenting and preserving the collective memory of the war of Ukrainians.[1]

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* These authors contributed equally.

[1] More detailed information can be found here: Docudays https://ukrainewararchive.org/, MyWar https://mywar.mkip.gov.ua, UA Witness https://uawitness.com/en/, Nurnberg 2022 https://www.nurnberg2022.org/en, War Crimes https://warcrimes.gov.ua/

This article seeks to analyse one of the written forms of war witnessing intensively used during full-scale phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War. More precisely, it investigates how digital war diaries published on MyWar and Facebook platform provide an insight into the shocking transformation of reality and everyday life of Ukrainians during the first year of the conflict. In the pages that follow, it will be argued that the current digital environment has changed the ways people witness, narrate, and document the warfare actively transforming the conventional notion of 'war diaries'. Further, it explores two prominent digital platforms, namely, MyWar and Facebook utilised by Ukrainians to document the war since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion. The analysis entails a comparison of how the two platforms shape narratives encompassing diverse war experiences and looks into how they evolve over time in relation to the unfolding war. In the next section, we provide a brief overview of the war testimonials genre and show how the current study fits into theoretical frameworks.

Digital witnessing: transforming war diaries in the digital age

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has exemplified the intricate dynamics of digital participation in the war. The beginning of the invasion was marked by the appearance of multiple testimonies in media spaces and on online networks. The platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram provided Ukrainians with the possibility to document the new reality and share the war-related episodes of life, experiences, and opinions in real time or shortly after the happening. Various studies emphasise that modern technology has been reshaping warfare through continuous personalised and individualised witnessing across different platforms (Boichak and Hoskins 2022, Hoskins and Shchelin 2023, Zasiekin *et al.* 2022). As Kerstin Schankweiler claims, 'new technologies have enabled individuals not only record, but also share their testimonies, which makes everyone a potential witness at any given time' (Schankweiler *et al.* 2018, 1). In a similar vein speaking about the Ukrainian context, Hoskins and Shchelin admit that 'millions of messages, images, and video, pouring out of the smartphones' (261) make the war against Ukraine 'unique in its unfolding through a prism of personalised realities, made and remade for individuals' (450). Such dynamics manifest the contemporary evolution of practices of witnessing and participation in times of conflicts. This new aspect of witnessing in the digital era called media witnessing (Frosh and Pinchevski 2011) or connective witnessing (Mortensen 2015) has attracted the attention of scholars since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Such practices have changed the ways of documenting and remembering the disruptive events by allowing the creation of multiple connections between individuals, groups, and societies in a mediatised networked environment (Hoskins 2011, 26) while also changing the relationship between the individual and the collective aspects of witnessing (Mortensen 2015, 1394). The testimonies, widely shared and remediated in the digital environment, collectively provide a public narrative about disruptive events, by making available the information 'in real-time on conditions of war, as well as on people's responses and adaptations to it' (Mark *et al.* 2012, 37). Forged and driven by new dynamics of digital environments, contemporary memories evolve 'along unpredictable trajectories, undergoing constant transformations and becoming more dynamic, ephemeral and fluid' (Camarda 2022, 339). Silvana Mandolessi argues, that today 'it is impossible to understand the mnemonic practices [...] without addressing the changes brought about by the digital turn' (Mandolessi 2023, 1513). Studying the evolution of collective memory and remembrance in the digital age, she claims that now 'the collective memory may be conceived of as a process, mediated and remediated by multiple media with the participation of dynamic communities that perform rather than represent the past', where the digital not only stores but also organizes the memory,

reshapes the agency of individuals, and provides space for the emergence of dynamic mnemonic assemblages instead of isolated mnemonic objects of the past (Mandolessi 2023).

The digital realm has also reshaped the understanding of witnessing. Today, it takes place on a massive scale and on different platforms simultaneously, creating 'collaborative possibilities for generating patterns of meaning' (Mortensen 2015, 1393). In this case, the witnessing it is not only limited to the act of bearing witness to something or being present as an observer (Oliver 2003: 133) but also means narrating 'a story based on personal observations and experiences that could "reach the hearts of men" and convey a moral judgment of what happened' (Pantti 2019:152). Thus, the current witnessing practices are not only limited to the act of passive observing but also involve active sharing with others through varied media networks within participatory digital environment. The central configuration of this new form of witnessing lies in the fact that 'the witnessing performed in, by, and through the media' which not only gives the possibility to media themselves bearing witness but also positions the audiences as potential witnesses to depicted events (Frosh and Pinchevski 2011, 1–3). The digital testimonies are not purely individual, and they are always co-constructed through the practices of sharing, commenting, tagging, linking, or liking (Murphy-Hollies and Bortolotti 2022, Page *et al.* 2013).

The 'witnessing fever' (Frosh 2019) which often feature zones of conflict exponentially increases the number of testimonial discourses and the new forms of witnessing, such as blogging, vlogging, live streaming, and image testimonials. This concomitantly provokes renewed interest to witnessing in such fields as journalism, media, and memory studies (Al-Ani *et al.* 2010, Cardell 2014, Douglas 2020, Holmes 2019, Kurasawa 2009, Mark *et al.* 2012, Qu *et al.* 2011, Starbird and Palen 2011, Zeitzoff 2017). Acknowledging the importance of new forms of witnessing, such studies investigate not only the multimodality of testimonies but also the relation between the production of witnessing and the construction of public opinion, between the witnessing practices and collective memory, between the storytelling, collective identities, and the self. For example, Smit *et al* focus on the analysis of the construction of the memory of the Syrian conflict via witnessing practices of YouTube (2017), while Al-Ani *et al.* investigate the personal and public aspects of blogs written by Iraqi civilians (2017). Also, a special focus is placed on the evolution of prevailing modes of witnessing during disruptive events of the last decade in the world. For example, the Arab uprisings were approached as the 'Facebook war' (Thompson 2016), while the Syrian conflict was declared as the 'first YouTube war' (Koettl 2014). Interestingly enough, the current Russo-Ukrainian war is described as the first 'TikTok war' (Chayka 2022, Friedman 2022) or the 'First Social Media War' (Ciuriak 2022) due to the innovative forms of narrating wartime experiences.

The recent proliferation of digital witnessing in response to conflicts demands revisiting the genre of a war diary. In the history of military conflicts, war testimonies in the form of diaries have always been an important tool not only chronicling the war experiences but also contributing to framing the public discourse of the war. In circumstances of military conflicts, the diary as a daily record that combines observations, reflections, and feelings becomes as Nebel claims 'the most appropriate written form in times of crisis' (Nebel 1948, 6). Focusing on the nature and functions of this cultural practice for both individual and social dimensions, various studies have already provided deep analysis of the forms and role of war diaries in previous conflicts (Augustyns 2020, Cochrane 2015, Dwyer 2009 Harari 2007, Kulinska *et al.* 2021, Mark *et al.* 2012, McNeill 2002). While few studies have investigated how written practices of witnessing and documenting the conflict transform into diary-style blogging on social media (Douglas 2020, Mark *et al.* 2012, Miller 2019), there is not enough research on the genre of the digital war diaries.

The study of digital war diaries, which are filled with personal experiences as a result of disruptive events, is impossible without referring to theories of trauma. As the violence and horrors of war are inevitably connected to the trauma, the war diaries are often studied as 'a tool of transforming trauma and a means of expressing anger and frustration' through the expression, reflection, and communication of traumatic events (Lejeune 2009, 194). This makes trauma one of the key categories of war diaries. Cathy Caruth, a leading researcher of trauma theory, emphasizes that trauma, 'is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that that is not otherwise available' (1996). Ukrainian researcher Tamara Hundorova gives the following definition, 'trauma is a constant and unconscious fear caused by explicit or implicit factors, when psychological defence mechanisms simply do not work', and further, 'it is not only a horrible thing that breaks into life, but also a loss that has a significant emotional and psychological effect, when in fact the subject himself becomes an archive of loss, a place where the memory of trauma is stored' (Hundorova 2013). A number of studies have begun to examine transformation, co-construction, re-distribution, and sharing of trauma in digital spaces (Ibrahim 2021, Menyhért 2017, Peters 2008, Tokgoz-Sahoglu 2019). In this case, digital narratives are considered one of the main facilitators of the sharing process, which is the first step to overcoming the trauma (Tokgoz-Sahoglu 2019, 99). Ukrainian war testimonials that tell the story of the current Russian aggression are no exception. They represent an attempt to overcome the 'constant and unconscious fear' and 'the horrors and the loss' (Hundorova 2013) by verbalising and sharing the war-related experiences of people.

Case and method: digital platforms and tools for analysis

After the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainians started to actively use social media platform to post and share their lived experiences of war. The usage of hashtags #war #wardiary #warchronicles #війна #щоденниквійни #хронікивійни #війнавУкраїні #щоденник helps to easily identify accounts that contain war narratives and makes them more visible in media. Data on Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram demonstrate that there have been more than 1000 publications under almost each of them. Moreover, there are offspring of the above-named hashtags such as #wardiariesukraine or #wardiaries2022 and others. However, the performative nature of the visual culture featuring Instagram and TikTok, the entertaining character of these platforms, and predominantly short rather than lengthy text posts contribute to the performative rather than the confessional disposition of the war diaries posted there. By contrast, Facebook with its predisposition to extended textual content becomes one of the most effective tools of such confessional public practices as war diaries. At the same time, we can observe some top-down initiatives to collect and preserve war testimonies. In the first months, apart from researchers and different NGOs involved in the war documentation, numerous projects for archiving war memories appeared, such as UA Witness, War archive, Archive of War Testimonies, War archive of DocuDays, Museum of Civil Voices, and War Stories of Ukraine World.[2] One of such platforms initiated by the Ukrainian government is called MyWar.[3] It was designed to provide 'an opportunity for every Ukrainian who witnessed

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[2] More detailed presentation of the projects can be found here: UA Witness https://uawitness.com, Warchive https://www.warchive.com.ua, Archive of war testimonies https://swiadectwawojny2022.org/, War archive of DocuDays https://ukrainewararchive.org/ Museum of Civil Voices (https://civilvoicesmuseum.org/en), UkraineWorld https://ukraineworld.org/articles/stories
[3] *MyWar*, https://mywar.mkip.gov.ua/ (currently available only in mobile version), created in February 2022 by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine.

the brutal war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine … to describe their history'. The platform contains about 4000 stories written in Ukrainian, Russian, and less often in English, and has the function of automatic translation into 1 of the 75 languages, which makes the content of the platform accessible by people from all over the world. Thus, we can state that digital space provided a number of valuable resources for the online response of Ukrainians who could find suitable means for the narration of war experiences and trauma processing during disruptive war events.

Taking into consideration the multiplicity and multimodality of the platforms involved in documenting the Russo-Ukrainian war, the research data in this paper are mainly drawn from Facebook and MyWar to compare different mechanisms of the mediatisation of war testimonials on independent social media and state platforms. While Facebook represents a social network for anyone that enables users to instantly share variable war-related content, MyWar offers an example of the institutionalisation of war memory, an important element of the memory politics of the Ukrainian government aimed at the preservation of the war testimonies and documentation of the war crimes. The multimodality of the chosen platforms which involve not only written testimonies but also often some visual extension to them can generate fresh insight into how the living memory of the war is being constructed in the digital space. Thus, the material is considered from the perspective of multimodal analysis which allows us to study not only the text but also the visual elements of the digital storytelling practice.

The dataset comprises Facebook diaries selected with the help of hashtags and stories from MyWar. As for our analysis, we are aware that the chosen data do not capture the actual diversity of various open-access sources of testimonies, but due to the impossibility to embrace such an amount of data in one study, we decided to limit it to two platforms, namely, MyWar and Facebook to show how two different types of platforms, ie, free open-access and state created are used as a space of war memory production. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this study. A quantitative approach was employed since it gave us the possibility to speak about the gender (im)balance, the geography of the practices, diversity of war experiences, frequency, longevity, and time span of posting. Criteria for selecting the subjects for analysis on these platforms were as follows: city of primary residence, period of keeping a war diary, the experience of displacement, occupation, and resistance. It is important to admit that the scope of the study only includes diaries written by civilians because it is a primary inclusion criterion.

We analysed 100 Diaries on both platforms with a miscellaneous number of posts (from 5 to over 500 entries). Facebook users were drawn from a pool of Ukrainian Facebook with recurrent posts under the hashtags #war #wardiary #warchronicles #війна #щоденниквійни #хронікивійни which allowed to qualify certain posts as 'war diaries'. Besides, posts that included hashtags marking the sequence of war days, eg, #1деньвійни (the first day of the war), #56деньвійни, #366деньвійни, etc were also scrutinised as it offers an effective way to track the dynamics of posting of the war diaries. However, the quantitative analysis of the Facebook posts was at times highly problematic as due to the impromptu nature of Facebook content, it was not possible to investigate the exact number of them due to cross-referencing, varied number of hashtags under each post, and the occasional occurrence of the same hashtags in posts different from the context of Russo-Ukrainian war and vice versa, while some post had the characteristics of a diary entry although not marked by any of the aforementioned hashtags. Therefore, a quantitative approach was employed to observe if the Facebook data comply with the MyWar platform concerning the frequency of posting and timeframes, and also geography, gender, and experience diversity.

In addition, we opt for qualitative data analysis that allows us to capture the complexities of the phenomenon of digital war diaries on Facebook as a media platform. As Highfield and Leaver in their paper *A methodology for mapping Instagram Hashtags* claim,

there has been a general tendency within Internet Studies towards quantitative-driven, large-scale projects using automated procedures to record and assess activity on social media sites. However, the researchers claim that some practices can be easily missed through automated studies. This is especially important for digital platforms which contain text, visuals, and video elements, like Facebook and Instagram because both the textual and graphic elements of a post provide important information and analysis must account for both. As there is a risk of overlooking visual and mixed media within a post, developing techniques for analysing both images and text is a key area for social media research (Highfield and Leaver 2015). Therefore, qualitative methods offer an effective way of comparing the thematic scope of war diaries on both MyWar and Facebook. The qualitative methodological approach employed in the article is mixed, integrating textual analysis with Internet-related ethnography methods (Postill and Pink 2012) to examine the construction of mediated war testimonies within digital spaces. Furthermore, the study utilises discourse and narrative analysis to explore the narrative dynamics and chronotope of Ukrainian digital war diaries (Vaara and Reff Pedersen 2013). This methodology provides insights into the processes of constructing war testimonies through the aforementioned platforms.

Digital testimonies: exploring the structure and content of war diaries on MyWar and Facebook

The platform MyWar offers a large variety of war diaries. The landing page of the site invites eyewitnesses of 'the violence and atrocities of the war' to share their experiences 'with the world'. There are two ways to scroll through the stories – they can be sorted (1) by the number of reads and (2) by the activity of the authors that continue to keep their war diaries. The platform also enables the inclusion of texts, photographs, and videos from YouTube, allowing users to share their experiences through the site's multimodality. Such multimodality not only allows to create connections between different platforms used but also increases the visibility of the wartime testimonies on digital media. The identities of the witnesses are not concealed,[4] which helps to increase the credibility and truthfulness of the stories narrated on MyWar.

The majority of the entries are written in the narrator's mother tongue. Nonetheless, there are also instances in which the narrators openly admit that although Russian is their first language, they purposefully switched to Ukrainian during the invasion's full swing. This is a significant sign of how aware during the war one becomes of their nationality and cultural heritage. Furthermore, the automated translation feature allows access to diary entries in a variety of languages which significantly increases MyWar platform's potential readership. The primary purposes of the platform can be characterised as gathering and archiving war testimonies, as well as facilitating the co-construction and supporting of official war narratives. Given this functionality and the fact that MyWar was created as a Ukrainian government effort, this might be aimed at counteracting Russian propaganda manipulation in the context of the armed conflict. In contrast to MyWar, Facebook war diaries are primarily used to share personal experiences of living through the Russo-Ukrainian war performing a mnemonic function.

The comprehensive analysis of war diaries on both platforms reveals insights into unique perspectives and experiences of those affected by the war. The analysis of gender distribution on MyWar demonstrates that women's voices prevail over men's: 80 per cent of narrators are women and only 20 per cent are men, which is even more visible on

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[4] Every story includes an author's name, age, hometown, and, often, links to their Facebook or Instagram accounts.

Facebook with 87 per cent of war diary author's being female. The analysis also demonstrates that the authors of the war diaries on both platforms have diverse experiences of war including but not limited to occupation, displacement (30%–40%), and resistance and volunteering (60%). However, while on Facebook the stories of living under the occupation are rare, on MyWar, 40 per cent of users actively articulate this experience. The geographical diversity of these stories covers almost the entire territory of Ukraine, but the war diaries from cities adversely affected by Russian military aggression are the most common. These are mainly the cities that are closer to border regions such as Chernihiv, Kyiv, Bucha, and Irpin which are located in the North of Ukraine, Kharkiv and Sumy which are in the East, and Mariupol and Mykolaiv which are in the South.[5] The stories of people from Dnipro, Odesa, Lviv, Zhytomyr, and small towns in Donbas are also present. These cities have become centres of volunteer aid, often a transit point between the front and the rear. We can evidence similar geographic visibility of different regions of Ukraine in both Facebook and MyWar diaries, although the entries from users from big industrial cities are more frequent with the most number of war diaries written by the Kyiv citizens (53% on Facebook and 20% on MyWar in comparison to the rest of the cities altogether).

The analysis of war diaries on both platforms also uncovers varied approaches to documenting the conflict, with notable differences in the timing, consistency, and narrative structure of entries. One anticipated finding was that Facebook users treated the platform for chronicling every day of the war starting from the very first day of the full-scale invasion and on. Many of those who post every or almost every day marked their posts with the number of the day in the war, eg, 'День 375',[6] or 'the night in the metro on February 25–26th', '#2деньвійни'.[7] The analysis also demonstrated that the approach of users to the war diary was different with some keeping the practice through the whole period of war and documenting or posting the facts of their lives as a part of their war diary. Other users intermingle the diary entries on their feed with other types of posts and reposts. Such nonlinear organisation of the narrative features only Facebook, while MyWar platform allows the reader to access the entire diary at once, where the posts are organised according to the date and present a continued linear story. Most of the stories on MyWar (about 65%) begin –3–7 days after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, less often – people start writing only a month after the experienced events. It is worth noting that some of the diaries are very short and contain the chronicles of several weeks or in some cases several days of the life experiences of the witnesses and end when people are evacuated to safer places. The authors of 70 per cent of MyWar diaries stopped keeping them at the end of March – beginning of April, 20 per cent of diaries stopped being written in August 2022, and only 10 per cent of narrators continue writing till December 2022.[8] Half (50%) of Facebook users' diaries is being kept consistently until today. The other half featured either intermittent fragmented posts of the genre occurring until today (27%) or had a certain number of such posts mainly in the first weeks or months of the war (23%). Data demonstrate that the number of posts of the genre increases at the end of the first week of the war (19 posts on the sixth day in comparison to 1 post on the first day) and fluctuates with the highest frequency devoted to certain 'milestones' of the war, eg, the 100th day of the war and gradual decrease in activity the longer the war lasts.

The observed fluctuation between diary posting reflects the complex interplay between the psychological toll of documenting the traumatic experiences and participatory nature

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[5] Russian soldiers crossed the Ukrainian border from those three directions.
[6] Day 375.
[7] The second day of the war.
[8] We assume that MyWar platform is not functioning well at the moment as the entries for 2023 are absent.

of digital media promoting the process. A significant increase in the number of war diary posts in the first days, weeks, and months of war might be fuelled by the turning point in the personal and collective history of the majority of Ukrainians. Multiple posts describe 24th of February, 2022, to preserve the details of the beginning of the full-scale invasion. The first days of the war urged numbers of people to actively share their new agonising experiences of staying the nights in the bomb shelters, seeing explosions and deaths. The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is that the Russian invasion and thus the radical change in their life situation urged many users to share on social media and web platforms like MyWar posts which resemble diary entries. As emotional tension decreased and life for them returned to some sort of normality, they stopped posting their war diaries. This observation suggests that the two platforms serve as crucial trauma-coping tools which help to process dramatic changes in the everyday lives of thousands of Ukrainians. The decline in posting frequency on both platforms indicates that many users struggle to maintain consistency in posting their diaries. They admit the mental burden of recounting 'the memories that one wants to erase from one's life' (Oksana, Lviv, Facebook, 24.02.2023) and an urge to stop writing. Despite this, encouragement and messages from the readers urged them to continue posting. Some authors claim that they keep the diary not only for themselves but also for others. One of the authors even says that he does it for the future generation, for his small daughter who might want to read about the days and months of the war in the far future. Thus, the co-constructive environment of the social networks and the public visibility enables the user to share their chronicles of the war despite the fatigue and traumatising events.

The war strongly manifests itself in Facebook war diaries through the visual content emphasising the traumatic experience of witnessing 'the devastated world'. Posts on Facebook often contain intermittent video diaries indicating the number of days of the war, describing and showing war daily routine: nights in the bomb shelters, air raids, and missile attacks. The videos of the first days of war featured explosions, air attacks, tanks, and military planes displaying intense emotions and exposing spaces impacted by the war. Among the most frequently occurring or recurrent subject matters is 'the before and after' chronotype which often manifests itself in photos of life before and comparison of it with war times, or juxtaposition of dreadful aspects of life at the wartime and positive things in the life before the war. The photos of the places and spaces ruined by the war often go together with the demonstration of them in pre-war times or posts of the pre-war photographs of personal life as deliberate reminiscences of the peaceful past. Unlike other similar social networks like Instagram where despondency, gloominess, and dramatic symbolism of the war are exposed mainly through paintings and graphic images, Facebook users often complement their posts with dramatic pictures of places demolished by war portraying explosion craters, burnt or shelled cars, and buildings. Facebook war diaries are dominated by multiple photos of residential buildings hit and destroyed by missiles which emphasise the concept of 'lost home' portraying household items or pets waiting for their lost masters. Besides, the hashtags of war diaries are often added to the posts of various digital commemoration practices featuring or dead soldiers and their funerals, military cemeteries and soldier graves, former battlefields with crashed tanks, weapons, and cars, as well as the exchange of prisoners, or wounded military.

The war-related content shared, integrated into someone's private feed, and coded as war diaries indicate sharing the collective war experience rather than personal experience of loss and grieving and showcasing the participatory mechanisms of digital media. The common tendency is that personal war diaries repeatedly refer to the atrocities and hardships of war somebody else has endured, rarely exposing a user as a victim. In this way, war diaries sometimes became a solid ground for releasing negative emotions both

personal and as a part of the collective disdain. There are multiple posts on MyWar not only criticising the politics, propaganda, and actions of the Russians but also expressing hatred and negative emotions against both those who are actively participating and who are being passive, or cursing the enemies, and wishing perpetrators the same suffering as that of their victims. The traumatic experience manifests itself is by relating to the pain of others, sympathising or expressing shared hatred against perpetrators. While on Facebook, the personal traumatic experience is sometimes externalised through poems, paintings, and other artistic practices, on MyWar artistic representations of the war are absent. Instead, users tend to upload photo evidence of the Russian aggression or visual testimonies of their life under occupation.

Naturally, there are multiple posts of war diaries on Facebook and MyWar which recount the unsettling experience of people displaced by the Russo-Ukrainian War. On Facebook, in such posts, users compare their travelling experience before the war and the journey as a refugee. These posts frequently feature a detailed account of harrowing journeys accompanied by photographs of buses and crowded stations, maps of routes, and complicated itineraries. Maps, landscapes, and symbolic images connected with Ukraine like blue and yellow hearts emoji, or the emoji of the Ukrainian flag are extremely common manifesting the consolidation of Ukrainian identity across various social networks. On MyWar, which engage less visual content, the expression of Ukrainian identity and solidarity is manifested through the choice of profile picture with blue and yellow background, vyshyvanka, or other national symbols (every fifth account contains such symbols). The experience of displacement is conveyed through textual narratives focusing on the emotional state of being displaced rather than travel trajectories, 'We are leaving .... The heart hurts. We are leaving. This is terrible. I have a headache and I'm constantly shaking. Trying to concentrate on my breathing and relax. It doesn't work' (Olha, Zhytomyr, MyWar, 24.02.2022).

The analysis of the content of war diaries posted on MyWar and Facebook demonstrated that the war testimonies encompass several major thematic directions such as stories of survival in occupied regions or areas close to the frontline, stories of evacuation from dangerous regions, the stories of civil resistance and volunteering. The variety of experiences can be explained by the large scale of the Russian invasion and the impact it has on the life of a particular person. For example, chronicles from Mariupol[9] bear witness to a harrowing testimonies of survival amidst bombardment, scarcity of food, water, electricity, and connection to the external world, destruction of homes, profound losses of family, and friends. Their existential experience of survival organises the plot of the diaries and fills them with a reflection on life, death, and other existential questions. The stories which come from western regions of Ukraine less affected by war, like Lviv,[10] do not narrate or reflect horrors of the war but refer to its catastrophic consequences. Such stories are full of fear and uncertainty while showing dedication and willingness to help others. The digital war diaries of users from the southern and central regions of Ukraine narrate a difficult choice between displacement, looking for refuge in the west of Ukraine and abroad or staying home under the threat of the approaching war. Individuals, who opted to remain in Ukraine despite the awareness of the danger, also describe their volunteering aimed at helping both the Ukrainian military and internally displaced persons,

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[9] Large industrial city in the south-eastern part of Ukraine which was seized by Russians in the very first weeks of the war.

[10] City in the western Ukraine close to the Polish border which welcomed thousands of refugees in the first days of the war.

In two hours, they collected four cars of food [...] And it went on ... day after day ... Purchasing, searching drugstores, volunteer centres, checkpoints, pest control, hospitals ... At school, everyone was actively weaving camouflage nets ... (Iryna, Dnipro, MyWar, 26.02.2022).

Within the vast array of war experiences and life trajectories narrated in the forms of digital war diaries, it is possible to identify several predominant thematic tendencies that are intrinsic to all such diaries attributed to the profound shock induced by the exposure to warfare. These include existential themes of the liminality between life and death, the distortion of the perception of time and space, making the sense of the new reality imposed by war, narrating the self in times of war, and construction of the image of the other. The section that follows focuses on these peculiarities of narrating war experiences in more detail.

Trapped in the present: time–space disruptions in Ukrainian digital war diaries

Time and space became the central topics of many entries on Facebook and MyWar which marked the sharp transformation of the lives of the narrators and made it one of the inevitable elements of the process of expressing traumatic experiences of the current war. In their studies of Holocaust diaries, Golderg *et al.* argue that the narration in war diaries is not linear and 'differs completely from the continuous temporality of the life story' (2017 36), reflecting the temporal distortion created by the trauma. The traumatic events experienced by the author of the diary impact the way he or she perceives the continuity and motion of time (Goldberg *et al.* 2017 40). This phenomenon is vividly present in digital diaries which depict dynamic relation between individuals living the war and the changing war-affected environment. It is necessary to consider that in this article we analyse the diaries of the witnesses that are still living through the war and their diaries in many cases represent an immediate reaction to what people were experiencing at that moment. The fact that the war is not over does not allow people to distance themselves from the events or to have time for deep reflections on the historical significance of the moment. Users of Facebook and MyWar are concentrated on the present moments of living the war and try to document in detail major disruptive events as well as everyday routines during wartime. The power of the present and the impossibility to plan or think about the distant future produces a sense of uncertainty which causes a significant transformation of time–space perception and impacts the way the users narrate their stories.

The date 24 February 2022, in the majority of stories, is the beginning of the narration and, in fact, the point of bifurcation, when the usual reality of millions was split into before and after. On MyWar and Facebook, it is possible to find very detailed descriptions of the first minutes or first hours of the invasion. For example, Dasha from Bucha (Kyiv region) writes, 'The 24th of February. Bucha. I wake up at 6 in the morning without an alarm clock, I go to the shower and in a half-asleep state I hear two very loud explosions in a row' (Bucha, Facebook, 24.02.2022). Some people learn about the war from the messages or phone calls from their relatives. 'On the 24th of February at 5:25, I got an unexpected call from Odesa from my brother Andriy, 'The war has begun!', Cities are being bombed!' (Yeliena, Gostomel, MyWar, 24.02.2022).

The diaries demonstrate that even though the reality of war invades people's lives differently, it changes their plans and aspirations and provokes feelings of ontological insecurity and the fragmentation of space. Some of the users even call this day 'the end of the world'. The narrators share the same feeling of the historical importance of this date which is seen as not only one of the major events in their personal histories but has a larger geopolitical dimension. In the posts, users express their complicity in the current massive historic shifts and desire to keep the memory of that,

There are events in life that millions remember and then everyone remembers what they did at that very moment. Let's say I remember September 11, what I did, and where I was. So now, in the conversations of refugees, it is discussed who did what at 5 am on February 24th (Volodymyr, Odesa/Kyiv, Facebook, 05.03.2022).

The repetitive attacks of the Russian troops also evoke strong feelings of anxiety about the present and fear of the future that suddenly became vague and unclear. Such disintegration leads to the intensification of the sense of territorial belonging. Users often express their strong connection to the native places, be it the birthplace or the place of living, often by tagging them, like this Facebook user from Dnipro,

23 days that changed consciousness … desires and meaning of life … I dreamed of moving, living in another country, because I was amazed by our people and I liked Europeans with their joy of life and lower demand … Now I want to stay and I am staying (Maryna, Dnipro, Facebook, 18.03.2022).

In case people had to leave the place and go somewhere as a refugee, they also share the experience of uprootedness and uncertainty. Similar to the caption in the Facebook illustration which says, 'Now my life fits into a suitcase', one of the users writes about Ukrainians scattered all over the place,

I'm far away, and my friends are scattered all over the country, all over the world. The war shortens the time, strangers are no longer strangers, as they have already been sleeping with us on the underground floor for eleven days. It hurts, that you can't see your dear and near people, as you used to see them … (Alyona, Kyiv, Facebook, 06.03.2022)

People narrate their experience of homelessness and transition which is a result of the complicated life decisions of leaving their homes,

The decision to leave our home in Mykolaiv and then our parents' home in Voznesensk was not an easy one. I have just stumbled upon my keys to our Mykolaiv apartment and burst into tears again (Kateryna, Mykolaiv, Facebook, 7.03.2022).

For those who stayed in shelled cities, there are challenges that they narrate. A new uncertain and hostile environment leads to radical changes in the life routine modified by the war, which is one of the major themes in the dairies,

Tomorrow will be exactly one month since the start of the war. A month, which divided our lives into before and after (a little pathetic, but as it is). For a month we have never spent the nights at home. A month, as the bed stayed untouched. The month, as 'taking a bath' is understood as bathing in a spoonful of water, in a bowl, because the bathroom has a strategic reserve. A month, which brought the sounds of hail, tornadoes, and anti-aircraft fire into our lives (Alyona, Kyiv, Facebook, 23.03.2022).

It is noteworthy that Facebook diaries predominantly emphasize the depictions of users' everyday activities and newly established routines, while MyWar diaries are focused on the chronology of the Russian invasion alongside the emotional responses and existential dilemmas faced by the narrators.

Online war diaries are often dominated by the before and after motive featuring the war chronotype which manifests in posts through fusion of the temporal and spatial dimensions. The feeling of uprootedness and uncertainty is reinforced by the sense of loss of the life before present in many diaries. For example, MyWar entries mark the previous life as unreal or from another dimension, 'It feels like the past has ceased to exist, it was just a dream' (Alyona, Kyiv region, MyWar, 15.03.2022). 'WE ARE ALL REMAINED WITHOUT THE PAST!!! The children are broken, and so are we!' (Yulia, Mariupol, MyWar, 04.04.2022). This sentiment of disconnection from the past is not exclusive to MyWar; it is also evident in Facebook entries, illustrating the impact of war on personal and collective memory,

> It's still hard to realise that a week ago all of us were planning something, dreaming about long weekends, meeting with friends and families ... And now, nobody knows what is going to happen in the next few hours ... (Viktoria, Mykolaiv, Facebook, 01.03.2022)

The diary on Facebook and MyWar platforms evidenced the drastic transformation of the time–space perception of the events before and after the war started. The time sensation seems to be split into two main time frames. Some narrators feel that the time is accelerated by the war, while others endure the loss of the sense of time as if life stopped on the 24th of February, 'The ninetieth day of the full-scale war, the one hundred and fourteenth of February, the third month of the heroic defence of the state, the sixth month of winter. How many names for one war' (Alyona, Kyiv, Facebook, 24.05.2022). The temporal uncertainties are often mixed with the longing for the stability of the lost life,

> Every day I hope I'll have nothing to write about in the evening. They say that a person gets used to everything in 21 days. I honestly hoped I would too. When I looked at the photos of the Mariupol maternity hospital, I honestly thought that it could not be worse (Volodymyr, Odesa/Kyiv, Facebook, 16.03.2022).

As we can see Ukrainian digital diaries of the first months of the war are evidence of the brutal shock of facing the war and state the collapse of spatiotemporal reality. They exemplify the experience of millions of Ukrainians traumatised by Russian aggression who are trying to keep the fragmented world by bridging the past and the present. These chronicles preserve the memory of the intense war chronotype and time–space disruptions which indicates the presence of deep psychological trauma. The focal point of the split reality, of the before and after, is the 24th of February 2022, the date of the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

Narrating the self, constructing the other in times of war

Digital war diaries of Ukrainians are not only focused on the documentation of the war-related events but also raise existential questions such as 'who we are' and 'who are the others'. Even though the Russian aggression started in 2014 and already caused a major shift in the self-identification of Ukrainian society, the war itself seemed distant and localised to a limited territory for many Ukrainians before 2022. After the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian society again faced this existential problem and the issues of defining 'self' and 'other' became more acute.

The analysis of Facebook and MyWar diaries shows some evolution of the construction of the categories of 'self' and 'other'. In the first days of the invasion, they manifested a

certain level of hope in the judgments about the Russian invasion, its army, and the duration of the war. The online testimonies were seen by the users themselves as a tool to spread the information about the war. The diaries demonstrate that some Ukrainian Facebook users believed that the authorities had deceived the Russians and thus by finding out the truth available to them via social networks Russians would refuse to fight against the Ukrainians. For example, in the Facebook entry with a hashtag #щоденникВійни dated 28.02.2022, we can find the reposts of the screenshot from a broken phone of a Russian soldier where he presumably admits to his mother that they are not at the military training but at real war, shelling civilians who are not happy to see them on the Ukrainian land. Commenting on this photo in her diary entry, the user addresses Russian parents and urges them not to send their children to war because 'many of them may die on Ukrainian soil' (Natalya, Kyiv, Facebook, 28.02.2022). Although the authenticity of this photo cannot be verified, such messages demonstrate that at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainians believed that it was possible to stop the war by reaching out to ordinary Russians via shared digital spaces. In their Facebook diaries, users frequently articulate assertions regarding ordinary Russians just like themselves appealing to their conscience. One of the users writes,

> Millions of Ukrainian kids suffer, many even more and the longer war lasts the worse it gets. I wish all russians supporting this 'special operation' would watch their kids suffer and be unable to help. I am sorry to feel and wish so. Missiles and drones are sent here by people. Tanks are driven by people as well (Yulia, Kyiv, Facebook, 5.11.2022).

Thus, Facebook being an international open social network creates the circulation of information throughout the platform which in turn gives users the illusion of a dialogue with the 'other'. Therefore, multiple diary entries on Facebook seem to aim at reaching the Russian population, demonstrating to them the horror of the situation, making them admit their responsibility for the war, or cursing and expressing anger. In contrast to this, on MyWar where commenting and interaction is not possible, diaries seem to be more self-directed and centred on the re-evaluation of the 'other'. Therefore, Russians are not addressed directly, users most often refer to them using the pronouns 'they' or 'them' and assign them different emotive evaluations, 'I have never hated before in my life. I was angry - yes, I was offended - yes. And now I HATE *them*. Openly and unequivocally [...] THE TITANIUM SHIELD OF HATE' (Inna, Mykolaiv, MyWar, 26.02.2022, 14.03.2022).

As the war continued and new crimes of the Russian army were discovered, Ukrainians started to distance themselves more from Russians which has become visible through their digital diaries. The Russians started to be mentioned in terms of the binary opposition between 'self' and 'other'. At first, this opposition starts manifesting itself on the language level. The question of self is closely connected with the question of the native language. Although many users still post in Russian on Facebook, the issue of language has attained an unprecedented level of significance. In one of the diary entries, a user questions the correlation between speaking Russian and being a bad person,

> It's your choice what you have in mind ... Lately I have heard that they say that if you speak Russian, you are not Ukrainian ... We ourselves are to blame for the fact that the Russian language has filled everything and everywhere (Bogdan, Petrovo, Facebook, 24.06.2022).

Secondly, referring to the Russians, Ukrainians have started using lowercase to write the name of the country and the people (росія, but not Росія). Besides, the Russian

soldiers are called 'inhumans', 'enemies', 'invaders', 'orcs', 'bloodthirsty Russian relatives', etc, which is the direct manifestation of the dehumanisation mechanism. Any symbolic representation of Russia is marked by derogatory expressions such as the Russian flag which can be called Aquafresh[11] or Russian rag. Profanity becomes an important tool that lets emotions out. All over Ukrainian Facebook curse words and extremely offensive expressions have grown in popularity since the first day of the full-scale invasion. For instance, a Facebook user claims 'We are so different indeed. Fuck such neighbours' (N.d., Facebook, 11.03.2022) while reposting the post where somebody compares the Russians who complain about shutting down Instagram or MacDonalds and the Ukrainians who line up in supermarkets and pharmacies for essentials in between shelling and bombing. A similar tendency to use profanity can be found on MyWar. When swearing in their diary entries, people repost, and use common cliches circulating in the Ukrainian media sphere instead of utilizing their own pejorative language which displays certain co-creating of certain discourses on and via online spaces.

One of the obvious observation that emerges from the content analyse of the digital diaries is that the concept of 'other' as an 'enemy' is frequently mentioned along with references to the spectre of death. In MyWar diaries, the 'other' is equated with death. The narrators reflect on their awareness of the inevitable nature of death when the Russians occupy or even approach the place where they reside,

> Tonight, I have already come to terms with death when my house was shaking when planes flew so low one after another [...] Somehow it became cold. Sirens. Explosions, cries, death. Now the day can be described as follows ... But now there are no tears because the horror has passed, emptiness and wild coldness remain in the soul. I am afraid that I can no longer cry. I am afraid that the news of death is not shocking anymore (Alyona, MyWar 01.03.2022, 04.04.2022).

In this regard, Facebook diaries focus less on narrating the emotional experience of death fears but rather concentrate either on the general scale of Russian attacks counting the number of missiles strikes or reposting information about atrocities committed by Russians. One of the users wrote in their diary entry 'The Ministry of Murder of the Fascist Federation called today's murder of Ukrainians by rockets a "massive retaliation strike". Everything would be fine, but that's what Hitler called the missile attacks on the UK' (Eugenia, Odesa, Facebook, 09.03.2022). Not only the collective trauma manifests itself in such posts but also the controversial desire to distance themselves from the war and at the same time to show involvement in the events.

Both on Facebook and on MyWar, when writing about the pain and suffering of their fellow citizens, Ukrainians perceive this traumatic experience as their own and/or as shared. Now, the subjective self in the diaries about the Russ-Ukrainian War acquires a common meaning, one that applies both to everyone individually and to the entire Ukrainian society. Iryna from Lviv writes,

> Feelings are now cyclical – euphoria, fear, disgust, anger, hatred, guilt, and so on, and again ... Over time, up to the destruction of faith and general exhaustion. Now we have a common history and one pain for all [...] Because today we are all Mariupol, Bucha, Irpin, Gostomel, Kharkiv. And dozens of cities of pain and despair ... (Iryna, MyWar, 01.03.2022, 07.03.2022).

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[11] The colour of the toothpaste corresponds to the colours of the Russian flag.

The cities mentioned in the quote are now recognised almost all over the world and are associated with the physical and emotional traumas that the Russian Army has inflicted on the Ukrainian civilians. Multiple war diaries on both platforms narrate the traumatic experiences of living through the war, being a victim of the war, and witnessing the war. The narrativization of these experiences is important not only because such writing serves as evidence of war crimes committed by one country against another but also as a trauma articulating and coping mechanisms.

Digital diaries also demonstrate the transformation of social norms and floating the taboos. Being a socially restricted emotion, hatred and hate speech are normally not expressed openly. However, as a result of traumatic war experiences, people tend to break this taboo. Openly expressing and narrating hatred towards the enemy, the 'other' has become the new norm in Ukrainian digital spaces. For example, a user retelling a story of a mom whose 5-year-old daughter was raped by two Russian soldiers claims,

> That is why I blame everyone who brought these monsters here, as well as the priests who call it a 'holy war' ... But each of them must be castrated and put on the stake ... And those who justify them, because the church is God ... If you are among them, follow the Russian warship! (Lyuba, Khotyn, Facebook, 05.04.2022).

This and other examples also demonstrate that digital diaries provide one important tool for the co-construction and co-processing of the collective war trauma of Ukrainians. It is possible to call it, trauma sharing. Through reposts of photo and video evidence of tragic events, atrocities, or violent actions of Russian soldiers, via reactions and comments, users obtain the possibility to not only relate to the collective trauma of the society but also explicate their trauma through the pain of others, even if the intensity of traumatic experience may vary. Major events of the Russo-Ukrainian war such as attacks at the Zaporizhia nuclear power plant, destruction of Mariupol, discovery of the atrocities in Kyiv and Kharkiv region, evidence of tortures of civil population and soldiers, and evidence of massive graves on liberated territories are processed and circulated through sharing mechanism of social media.

However, as our research shows, at this stage of the war not only traumas are problematic to be articulated but some things are completely suppressed or/and avoided in the current digital war diaries. For example, the narrators on Facebook or MyWar are more willing to talk about the events or to convey their emotional states than to talk in detail about the horrors of the war that they endured personally. A user from Bucha while talking about the situation risky for her life simply sums up, 'We are still alive' (Larisa, Bucha, Facebook, 07.03.2022). On Facebook, the posts which narrate routine prevail over those which narrate emotions, likewise the posts in which users try to make sense of the situation and explicate the experience to the audience prevail over those which are ultimately confessional in nature. The posts on the MyWar platform also tend to focus on factual and emotional information, avoiding topics of experienced violence or physical suffering. But users on Facebook and MyWar in their diaries hardly ever write about the closest people whom they lost to the war. They rather write about friends and acquaintances who are not so close, which demonstrates silencing of their very personal dramas expressing instead grievances about more distant people.

Thus, digital wartime Ukrainian diaries provide an important space for moral and emotional evaluation of the self and other and co-processing of the war trauma. However, it is noteworthy that certain aspects of trauma, especially the horrors endured by individuals, remain suppressed or avoided in the diaries, highlighting the complexity of articulating such personal experiences in the context of war.

Conclusions

After analysing Facebook and MyWar diaries, we established that social networks and state-created platforms can become a powerful mechanism of witnessing, narrating, co-constructing, and sharing the experience of living through the war. The epistemological value of Ukrainian testimonies cannot be underestimated. Access to the Internet made it possible to document the experiences of thousands of Ukrainians during the Russian aggression making it one of the most documented wars in history. These testimonies not only provide knowledge about the chronology of the events but also describe individual trajectories of the war witnesses and give valuable insights into the evolution of the emotional perception of the war. Digital war diaries also play a critical role in the trauma-coping mechanisms because they help to overcome the shock of war and give voice to many of those who endured or become a witness to the horrors of life in the zone of conflict. Besides, the results of this investigation proved that intentionality of the digital diaries produced in the public environment modifies the ways of narrating the stories, which are produced not only for oneself but also for public consumption.

Despite the conceptual differences between multiple online platforms used by Ukrainians for witnessing the war, there are many similarities and common practices of narrating the Russian aggression which serve the same functions. Both Facebook, as a social network that allows immediate expression, shareability, and wide multimodality of the posts, and MyWar, a platform created by a state with less interactive functionality but a more homogenous textual organisation, provide users with the possibility to make sense of the new reality, to create the bridge between before and after, to articulate the trauma, built up a dialogue, while also trying to draw up the border between the self and the other.

At the same time, war diaries on Facebook and MyWar manifest several substantial divergencies in content and form. On MyWar, the testimonies represent a planned practice of storytelling as the setting of the platform itself declares the objectives and the format of the narration. In contrast to MyWar, Facebook diaries offer the users the possibility to express immediate reactions to disruptive events and a certain freedom of expression allowing combining different modalities of narration. The intentionality of the production of the testimony on MyWar is manifested through a more detailed chronology of the stories, their linear organisation, and a strong focus on documenting war events. In contrast, a fragmented storytelling style, which prevails on Facebook, mixes the narration with reposts, links to other war events or non-war-related content. Unlike MyWar, the functionality of Facebook allows users to co-construct war stories via commenting and reposting functions.

We also could observe a tendency of intensive diary entries in the first weeks and months of the full-scale invasion which dramatically declined after the first six months. It can be explained by the fact that society gradually got used to the new reality and learned to cope with an overwhelming urge to express the trauma of war. In our opinion, it is very important to support digital war diary initiatives and war archiving projects to continue preserving the memory of war of Ukrainians. Indeed, these textualised testimonies fulfil an extremely important role – recording and preserving the war memory for future generations which will later enable the post-war reflection on the significance and long-term consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

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