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FROM NICHE TO MAINSTREAM: A MAPPING REVIEW OF THE GROWTH IN PODCASTING RESEARCH

KATEŘINA VRZALÍKOVÁ & JAROSLAV SVĚTLÍK

Metropolitan University Prague & Paneuropean University Prague

ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of podcasting research over the past two decades (2004 - January 2024) based on data retrieved from the Web of Science database. Through a mapping review, it documents how academic interest in podcasts has grown from a niche topic into a significant area of media and communication studies. The study identifies thematic shifts, influential publications, and methodological approaches that have shaped this field. It also highlights the interdisciplinary expansion of podcast research into areas such as education, health communication, and cultural production. The outcomes of this analysis both provide a foundation for future studies and open discussion on the role of podcasts in contemporary media and academic discourse.

KEYWORDS

podcasting • mapping review • media studies • digital audio media • research trends • bibliometric analysis • content analysis • new media • podcast research

INTRODUCTION

Podcast. A term that some audiences may already feel overexposed to, while others remain unfamiliar with. There are many definitions, yet the concept itself remains marked by ambiguity and debate. Dario Llinares, Neil Fox, and Richard Berry describe podcasting as a new sound medium that opens up new possibilities for creating engaging conversations that listeners find valuable. It is a hybrid, combining ideas, sound and text (Llinares et al., 2018). Such conceptual uncertainty is not unusual in the study of emerging media: as Couldry and Hepp (2017, 7–8) argue, the way a medium is defined strongly shapes the analytical approaches applied to it. In the case of podcasting, this lack of consensus has influenced both its perception by audiences and the diversity of research perspectives.

The first contribution indexed in Web of Science that placed podcasting at the center of academic interest was written by Nadiro A. Hira and was titled *Podcasting - From TV to MP3*. It was published in 2005 as editorial material in the American magazine *FORTUNE* (Hira, 2005). Since then, the interest of the scientific community has been gradually increasing. From only 13 contributions in 2005, the number rose to 234 in 2023, with the peak so far in 2022 (312). In January 2024 podcasts marked the 20th anniversary of their rise, which changed the way content is consumed and stories are shared. On this occasion, a systematic overview of academic activity in this field is appropriate. It may serve as a basis for a more comprehensive summary once research results from 2025 become available, representing two full decades of podcast scholarship. Scientists have examined podcasts in connection with entrepreneurship, education, religion, philosophy, politics, culture, and healthcare. This mapping review provides an overview of the annual number of publications, examined topics, influential authors, and major research trends in podcast scholarship. The aim of the study is twofold: first, to document the development of podcast research across the past two decades, and second, to identify emerging trends that may guide and inspire future studies.

New media formats such as podcasting often result in the creation of new communication patterns and cultural practices. As Manovich (2002, p. 19) argues, the development of media technologies fundamentally reshaped production, distribution, and communication, much like the invention of the printing press transformed cultural paradigms. This new revolution, characterized by the digitalization and democratization of media production and consumption, underscores the need to situate such transformations within the broader field of media studies (Lister et al., 2009, p. 307). McLuhan (2000, p. 352) similarly stresses that cultural and communicative changes caused by media innovations cannot be fully understood

without considering their impact on social structures and human thought. Within this framework, podcasting can be seen not only as a reflection of cultural transformation but also as an active force shaping contemporary communication and meaning-making. Moreover, Krippendorff (2019, p. 361) emphasizes that rigorous content analysis is necessary to validate such changes, as research must accurately reflect the world it seeks to describe. Podcasts are still developing and therefore research methods and approaches for their study must also continue to evolve. The findings presented in this mapping review not only map the development of podcast scholarship but also provide a foundation for further studies and guidance within the rapidly changing landscape of new media.

1. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The goal of this mapping review is to identify research trends in the analysis of podcasting and the most influential works within the field. The data were collected from the Web of Science database on January 25th, 2024. Web of Science was chosen because it represents one of the most widely used and publicly available multidisciplinary citation indexes, which ensures comparability, verifiability, and transparency of results. However, this reliance also introduces limitations, as relevant studies indexed in other databases (such as Scopus or regional citation indexes) may not have been included, particularly those published in languages with less widespread circulation. The search keywords were: “podcast”, “podcasts”, “podcasting” (thus allintitle: podcasting OR podcast OR podcasts), applied to the search field for article titles with at least one of these terms and a publication date within 2004 - January 2024. Initially, a total of 2150 documents were obtained, covering a wide range of publication types. Within the framework of preliminary data processing, a series of filters was implemented to remove unwanted records with the goal of making the research sample more relevant and efficient. Specifically, records of conference contributions, books, film reviews, newspaper articles, letters, conference abstracts, book reviews, editorial materials, and series of conference proceedings were excluded from the analysis. This step allowed us to focus exclusively on original research journal articles, in line with the study’s aim of analysing the development and contemporary trends within the field. Moreover, all contributions that did not present authors’ names were eliminated from the dataset, to ensure verifiability and the scholarly reliability of the included data. After the application of these criteria, the final sample consisted of 957 materials. There were 842 articles in English, 55 in Spanish, 31 in Portuguese, 9 in German, 7 in Russian, 5 in French, 2 in Italian, 2 in Turkish, and one each in Bulgarian, Chinese, Polish, and Ukrainian. The

average number of pages was 13. Consequently, the publications were sorted according to year of publication, and an arithmetic mean of the number of citations was calculated.

These articles were exported in the form of “Export Records to Tab Delimited File - Full Record and Cited References”, gradually according to year of publication, and subsequently uploaded to the VOSviewer software for data visualization. For the analysis, the options “Create a map based on bibliographic data” and “Read data from bibliographic database files: Web of Science” were selected, with citation used as the type of analysis and documents as the counting method. A total of 917 documents complied with the set limits. Subsequently, the visualization of the citation network was carried out in VOSviewer. This analysis revealed the structure and dynamics of the scientific community within this field, while also identifying key publications and authors with the strongest influence on the development of the field. The visualization further enabled the division of research articles into several thematic clusters corresponding to the main research directions. A detailed thematic analysis of these clusters was then conducted. The main areas of interest identified included: the development of podcasting as a medium, analyses of podcasting platforms, and the use of podcasts in education and communication. For each cluster, central publications with a high citation rate were identified and analysed in terms of their influence on the research field. The final phase of the analysis consisted of a temporal analysis of trends, which tracked the dynamics of publications and citations from 2004 up to January 2024. This step enabled the identification of periods of significant increase or decrease in research interest and provided insights into the long-term development of this field.

2. RESULTS

On the basis of the data analysis concerning the distribution of scientific publications focused on podcasting by year of publication (Table 1), several key trends can be identified. The data clearly demonstrate a growing academic interest in this topic. While no articles were published in 2004, the year of the creation of podcast technology, the first two publications appeared in 2005 with an average of 1.5 citations per article. From that year onward, a steady increase is evident both in the number of publications and in average citations, underscoring the growing relevance of research in this field. For example, in 2007, 22 articles were published with an average of 33.64 citations and a total of 740 citations. This upward trajectory continued until 2010, when 46 articles were published, with an average of 28.78 citations and a total of 1,324 citations. This peak suggests that particularly influential works were published during this period, shaping subse-

quent research. Between 2011 and 2014, the data indicate fluctuations in both the number of publications and the average number of citations. For instance, in 2011, 37 articles were published with an average of 18,89 citations and a total of 699 citations. The decline in average citations per article during this period may indicate shifts in research focus or the nature of the published works. From 2015 to 2019, the number of publications gradually increased—for example, in 2019, 53 articles were published with an average of 12,83 citations and a total of 680 citations. This steady growth confirms that podcast research had become an established academic field. The years 2020 to 2024 brought a sharp increase in the number of publications, accompanied, however, by a decrease in average citations per article. In 2021, for instance, 95 articles were published, but the average citations dropped to 3.69. The trend continued in 2023, when 161 articles were published with an average of only 0,72 citations per article. This decline may be attributed to several factors, including possible saturation of the research field, changes in quality or focus, and above all the short time window available for newer publications to accumulate citations. The data for 2024 show particularly low values, which is explained by the fact that the dataset covers only January 2024. No conclusive statements about this year can therefore be made. In addition to average citation counts, the data also show a wide dispersion: for instance, in 2007, the most cited article reached 229 citations while the least cited had none, with a median of 7 citations. This suggests that a small number of highly influential papers strongly shaped the overall averages.

Table 1: Yearly number of publications on podcasting and descriptive citation statistics (2005 - 2024). Source: Authors' processing

Publication Year	count	mean	median	max
2005	2,00	1,50	1,50	3,00
2006	8,00	5,50	2,50	20,00
2007	23,00	25,35	8,00	229,00
2008	21,00	23,38	9,00	121,00
2009	46,00	27,54	12,50	146,00
2010	47,00	22,60	8,00	143,00
2011	38,00	13,84	8,00	74,00
2012	32,00	23,94	14,50	134,00
2013	31,00	11,03	8,00	48,00
2014	27,00	18,07	9,00	195,00
2015	39,00	18,10	10,00	96,00
2016	42,00	9,74	6,50	48,00
2017	41,00	11,05	5,00	56,00

Publication Year	count	mean	median	max
2018	33,00	9,58	7,00	48,00
2019	54,00	10,98	4,50	96,00
2020	67,00	6,08	3,00	52,00
2021	96,00	3,26	2,00	18,00
2022	145,00	2,44	1,00	41,00
2023	162,00	0,69	0,00	14,00
2024	2,00	0,00	0,00	0,00

From the outputs of the analysis of the geographic distribution of publications on podcast topics, it is apparent that there are significant differences in the number of published articles among particular cities. Abingdon shows the highest number of publications - 184 in total. This dominance is not due to Abingdon itself as a research hub, but rather to the presence of Routledge Journals, Taylor & Francis Ltd, which publishes a large share of articles in this field. In second place is New York with 74 publications. This result is closely linked to the publishing activity of SAGE Publications Inc, one of the leading academic publishers headquartered in the city. London follows with 68 publications. Its high position is largely explained by the strong publishing activity of Wiley, which contributes significantly to podcast-related research dissemination. The cities of Hoboken and Thousand Oaks took fourth and fifth place with 46 and 44 publications. These outputs correspond mainly to the presence of Springer in Hoboken and Elsevier Science Inc. in Thousand Oaks, illustrating that bibliometric patterns often reflect the location of major publishing houses rather than local research activity itself.

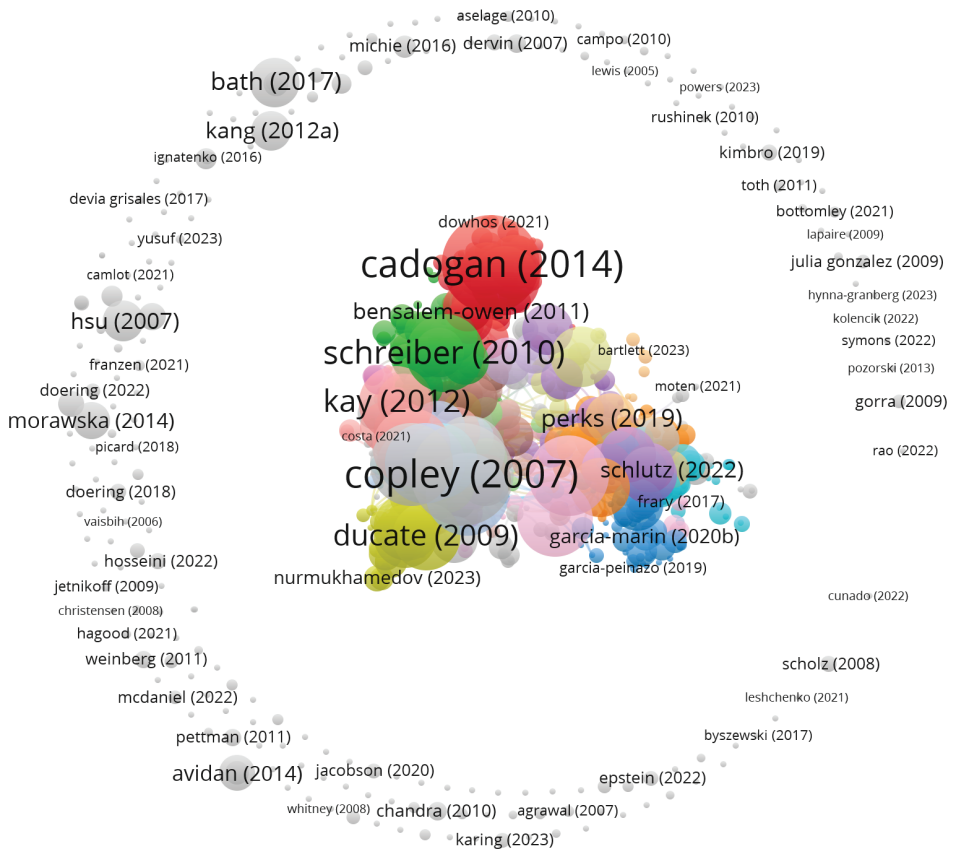
When analysing the information on the top publishers of scientific journals, which published articles focused on the podcasting issues during the examined period, it is apparent that there is a considerable concentration of publications at several key players on the publishing market. The most important publisher is Routledge Journals, Taylor & Francis Ltd, which accounts for 169 published articles. This dominance is partly linked to journals such as *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* and *Communication Education*, which regularly publish podcast-related research. The second place is shared by SAGE Publications Inc. and Wiley, each with 44 publications. These publishers disseminate research on podcasts mainly through journals such as *Journalism (SAGE)* and *International Journal of Communication (Wiley)*. Their position reflects the broad disciplinary coverage of their journal portfolios. Springer and Elsevier follow with 31 publications each. Their contribution is somewhat smaller, yet significant, particularly in journals addressing education, technology, and ap-

plied communication research. This suggests that podcast-related scholarship is also expanding beyond traditional communication and media journals into interdisciplinary outlets. Overall, publications on podcasts are strongly concentrated among a small number of large international publishers. This concentration reflects not only their specialization and editorial policies but also the central role of their journals in shaping the scholarly discourse on digital audio media.

The trendy topic in the last concluded year (2023) was particularly the importance of the podcast as a tool in education, both in formal education (for example, university courses and professional training) and in informal contexts. Articles such as *Student-Produced Podcasts as a Teaching and Learning Tool* and *Pod Save IR: Podcasts as Effective Assignments in the International Relations Classroom* demonstrate how podcasts can serve as an effective didactic instrument supporting active learning and increasing involvement of students. These articles were among the most cited papers in 2023, reflecting the strong impact of educational research on the overall bibliometric profile of that year. Several studies published in 2023 deal with the use of podcasts as a means for increasing awareness and communication on health and social topics. Examples include *GeroCast: Using Podcasting to Deliver Living Cases in Gerontology Education* and *A New Podcast for Reducing Stigma against People Living with Complex Mental Health Issues: Co-design Study*. Both were published in journals with strong citation activity in 2023, underlining the role of podcasting as a public health communication tool. This direction of research implies the increasing importance of podcasts as a tool for public health and social justice. Other publications focus on the analysis of specific genres of podcasts, such as true crime, and their influence on listeners. Studies such as *True Crime Podcasts in Australia: Examining Listening Patterns and Listener Perceptions* and *My Favourite Genre is Missing People: Exploring How Listeners Experience True Crime Podcasts in Australia* illustrate the social impact of popular podcast genres. These works, though less cited than educational and health-related papers, contribute to debates about ethics, media consumption, and empathy. Podcasts are also used in the area of scientific communication and the popularization of science. Articles such as *The Use of Podcasts for Science Dissemination in Science Teaching* and *Podcasting as a Tool for Crisis Communications: The Story of Health on Call* demonstrate how podcasts can serve as an efficient tool for the dissemination of scientific knowledge to the general public. This trend is particularly relevant within the context of the growing need to increase scientific literacy and to provide the public with trustworthy information in critical situations such as the COVID-19 pan-

dem. Last but not least, some studies focus on technical and methodological aspects of podcasts, such as Artificial Intelligence Trend Analysis on Healthcare Podcasts Using Topic Modelling and Sentiment Analysis: A Data-Driven Approach. This study illustrates how advanced computational techniques, namely artificial intelligence, are increasingly applied to podcast content. Its interdisciplinary nature connects media studies with data science and health research, signalling new directions for podcast scholarship.

Figure 1: Overall network visualization of citation type of analysis and documents counting method (917 items). Source: Authors' processing, access to the interactive display <https://tinyurl.com/2c22ft8x>



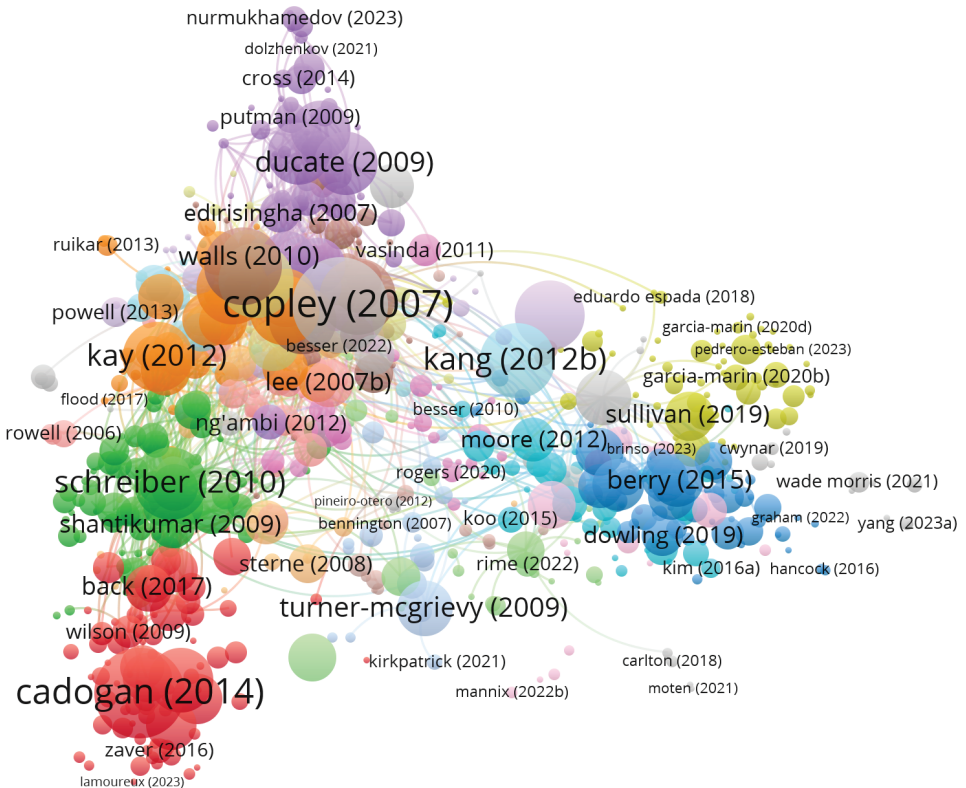
The chart presented above introduces the complex network of citation rate among scientific publications that reveals the structure and dynamics of the scientific community in the area. The main cluster in the middle of the

picture includes key publications such as Cadogan (2014) in the category Emergency Medicine with 195 citations, Copley (2007) in the category Education & Educational Research with 229 citations, Schreiber (2010) in the categories Education & Educational Research; Linguistics with 123 citations, and Kay (2012) in the categories Computer Science, Interdisciplinary Applications; Education & Educational Research with 115 citations which belong among the most highly cited articles in the dataset. Their central position in the network demonstrates how podcast research has been shaped not only by media and communication studies but also by adjacent fields such as medicine, linguistics, and computer science. This interdisciplinarity is one of the defining features of podcast scholarship. The colourful clusters represent distinct thematic areas: for example, education-oriented studies cluster together, health communication forms another group, and technology-focused works (such as Kay 2012) create a separate branch. The density of points around the central nodes indicates that these works are repeatedly cited across clusters, functioning as bridges between disciplines. By contrast, isolated points on the map represent more specialized or niche studies. While these articles may not be highly cited, they broaden the thematic scope of the field and may serve as starting points for future, more focused research directions.

The specification of the years of issuing publications enables us to follow the development of the research in time and to identify emerging trends within the framework of this scientific field. The concentration of newer years in certain clusters may indicate current or emerging trends within the field, while older publications, which are still central and strongly cited, indicate a long-term influence of these works. Cadogan's publication (2014) is placed in the centre of a big cluster, with 195 citations. This indicates that since its publishing in 2014 it has been playing a crucial role within the area of Emergency Medicine. This article apparently initiated or influenced subsequent research, which proves its permanent influence. Copley (2007) with 229 citations, and Ducate and Lomicka (2009) with 99 citations, also occupy an important place in their categories (Education & Educational Research and Linguistics). This indicates a long-term impact of these publications on their fields. Their permanent presence in the network indicates that the research and discussion they initiated have remained relevant many years after their publication. Around the publications such as Kay (2012) with 115 citations, and Schreiber (2010) with 123 citations, we can observe a concentration of other points in the following years after their publication. This may indicate that these works opened new research directions or reinforced existing trends within areas such as Computer Science and Education. Kay (2012) is important in the categories Computer

Science, Interdisciplinary Applications and Education & Educational Research, which indicates the growing importance of an interdisciplinary approach in these fields, particularly in the applications of informatics in education. We can observe that some areas, such as Emergency Medicine, gained more attention after 2014, probably due to important publications such as Cadogan (2014).

Figure 2: Network visualization of citation type of analysis and documents counting method of the largest set of connected items (692 items). Source: Authors' processing, access to the interactive display <https://tinyurl.com/24znmhmq>



A closer visualisation of the main cluster and the relations among scientific publications shows that the work depicted in red titled Free Open Access Meducation (FOAM): the rise of emergency medicine and critical care blogs and podcasts (2002-2013) by Mile Cadogan etc. (2014) that was - within the category Emergency Medicine in the Web of Science - cited 199

times in all databases has a crucial influence, which is apparent from its central position and the size of the node. This article is probably a key contribution that initiated or significantly influenced the following research within the area of urgent medicine, as indicated by the dense clustering of related publications around it. The presence of other authors and works in the vicinity of the work Mike Cadogan et al. (2014) shows a strong network of scientists who either collaborated on this topic or further developed its ideas. This work is not only a milestone within the area but it also points at its interdisciplinary reach, which proves its importance for contemporary scientific discourse in urgent medicine. This study has inspired a number of other publications that focused on the development and application of FOAM in practice. The connection such as the one between Riddell (2020) and Thom (2015) indicates that the FOAM concept evolved and spread into other areas of urgent medicine and critical care. These follow-up studies not only spread the original ideas but also contributed to the further improvement of methodologies and practices in health professional education and thus they consolidated the importance of FOAM as one of the major trends in modern medical care. The interconnection with newer publications shows that the work by Cadogan et al. (2014) has been still influencing contemporary research and that it inspires new directions in education and communication in medicine. For example, the publications by Chin (2017) and Riddell (2020) show that FOAM not only continues in its development but it also adapts and expands into other contexts and disciplines. This continuing influence shows the increasing importance and permanent relevance of FOAM within the framework of education and practice in urgent medicine, which makes the work by Cadogan et al. (2014) an indispensable part of the discourse in this area.

In the orange part of the visualisation, where the articles *Podcasting in higher education: What are the implications for teaching and learning?* by Lonn (2009) (85 citations, Internet and Higher Education) and *Podcasting: A new technological tool to facilitate good practise in higher education* by Fernandez et al. (2009) (130 citations, Computers & Education) dominate. Their influence on the area of university education, with a strong emphasis on the integration of technologies - particularly in the category Computer Science - is fundamental. Both articles occupy central positions in the visualisation, which confirms their importance and high citation rate in academic literature. They serve as key reference points for following research in the area of digital learning tools. These works inspired further research focused on the efficiency of podcasts in various learning tools, which is apparent from their interconnection with a number of other important publications such as Heilesen (2010) (138 citations, Computers &

Education) and Copley (2007) (229 citations, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*). Such interconnection points at widespread acceptance of podcasting as an effective tool for the support of education goals and its adaptability across disciplines. The link with publications such as Merhi (2015) (62 citations, *Computers & Education*) and Swan (2011) (11 citations, *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*) demonstrates that the conclusions of these studies were also implemented in other education contexts, which strengthened the importance of podcasting as a key tool for innovation in education.

The violet part of the visualisation, where the articles *Creative use of podcasting in higher education and its effects on competitive agency* by Lazzari (2009) (79 citations, *Computers & Education*) and *Using podcasts to replace lecture: Effects on student achievement* by O'Bannon et al. (2011) (74 citations, *Computers & Education*) dominate. These represent key nodes within the framework of categories *Computer Science and Education & Educational Research*. These studies play an essential role in the discourse on the use of podcasting within university education, particularly relating to its influence on learning results and the competitiveness of students. Lazzari (2009) focuses on the creative use of podcasts and their impact on the competitiveness of students, while O'Bannon (2011) deals with replacing traditional lectures with podcasts and their influence on reaching students. These studies laid the foundations for a wider examination of podcast efficiency in education, particularly in technical and pedagogical disciplines. The interconnection of these works with other studies such as Ducate (2009) (99 citations, *Language Learning & Technology*) and Rosell-Aguilar (2013a) (28 citations, *Language Learning & Technology*) indicates that their conclusions were widely accepted and developed further within various educational contexts. In addition, Rosell-Aguilar (2013b) (8 citations, *Computers & Education*) illustrates how podcast research expanded into broader discussions of language learning technologies. From the visualization is apparent that the works by Lazzari (2009) and O'Bannon (2011) stimulated new trends in digital learning, focused on increasing the competitiveness of students and improving educational results. The emerging cluster around these studies reveals an increasing interest in the use of podcasts as not only a supplement to traditional education methods but also as a main tool for learning. These trends show the increasing importance of digital technologies in the academic environment and their potential to transform traditional teaching methods.

In the grey part of the visualisation, where the articles *Audio and video podcasts of lectures for campus-based students: production and evaluation of student use* by Copley (2007) (229 citations, *Innovations in Education*

and Teaching International) and Examining the Motives of Podcast Users by McClung (2010) (72 citations, *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*) dominate, we can observe their essential influence in the category Communication. These studies focus on the use of podcasts in university education and on motives that guide users to use these digital tools and therefore they contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of podcasting in modern communication and learning. The interdisciplinary interconnection of these works with other studies shows that their influence goes beyond the area of education and communication. The interconnection with publications such as Sullivan (2019) (53 citations, *Social Media + Society*) and Garcia-Marin (2022) (3 citations, *Social Sciences-Basel*) shows that podcasting was widely accepted and adapted in various disciplines, which supports its increasing importance as a tool for communication and learning.

In the khaki part of the visualisation, where the article *The Platforms of Podcasting: Past and Present* by Sullivan (2019) (53 citations, *Social Media + Society*) in the category Communication dominates, we can observe how this article made a significant contribution to understanding the evolution and contemporary status of podcast platforms. Sullivan's work occupies a central position in this part of the visualisation, which indicates its high rate of citation and the influence in academic discourse on podcasting as a media and communication tool. The article by Sullivan (2019) is located in the centre of a density interconnected cluster, which indicates that it had become a key reference point for further research in the area of podcast platforms. This article maps the history of podcasting, analyses the development of platforms and examines how these platforms have developed from a tool for alternative distribution of media to an important communication means with a wide reach. Sullivan's work is often cited and is strongly connected with other studies, which proves its fundamental influence on understanding the dynamics and importance of podcast platforms in modern communication. The interconnection with other publications within the khaki area of the visualisation such as Garcia-Marin (2020d) (3 citations, *Profesional de la Información*) and Terol (2021) (16 citations, *Historia y Comunicación Social*) shows that Sullivan's work has inspired a wide range of research focused on various aspects of communication technologies and their impact on society.

In the dark-blue part of the visualisation, where articles related to podcasting as a medium and its development dominate, are the key nodes represented by publications that focus on an in-depth analysis of podcasting within the framework of the category Communication. Specifically, they are the articles *Why Pod? Further Explorations of the Motivations for Independent Podcasting* by Markman (2014) (41 citations, *Journal of Radio*

& Audio Media), *Everything Old is New Again: Podcasting as Radio's Revival* by Markman (2015) (36 citations, *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*), *A Golden Age of Podcasting? Evaluating Serial in the Context of Podcast Histories* by Berry (2015) (217 citations, *Radio Journal*), *Podcasting: A Decade in the Life of a 'New' Audio Medium: Introduction* by Bottomley (2015a) (126 citations, *Radio Journal*), *Part of the Establishment: Reflecting on 10 Years of Podcasting as an Audio Medium* by Berry (2016) (163 citations, *Convergence*) and *Immersive Audio Storytelling: Podcasting and Serial Documentary in the Digital Publishing Industry* by Dowling (2019) (39 citations, *Radio Journal*). These studies represent crucial points of the discourse on podcasting as an established media of important cultural and communication impact. Berry's articles from 2015 and 2016, together with Bottomley's publication in 2015, play a central role in this part of the visualisation, whereas they reflect the importance of podcasting as a newly established audio medium that achieved widespread recognition and acceptance. Berry's (2015) study focuses on the evaluation of the phenomenon of the podcast *Serial* within the historical context of podcasting. This enables a better understanding of the development and popularity of this medium. His following publication from 2016 extends this analysis by reflecting on ten years of podcasting as an important audio medium that had gradually become a part of a wider media sphere. Bottomley's work of 2015 examines the decade of podcasting, while it focuses on its transformation from a novelty into an established medium. Markman's studies of 2014 and 2015 focus more profoundly on the motivations for independent podcasting and on podcasting as a renewal of the radio in the digital age. In this way, these studies provide a complex analysis of how podcasting influences current media practice and how it serves as a tool for personal expression and cultural production. The interdisciplinary connection of these studies with other research indicates that the influence of podcasting impacts various areas, from media studies to cultural analysis and digital technologies. For example, Dowling's work of 2019 focuses on immersive audio storytelling and its role in digital publishing and thus it expands the discussion of podcasting as a tool for digital narratives and documentary works. This interconnection shows how podcasting not only serves as a medium for the dissemination of information but also as a platform for innovative and experimental forms of storytelling. The clusters of connected studies indicate an increasing interest in the analysis of podcasting not only as a medium but also as a cultural phenomenon that reflects wider social changes and technological innovations. Their research not only expanded our understanding of podcasting as an audio medium but it also contributed to a wider debate on its role in contemporary culture and digital technologies.

It is also important to highlight the point of pale blue, where the article by Kang (2012b), *Effects of podcast tours on tourist experiences in a national park* (26 citations, Tourism Management), in categories Environmental Sciences & Ecology; Social Sciences - Other Topics; Business & Economics is the most crucial. Furthermore, the biggest pink point is in place of the article by Garcia-Marin (2022), *New Media, New Practices? A Study of the First Spanish Podcast Community and Its Pioneers* (13 citations, International Journal of Communication) in the category Social Sciences - Other Topics. Eventually, the biggest brown point is a representation of the article by Hew (2009), *Use of audio podcast in K-12 and higher education: a review of research topics and methodologies* (622 citations, Educational Research Review) in the category Education & Educational Research.

These trends indicate that podcasts will continue to play a key role in shaping the media landscape and in the development of new methods of communication and education in the digital age. Overall, the results of the analysis highlight several important trends within podcast research. First, the dominance of English-language publications (842 articles) clearly demonstrates the prevalence of anglophone academic production, while only a limited number of studies were published in other languages (e.g., 55 in Spanish, 31 in Portuguese). This linguistic imbalance suggests that research on podcasting is strongly shaped by Western perspectives, leaving other regional and cultural contexts underrepresented. At the same time, the dominance of English can also be explained by its role as the *lingua franca* of science and by the fact that the majority of journals indexed in the Web of Science are published in English, which reinforces its prevalence in international research outputs. Second, the concentration of publications within a few key publishers (Routledge, Sage, Wiley, Springer, Elsevier) and journals reflects the specialization of these institutions in communication, media, and education, which strengthens their role as gatekeepers of academic discourse on podcasts. Third, the thematic trends identified in recent years – particularly the use of podcasts in education, healthcare communication, true crime genres, and the integration of artificial intelligence in analysis – indicate that podcasting has become a firmly established interdisciplinary research field. Finally, the observed geographic and institutional concentration raises questions about inclusivity and diversity of perspectives, while at the same time providing a clear map of leading centres and directions in podcast scholarship.

DISCUSSION

The findings about the geographical concentration of scientific publications in several selected cities, particularly in Abingdon (USA), raise

questions about the underlying factors contributing to this dominance. One possible explanation is the presence of major academic institutions with a strong focus on digital media research; another is the geographic proximity of influential publishing houses specialized in media and communication studies. Importantly, this concentration also highlights the imbalance between global centres of knowledge production and under-represented regions, which may shape the overall direction of podcast scholarship in ways that privilege Western academic contexts. Further research should therefore investigate the interplay between institutional infrastructures, funding ecosystems, and the location of publishing houses, and whether similar patterns appear across other fields of media and communication research.

The dominance of several main publishers, particularly Routledge Journals, Taylor & Francis Ltd, demonstrates that podcast research is strongly shaped by a relatively small group of gatekeeping institutions. While this dominance can reflect specialization and expertise in media and communication studies, it also raises concerns about the diversity and plurality of scientific discourse. The concentration of output in a handful of publishers may restrict opportunities for alternative voices, regional perspectives, or interdisciplinary approaches that do not align with the editorial priorities of these dominant outlets. Further analysis could examine whether this structure limits innovation and inclusivity, and how open access or emerging regional journals might provide alternative pathways for disseminating knowledge. The time analysis of publications revealed not only an increasing number of articles but a decreasing average number of citations per article in the last years. This pattern may indicate phenomena such as market saturation, fragmentation of citation practices, or shifting research quality and focus. With the growing volume of publications, citations are likely dispersed across a wider pool of works, reducing the average impact per article. Such developments should be closely monitored, as they may signal a shift in the dynamics of academic influence: the field may be broadening but simultaneously losing its concentrated impact. Understanding whether this points to diversification or dilution of research is crucial both for authors seeking visibility and for publishers curating quality scholarship.

Within the framework of bibliographical analysis carried out by the software VOSviewer, the key network of citations among scientific publications was identified. The network analysis reveals not only structural dynamics of the research community but also interdisciplinary overlaps, showing how podcast research connects education, communication, computer science, and medicine. The clustering of publications into the-

matic groups suggests that podcasts function as a boundary object that fosters collaboration across traditionally separate disciplines. The main cluster includes influential publications such as Cadogan (2014), Copley (2007) and Shreiber (2010), which underline the centrality of emergency medicine, education, and linguistics in shaping podcast research. The colourful clustering in the visualisation not only points at thematic variety but also shows the intensity of cross-referencing practices, while isolated nodes highlight more specialized or marginal approaches. This balance between central clusters and isolated studies illustrates both the coherence and fragmentation of the field. The main limitations of this study stem from geographic and linguistic biases in the analysed publications. The overwhelming dominance of English-language works (842 out of 1000+) highlights the prevalence of anglophone academic discourse, while non-English studies (e.g., Spanish or Portuguese) remain marginal. This imbalance may obscure regional perspectives on podcasting, particularly in contexts where the medium has played significant roles in cultural or political communication. Another important limitation is the reliance on a single database (Web of Science). While it provides a rigorous and standardized dataset, it excludes many regionally published or non-indexed works, which could lead to an incomplete picture of podcast research globally.

Future research should therefore integrate multiple databases (e.g., Scopus, Google Scholar) and actively incorporate non-English-language studies to achieve more inclusive results. Additionally, deeper analysis is needed to understand the institutional and structural factors shaping scientific production, the implications of publisher dominance for diversity, and the long-term trajectories of podcast research across disciplines. Addressing these issues can not only enrich current knowledge in media studies but also provide a broader understanding of digital media's role in shaping modern societies worldwide.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the geographic distribution of publications showed that podcast research is unevenly distributed across global academic centres, with a striking concentration in Abingdon (UK, the location of Routledge/Taylor & Francis) compared to cities such as New York or London. This points less to “natural” centres of expertise and more to the decisive influence of publishing houses and institutional infrastructures in shaping where knowledge is produced and disseminated. Such concentration suggests a structural imbalance that privileges Western academic contexts while underrepresenting perspectives from other regions. The

analysis of publishers then showed that a handful of dominant publishers (Routledge/Taylor & Francis, Sage, Wiley, Springer, Elsevier) serve as the main gatekeepers of podcast scholarship. While their expertise in media and communication explains this dominance, it also raises concerns about inclusivity and the diversity of scholarly voices. This concentration highlights both the benefits of specialization and the risks of limiting innovation and regional perspectives. The time analysis revealed a significant increase in the number of published articles over the years, since 2005 (one year after the emergence of podcasts), showing how podcasts have become an established subject of academic inquiry. However, the decreasing average number of citations per article in recent years points to field fragmentation and possible saturation. This suggests that while the breadth of research is expanding, its concentrated academic impact is becoming more diffuse. The analysis of the scientific articles published in 2023 confirms that podcasts are increasingly used in applied contexts such as education, healthcare communication, and science popularization. This reflects not only the growing interdisciplinary character of podcast research but also its societal relevance: podcasts function as tools for learning, destigmatization, and public communication, with potential to influence both media practice and social change.

The bibliometric analysis carried out with the help of the VOSviewer tool revealed several key trends that shape the development of podcast scholarship. The visualisation of the citation network showed that the field is structured around a small number of highly influential publications (e.g., Cadogan 2014; Copley 2007), particularly in medicine and education, which continue to shape academic discourse. The analysis of clusters in the VOSviewer highlighted the main thematic clusters – education, healthcare, communication/cultural studies – showing how podcast research is simultaneously interdisciplinary and fragmented. The temporal analysis revealed that older, foundational works continue to exert influence, while the rise of newer clusters suggests emerging trends that may redefine the field in the coming years. Taken together, these findings underline both the achievements and limitations of current podcast research: the field is vibrant, interdisciplinary, and increasingly socially relevant, but at the same time unevenly distributed, linguistically biased, and structurally concentrated. Addressing these imbalances – through greater linguistic inclusivity, diversification of publication venues, and engagement with non-Western perspectives – should be a key task for future research. In the rapidly evolving digital media environment, continuous monitoring and critical reflection will be essential for ensuring that podcast scholarship remains both innovative and inclusive.

Kateřina Vrzalíková is a PhD candidate in Media Studies specializing in podcast narrative and the role of sound in storytelling. Her research examines narratological approaches to podcasts, the role of sound in shaping meaning, cross-genre narrative structures, and the representation of political events in audio media, as well as the use of artificial intelligence in podcast production and the broader question of whether podcasts constitute a new media form or a reinterpretation of traditional formats.

Metropolitan University Prague
Faculty of Media Studies
Učňovská 100/1
190 00 Prague 9
CZECH REPUBLIC
ORCID 0000-0002-9734-9297
E-mail: vrzak2ax@student.mup.cz

Jaroslav Světlík is a Professor of Marketing at Paneuropean University in Prague, specializing in marketing communication, intercultural communication, and strategic marketing. He has authored numerous academic publications and books focused on communication strategies, consumer behavior, and the marketing performance of enterprises. As a member of the university's Scientific Council, he contributes to the institution's academic development and research agenda. His recent work includes studies on sustainable marketing communication and the strategic behavior of small and medium-sized enterprises. Professor Světlík is also an experienced lecturer, teaching across various marketing and communication disciplines.

Paneuropean University Prague
Spálená 14
110 00 Praha 1
CZECH REPUBLIC
ORCID 0000-0001-9879-538X
E-mail: jaroslav.svetlik@peuni.cz

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SOFT POWER ON THE FRONTLINES: HOW UKRAINIAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY CONFRONTS RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

OLEKSIY HOVPUN¹, VALERII MARCHENKO¹,
SERGEY V. PETKOV², YURII MOROZIUK¹ & VASYL KOVTASH³

¹National Academy of Culture and Arts Management, Kyiv, Ukraine

²Department of Military Law and Special Linguistic Training,
Military Institute, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine

³Lawyers' Office, 77 Hrushevsky Str., Rivne, Ukraine

ABSTRACT

During hybrid warfare, when disinformation is one of the key threats to national security and social cohesion, cultural diplomacy is emerging as an effective strategic communication tool that can build trust, consolidate communities, and neutralise manipulative narratives. In this regard, the aim of the study is to analyse the potential of cultural diplomacy in countering Russia's disinformation by integrating soft power into the state's strategic communication system. The methodological basis is a mixed approach that combines content analysis of information campaigns, case studies of cultural projects implemented during the period of hybrid aggression, in-depth interviews with experts in public diplomacy, and statistical assessment of the effectiveness of cultural initiatives in changing public attitudes. The study covers the Ukrainian and European experience of using cultural instruments as counter-narrative tools aimed at increasing media literacy, reducing susceptibility to hostile propaganda, and restoring the country's positive image in the international space. The results demonstrate that the most effective are multichannel cultural strategies that combine offline and digital formats. Moreover, they should be based on the principles of local engagement and mutual trust, while integrating elements of education and civic communication. Finally, cultural diplomacy should be viewed as a soft power tool and a component of a holistic system of strategic communication that ensures resistance to disinformation.

KEYWORDS

cultural diplomacy • strategic communication • disinformation • hybrid warfare • soft power • media literacy • narrative analysis

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the information space has become one of the key arenas of geopolitical confrontation. Thus, manipulative narratives, disinformation campaigns, information and psychological operations are used as tools that can influence political processes, social unity, international relations, and national security of states. This problem is especially acute in hybrid warfare, where information and culture serve as elements of the strategic struggle for attention, trust, and interpretation of reality (Bachmann et al., 2023). Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine demonstrates that modern wars are fought not only on the battlefield, but also in the system of meanings, symbols, historical memory and cultural codes (Krasnodemska et al., 2024). That is why today there is a growing need for a comprehensive rethinking of the role of cultural diplomacy, an area that has traditionally been associated with soft power and the formation of a positive image of the state, but later began to perform the functions of information security, narrative counteraction and strengthening social resilience (Vetrynskyi, 2017). Over the past decade, the number of research studies on the mechanisms of soft power (Nye, 2004), strategic communication (Snow, 2005), public diplomacy (Melissen, 2005) and information security (Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2015) has increased worldwide.

Despite growing academic interest, cultural diplomacy remains under-researched in the context of countering disinformation. Existing studies focus mainly on cultural image, intercultural dialogue, or specific programmes but regard culture as a mechanism for building narrative resilience rarely, changing perception frames, and creating a trusting communication environment (Arndt, 2005; Farrell-Bavinton, 2021). Disinformation studies tend to focus on media literacy, fact-checking, or cybersecurity, leaving the cultural component on the periphery (Khislavski, 2022; Kutsenko, 2025). As a result, a number of conceptual and applied gaps remain, namely: the absence of a coherent model for integrating cultural diplomacy into strategic communication, limited research on its impact on emotional and symbolic frames, the lack of systematic empirical evidence and clear performance indicators, and the insufficient analysis of international cases. Hence, there is a need to consider culture a soft power tool and a key resource of information security capable of shaping defensive narratives, building trust, and increasing the resilience of society in the face of hybrid threats.

Disinformation is no longer a secondary phenomenon or a side effect of the conflict; instead, it has developed into an independent and systematic tool of strategic influence aimed at undermining social trust, manipulating emotions, creating misconceptions, and imposing one's interpre-

tations of events (Arribas et al., 2023). Since 2014, Ukraine has been experiencing unprecedented information aggression, accompanied by large-scale military operations, in which Russian propaganda uses systematic tools to manipulate historical memory, culture, and identity, for example, false narratives about the “fictitiousness of the Ukrainian nation”, constant appeals to Soviet symbols, and imperial myths (Khislavski, 2022). This indicates the need to protect the information space and create an alternative cultural space that will resist propaganda emotionally, ethically, and cognitively. In such circumstances, cultural diplomacy works not only with facts but also with meanings, symbols, historical memory, and values that disinformation tries to distort or usurp. Unlike traditional information campaigns, culture creates a lasting emotional and cognitive foundation that enables societies to evaluate manipulative messages critically and maintain their own identity in times of crisis (DW, 2022).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyse cultural diplomacy as a strategic communication tool in countering Russia’s disinformation during hybrid warfare and develop recommendations for integrating the cultural component into the state information security policy. To achieve it, several interrelated tasks are set: to outline the theoretical foundations of cultural diplomacy, soft power, strategic communication, and disinformation; to identify the mechanisms of influence of culture on the emotional, cognitive, and social resilience of audiences; to analyse Ukrainian and international cases of cultural diplomacy as a means of countering disinformation; to assess the effectiveness of different cultural formats.

Being integrated into the system of strategic communication, cultural diplomacy can increase society’s resistance to disinformation significantly via emotionally appealing counter-narratives that compete with manipulative messages. Another important factor is the strengthening of social capital and trust, which ensures the perception of reliable information. Moreover, cultural diplomacy creates alternative symbolic structures and visual frames that allow for reinterpretation of events and reduce the impact of hostile interpretations. It also develops international solidarity and cultural partnerships that strengthen the legitimacy of Ukrainian narratives in the global context. Apart from that, rethinking of historical memory serves as a resource of cognitive resilience that can protect society from repeated propaganda schemes.

The novelty of the study lies in the formation of a coherent theoretical framework of cultural diplomacy as an instrument of information security, which has not yet been conceptualised in the national and European scientific discourse. In contrast to previous works that consider culture primarily to be a resource of image or intercultural communication, the

suggested approach interprets it as a mechanism of narrative protection and strategic influence. In addition, a systematic analysis of the role of cultural practices in neutralising disinformation frames is carried out, and the connection between culture, emotional resilience, and the audience's cognition is outlined. The study also contains a review of empirical cases from Ukraine, the EU, and the United Kingdom, which have not yet been considered from a comparative perspective.

The choice of Ukraine, the EU, and the UK is conditioned by their unique experience in using cultural diplomacy in the face of intense information pressure. Ukraine is one of the main targets of Russian disinformation campaigns, which makes it a laboratory for modern approaches to cultural resilience and external communication. As a country with a strong tradition of public diplomacy and the British Council institutional model, the UK demonstrates a different, institutionally stable approach to combining culture and security (British Council & Ukrainian Institute, 2024). In contrast, the EU develops supranational standards and cultural diplomacy programmes aimed at upholding trust, mutual understanding, and democratic frameworks in the region.

These cases represent different levels (national, supranational, and regional), which permit to explore a wide range of cultural diplomacy models relevant to the context of hybrid warfare and countering disinformation. This Therefore, it is possible to build a generalised analytical framework and identify practices suitable for adaptation in Ukraine. Finally, the findings are important for state institutions, cultural organisations, and international partners, as they offer realistic strategic guidelines for the development of cultural diplomacy as one of the key tools for countering disinformation during modern hybrid threats.

1. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The methodology of this study is based on the principles of a mixed-methods approach, involving the analysis of discursive and narrative processes with quantitative measurement of changes in public attitudes, frame formation, and transformation of trust in audiences. The use of several methods helps preserve the reliability of the results due to the cross-checking of data (triangulation), which is an important condition in studies related to information security and strategic communications.

The study used various types of sources, namely: publications of national and international media, official documents of cultural institutions, reports of state bodies, analytical reviews of international organisations, digital archives of cultural campaigns, social networks, press releases, documents of the Ukrainian Institute, British Council, European

External Action Service, and Polish institutions. These sources provided an empirical basis for analysing cultural strategies, narrative formation, and the effectiveness of cultural programmes in countering disinformation. Digital products (videos, posters, documentaries, social media campaigns, visual installations, and content on digital cultural platforms) were also analysed. The multimedia material is vital, as disinformation and counter-narratives often have a visual and symbolic nature.

The research involved several stages. At the first stage, a systematic analysis of academic literature was conducted, covering works on cultural diplomacy, soft power, strategic communications, framing, narrative analysis, and disinformation studies. The data collection timeframe was May 2022 - February 2024. At this stage, the main conceptual approaches that were applied in the subsequent stages were identified. The theoretical analysis also permitted to identify gaps in research, such as the lack of models explaining the interaction between cultural diplomacy and information security, as well as insufficient attention to the narrative nature of cultural communications.

The second stage included a content analysis of three types of sources: (1) publications in the media and social media about cultural initiatives implemented during the hybrid aggression; (2) digital materials of cultural campaigns; and (3) official communications of cultural institutions. The content analysis helped identify key narratives, emotional tones, semantic accents, and frames that dominated cultural initiatives. The categorisation method permitted to identify common elements between the cases, such as the use of visual symbols, historical stories, and images of solidarity or resilience. An important component of this stage was the construction of a chronology of information attacks and corresponding cultural reactions to trace the cause-and-effect relationships between events.

At the third stage, Episode 45: Ukraine's Cultural Scene After a Year of War. With Volodymyr Yermolenko of the Die Kulturmittler (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2025) was analysed. The fourth stage involved comparative case study analysis. Five representative cases were selected for the study: the Ukrainian campaign and Brave Ukraine (2025a, 2025b), the Polish initiative Culture for Ukraine (Polish Support Center for Culture in Ukraine, 2025a, 2025b), the activities of the European External Action Service (2025) within the EUvsDisinfo (2025a, 2025b), and the British cultural season "UK-Ukraine Season of Culture" (British Council & Ukrainian Institute, 2024). These cases were chosen due to their diversity, the availability of available materials, and their significance in shaping narrative resilience. The comparison provided grounds to identi-

fy the differences between national, regional, and supranational models of cultural diplomacy and highlight common features of successful strategies, including multichannel, emotional, work with historical memory, cooperation between actors, and long-term programmes.

The fifth stage included an analysis of digital activity and statistical indicators of audience interaction with cultural initiatives. Data was collected on the reach, engagement, dynamics of content distribution, tone of comments, and interactions. The assessment of the digital presence of cultural campaigns facilitated understanding how effectively they work in environments that are the main target of disinformation attacks. In addition, limited surveys of audiences of cultural events were conducted to record changes in perception, trust, media literacy, and emotional reactions.

The choice of methods used is attributed to the fact that cultural diplomacy is a multilevel, multimodal, and interdisciplinary phenomenon. Thus, quantitative methods made it possible to measure the intensity of communication processes, identify statistical patterns and assess audience coverage. Qualitative methods helped to examine the semantic, emotional, symbolic, and ideological structure of cultural initiatives. Comparative case analysis permitted to identify models and mechanisms that were effective in different geographical and political contexts. The chosen methodology provided a comprehensive and in-depth study of cultural diplomacy as a component of strategic communication. The combination of different types of data, different levels of analysis, and different methods helped to study the impact of cultural instruments on countering disinformation and provide recommendations for their further use in the system of national and international information security.

2. RESULTS

2.1 Cultural narratives of resilience: Intersections of soft power, strategic communication, and security

Despite the rapid development of tools for analysing information threats, during hybrid warfare, the struggle is for meanings, emotions, and symbols. In this regard, culture shapes myths, stories, images, and perceptions that in turn determine how societies interpret events, respond to information attacks, and build their resilience to threats. However, at the intersection of cultural diplomacy, strategic communication, and disinformation studies, there is still a lack of holistic approaches that can explain how culture affects societies' ability to resist manipulation (Bjola & Pamment, 2018).

The study of cultural diplomacy was traditionally on the works of such authors as Cummings (2003), Arndt (2005), Snow and Cull (2020), who interpreted culture as a tool for building trust and international reputation of states. In these works, culture appears as a means of soft influence, namely an element of image policy that creates a favourable background for dialogue. However, currently, it is apparent that such approaches hardly address the question of how cultural practices function in the context of hybrid warfare, where information weapons are extremely destructive. In other words, what works well in peaceful interstate communication turns out to be insufficient in a situation where culture becomes a field of struggle for meanings.

Subsequently, Nye (2004) modernised the soft power concept, creating preconditions for rethinking the role of intangible resources in foreign policy. Nye (2004) emphasised that the attractiveness of culture could be a source of international influence no less than economic or military factors. However, culture functions primarily as a reputational resource and not as a security mechanism. Hence, Farrell-Bavinton (2021) pointed out that soft power in the twenty-first century is a means of persuading external audiences and an element of society's internal resilience to information attacks. Although he outlined the paradigm shift, and the question of how cultural narratives and images affected the ability of audiences to resist disinformation remains unresolved.

At the same time, strategic communication requires models that can explain the effectiveness of information interventions. Thus, in the NATO StratCom COE (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020), strategic communication is seen as a complex system of coordinated actions aimed at maintaining trust, legitimacy, and sustainability. However, the cultural component is relatively poorly institutionalised because culture is mentioned mainly as a context for political messages rather than as an independent resource capable of building resilience. This creates another gap: despite the obvious influence of culture on the perception of information, it has not become a full-fledged element of strategic communication models.

Within the framing and narrative theories, the mechanisms of cultural meaning transmission were analysed. A frame is not only a way of describing an event but also a tool that determines what will be noticed, what will be focused on, and what emotions will dominate perception (Taras, 2012). In this context, culture takes on a new meaning since it establishes the symbolic framework through which society interprets threats. The narrative approach proposed by Vliegenthart and van Zoonen (2011) deepened this vision. Accordingly, the stories that a state or society

tells about itself become as important as facts. Narrative shapes identity, defines the boundaries between ours and others, structures expectations, and thus acts as a tool to counter manipulation.

In this context, the notion of narrative resilience can be identified as a key factor in resisting disinformation. It refers to the ability of a society to resist manipulation through fact-checking and a powerful system of its own meanings, i.e., images, stories, and symbols that allow it to maintain semantic integrity even when the information space is under massive attack (Kupiecki et al., 2023). Disinformation studies show that information influences act primarily through emotions, trust, and group identities (Shapovalova, 2024). However, culture is hardly present in their analytical models. It remains a background although wars it often determines which messages are accepted and which are rejected in real information.

Furthermore, Hrytsak et al. (2019) and Lylo (2022) explored the role of cultural practices in shaping narrative resilience and countering information manipulation. Kutsenko (2025) analysed the mechanisms of strategic communication and the impact of information campaigns on public consciousness. The analytical materials of the Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security (2024) and the Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law (Subota, 2025) also highlighted the practical aspects of cultural diplomacy in the context of hybrid threats. Their research confirms that culture is capable of shaping the image of the state and being as a tool of information and narrative security. In this context, technical solutions or fact-checking are not enough to counter disinformation effectively. Therefore, a holistic conceptual framework that takes into account culture as a security resource is needed. Hence, the lack of an integrated and interdisciplinary framework that would explain the interaction between cultural diplomacy, strategic communication, and narrative resilience mechanisms stipulates the research gap that this study aims to fill.

2.2 Cultural narratives of resilience: Intersections of soft power, strategic communication, and security

The comparison of international and Ukrainian experiences shows that cultural diplomacy is transforming from an instrument of soft power into a component of a strategic communication system capable of countering disinformation through the formation of new emotional, symbolic, and social meanings (Kuleba, 2022). Unlike the classical understanding of cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool, the current context demonstrates its expanded security function, formed at the intersection of

narrative, psychological, and communicative approaches (Pocheptsov, 2018). In other words, culture no longer only transmits values; instead, it constructs a protective narrative environment in which hostile information operations lose their effectiveness. The content analysis of media materials, social networks, digital platforms, and official communications of cultural institutions allowed for identify keying narratives, emotional frames, visual patterns, and semantic structures that shaped the communication strategies of cultural initiatives during Russia's hybrid aggression against Ukraine.

One of the most illustrative cases is the Brave Ukraine campaign (2025a, 2025b), implemented by the Ukrainian Institute and the Banda agency. According to the Ukrainian Institute (2023), the potential social media reach of communication campaigns was 454 million people, while the press releases/descriptions of the Brave Ukraine (2025a, 2025b) campaign from Banda Agency and its partners cited the figure of over 2 billion contacts (impressions). The total digital reach of the campaign in 2022-2024 exceeded 1,2 billion impressions, including social media, external media, and partner platforms. Campaign posts distributed through Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter/X demonstrated a high level of engagement: the average engagement rate was 7-12%, which was significantly higher than the global average for cultural projects over the same period (3-5%).

Figure 1: New branded posters, and support the project on social media by using #braveukraine hashtag. Source: EUvsDisinfo (2025a)



The analysis of the tone of the comments shows a predominance of positive and neutral reactions (approximately 78%), the majority of them expressing support, empathy, and recognition of the bravery of the Ukrainians. Negative comments (about 8%) often came from accounts identified as bot farms or coordinated pro-Russian networks, which was consistent with EUvsDisinfo (2024) data on campaigns to discredit Ukraine's image. The dynamics of spreading was marked by peaks during high-profile events (attacks on Kyiv, speeches by Ukrainian officials, international summits), indicating the reactive nature of digital mobilisation. The analysis of media publications proves that the campaign was a global information phenomenon due to the use of clear emotional frames: courage, dignity, and resistance, which allowed Ukraine to be identified not as a victim but as a subject thanks to a powerful visual style. Using large-scale installations, digital exhibitions, art films, and poster campaigns (Figure 1), illustrative symbols of courage and resilience repelled Russian disinformation narratives about "chaos", "weakness", or "radicalism" in Ukraine (EUvsDisinfo, 2025a, 2025b).

Furthermore, the emotional narrative of bravery, built on cultural codes, proved particularly effective in mobilising international support by creating a sense of empathetic co-presence. In numerous media reports, the visual markers of the campaign were traced as central elements of the new frame of Western perception of Ukraine (Teller, 2022). Social media replicated versions of the visual posters, with key textual markers such as bravery, freedom, and resistance.

Meanwhile, disinformation narratives disseminated by Russian resources tried to create a frame of fictitiousness of the campaign, emphasising the alleged "unrealistic image of bravery". The comparison of these two discursive lines reveals that the campaign worked as a countering narrative to the Russian narrative of "Ukraine is weak" and "Ukraine is not independent" and offered an image of an active society. Against this backdrop, the content analysis of Russian disinformation messages collected in the EUvsDisinfo database show that key propaganda messages about "chaos in Ukraine", "decline of the state" or "Ukrainian radicalism" were neutralised by the image of a disciplined, dignified, and courageous nation (EUvsDisinfo, 2024), confirming the strategic effectiveness of cultural communication.

Furthermore, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute held exhibitions, film screenings, and support programmes for Ukrainian artists in 2022-2023. The example of the initiatives included the Artists for Ukraine joint project and exhibitions that were popularised in Poland and abroad (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Stand With Ukraine*, created by Jane Mechner and Molly Nolan, 2022.
Source: Artists for Ukraine (2022)



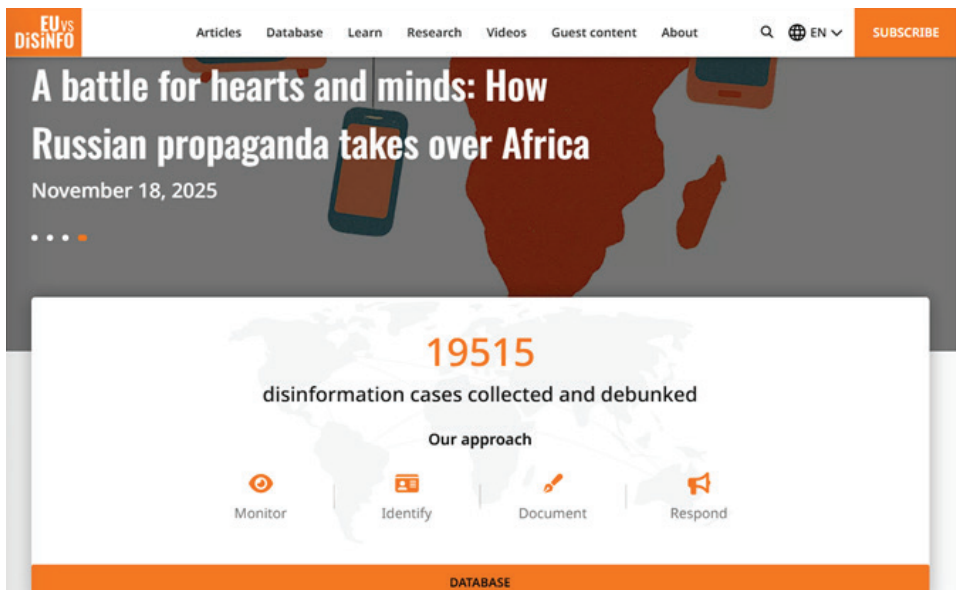
The Polish case Culture for Ukraine (Polish Support Center for Culture in Ukraine, 2025b) demonstrates a different model of cultural diplomacy, i.e., a partnership cross-border model, in which the partner state acted as a counter-communicator in countering disinformation directed against Ukraine. Through joint exhibitions, film screenings, cultural events, and the involvement of Ukrainian artists, Polish institutions formed sustainable counter-narratives to topics exploited by Russian propaganda systematically, such as “Ukrainian refugees” or “interethnic tensions” (Brand Finance, 2025). The total reach of official Adam Mickiewicz Institute cultural projects related to Ukraine in 2022-2023 was about 30 million impressions, while the average engagement was 4-6%, which was in line with typical indicators for EU cultural platforms. The tone of the comments was mostly positive (about 72%), especially in posts that emphasised the historical affinity between Poland and Ukraine (Polish Support Center for Culture in Ukraine, 2025a; Adam Mickiewicz Institute, 2025).

At the same time, local waves of negative comments on refugees were recorded in the Polish segment of social media (jumps in negative tone of up to 18-20%). They correlated with waves of Russian disinformation about the “migration crisis”, according to analytical reports by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute (2023). However, cultural initiatives aimed at emphasizing partnership reduced the amplitude of negative emotions significantly, which in turn proved the effectiveness of cultural correction of vulnerable narratives. The content analysis shows that Polish institutions focus on the narrative of solidarity and historical kinship.

The media disseminated materials about joint cultural events, residencies for Ukrainian artists, and translations of Ukrainian literature. On social media, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute used visual symbols combining Polish and Ukrainian national colours, and frames such as *pamiętamy* (Eng., we remember), *solidarni* (Eng., in solidarity), and *razem* (Eng., together). These communication strategies served to build trust and created a space in which Polish and Ukrainian audiences coexisted within a common historical narrative. In response to Russian disinformation campaigns that promoted the “Ukrainians are a threat” frame systematically, Polish cultural initiatives generated the opposite meaning of “Ukrainians are partners”. Since such messages often circulated in local information environments, Polish cultural platforms performed the function of correcting distorted frames exactly where they had the greatest impact. The networks of cultural cooperation between Polish and Ukrainian institutions created an infrastructure of trust as a key condition for information security in the region and demonstrated how culture can be turned into an instrument of institutional counteraction to disinformation.

Within the EU initiatives, the EUvsDisinfo database and the broader Strategic Communication East programme (2015-2024) played an important role (European Council, 2015). According to European External Action Service (2025) public reports, in 2023, EUvsDisinfo pages generated over 19

Figure 3: Disinformation cases collected and debunked EUvsDisinfo. Source: EUvsDisinfo (2024)



million impressions, with an interaction rate of 5-8%, which was high for fact-checking platforms.

The tone analysis shows an extremely high level of trust: the positive response rate was around 81%, and user comments often focused on gratitude for clarification or requests for refutation of new fakes. These platforms had a significant impact on media dynamics: their materials were cited by leading European media regularly, which led to the further spread of cultural and historical counter-narratives. The analysis of official reports and media materials shows that these tools worked at the level of systemic analytics, strategic disinformation exposure, and a cultural dimension (EUvsDisinfo, 2024). In its public communications, EUvsDisinfo used cultural metaphors (battle of narratives, the weaponisation of history), visual images explaining the mechanisms of disinformation, and classifications of manipulative stories. On social media, their posts often contained examples of distorted historical interpretations, which allowed audiences to understand how culture and collective memory were targeted by information attacks (EUvsDisinfo, 2025a, 2025b). This approach created a frame of cultural literacy in which audiences viewed historical and cultural texts as potential targets for manipulation.

The British case of the UK-Ukraine Season of Culture (British Council & Ukrainian Institute, 2024) focused on emotionality and intercultural dialogue, which was evident in the coverage of cultural events in the British media. According to the British Council, in 2022-2023, the Season's digital materials generated more than 40 million impressions, and the engagement rate was 6-9%, being significantly higher than the average for other cultural programmes in the UK (British Council & Ukrainian Institute, 2024). The comments had a distinctly empathetic tone (82% of positive reactions), and the most popular content was videos with Ukrainian artists and interactive visual installations.

A special feature of the British case is that it formed a pro-Ukrainian cultural community that shared materials on social media, contributing to the organic growth of the coverage. The content analysis shows that British communications used the narrative of Ukraine as a cultural nation, which contradicted the Russian disinformation narrative about the "fictitiousness of the Ukrainian nation". The British Council's social media was dominated by visual images of contemporary Ukrainian art, music, and theatre, which formed the frame of Ukraine's cultural complexity and subjectivity (British Council & Ukrainian Institute, 2024). An additional emphasis was placed on the stories of Ukrainian artists who continued to create despite the war. Such materials created an empathetic effect and strengthened emotional solidarity with Ukraine at the cultural level.

2.3 Comparative analysis of cultural diplomacy models in the context of hybrid warfare

The comparative analysis of the three groups of sources demonstrates a number of common semantic accents. All the cases used visual symbols (national colours, motifs of bravery, images of resilience), historical stories (memory of resistance to totalitarian regimes, experience of occupation), and emotional frames (dignity, solidarity, subjectivity). However, cultural institutions adapted their communications to specific waves of disinformation: during periods of intensified Russian information attacks, the number of materials aimed at exposing historical manipulations, explaining cultural contexts, or updating national symbols increased. This permitted to trace clearly the logic of attack - reaction: cultural initiatives did not react chaotically but were built a consistent line of semantic defence.

Moreover, the comparison of the selected cases establishes common mechanisms of cultural diplomacy during hybrid warfare and significant differences in their functioning models. In addition, despite their different scale, institutional capacities, and socio-political context, they all use culture as a systemic tool for building resilience (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparative analysis of cultural diplomacy cases. Source: Author's processing

Case	Key narratives	Emotional frames	Resilience model	Cultural diplomacy tools	Reaction to disinformation	Unique features
Brave Ukraine (2022–2024)	Bravery, subjectivity, freedom	Pride, indomitability	Mobilisation	Visual campaigns, posters, global media	A counter-narrative to “Ukraine is weak”	Strong recognition, instant virality
Culture for Ukraine (2022–2023)	Solidarity, partnership, community	Empathy, support	Partnership solidarity	Cultural programmes, translations, residencies	Rejecting the “Ukrainians as a threat” narrative	Strengthening historical kinship
EUvsDisinfo	Transparency, fact-checking, historical literacy	Rationality, criticism	Analytical and institutional model	Analysis of disinformation, explanatory materials	Deconstructing the manipulation of history	The most systemic and supranational case
UK–Ukraine Season of Culture (2022–2023)	Cultural subjectivity, creativity	Empathy, interest, and commitment	Empathic and cultural model	Art events, exhibitions, music programmes	Rejecting the narrative “Ukraine is not a cultural nation”	Focus on modernity and creative potential of Ukraine

The comparison of international and Ukrainian experiences shows that cultural diplomacy is transforming from an instrument of soft power into a component of a strategic communications system capable of countering disinformation by creating new emotional, symbolic, and social meanings.

All of the analysed cases demonstrate that culture in modern conflicts ceases to perform an exclusively representative function and instead acquires the characteristics of a security tool capable of influencing cognitive processes, framing events, and the dynamics of international support. It is worth noting that cultural campaigns that work with strong emotional frames (courage, solidarity, memory, subjectivity) have a higher level of virality and engagement. Campaigns with a strong visual identity demonstrate a consistently positive tone and wider international reach.

Currently, cultural diplomacy forms a protective information environment and reduces the effectiveness of enemy manipulations. This is due to the fact that culture operates with emotional and symbolic codes simultaneously, which are much more stable than rational arguments. Therefore, cultural interventions are able to influence the deeper levels of public perception and neutralise disinformation narratives by replacing them with stronger positive meanings. In all cases, there is a clear correlation between waves of disinformation and the growth of digital activity of cultural institutions, which confirms their role as reactive and strategic actors in the information environment. Finally, quantitative indicators confirm the effectiveness of cultural communications as a tool for building digital resilience and countering information attacks in the international context.

The analysed cases demonstrate different models of cultural resilience: mobilisation, partnership, institutional and analytical, memory and history, and empathy and culture. They use similar strategies: working with identity, emotional frames, historical stories, and visual symbols. These elements are activated systematically in response to specific waves of disinformation, which indicates the adaptive nature of cultural diplomacy in hybrid warfare. Thus, the ability of culture to combine emotional impact with deep semantic structures makes it one of the most effective tools for countering disinformation in modern conflicts.

Moreover, the analysis of digital activity and international practices shows that the next logical stage in the development of Ukraine's cultural policy should be its deep integration into the system of strategic communication and national security. That is why the key task is to create a coordination environment within which cultural, diplomatic, information, and security institutions can work in a coordinated manner, share analyses, and form narrative priorities jointly. The creation of an interagency platform that would combine the MFA, ICIP, the Centre for Strategic Communications, the Ukrainian Institute and other organisations would strengthen the coherence of communication strategies and ensure the ability to respond quickly to information attacks. Meanwhile, there is a need for stable long-term funding for cultural initiatives related to narrative resil-

ience. Cultural campaigns integrated into the information security sphere would have a long-term impact and, therefore, require budget planning for at least three to five years, rapid response capabilities, and support for institutional infrastructure. Therefore, it is advisable to create separate government programmes and grant instruments aimed at supporting rapid cultural interventions, similar to the rapid-response funds models used in leading countries.

The study establishes that in the context of hybrid warfare, culture ceases to be only a carrier of values and turns into a way of protecting the information space by creating strong emotional and symbolic counter-narratives. Therefore, it is advisable to develop narratives that directly deny Russian strategic frames systematically, in particular, regarding Ukraine's subjectivity, democratic tradition, and continuity of national history. It is also important to institutionalise work with historical memory as part of information security. In this regard, documentary projects, digital archives, and educational initiatives that explain the mechanisms of historical manipulation should be more supported. The success of Brave Ukraine (2025a, 2025b) campaign also proves the importance of using strong visual codes and emotional frames that are recognisable instantly and easily scalable on social media. Their systematic use can create a stable symbolic space in which disinformation messages lose their resonance.

Another vector of improvement concerns the development of the digital ecosystem of cultural diplomacy. As the key processes of narrative dissemination occur in digital environments, Ukraine needs to create a single national platform for cultural diplomacy that would combine all digital products, international projects, analytical data, and resources for partners. Moreover, it is important to strengthen the analytical component in order to use data on engagement, virality, tone of comments, and waves of disinformation to promptly adjust strategies. In addition, the effectiveness of cultural institutions largely depends on professional social media management, so targeted training, modernisation of communication teams, and provision of high-quality analytical tools are necessary.

The study also shows the importance of international cooperation and the creation of cross-border cultural coalitions. The Polish case of Culture for Ukraine indicates that the model of partnership solidarity, in which the partner state is involved in shaping counter-narratives, enhances the information resilience of the region significantly (Polish Support Center for Culture in Ukraine, 2025b). This approach should be scaled up by forming sustainable partnerships with key European and transatlantic cultural institutions. Cooperation with the EU can combine cultural interventions with systemic analytics and strategic exposure of manipulations. In turn,

the British experience emphasises the importance of emotional empathy and intercultural dialogue, which should also be integrated into Ukrainian international campaigns.

In addition, the need for closer integration of culture, education, and media literacy is identified. Cultural projects are strengthened when they include elements of educational work, such as public lectures, discussions, creative workshops, or multimedia materials explaining the mechanisms of manipulation. The creation of multimedia educational products that combine cultural content with critical analysis of information will help carry out independent narrative analysis. Integrating elements of cultural diplomacy into the educational environment, in particular into university programmes for communication, cultural studies, and international relations students, will help create a generation capable of working critically with the cultural and information space.

Moreover, evaluating the effectiveness of cultural initiatives requires special attention. The introduction of a standardised system of indicators will help assess the impact of cultural campaigns on audience sentiment, changing narratives or increasing resilience to disinformation. Such indicators should include digital metrics and such variables as trust, sense of community, and recognition of cultural symbols. Therefore, it is important to involve university research centres, think tanks, and independent experts who can provide external assessment and suggest methodological updates.

Finally, the research findings demonstrate the key role of artists in shaping national narrative resilience. Therefore, cultural policy should include support for artists who work with the topics of war, memory and identity. The development of international residencies and cultural collaborations will also strengthen the presence of Ukrainian culture in the global space. Apart from that, establishing cooperation between cultural institutions, fact-checking organisations, and educational platforms will help create reliable, sustainable, and culturally relevant narratives.

In general, these recommendations outline a set of measures that can transform cultural diplomacy from an instrument of soft power into an effective mechanism of information security. Their implementation will enable Ukraine to form a sustainable cultural environment systematically, counteract manipulations, and create new positively charged meanings that will work to build trust, social capital, and international support.

DISCUSSION

Interviews and public statements by Ukrainian intellectuals and cultural experts emphasise that culture also performs an internal stabilising func-

tion. For example, a well-known Ukrainian public intellectual Volodymyr Yermolenko (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2025) notes that culture in times of war not only preserves identity but also helps society form a line of defence against semantic attacks via creating the very narrative stability that reduces vulnerability to external manipulation. Similar thoughts can be traced in the comments of other Ukrainian researchers and cultural managers who speak of culture as part of national defence in the sense of sense-making and moral consolidation (Kutsenko, 2025).

British, European and Ukrainian experts point out that the key mechanism is a combination of emotional appeal and cultural and historical context. In its report on the UK-Ukraine Season of Culture, the British Council emphasises that human stories, artistic performances, and intercultural exchanges evoke empathetic engagement, which in turn stipulates stable international support and weakening of disinformation narratives about Ukraine's "fictitiousness" or "incivility". The emotional component proves to be crucial. Thus, when audiences are emotionally engaged, they are more likely to accept complex counter-narratives and less susceptible to manipulative messages (British Council & Ukrainian Institute, 2024).

Among the key barriers highlighted by experts in their publications and comments, there are several systemic problems. First of all, it is the institutional fragmentation, which is manifested in the lack of a coherent policy between the ministries of culture, information, and foreign affairs (Puurunen, 2024). An additional challenge is the lack of funding for long-term cultural programmes, which makes it difficult to develop consistent strategies. Special attention is drawn to the slow adaptation of cultural institutions to the dynamics of disinformation waves, which often results in delayed responses to information threats (Kravchenko et al., 2024). Measuring the effects is also problematic as there are still no agreed Key Performance Indicators that would allow assessing the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy in the context of information security. EUvsDisinfo (2024) analysts and European External Action Service (2025) researchers note that while fact-checking and technical tools are important, without cultural strategies that work at the level of meaning and identity, the mechanism for countering disinformation will be incomplete.

There are also specific quotes reflecting expert opinions. For example, in an interview, Volodymyr Yermolenko emphasized that today Ukraine's role is to protect culture as an instrument of the nation's existence; the Ukrainians are building not only museums but also defensive lines of meaning (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2025). In its publication on the 2022-2023 season, the British Council determines that cultural ties create a sustainable support network that continues to operate after the event (British

Council & Ukrainian Institute, 2024). Lange-Ionatamišvili (2015) notes that deconstructing historical manipulations is the key to weakening the tools of information aggression. These opinions represent a synthesis of practical experience and analytical interpretations of experts in cultural diplomacy and information security (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The study allowed for a holistic understanding of cultural diplomacy as a strategic tool in countering disinformation and demonstrated that its potential goes far beyond the traditional understanding of soft power. In the context of hybrid warfare, culture is not just a channel for representing a country but a medium for shaping the semantic, emotional, and cognitive resilience of society. Cultural diplomacy can function as a full-fledged component of the information security system.

The analysis of the theoretical framework revealed the lack of an integrated model that would combine culture, strategic communication, and information security. Existing approaches to soft power, public diplomacy or framing offer important but fragmented explanations. The identified gaps demonstrate the need for a new conceptual approach that considers the narrative and emotional nature of cultural communication. The research provided an analytical toolkit that embraced the mechanisms of narrative resilience, the interaction of cultural and information codes, collective memory, and the symbolic environment in shaping the public's ability to resist manipulation.

The analysis demonstrated that cultural campaigns could change global frames of perception of Ukraine effectively, form strong counter-narratives, and neutralise key disinformation messages. The analysis of the cases showed that different countries used cultural diplomacy as a means of protecting society from destructive information influences. Despite the diversity of contexts, these practices shared common characteristics such as the reliance on emotionally charged images, the use of historical stories as a protective resource, the creation of symbols of subjectivity and solidarity, and the formation of multi-level partnerships that strengthened resilience. These elements ensured the long-term effect of cultural communication that would go beyond short-term information response.

The results of the digital content analysis confirmed that cultural reduced the impact of hostile information narratives through high engagement, emotional response, and spread in global social networks. The high recognition of visual codes and the positive tone of reactions indicated that culture constructed an alternative information environment domi-

nated by its own meanings rather than those imposed from outside.

The creation of a holistic theoretical and methodological model that would define cultural diplomacy as a tool for narrative security combined the concepts of soft power, framing, narrative theory, and disinformation analysis into a single analytical system. Thus, the conceptual apparatus of narrative resilience, cultural framing, and symbolic protection was introduced, which facilitated describing and measuring the impact of cultural practices in the context of information threats. Therefore, it was established that cultural diplomacy was a strategic component of modern security policy. It could respond to disinformation and create a positive information environment that reduced the vulnerability of society. Its effectiveness was based on the ability to combine emotions, knowledge, tradition, innovation, historical memory, and digital communication formats.

In general, it was proved that culture served as a long-term defence mechanism that helped society to maintain subjectivity, build resilience and assert itself in the global information space, even in the face of intense external pressure. That is why the development of systemic cultural diplomacy should be seen as one of the key priorities of state policy in the era of hybrid threats. The results of the study create the basis for the further development of state policy in the field of cultural diplomacy and information security, and open up prospects for new interdisciplinary research that combines cultural studies, communications, international relations, psychology, and disinformation studies.

Oleksiy Hovpun is a Doctor of Law and Associate Professor, serving as Vice-Rector for International, Scientific and Pedagogical Work at the National Academy of Culture and Arts Management (Kyiv, Ukraine). His academic and administrative activities focus on legal regulation in the cultural sphere, higher education governance, and international academic cooperation. He actively contributes to research and institutional development in legal education and cultural management.

ORCID: 0000-0002-5753-966X

E-mail: prof.staff_culture@dakkkim.edu.ua

Valerii Marchenko is a Doctor of Philosophy, PhD in History of Arts, Professor, and Rector of the National Academy of Culture and Arts Management (Kyiv, Ukraine). His scholarly interests include the history and theory of arts, cultural policy, and the development of higher education in the cultural sector. He has extensive experience in academic leadership, research, and the modernization of cultural and artistic education.

Sergey V. Petkov is a Doctor of Law and Professor at the Department of Military Law and Special Linguistic Training, Military Institute of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. His research focuses on military law, national security, international humanitarian law, and legal aspects of defense. He has significant experience in legal education and research related to military and security studies.

Yurii Moroziuk is a PhD student at the National Academy of Culture and Arts Management (Kyiv, Ukraine). His academic interests are centered on legal and organizational aspects of cultural management, cultural policy, and the development of educational institutions. He is engaged in research activities related to the modernization of governance and legal frameworks in the cultural and creative sectors.

Vasyl Kovtash is a practicing lawyer at the Lawyers' Office in Rivne, Ukraine. His professional activities focus on legal practice, advisory services, and the application of law in public and private sectors. He combines practical legal experience with analytical work, contributing to research and professional discussions on contemporary legal issues.

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FROM I TO WE: HOW HATE BECOMES COLLECTIVE

JULIA GOTTSTEIN

Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

Törnberg, A., & Törnberg, P. (2024). *Intimate communities of hate: Why social media fuels far-right extremism.* Routledge.

The far-right shift and the growing development of anti-liberal sentiment have long attracted societal, political, and academic attention, yet this interest has intensified in recent years due to broader forces advancing anti-liberal agendas. How are far-right ideologies mobilized and sustained in a highly mediated world where much of social interactions unfold online? Given that it has become virtually impossible to avoid even occasional references to phenomena such as hate speech or disinformation campaigns, academic inquiry into these issues offers valuable insights into the mechanisms through which online communities of hate operate. At the same time, scholarship on extremism has a tendency to shift between technologically deterministic views based on the affordances of digital

spaces and psychological interpretations. This leaves a conceptual gap concerning the social and relational dynamics of radicalization, the area to which the book under review makes a substantial contribution.

Work by sociologists Anton Törnberg from the University of Gothenburg and Petter Törnberg from the University of Amsterdam is perhaps one of the most comprehensive studies that demonstrate the mechanics of how radical groups are formed within online spaces. Drawing on two decades of data from one of the oldest and most influential white supremacist forums, Stormfront, the authors examined the social processes that shape the digital lives of far-right extremists. A deliberate focus on Stormfront as an empirical site enabled them to explore individual trajectories along-

side the broader, long-term consolidation of a transnational extremist community.

Overall, it is most common in academic discourse to conceptualize online community formation through the frameworks of echo chambers (e.g., Sunstein 2001) and filter bubbles (e.g., Pariser 2012), which are essentially rooted in the Habermasian idea of public rational discussion (Habermas & Burger 1998). In other words, it is interpreted as a consequence of isolation when participants primarily encounter opinions that amplify their pre-existing beliefs rather than challenge them. While the underlying causes may be debated, ranging from the affordances of participatory spaces to algorithmic curation by platforms, the core hypothesis remains the same: overexposure to one-sided arguments. The Törnbergs, however, propose a significant shift toward a sociological understanding grounded in ritual, emotion, and symbolic belonging. Drawing from Collins' (2004) adaptation of Durkheim's theorization of community, they conceptualize online discussions as digital rituals that create collective identity, emotional energy, and shared worldviews (Törnberg & Törnberg 2024). In doing so, they situate the debate on extremism within a broader sociological tradition and provide an empirically grounded counterpoint to the theorization that attributes radicalization primarily to overexposure to homogeneous content in terms of views.

This shift is important for how we think about radicalization. Essentially, through a detailed exploration of interactions between community members of Stormfront, the authors conclude that neither persuasion nor argumentation plays a significant role. Instead, communication serves not only as an informational function, but primarily as an

emotive one, fostering a sense of belonging and emphasizing similarities and differences to distinguish an "us" from a "them" (ibid., p. 7). This is crucial in understanding the mechanics of how online communities operate. In Durkheimian theory (Durkheim & Fields 1995), rituals connect identity, narratives, and emotions, reflecting our fundamental need to belong and make sense of the world. Authors argue that radicalization and extremism can be understood as arising from the very same social drives, specifically through the formation of in-groups (us) and out-groups (them). External threats, therefore, can potentially reinforce internal cohesion, while strong in-group bonds may intensify hostility toward outsiders. (ibid., p.9). Importantly, the process appears to be primarily symbolic and relational rather than rooted in rational deliberation or isolation from opposing arguments. In contrast to the echo chambers theory, which presupposes a lack of contact with opposing views, the authors demonstrate how engagement with outside events and actors serves as raw material for strengthening in-group bonds. This reframing is one of the book's main contributions and directly engages current debates on the relational nature of online participation.

The authors introduce the concept of tribal epistemology (p. 35) to illustrate how online communities develop distinct systems for understanding and evaluating information. They identify four interconnected elements that structure interactions: forums as communal gathering places that foster a sense of shared identity; community-specific language that helps to establish boundaries and clearly distinguish insiders from outsiders; a mutual focus of attention through recurring topics; and a collective emotional atmosphere. This

lens helps explain why contested truths, conspiracies, and emotionally charged narratives flourish in such settings. It happens not due to informational isolation but because they sustain a ritualized sense of “we.” The book goes so far as to frame these communities as digital tribes, drawing an analogy with Aboriginal communal gatherings (p. 9). While it may appear bold, it effectively captures the depth of symbolic and emotional investment that characterizes long-term participation in extremist spaces. Moreover, the notion of tribal epistemology resonates with current debates on mis- and disinformation, where questions of truth are increasingly intertwined with identity and loyalty. This study, however, further grounds these discussions in an empirically rich reconstruction of interaction rituals, rather than in abstract concerns over truth and falsehood.

To contextualize the empirical basis for researching such interaction rituals, it is important to note that Stormfront, founded in 1996, functioned as a discussion-based forum with strict moderation rules and clear ideological boundaries (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). It gained the grim reputation of being the “murder capital of the Internet,” with its users linked to almost one hundred murders since 2010, including Anders Breivik’s 2011 attacks (Törnberg & Törnberg 2024, p. 51). Despite numerous attempts to shut it down, Stormfront remained active until 2017, leaving an extensive archive (more than 10 million posts by around 100,000 users) encompassing more than two decades of far-right discussions. It also highlights how long-standing infrastructures of participation prefigure contemporary platform dynamics, complicating narratives that investigate the roots of online extremism solely in newer social media architectures.

Such a large dataset indeed offers, on the one hand, unprecedented longitudinal coverage and the opportunity to trace community formation and observe how individual users descend into extremism; on the other hand, it poses significant challenges due to the volume of content. To overcome those challenges, the Törnbergs adopt what they call critical methodological pluralism (p. 40), integrating computational tools with qualitative digital ethnography. Their research design essentially moves between pattern detection in big datasets, close interpretive reading, and hypothesis refinement. This design exemplifies current attempts in computational social science to maintain interpretive sensitivity while working with large datasets. Although a detailed description of the methodology isn’t the primary aim of this review and the book itself may initially seem overwhelming to readers unfamiliar with computational sociology, it is crucial to note that it offers substantial value for readers interested in moving beyond the quantitative vs. qualitative dichotomy and exploring how computational tools can be integrated with digital ethnography. This approach enables researchers to handle a vast dataset while maintaining access to nuanced, in-depth analysis of social phenomena. In the context of existing scholarship, this is not a radical shift but rather a sophisticated consolidation of emerging mixed-methods practices in the research of online spaces. Its true innovation lies in the consistent use of these tools to support an established theory, rather than treating computational outputs as ends in themselves.

The question remains: How does the study empirically demonstrate that radicalization is a social process of community formation rather than a development driven by the ex-

change of arguments in isolation from opposing opinions? The empirical analysis focuses on how Stormfront users responded to and interpreted two major political events: the 2008 election of Barack Obama as U.S. president and the 2016 election of Donald Trump. These highly mediated moments enabled the authors to trace the formation of collective identity, emotional energy, and shared worldviews. By focusing on reactions, they demonstrate that extremist communities do not withdraw from the broader public sphere but actively reinterpret it through their own ritualized lenses. The key empirical patterns can be distilled into three main insights.

Rapid adoption of the community language

The analysis revealed that first-time posters initially stand far from the forum language but converge relatively quickly. For example, first-person singular pronouns (I, my, I'm) are over time replaced by second-person plural forms (you, your), referring to the Stormfront community, as well as by group identifiers such as "wn" (White Nationalist) or the abbreviation "sf" for the forum itself. Similarly, while new members tend to use personalization such as "I White," "I believe/think/agree/disagree," this gradually shifts toward collective identity markers such as "We Whites," "We nationalists," "We fighting," "We act," and "We want," reflecting an increasingly established sense of community's in-group. Beyond pronoun shifts, the study also identified systematic lexical substitutions that marked ideological alignment and adaptation to the community's discursive articulation. Terms like "government" were increasingly replaced by "zog", short for Zionist Occupational Government, referring to an antisemitic conspir-

acy theory. Similarly, "media" was substituted with "msm" ("mainstream media") or, again, with "zog." And so on. Overall, according to the researchers, almost complete linguistic convergence had occurred after approximately 20 posts (pp. 65-69). These findings illustrate that users tend to align quite rapidly with the community's dominant discourse, gradually internalizing and reproducing its shared identity as they continue to participate and transition into active membership. The analysis thereby adds empirical weight to longstanding qualitative observations about "learning the language" of extremist groups, but in a way that makes visible the tempo and scale of this adaptation across thousands of users.

Transformation of individual moral shocks into collective cohesion

According to the analyzed data, newcomers tend to express strong emotions, such as shock, fear, and disgust, while long-term members adopt a more neutral tone. This analysis was primarily based on content posted around the 2008 American presidential election. The authors conclude that for new members, the election of Obama constituted a moral shock, and through shared narratives, their feelings were collectively transformed into solidarity, creating a sense of belonging and empowerment. Long-term members, already immersed in the community's established narratives, served as a buffer against shock. Here, the book convincingly demonstrates how moral shocks do not radicalize individuals in isolation, but are collectively processed and transformed into collective cohesion, offering an empirically grounded explanation for why extremist communities can absorb destabilizing events and turn them into opportunities for further integration.

Collective meaning-making through discursive struggles

The study demonstrates that constructing a communal worldview was not a straightforward process, as community members negotiated competing interpretations. The authors conceptualize it as grassroots framing. Through the examination of discursive narratives following the 2008 and 2016 elections, they were able to distinguish between four main categories: Obama as a threat (keywords: white slavery, end of the White race, economic stagnation) or an opportunity (keywords: eye-opener, wake-up call), and Trump as trustworthy (keywords: great opportunity, victory for whites, white awakening) or untrustworthy (keywords: pacification of White people, system is the problem, Trump's connections to Jews) (pp.82-92). A key finding is the discursive transformation of "disasters" into "opportunities," with Obama fitting a "worse is better" frame and Trump a "better is better" frame, showing how political events empower communities through framing. This suggests that extremist communities judge events less by facts than by frames that align with their values, thereby reinforcing their worldview and sense of belonging. The interaction of narrative and identity also explains extremism's link to misinformation, where truth is shaped by identity and desire, allowing conspiracies to persist. By highlighting grassroots framing struggles, the book challenges portrayals of extremist communities as monolithic and emphasizes internal contestation as an important, yet often overlooked, aspect of how radical worldviews are stabilized.

The book offers a comprehensive theoretical contribution and a rich empirical basis to contemporary research on extremism, challenging the currently dominant echo cham-

ber paradigm and demonstrating that online radical spaces are not isolated, but actively engage with and interpret opposing viewpoints. Moreover, exposure to these opposing viewpoints can actually strengthen radical beliefs, as radicalization is primarily social rather than informational in nature. This reframing has important implications for policymakers and scholarship alike, suggesting that interventions targeting information flows or algorithmic exposure alone may be insufficient.

The book further illustrates that online participatory spaces have the potential to fundamentally transform how people engage with political and social issues by shaping identities and fostering communities with strong in-group bonds, something that passive consumption of information cannot facilitate. It is important, however, to situate the study within its context. Stormfront represents a structure from the early days of discussion forums, and its organization and dynamics differ from the affordances of contemporary social media platforms. Furthermore, while Stormfront was not the only space for extremists, its unique history, nature, and longevity raise questions about the generalizability of the study's findings. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the book overall is an important academic work for scholars of sociological research on extremism, as well as for computational sociology, offering a significant methodological approach that integrates computational tools with human annotation. For readers accustomed to thinking about radicalization through the shorthand of echo chambers and algorithmic personalization, the study serves as a timely reminder that collective rituals, shared emotions, and identity work remain central to understanding why extremist communities endure. At the same time, the focus

on a single, highly specific forum means that further research will be needed to test how far this ritual-based perspective travels to more fluid, platform-specific environments such as mainstream social media or encrypted messaging apps. Despite this, the book stands out as a theoretically ambitious and empirically

grounded contribution that invites scholars to rethink far-right mobilization and radicalization online, offering a perspective that both complements and challenges existing paradigms, making this work a valuable resource for scholars across sociology, media studies, and computational social science.

Mgr. Julia Gottstein, M.A. is a doctoral student from the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. Her research focuses on online participatory spaces, moderation of user-generated content and journalistic gate-keeping.
ORCID: 0000-0001-6458-5480

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