ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЇ СУЧАСНОГО СУПСІЛЬСТВА

*Lauren Nyquist, Mary Neuburger, Maya Patel, Oksana Lutsyshyna,
Matthew Orr, Matt Maldonado, Milena Djordjevic-Kisacanin, Abigail Kuchek*

THE ZELENSKY PHENOMENON: YOUTH, SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN UKRAINE

Лорен Найквіст, Мері Ньюбергер, Майя Пател, Оксана Луцишина, Меттью Орр, Метт Малдоналдо, Мілена Джорджевич-Кісачанін, Абігейл Кучек
Феномен Зеленського: молодь, соціальні мережі та залученість у політичні процеси в Україні

Завдяки соціальним мережам молодь отримала можливість брати безпосередню участь у політичних подіях протягом українських революцій останніх років. У цій статті ми досліджуємо види взаємодії молоді з політичними процесами та задіяність у цих процесах соцмереж. Ми аналізуємо президентські вибори 2019 року і обрання Володимира Зеленського президентом України. Наша методологія включає кількісні (анкети-опитування, аналіз даних) і якісні (фокус-групи) дослідницькі методи; розмови онлайн і наживо із студентськими фокус-групами з різних міст України; слідкування у соцмережах за рядовими дописувачами і за впливовими топ-блогерами. Ми розповсюдили анкети опитувань до, після, і між виборчими турами. Учасникам було запропоновано питання кількох типів – відкриті і такі, що вимагали вибору між варіантами відповідей.

Наше дослідження тривало із січня по липень 2019 року і включало робочу шеститижневу поїздку в Україну, де ми мали зустрічі з лідерами молодіжних організацій і представниками політичних рухів. Для опитувань ми обирали учасників віком 18-24 роки і намагалися представити якнайбільше регіонів та різні соціальні верстви. Під час роботи ми зіткнулися з рядом викликів, таких як необхідність взяти до уваги політичну, регіональну та культурну різницю між регіонами України, а також численність зібраних даних. Однак, це дозволило нам суттєво поглибити висновки.

У статті ми розглядаємо використання соцмереж як ознаку включеності молодих громадян у політичне життя, а «феномен Зеленського» - як приклад і наслідок їхньої участі. Західні вчені висловлювалися про потенціал соцмереж у встановленні авторитарних режимів. Зваживши їхні міркування і проаналізувавши зібрані дані, ми прийшли до висновку, що соцмережі фундаментально змінили ритми і можливості політичної участі громадян і спонукали молодь до надзвичайно високого рівня участі у виборах. Використання соцмереж В. Зеленським та його командою - приклад того, як Інстаграм-революція принесла реальні результати виборів.

In April of 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky beat the incumbent Petro Poroshenko in the Ukrainian presidential general election in a landslide with 73% of the vote. A well-known Ukrainian comedian and actor, Zelensky announced his candidacy under the umbrella of his new party "Servant of the People" only in January of 2019. His meteoric rise from improbable candidate to president of Ukraine was a surprise to many, but it precisely mimicked the fate of the disarming schoolteacher he played in a hit comic TV series (also named "Servant of the People"). In the show, Zelensky's character is suddenly and unexpectedly elected president of Ukraine, after a video of him railing against corruption to his school principal goes viral. His students are the vehicle for the video's rapid spread, as well as the enablers for his ultimate election and consequent (comical) efforts to fight corruption in Ukraine. All of this is hauntingly familiar, calling to mind both Zelensky's late announcement of his candidacy on

an anti-corruption platform and his use of social media to appeal to Ukrainian youth. In the end Zelensky received voter support from a broad constituency, but youth support was unprecedented and decisive; 80% of 18-29 year-olds voted for Zelensky, the highest percentage of any age group (Kucheriv, 2019).

This article seeks to illuminate the complex and context-specific ways Ukrainian youth engaged in politics via social media during the presidential elections of spring 2019. We hope to contribute to ongoing scholarship that seeks to explain and assess the role of social media in the political process, or political participation more broadly. Scholars and cultural theorists are locked in an evolving debate about the power of social media to enable (or obstruct) political participation; to empower or disempower the disenfranchised. Scholars have long seen social media as an effective vehicle for political participation and "deliberative" or "digital democracy", albeit with a critical eye to its increasing pitfalls (Loader & Mercea, 2011; Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts, & Barbera, 2017). Indeed, a cacophony of voices have expressed alarm about the use of social media by authoritarian states, entrenched power structures, and populist politicians (Morozov, 2011; Lanier, 2013; Persily, 2017; Feldstein, 2018; Deibert, 2019). Still, much work remains to explore the ways in which social media operates in distinct political environments and among discrete segments of the population. Youth are particularly interesting in this regard. They are not only of critical interest for understanding the global political future; they also represent the first generation to be entrenched in social media from an early age. As new generations and platforms enter the political arena, we must continually evaluate the possibilities (and dangers) of social media as it operates in distinct ways in various contexts around the globe.

The Ukrainian case provides an important example of how social media and politics operate in the post-socialist world, an arguably unique (if varied) ecosystem for the generation, circulation, and weaponization of information. The young democracy that emerged from communist rule only in 1991 is now on the frontline of Western attempts to bolster democracy and compete with Russia for regional influence. It is also the primary focus of Russian ambitions, information wars, and military actions in its so-called "near abroad" (Mejias & Vokuev, 2017; Makhortykh & Sydorova 2017). The post-socialist world, and above all Russia, seems to continually draw scholarly and journalistic attention as a kind of epicenter for the potential of social media to impact democratic processes in various ways (Maréchal, 2017; Pomerantsev, 2019). If the precarious dawn of democracy in the region coincided with the birth of the internet, then its coming of age has coincided with the rapid metastasizing of social media platforms. In particular, a range of studies have cast light on the role of the most powerful post-socialist actor—namely Russia—in disinformation and trolling that thwarts democratic actors and movements (or more generally interferes in democratic processes) at home and abroad.

Ukraine's political and geopolitical situation—as well as the prevalence of social media in patterns of youth civic engagement—is rapidly changing. Ukraine shares a number of legacies with its post-socialist neighbors, namely economic and political instability and rampant corruption. However, it has ridden a uniquely tumultuous rollercoaster of hope and disillusionment, with three revolutions and regime changes since 1991. As has been well documented, social media has enabled youth to play key roles in democratically motivated revolutions, such as Ukraine's Orange (2004-5) and especially Euromaidan (2014) Revolutions (Goldstein 2007; Bohdanova, 2014; Onuch, 2015; Surzhko-Harned & Zahuranec, 2017). In fact, today Maidan square in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev/Kyiv now features an installation of large freestanding pictorial walls plastered with facsimiles of Facebook posts from 2014, documenting, organizing and mobilizing citizens for what has come to be called the "Revolution of Dignity", or elsewhere, the "Facebook Revolution" [insert Figure 1].

Figure 1

Institute of National Memory (Photographer). (2017, November 21). *The opening ceremony of the Maidan installation of the pictorial walls*. Retrieved from http://www.memory.gov.ua/news/do-dnya-gidnosti-v-kievi-vidkrilas-vistavka-maidan-landshafti-pamyati.

Complementary scholarship on youth and political participation in Ukraine suggests not only their inordinate role in this episodic revolutionary politics, but also their deep disillusionment leading to a kind of apathy in their aftermaths (Diuk, 2012). Most of these studies, however, are focused on "generation X" in times of all out revolt rather than seeming political dormancy.

In contrast, this article looks to the role of Ukraine's "Generation Z" (ages 18-24), exploring their use of social media as a form of political engagement, with a focus on the election cycle in spring 2019. We capture what turned out to be a significant phenomenon as it unfolded: the critical role of youth and social media in the election of an unlikely, late-comer presidential candidate. Based on interdisciplinary research conducted between January and July of 2019, this case study elucidates the importance of the unique cultural and political context which propelled this particular outcome. We argue that in Ukraine, traditional modes of political information circulation as well as political activity are becoming less relevant with each generation. We explore how seemingly non-political and apolitical modes of participation and communication can become the most effective vehicles for political messaging in the context of deep antipathy towards the political establishment. In the case of Zelensky's appeal to Ukrainian youth in 2019, newer social media platforms such as Instagram and Telegram became the vehicle for politics in a new key that was at once more personal and intimate, but also more potentially "viral" and unpredictable.

Methodology

Our research methodology was specifically designed with the intention of generating a holistic understanding of the context, forms, and mechanisms of Ukrainian youth's political engagement, for which social media played a major role. To do this we amassed a large amount of quantitative data that was supplemented, if not shaped, by our qualitative research efforts as they unfolded over the course of electoral season. Data was gathered through online-focus groups, surveys, and observations of social media beginning in January of 2019. This was after a year's worth of preparation by a team of faculty and students at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). The project research was completed by the end of the summer 2019, after a four-week trip to Ukraine and the gathering and analysis of the final

post-election survey. The active participation of UT students was key to the study, in part because they were able to connect and open avenues of communication with their Ukrainian peers better than faculty. In addition, they arguably have a deeper understanding of the deeply embedded nature of the social media experience for their generation. Students carried out interviews, focus groups, and helped design and prepare surveys. A number of UT faculty from different academic areas within the university consulted along the way creating a truly interdisciplinary collaboration.

In the initial formation of our research methodology we faced a number of immediate challenges. The first challenge was the need to mitigate the pervasive political, regional and cultural divide within Ukraine, as well as the pervasive language divide—Russian versus Ukrainian-language speakers. In light of this we did our best to target youth between the ages of 18-24, with a widespread geographic distribution and from a variety of backgrounds. Although we limited our age range, we did not exclude participants by educational level, geographic location, language, and/or political affiliation. Admittedly, our focus groups were carried out with university students, which in some respects skewed our results towards a more educated populace. In addition, on some surveys there were more willing participants from the Lviv region. Having said that, even when we removed Lviv respondents from survey results it did not alter them with any significance, which was quite surprising given the distinct—and generally more anti-Zelensky—nature of this core region of Western Ukraine.

To cast as wide a net as possible we adopted a multi-method, longitudinal approach which spanned the pre- and post-electoral period—namely January-July 2019. This included multiple surveys, focus groups online (Skype sessions from Austin) and in-person in Ukraine. We also spent unstructured time with Ukrainian youth in country that allowed for participant-observation insights to complement other findings. Finally, we observed the social media posts and profiles of various candidates, political influencers, and a select group of Ukrainian youth in both Russian and Ukrainian. Through this approach we were able to acquire both quantitative and qualitative data, which considerably complicated, but also nuanced, our findings.

In terms of surveys, we distributed four surveys over a six-month period, pre- and post-election. Our questions included open-ended, all-that-apply, and single-choice questions. The first three surveys were distributed using an in-country research assistant with an established network of contacts in youth organizations throughout Ukraine; all respondents were between the ages of 18-24. These surveys were distributed electronically on Survey Monkey in both Russian and Ukrainian, to avoid excluding respondents along language-political lines. The fourth survey was distributed in person, both in Ukrainian and Russian by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in 110 Ukrainian settlements [insert Figure 2].

Figure 2

Geographic Distribution of Survey Responses

Number of Survey Responses

- 0 - 30
- 31 - 82
- 83 - 117
- 118 - 236
- 237 - 654
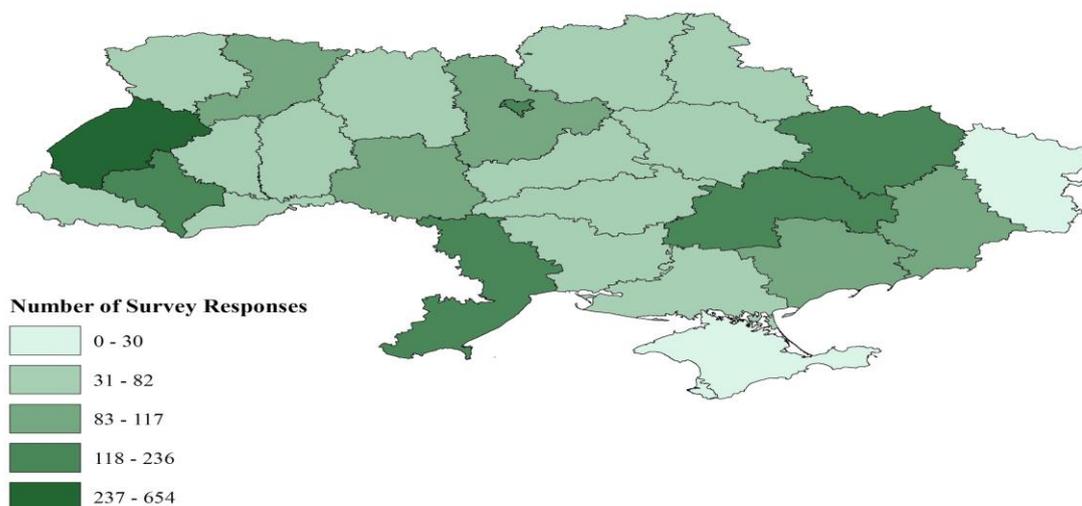
This survey went to a broader demographic, essentially 18 and up, to allow for comparison across voting age groups. While a set of core questions remained unchanged throughout all of the surveys, we did use unique questions to gauge political sentiments and address new questions as they arose before and after the presidential first round elections in March and second round elections in April. In all, survey questions had approximately a 90% percent response rate and they reached approximately 2,925 individuals.

In addition to surveys, beginning in January of 2019 we began a series of virtual focus groups with students at universities in Kyiv, Odessa, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kharkiv, and Uzhhorod. These focus groups were conducted over Skype and Google Hangout with an average of five Ukrainian student participants per session, though some had as few as one or two. The focus groups were designed as semi-structured interviews, with a consistent set of questions but also flexibility to pursue pertinent topics or issues that emerged along the way. These virtual focus groups were a good tool in gauging the evolving political sentiments in Ukraine before and after the first and second round elections, and explaining any interesting anomalies found in the survey.

We also held focus groups and individual interviews in-country, namely in the Ukrainian cities of Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Odessa, and Kyiv. This distribution of cities allowed a fairly representative sample of political opinions and levels of engagement of Ukrainian youth, albeit with a focus on students in urban areas in Western and Central Ukraine. While including cities in Eastern Ukraine would have been ideal, the ongoing conflict made traveling to the region unsafe and posed significant safety and logistical challenges for surveys and other kinds of data collection. As with online focus groups, we had a set list of questions for in-country interviews and meetings, but also deviated as was appropriate to pursue interesting avenues of conversation. The majority of these focus groups were with previously acquired university contacts. However, we also conducted interviews with youth political party representatives and leadership and new groups of students from different universities and youth organizations. In this way we tried to diversify our interviews

to include youth from technical and trade schools or not enrolled in universities. In online and in-country focus groups we asked general questions about youth, politics and social media that also extended to observations about friends and family outside of university circles, and even to circles from other regions of Ukraine (including the East).

Our final avenue of data collection was through Facebook, and to a lesser extent Instagram and Twitter, where we conducted a general analysis of political discourse in the Ukrainian social media environment (in Russian and Ukrainian). From our pre-election online survey of Ukrainian students (February-March 2019), 62% of respondents identified Facebook as the social media platform that they used most often for the purpose of political or social activism. Therefore we decided to follow and code the posts of seven popular political-analysts and social media influencers from Ukraine during a period of one month in the lead up to the first round elections. These social media influencers posted both in Russian and in Ukrainian, were from throughout Ukraine, and, in total, posted 317 posts with an average popularity of 891 likes. We coded these posts for sentiment, tone, intent, motivation, and the presence of any antecedent for topics covered. We also coded for key thematic subjects to understand what topics were popular throughout the presidential campaign. This aspect of our study was important to build an understanding of the pervasive tone of political commentary over social media in Ukraine, that is the political narratives that framed the process we were exploring.

In the process of our research, we began to realize the extent to which the very concept of "political" had to be re-considered in the case of youth in general, and Ukraine in particular. We came to realize that we would be missing the mark entirely if we did not interrogate the meaning and broaden our view of "political engagement" in Ukraine. Our work contributes to recent scholarship that has argued against the pervasive assumption that youth are increasingly apathetic just because they are alienated from formal political structures (Henn et al., 2002; O'Toole 2003). As O'Toole (2003) argues, most research does not explain the difference between political apathy and non-participation, which is best explained through more qualitative responses that look to other types of informal engagement. These conclusions were very much supported by scholarship and our work in Ukraine, where arguably students are even more alienated from formal politics than in the West (Tereshchenko, 2010). By pursuing multiple avenues of data collection, we approached political engagement in the most holistic way possible, including through social media and beyond formal politics in other non-traditional formats. In doing this we felt it was essential not only to understand the resulting effects of social media on youth in Ukrainian politics, including their voting behavior, but also to understand how Ukrainian youth explain and perceive their own decisions and political ecosystem.

Social Media in Context

The importance of understanding and underlining *context* in the operation of social media in politics should not be underestimated. There are a number of shared experiences and contemporary conditions particular to Ukraine that have had a profound effect on the way social media operates among Generation Y. Context-specific issues also shape the political behavior of older generations in Ukraine, but their generational experiences are also markedly different. Notably, older generations—Generation X and the baby boomers—lived under communism and watched its precipitous collapse. They lived through the Ukrainian Revolution on Granite in 1990-91 that ushered in Ukrainian independence and the shift to democracy and capitalism, with all of the attendant expectations. They also lived through the extreme difficulties of the 1990s, when former communist elites were well positioned to

amass wealth and power. For many in the older generation a lack of trust and legitimacy in communist elites was compounded by the post-communist power grab and the prominence of the new "oligarchs". For all generations, then in Ukraine, as in other post-socialist states, politics has unsavory connotations (Nikolayenko, 2013, 35).

If for the older generations the weight of the past is more direct, the younger generation is well aware of the problems of the present which arose in the wake of the old system. In our surveys, 74% of respondents identified corruption as the principal issue impacting Ukraine; this seems to effectively undergird virtually all other issues including the functioning of a democratic system, economic ills, and even Ukraine's fraught relationship to Russia (and now the US). Moreover, almost 38% of Ukrainian youth in our surveys checked the box "difficult to answer" when asked to characterize Ukraine's political system. In the shadow of constant revelations about the abuse of power by Ukrainian oligarchs many young Ukrainians wonder if their system is democratic at all, or if free and fair elections are even possible. They are looking for change, if not a way out; brain drain is a continued and even dire problem in Ukraine.

Equally critical is the fact that a number of youth-led Ukrainian revolutions since 1991 have inspired hope for change but ended in disappointment. The collapse of communism in 1991 first raised hopes in older generations for a better future, that were summarily dashed. Post-communist patterns of corruption marked by power and resource grabbing have led to Ukraine's two "Maidans", named for Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence square) that became the center of protests in the so-called Orange Revolution of 2004-5 and the Euromaidan of 2013-4. In the first of these "Maidans" Ukrainians protested the rigged elections that brought the unpopular and pro-Russian candidate, Victor Yanukovych, to power. As a result Victor Yushchenko was elected in a run-off, but he also proved to be a disappointment. Ironically, Yanukovych was voted in as his successor in 2010, but he eventually faced mounting opposition to his corrupt administration. Mass and protracted protests were sparked in 2013 by his refusal to sign an association agreement with the European Union, instead looking to Putin's Russia for closer ties. Euromaidan or the "Facebook Revolution" grew in scope and intensity and ultimately resulted in the death of 100 people—the so-called "Heavenly 100"—at the hands of the authorities. It ultimately led to victory for the protesters and the ousting of of Victor Yanukovich, whose former mansion (or castle) was made into the popular "Museum of Corruption" outside of Kyiv. Post-Maidan expectations were again lifted, but Yanukovich's successor, Petro Poroshenko, has been ill-equipped to fulfill his many promises. As in the first Maidan, the second has been followed by vocal public disappointment and by March of 2019 Poroshenko's approval ratings were abysmal.

This cycle of revolution has created a pervasive and profound cynicism in Ukrainian political discourse of all generations. This was pervasive in Facebook posts of political influencers, as well as our surveys, focus groups and informal discussions with Ukrainian youth. As became clear in the course of our study of social media influencers, cynicism laced with political humor was the operative form of political communication. In our sentiment analysis of Facebook posts on all political candidates, the overwhelming majority were negative, with Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko (the other front-runner in the primary) as principal targets. Tymoshenko, like Poroshenko, is a well-known figure in Ukrainian politics, but also with various corruption scandals sullying her name. While Zelensky had his share of negative posts, he—for the most part—was less the target of invective, but rather jocular jabs. In fact, if his lack of political experience was a concern for some, for many it was seen as a plus. As one student from a Lviv interview in February succinctly put it, he was not concerned about this, as "Experience in politics, means experience in corruption." As another

student from the same focus group noted, Zelensky was rising in the polls, because people "did not trust politicians" and "wanted something new." This last sentiment reveals the lack of trust in formal politics, but also the continued hope and desire for change. If the aftermath of Euromaidan brought disappointment, the ability to affect change amidst profound and even existential challenges is also fresh in people's memory.

One of these challenges are the cultural and political fault-lines that mark the map of contemporary Ukraine. Beyond generational and social differences, there are also regional cleavages, largely stemming from the disparate historical experiences of eastern and western Ukraine. Western Ukraine is largely Catholic and Ukrainian-speaking, with much of its history under (Catholic) Polish and Austro-Hungarian rule. This region became part of the Soviet state only during World War II, and as such did not experience the same degree of early Soviet terror. In contrast, Eastern Ukrainian is largely Eastern Orthodox, with a greater percentage of Russian speakers, while Central Ukraine is more mixed in terms of language usage. Like the East, Central Ukraine is Orthodox and has been under Soviet rule since 1922. As such these regions were privy to some of the worst excesses of Stalinist terror— collectivization, forced famine, and the purges. As Ukrainian writer and analyst Mykola Ryabchuk (2003) has suggested, if eastern Ukraine was "colonized" by the Russians, the West was only temporarily occupied. The dividing lines between Eastern vs. Western Ukraine have become a powerful tool for internal and external political forces to divide the country or stake out bases of proxy support. Such divisions, however, also obscure shared historical experiences such as Nazi occupation in World War II, postwar Soviet authoritarian rule, and more recently the painful post-Soviet transition to capitalism and democracy.

Surprisingly, East-West cleavages and the issue of Russian influence in politics were muted in our research findings. This is not to say that (Putin's) Russia or the role of Russian language in Ukraine are not issues. On the contrary, these are pervasive issues among Ukrainians in and outside our research purview. Still, only one student in an interview in June in Ivano-Frankivsk expressed the opinion that Russia had "interfered" in the elections, and a few (post-election) were worried that Zelensky was a kind of Russian tool. But such sentiments were quite negligible, considering the fact that Zelensky is a native Russian-speaker whose Ukrainian is far from perfect. Zelensky is also Jewish, which (also surprisingly) came up with only one student in Lviv, who in a post-election focus group described him as "alien" to Ukraine because of his Jewishness and Russian-language usage. To be clear, Russian-language usage is pervasive in large swaths of Ukraine, and so for most (who after all elected him) did not disqualify Zelensky from being "Ukrainian" in the broadest, inclusive sense. If anything, Zelensky's ability to cross the Russian-Ukrainian language (and cultural) divide worked in his favor. In fact he explicitly ran on a platform of Russian-Ukrainian unity, not with Putin's Russia, but for Russian- and Ukrainian-speakers within Ukraine. This stance was an explicit critique of the incumbent Poroshenko, who has alienated Russian-speakers within Ukraine with a string of policies that seem to privilege the Ukrainian language in education and administration. This also included the prohibition of Vkontake, the most popular Russian-language social media platform that is similar to Facebook in affordances. These policies seemed to work against Poroshenko, who in the end took the electorate only in the Ukrainian-speaking West; but even there was met with plenty of opposition. For the younger generation, then, Russia is a huge issue as an external force and as a current occupier of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. It appears that the Russian-speakers *within* Ukraine are viewed as necessary allies in forging a new democratic future.

Still, in the course of the electoral season, most Ukrainian students were reticent to openly support *any* candidate in focus groups; they were also skeptical about Ukraine's democratic process, institutions, and their own futures in the country. At the same time,

however, we were struck by Ukrainian youth's paradoxical hope and willingness to participate in Ukrainian civic life in varied ways. This did not always manifest in formal political activities but did eventually translate into high levels of voter participation in the elections. This underlines the fact that youth's engagement with the complicated politics of Ukraine is a complex and even moving target, which should not be measured by *formal* political participation alone.

Social Media as Politics

It is unsurprising in an era of widespread internet and cell phone access that Ukrainian youth are highly adept at social media, with important political implications. All Ukrainian focus group participants indicated that they used some form of social media with various degrees of frequency to post their own content and/or view, like and share content. Facebook, Telegram, and Instagram were most frequently used, not only for personal or entertainment purposes but for consumption and circulation of political content. Focus group participants *all* stated that they had encountered political content on social media. This was true of participants who actively sought out political content, as well as those who characterized themselves as "apolitical" and indicated they did not use social media for political purposes. When asked to specify sources, participants indicated that they had encountered political content in the form of advertisements, posts shared by friends, posts shared directly by political campaigns and other politically oriented organizations, and posts originally shared by these organizations that were then re-posted by friends. Hence Ukrainian youth using social media were exposed to political content regardless of whether they sought it out.

More importantly, social media was one of the primary sources of political information and modes of political engagement for Ukrainian youth in our study. According to our surveys, 45% of youth used social media as their primary source for information about the political system in Ukraine, second only to higher education. When asked where they regularly accessed news, the numbers are even higher; 92% responded that they sourced their news through online media sources, with many specifying social media platforms like Facebook and Telegram. In focus groups many who indicated that they used social media as a source of news and political information named it their *sole* source for accessing this content. In addition, most agreed that social media enhanced democracy by allowing for the widespread dissemination of information. However, some were troubled by the growing influence of online media. One participant told us that the sheer quantity of information made it difficult to filter "fake news" from reliable sources. They called it a "problem of the 21st century," and estimated that "only 5 to 10% of people" can reliably filter online information and assess credibility. Regardless, there was virtual unanimity among participants that social media plays an influential role in politics for their generation.

The significance of using social media as a primary tool for acquiring political news can be best understood within the context of young people's views on politics and political engagement more generally. When focus group participants were asked "Are you involved in any kind of political activism?" most participants answered in the negative and were unwilling to label themselves "political." This was true of young people who indicated high levels of civic and social engagement through activities like volunteering, working in student and local government initiatives, and advocating for civic and humanitarian causes. Most of these are activities that would be considered "political" in the American context. Even participants who openly professed to having strong political beliefs did not consider themselves "political". This reflected their association of "being political" with formal

political party affiliation and party politics. Young Ukrainians associated party politics with corruption and self-interested individuals or groups rather than platforms or ideologies. As one participant of a February focus group in Lviv noted, "Parties are organized around people, not ideologies". The result was that many Ukrainian youth had a narrower view of what constituted "political" engagement than the American research team and were reticent to call themselves political or admit support for a candidate; for most, being political was considered potentially unsavory or corrupt.

Young Ukrainians were still clearly politically informed and engaged in the broader sense, and social media played an important, if not central, role in this engagement. A significant number of survey respondents, for example, saw social media as a platform for active (and acceptable) political engagement. In response to the question in our first survey, "Are comments, likes, and shares political activity?" 43% of respondents answered yes. Nevertheless, at least a portion of focus group respondents expressed considerable uncertainty about the role of social media in the political process. True, many participants saw the outsize role of social media in politics as "inevitable," given its outsize role in individuals' everyday lives, and some students went so far as to say social media *should* play a large role in politics. Other participants, however, were troubled by social media's dominance in political discourse, with concerns that while social media may amplify engagement, it also enables a political landscape where people are not required to think critically. They feared that social media could either slot users into echo chambers or land them in non-substantive arguments in "comments" sections. Many were concerned about the impact such a dismal state of public discourse could have on Ukraine's political future. One student from a focus group in Uzhgorod stated, "Ukraine has huge potential", but is constrained by citizens' anti-intellectual mentality, which has allowed for the continuation of corruption and other problems—in his words, Ukraine does not have enough "thinkers."

Two significant implications stem from these findings. It confirms that social media has become a *primary* source for Generation Y in Ukraine for political information and engagement with political issues and candidates. Far from allowing youth to avoid politics, social media appears to diminish users' ability to avoid political discussion and content. It also enabled engagement through clicks, likes, and shares. Not surprisingly, Ukrainian youth were split over whether these changes were positive, but for most they were seen as inevitable. Taking the lead from such responses, the online engagement of Ukrainian youth does not appear tantamount to mere "slacktivism". This is in contrast to recent scholarship, which posits that social media political engagement represents a low-impact *replacement* for traditional activism, and thus a net negative (Chistensen; Lee & Hseih). Instead, it lends credence to more optimistic portrayals of social media as an innovative means of connecting behind a common cause (Kahne, Middaugh & Allen; Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga & Shah; Xenos, Vromen & Loader). Debate over the impact of social media on politics in various contexts is ongoing, but our research makes a clear statement regarding its significance in Ukraine: for better or worse, social media not only plays a powerful role in Ukrainian politics, it allows for greater participation by Ukrainian youth.

The Zelensky Phenomenon

The outcome of the 2019 Ukrainian Presidential elections is indicative of just how momentous a role youth and social media can play in electoral outcomes. Social media appears to play a powerful role in politics, especially among youth, almost everywhere that there is widespread internet access. Arguably, the state of Ukraine's democracy made it particularly amenable (or vulnerable, depending on your viewpoint) to the "Zelensky

phenomenon"; that is to say, Volodymyr Zelensky's social media brand, message, method and tone enabled his rise out of nowhere, politically speaking, to win the presidency in a landslide. Zelensky's campaign and victory is the embodiment of how engagement, youth, and social media collided in a way that was totally new for Ukrainian politics. His campaign team employed an innovative informational strategy centered on social media platforms and targeting youth. This strategy and young Ukrainians' response to it was crucial to the victory of the unorthodox leader of "*Komanda Ze"* (Team Z).

The numbers speak for themselves. Zelensky won among all age groups, but his support was highest among the youngest voters: as noted above, 80% of voters between 18-29 supported Zelensky (Kucheriv, 2019). Admittedly, our survey and focus group sample leaned towards Poroshenko, with 40% supporting Poroshenko in the first round (14% supporting Zelensky) and 70% stating that they supported Poroshenko in the second round of voting. This was partly attributable to the over-representation of respondents from Lviv in our first two (pre-general election) surveys. It is also the likely result of participants' unwillingness to admit—or *commit*—to supporting Zelensky prior to the election. His popular persona, after all, was seen by a portion of educated Ukrainians as not serious, and even clownish. Nevertheless, focus group respondents were well aware of the growing support for Zelensky among their young peers. More importantly, 57% named Zelensky as the candidate that best employed social media in our pre-election survey, indicating that they were tapped into Team Z's social media presence [insert Figure 3].

Figure 3

Which Candidate Utilized Social Media Best?
Based on the Results of the Pre-Election Survey
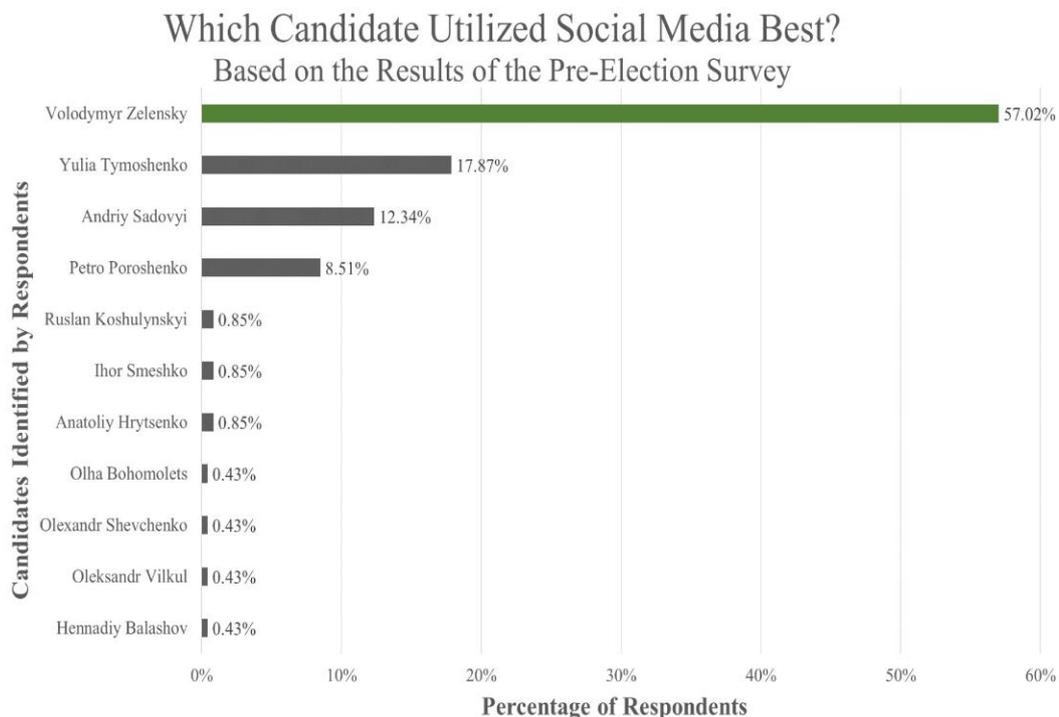
In addition, an average of 36% of survey respondents said that social media had an effect on their decision to vote or specifically who they voted for in 2019 [insert Figure 4].

Figure 4

Did Social Media Influence Your Decision to Vote or Who You Voted For?

Does Not Have Social Media, 1%
No Response, 1%
Hard to Say, 6%
Yes, 36%
No, 56%
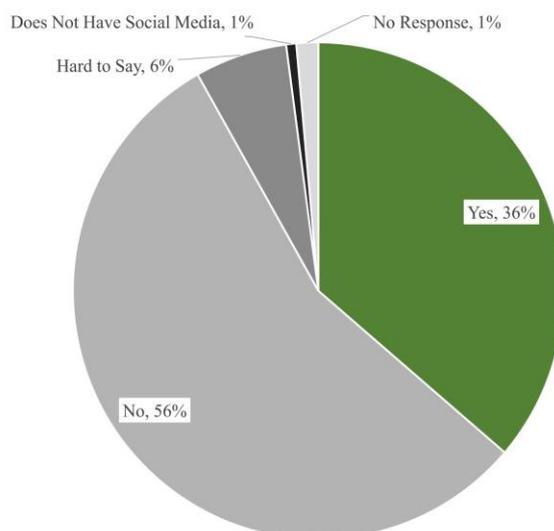
In our post-election focus groups it became clear that Zelensky had effectively galvanized support among youth with his social media presence. As a participant from Kiev/Kyiv stated in a June focus group, "In the past, there was this fashion that young people didn't vote and left the politics to older people, but Zelensky's campaign flipped this and changed this idea for young people, so it brought in tons of youth engagement." As a student from Odessa was keen to point out that, "Zelensky has 2.6 million subscribers on Instagram, Poroshenko and Tymoshenko have no more than 200,000. The amount of 'likes' that Zelensky has on his photos exceeds the total followers of other candidates. He used Instagram to attract young people, as they are always on Instagram… Poroshenko and Tymoshenko used the old methods like TV and standing in the corner." Indeed, students generally did not get any news or information from TV, which they considered the purview of the "oligarchs". It is notable that Zelensky barely appeared on TV at all, except as his fictional presidential self, which for some may have heightened his appeal across generations. Significantly, Zelensky officially announced his candidacy in a January 2019 "New Year's address" on the popular Ukrainian channel *1+1*. His announcement aired at the exact same time as the traditional presidential New Year's message by then president Petro Poroshenko, which was aired on *all* other channels. The signaling was clear: Zelensky was already performing the presidency, in the role usually reserved for the actual president. In addition, the new season of "Servant of the People" was released in March 2019, just before the first round of the election. This arguably blurred the line between perceptions of Zelensky as fictional versus real president. This worried Zelensky's critics. A student from Ivano-Frankivsk expressed concern that, "people watch Zelensky's show and don't understand it's fiction and imagine that this is real life, the character is real. They think, 'he's a good fella, he's just like us, he'll change things immediately, lower prices right away, the fairy tale will come true.' He is very charismatic, very believable, people want to believe that maybe he is right".

Zelensky's popularity as a TV persona should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, his election would have been impossible absent the form, content, and tone of his campaign team's social media strategy. In terms of form, Zelensky incorporated new platforms and tactics into his social media campaign, which were exceedingly effective among youth. A member of Zelensky's digital team told us that they were well aware of the decisive role of

social media, and shared examples of the innovative techniques they were using to maximize these new platforms' effect. One such strategy was on Telegram, where Zelensky's campaign used channels and group chats to outsource tasks such as putting up flyers and distributing materials to volunteer supporters online, without any kind of vetting. The result was that anybody receiving these mass messages could perform the tasks and become unofficial workers on behalf of the campaign. This also allowed Team Z to save organizational time and outsource costs. Moreover, this strategy exemplifies how Zelensky's team was able to convert online engagement to offline activities to benefit his campaign.

As noted above, Ukrainian youth mainly use Facebook for political and civic activism. However, our focus group and survey results indicate that most youth, including less "politically active" young people, are more likely to use Telegram and Instagram than Facebook for social networking, communication and entertainment purposes. As one June survey respondent from Rivne noted, "People don't necessarily engage with Facebook anymore, and are now more on Instagram, which is significantly less political. Instagram is less informative compared to Facebook. Zelensky [is] on Instagram; he is very close to the people." Significantly, a number of focus group participants from Ivano-Frankivsk and Odessa noticed the sudden politicization of Instagram through candidates' advertisements. These ads compelled them to start following various candidates' official pages. In short, even the social media platforms used by youth for mainly non-political purposes became flooded with political messaging. This messaging came most prominently, and was delivered most effectively, from Team Z.

Indeed, while Zelensky had a significant campaign presence on Facebook, his most vigorous and revolutionary campaign strategies were carried out on Telegram and Instagram. These platforms allowed him to reduce messages to simple images with links to other Zelensky posts and content, such as the campaign blog or posts from supporters. As noted above, Telegram was also used to mobilize Ukrainian youth to participate in unofficial campaign activities. One such activity was the suggestion on Zelensky's main campaign channel, "Team Z," that anybody reading the message should print out a copy of his campaign platform from a provided website link and read it out loud (and discuss) with a parent or grandparent. Thus, Team Z sought to leverage its strength among the youth to sway voters from older demographics. Ukrainian youth were well aware of Team Z's vigorous activities on Telegram; as a young woman from Kharkiv remarked, "on Telegram there was more for Zelensky, because people were working for the candidate." On Instagram, Team Z also actively engaged new (and potential) supporters, offering them concrete ways for them to get involved. "If you want to contact Zelensky, you should use Instagram" said a student from Odessa, referring to the fact that Zelensky's team would follow up with those who liked or commented on his videos. Eugene, student in a June Focus group in Kiev/Kyiv also noted, "If you liked or commented on Zelensky's stuff, they would find you, reach out to you, send information inviting you to get involved." Team Z's campaign on these platforms was relentless, and their activity was far more visible and strategic than that of any other candidate in the first and second round elections.

The style and content of Zelensky's campaign messaging over these platforms were as important as tactics. The Zelensky campaign maintained a simple narrative that focused almost solely on fighting corruption and ending the war in the Donbas. This messaging found a widespread audience but was especially effective in mobilizing young Ukrainians. Zelensky sensed and capitalized on the general—and especially youth—frustration with Ukraine's slow and rocky "perpetual transition" to a full-fledged market economy and democracy hindered by the ongoing war and corrupt oligarchs. Zelensky often took on such issues in an indirect and seemingly apolitical way—which was precisely the point. He emphasized his status as a

political outsider, often posting fun or silly images (like selfies) and videos of himself doing "regular things" like eating, waiting in lines, and having fun at the gas station. As a young woman from Lviv said in a June focus group, "People voted for him because he was a new person in politics, as opposed to the people that have been in for 15, 20 years that people are getting sick of. Zelensky used Instagram and it was *his* voice." This reinforces the idea that many Ukrainians perceived Zelensky as a real, even *fun* person, unsullied by corruption in spite of his personal wealth and connection to a prominent oligarch. His style in this regard was in stark contrast to all other candidates, whose campaigns were composed of standard political fare like posed pictures and impersonal messaging. Young consumers might have assumed that the posts and ads of more experienced and older politicians were produced by their staffers and not by the candidates themselves, conforming to the accepted standards of the election campaigns. These campaigns did not rely on 'human connection" and "personal touch," as did Zelensky's campaign. As the same young woman from Lviv continued, "Poroshenko even said that Zelensky was really good at connecting with the youth on Instagram; apparently that was a way of dismissing him as not a serious candidate." Ultimately, the Poroshenko campaign's failure to reach young people in the same way made a difference.

In a sense, Team Z promoted a *parasocial relationship* with Zelensky's supporters. "Parasocial relationships" refer to unreciprocated bonds such as the connection fans form with celebrities. Political scientists have documented a global rise in this kind of "personalization of politics" since the Reagan-Thatcher era (McAllister, 2007). However, the 2019 Ukrainian presidential election exemplifies how social media and celebrity status operate in the social media era. Indeed, Zelensky became notorious for avoiding formal interviews, instead posting casual selfies and front-camera vlogs on social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram. The tone of his posts were not unlike that of a social media influencer dictating his thoughts to fans amidst his day-to-day on-goings, like his morning runs and swims, clown flash mobs, or road trip antics with friends [insert Figure 5] [insert Figure 6].

Figure 5

Youtube/Zelensky Team (Photographer). (2019, February 7). *Billboards.* Retrieved from https://vgolos.com.ua/lviv/vesna-pryjde-budut-novi-zharty-pro-hohliv-u-lvovi-z-yavylys-provokatyvni-bilbordy-foto_926260.html.

Figure 6

Youtube/Zelensky Team (Photographer). (2019, January 1). *Zelensky after a run in the snow* [digital image]. Retrieved from https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/mykola-vorobiov-ukraines-top-comedian-is-running-for-president-and-no-this-isnt-a-bad-joke.html?cn-reloaded=1.

Through theatrical ads and outright theatrics, he built a campaign of personality that was only possible through modern social media platforms. In the view of critics, this came at the expense of clearly outlined policy

In terms of tone, Zelensky was best able to connect to young voters through his use of predominantly positive messaging. Zelensky maintained an optimistic humorous tone throughout the campaign, which young Ukrainians found striking and refreshing amidst a political culture rife with negativity and cynicism. Zelensky presented himself as the candidate of peace, Ukrainian-Russian coexistence, and hope, as opposed to Poroshenko who was closely associated with continued war, hardship, and internal Russian-Ukrainian ethnic division. A focus group participant from Lviv put it well: "On the psychological side, Poroshenko was associated with war and sadness and crying. Zelensky was associated with laughter and happiness." Zelensky appealed to youth by incorporating humor and hope into everything he did with the campaign. His most popular campaign slogan, which appeared on social media and billboards across the country, was "*Vesna priyde, sadzhati budemo*" (Spring will come, and we will plant) [insert Figure 7].

Figure 7
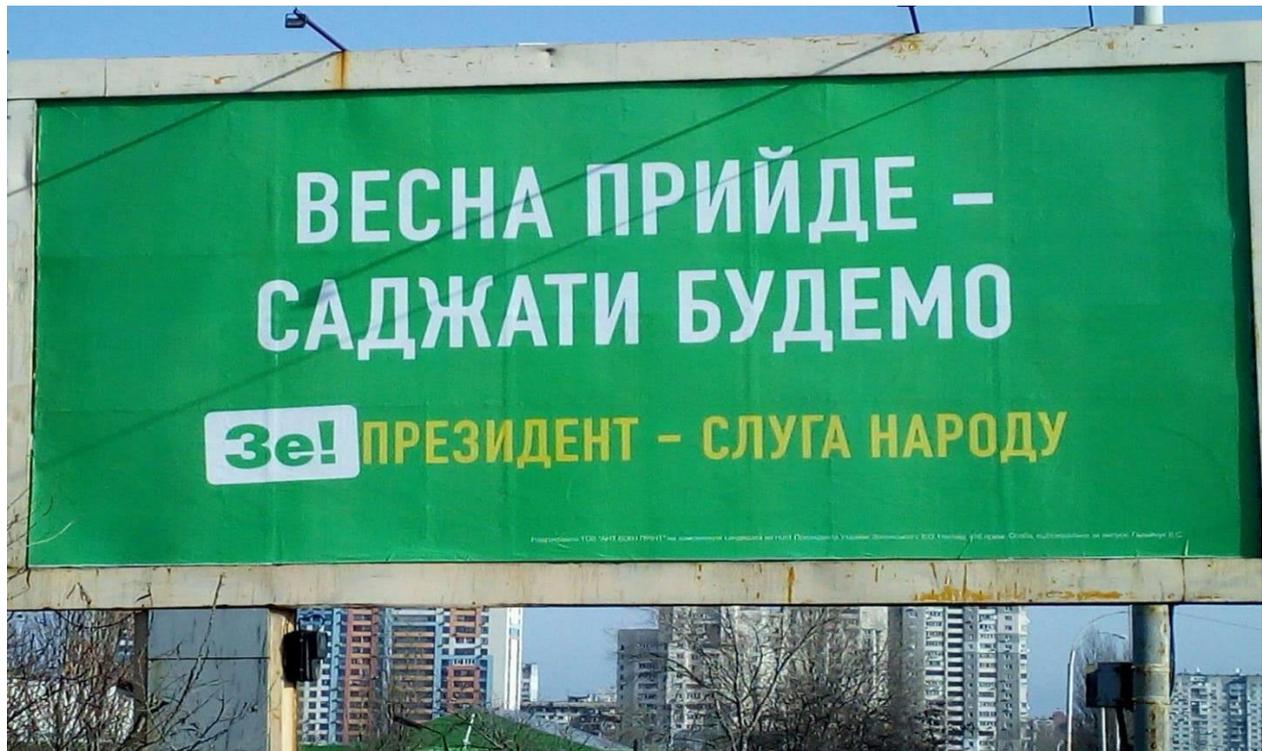
Zelensky, V. (Photographer). (2019, February 7). *A selfie* [digital image]. Retrieved from https://24smi.org/news/141251-zelenskii-zapustil-prilozhenie-iakloun.html.

  This is a double entendre in Ukrainian, as the verb for 'to plant' (*sadzhati*) is the same as 'to send to prison,' hearkening retribution for jail-bound corrupt officials. Zelensky's tone was markedly different than that of his opponents, and this was a defining feature for his supporters and critics alike.

  These findings clash with dominant narratives of the Zelensky victory's significance. If many consider Zelensky a protest vote, our research shows that support for the comic candidate gradually crystallized from "anything but the oligarchs" to emphatic endorsements of his leadership potential. Zelensky's image was carefully mediated to encourage the formation of these parasocial relationships in voters, and it worked. The Ukrainian comedian-turned-president transformed what many initially considered a joke campaign into something very real by curating an online persona that successfully conflated him with his very relatable sitcom character. This couldn't have happened a few short decades ago, when to hear a candidate speak you had to wait for their scheduled appearance on TV only to listen to them answer a list of dry campaign questions. *Komanda-Ze*'s use of social media to dismantle political formality made voters feel understood, and thereby made Zelensky appear *real* and *accountable* to them. This effect was strongest in young voters, the demographic that arguably carried him to victory. Zelensky's victory has therefore shown that social media has ushered in an era where the facilitation of such parasocial relationships with young voters through social media can be an effective political strategy, even absent traditional qualifications or well-defined political platforms. Indeed, it was the apolitical nature of the Zelensky campaign's approach that was most effective among youth who hold formal politics at arm's length.

Conclusion

  Zelensky's political success is not merely an absurd example of life imitating art. It is an example of an Instagram (and Telegram) revolution. If Facebook and TV had a role to play

in this electoral avalanche among older generations, Instagram and Telegram were the platforms that propelled youth online and offline engagement, and hence the win for Zelensky. As youth have come of age politically while plugging into a range of social media platforms, political participation has taken on new unprecedented forms. Arguably, social media engagement did not replace formal participation in the 2019 Ukrainian presidential elections, but propelled it. Social media has allowed for new possibilities for mobilization and influence as it allows for ideas, narratives, and images to go viral in the course of political campaigns. In various global and digital contexts it is difficult to measure the exact impact of social media in moving the political needle. This is especially true in more entrenched political systems, like that of the US. However, in more fragile—or mutable—political arenas like Ukraine, the impact is starker. Again, context is critical. As we saw in the Zelensky phenomenon, social media fundamentally changed the rhythms and possibilities of politics and Ukrainian youth were central to this change. Still, we should examine Zelensky's path to the presidency carefully. It is a harbinger of the increasing and changeable power of social media, as well as the potential role of youth in politics. Moreover, Team Z's campaign is a potential example of mass manipulation through social media platforms. The campaign's implications for the future of politics in the social media era are no laughing matter.

1. Bohdanova, T. (2014) Unexpected revolution: the role of sSocial media in Ukraine's Euromaidan uprising, *European View*, 13, 133–142.

2. Deibert, R. J. (2019). The road to digital unfreedom: three painful truths about social media. *Journal of Democracy,* 30, 25-39.

3. Diuk, N. (2012). *The next generation in Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan: youth, politics, identity, and change*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

4. Feldstein, Steven.(2018). How artificial intelligence is reshaping repression. *The Journal of Democracy.* 30, 40-52.

5. Goldstein, J. (2007). The role of networked technologies in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution. The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School, Research Publication, No. 2007-14. December 7, 2007. Retrieved from https://cyber.harvard.edu/publications/2007/The_Role_of_Digital_Networked_Technologies_in_the_Ukranian_Orange_Revolution

6. Henn, M., Weinstein, M., & Wring, D. (2002). A generation apart? youth and political participation in Britain. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 4, 167-192.

7. Kahne, J., Middaugh, E. & Allen, D. (2014). Youth new media, and the rise of participatory politics, YPP Research Network Working Paper #1, March 2014. Retrieved from http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/default/files/publications/YPP_WorkinPapers_Paper01.pdf

8. Kucheriv, Ilko, Who voted for whom in the 2019 elections, *Ukrainform*, Retrieved from https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-presshall/2689257-hto-za-kogo-progolosuvav-u-drugomu-turi-viboriv-prezidenta-ukraini-demograficni-rezultati-nacionalnogo-ekzitpolu2019.html

9. Lanier, J. (2013) *Who owns the future*? NY: Simon and Schuster.

10. Lee, Y. & Hseih, G. (2013). Does slacktivism hurt activism?: the effects of moral balancing and consistency in online aActivism, CHI '13 Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 811-820.

11. Loader, B. & Mercea, D. (2011). Networking democracy? *Information, Communication & Society*, 14, 757-769.

12. McAllister, I. (2007). The personalization of politics. In R.J. Dalton, R.J & H-D Klingemann (Eds)., *The Oxford handbook of political behavior*, 571-598. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

13. Makhortykh, M., & Sydorova, M. (2017). Social media and visual framing of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. *Media, War & Conflict*, 10, 359–381.

14. Mejias, U. A., & Vokuev, N. E. (2017). Disinformation and the media: the case of Russia and Ukraine. *Media, Culture & Society*, *39*, 1027–1042.

15. Maréchal, N. (2017). Networked authoritarianism and the geopolitics of information: understanding Russian internet policy, *Media and Communication,* 5, 29-41.

16. Morozov, E. (2011) *The net delusion: the dark side of internet freedom*. NY: Public Affairs.

17. Nikolayenko, O. (2014). *Citizens in the making in post-Soviet states*. London: Routledge.

18. Onuch, O. (2015) EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine: social media versus social networks. *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, 217-235.

19. O'Toole, T. (2003). Engaging with young people's conceptions of the political. *Children's Geographies*, 1, 71-90.

20. Persily, N. (2017). Can democracy survive the internet? *Journal of Democracy*, 28, 63-76.

21. Pomerantev, P. (2019) *This is not propaganda: aAdventures in the war against reality* (NY: Public Affairs).

22. Surzhko-Harned, L., & Zahuranec, A.J. (2017). Framing the revolution: the role of social media in Ukraine's Euromaidan movement, *Nationalities Papers*, 45, 758-779.

23. Tereshchenko, A. (2010). Ukrainian youth and civic engagement: unconventional participation in local spaces, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 13, 597-613.

24. Tucker, J.A, Theocharis, Y., Roberts, M., & Barbera, P. (2017) From liberation to turmoil: social media and democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 28, 46-59.

25. Xenos, M., Vromen, A. & Loader, B. D. (2014). The great equalizer? patterns of social media use and youth political engagement in three advanced democracies, *Information, Communication & Society*, 17, 151-167.