

# Exploring new frontiers in today's encyclopedic practice

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## Abstract

This article offers a concise yet substantive review of the monograph “Ukrainian encyclopedias in current socio-communicative challenges” (Kyiv, 2024), authored by O. Ishchenko and M. Stepanenko and edited by M. Zhelezniak. The monograph examines the contemporary state of Ukrainian encyclopedic practice within the broader context of intensified information flows, media transformations, and the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. It highlights the growing role of encyclopedias as instruments of public communication, knowledge organisation, and cultural resilience. Drawing on leading Ukrainian encyclopedic projects, the authors analyse editorial communication with contributors, the challenges of attracting qualified experts, and the increasing visibility of encyclopedic content in war-time media discourse. Particular attention is given to encyclopedias as new media, shaped by digital technologies and aligned with the principles of Open Science through their commitment to open access. The review evaluates the monograph's contribution to understanding structural obstacles that impede the development of encyclopedic initiatives, including insufficient recognition of encyclopedic authorship in academic evaluation systems. Overall, the work is presented as a timely and valuable contribution to the field, relevant not only for Ukraine but also for countries seeking to strengthen informational resilience and scholarly communication infrastructures.

## Keywords

Encyclopedia studies, social communication, academic encyclopedias, Russia's war against Ukraine, cultural security informational resilience.

According to a perceptive observation by the Ukrainian historian Y. V. Vermenych, the current military challenges facing Ukraine have compelled both the state and society to rethink and optimise their security strategy with a view to strengthening national defence capacity and resilience. Within this process, special significance is attached to the humanitarian dimension of national security, which—under present conditions—requires renewed conceptualisation (2024, p. 30). Today's social reality calls for fresh perspectives on long-standing issues, as well as informed responses to new ones. One of the key areas within the broader socio-humanities is encyclopedic practice—an academic and professional field concerned with encyclopedias, their preparation, compilation, and publication; in a wider sense, it encompasses the collection, systematisation, preservation, and dissemination of scholarly (encyclopedic) knowledge in reference form. As Smolii and Boriak note, “encyclopedic studies occupy a special place in European and global scholarship, for they not only synthesise and organise our understanding of knowledge but also communicate it to society” (2014, p. 4).

In other words, encyclopedic practice is directly concerned with information and information-and-communication technologies; consequently, it also engages with countering information threats and strengthening the resilience of the national information environment, ultimately forming an integral informational component of any state's national security. It is not difficult to see that a nation's information resilience depends to a great extent on the level of knowledge it possesses about its own history and on the convictions shaped by that knowledge. Fully aware of this, the Russian Federation persistently imposes its own version of history on the world, laying claim to the past of others—not only Ukraine's, though the history of Kyiv and Rus' is of particular strategic importance for Russian narratives. In Ukraine, by contrast, these issues have traditionally been approached with far more forbearance, a tendency vividly reflected in how closely today's circumstances echo those of the Second World War: *“We Ukrainians, as direct historical witnesses—political émigrés amid the vast contemporary diaspora—must write works that thoroughly reveal to the world the Bolshevik tyranny in Ukraine. Were the Germans in our situation, they would have produced dozens of volumes, entire encyclopedias, about it. And we? It is foreigners who must translate—from Ukrainian into every language—the story of Moscow–Bolshevik attempts to erase the Ukrainian nation from the face of the earth. Have we conveyed this truth to the world? No!”* (Ishchenko & Stepanenko, 2024, p. 56).

That Ukraine's informational front requires substantial reinforcement is now widely acknowledged — yet, as the quotation shows, this concern was voiced already in an earlier era. Moreover, the issue is no less relevant for Moldova and for many other countries around the world.

An important contribution to contemporary encyclopedic practice has recently been published by the Institute of Encyclopedic Research of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine: the monograph “Ukrainian encyclopedias in current socio-communicative challenges” (authored by Oleksandr Ishchenko and Mykola Stepanenko; academic editor Mykola Zhelezniak). Questions of communication that arise within the modern encyclopedic field have long posed challenges for encyclopedia compilers worldwide. A scholarly examination and monographic treatment of these issues was therefore overdue, and the publication of such a study is both timely and undeniably relevant.

The book offers, for the first time, a substantive overview of the core problems faced by encyclopedic editorial offices and publishers in the preparation of their works. The scope of these issues is so broad that addressing all of them within a single monograph would be unrealistic. As an example of what inevitably remained outside the authors' focus, one may note that over the past year a major challenge—not only for global encyclopedic practice but

for numerous other professional domains—has been the emergence of generative artificial intelligence capable of producing high-quality texts in response to user queries (e.g., ChatGPT). It is noteworthy that in May 2024, the regular European Encyclopedia Conference, now the principal communication platform for contemporary encyclopedists, was held in Oslo (Norway); several presentations at the event specifically addressed artificial intelligence. The monograph, however, does not foreground this topic, and one may hope that it will feature in the authors' future research.

It should also be mentioned that scholars of the Institute of Encyclopedic Research of the NAS of Ukraine have produced a number of significant Ukrainian-language works that have contributed meaningfully to the development of modern encyclopedic studies, including "Ukrainian electronic based encyclopedias in light of socio-humanities" (Kyiv, 2021), "Ukrainian encyclopedias: typology, style, functions" (Kyiv, 2018), "Ukrainian electronic and print encyclopedias: achievements and prospects" (Kyiv, 2015), and "Methodological principles for creating print and electronic encyclopedias" (Kyiv, 2015).

What, then, do the authors of this monograph focus on? Using Ukrainian encyclopedic publications as their primary examples, they outline the state of encyclopedic practice in an era shaped by mass communication; examine encyclopedias as a form of new media; analyse the specific features of communication between editorial teams and contributors; draw attention to the difficulties involved in engaging qualified authors in the preparation of encyclopedic content; and address the recurrent problem of popular-science writers labeling their works as "encyclopedias." The authors also outline key trends in the naming conventions of Ukrainian encyclopedic editions, explore in considerable detail the pragmatic aspects of encyclopedia titles, and attempt to conceptualise contemporary encyclopedic discourse. A separate emphasis in the monograph is placed on the practical value of encyclopedias in today's world, one defined by a multitude of communication channels and information sources. The study demonstrates that the practical significance of encyclopedic literature closely correlates with its level of public visibility and popularity.

Moldova is no exception in this regard. As noted in one study, "the adaptation and renewal of the national cognitive potential, as well as the assimilation of international experience, constitute an important factor in shaping a new societal mindset during a transitional period" (Manolache, Țăruș, Ksenofontov, 2014, p. 29). In 2007, the Institute of Encyclopedic Research was established in Moldova with the purpose of preparing and producing the *Enciclopedia Moldovei* as a reference source of academic knowledge on the country's history and contemporary development. Among the Institute's principal research areas are (Manolache, 2014, p. 25):

- encyclopedic studies and their relationship to other scholarly fields;
- research on the compilation of encyclopedias (both universal and thematic);
- studies aimed at defining encyclopedic order and sequence (methods of classifying sciences, identifying related terms, establishing cross-references, etc.);
- onomasiological research for the development of terminological registers (concept analysis and the selection of terminology across scientific domains);
- terminological research (examining polysemy and homonymy in interdisciplinary scientific terms);
- studies on principles and methodologies for expanding and organising entries in universal and thematic encyclopedias;
- research on the norms and models of structure and content in encyclopedic articles;
- the study of historical encyclopedias and works on the history of science;

- research in the history and methodology of science, as well as the history of the natural, exact, and socio-humanitarian sciences; work in historiography and the analysis of historical scientific sources;
- studies on the history of the Academy of Sciences of Moldova and institutions in the fields of science and innovation;
- theoretical and methodological biographical research; and the preparation of scholarly biographies of prominent national and international figures.

As we can see, several of the Institute's tasks align closely with the issues examined in the monograph under review.

The examination of encyclopedias as a form of new media, undertaken specifically on the basis of Ukrainian publications, appears to be carried out here for the first time. The authors' comparison of contemporary encyclopedias, understood as extensive electronic knowledge bases, with online media is entirely justified. According to scholars, encyclopedias are a highly adaptable genre in historical perspective, since their form and the nature of their content have varied substantially across different periods and cultures. They have always depended on the development of printing and its technologies, and today they depend on information and communication technologies (O'Sullivan, 2011, p. 34). As the monograph demonstrates, modern encyclopedias increasingly display the same characteristics that define new media, which are forms of mass communication built on communication technologies that enable interaction both among readers and between readers and media institutions (Rice, 1984, p. 18). In this respect, Wikipedia, familiar to virtually everyone, serves as the clearest example of such an understanding of the encyclopedic genre.

The monograph is written to a high scholarly standard and contains a substantial amount of valuable and engaging material. For example, when presenting information on the history of encyclopedic practice, the authors note that the word *encyclopedia* first appeared in the title of an encyclopedic work in 1559. The reference is to *Encyclopaedia, seu orbis disciplinarum, tam sacrarum quam prophanarum, epistemon*, authored by P. Skalić and published in Basel. In the post-Soviet academic environment, however, it was long accepted that the earliest reference work whose title included the term *encyclopedia* was the 1620 publication *Cursus philosophiae encyclopaedia*, compiled by Johann Heinrich Alsted, described by Blair (2013) as a "Protestant theologian and educator." This was also the position presented in what the reviewer calls "one of the most authoritative encyclopedias of its time," the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, which stated: "In 1620 the word encyclopedia was included for the first time in the title of an encyclopedic work (Alsted J. N., *Cursus philosophiae encyclopaedia*, Herborn)" (Gudovshchikova and Terehov, 1978, p. 207). More broadly, the monograph offers an extensive linguistic analysis of the word *encyclopedia*, as well as *Wikipedia* and their derivatives, and demonstrates how the meanings of these terms vary depending on the sources consulted and the discursive contexts in which they are used.

Among the noteworthy insights presented in the monograph is the discussion in the section titled "Practical Use of Encyclopedic Content in Wartime," which includes a content analysis of citations of Ukrainian encyclopedias. This part of the study examines how materials from the *Encyclopedia of the History of Ukraine*, the *Encyclopedia of Modern Ukraine*, the *Great Ukrainian Encyclopedia*, and the *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine* are used in the media. The analysis demonstrates both the extent and the nature of the use of encyclopedic content in mass-media discourse, particularly in news reports related to the war. The author shows that Ukrainian media outlets are increasingly citing academic encyclopedias when covering events connected to the social, political, and cultural life of Ukrainians during the war. As a result, encyclopedic content is becoming an important contribution to the on-

going documentation of Ukraine's contemporary history. This trend, according to the author, reflects a rising level of media literacy among Ukrainian journalists, who are beginning to recognise that encyclopedias provide verified and expert-prepared information and therefore should be prioritised over other, often less reliable, sources. The monograph suggests that the growing frequency of references to the EMU, the EHU, the GUE, the IEU, and other scholarly reference works in wartime media may serve as a catalyst for the broader popularisation of academic encyclopedic practice in Ukrainian society. For the academic community of Moldova, such an evaluation would represent a significant achievement.

The authors' effort to interpret contemporary encyclopedias through the lens of the Open Science framework deserves particular recognition. They demonstrate that all well-known Ukrainian encyclopedias available online and produced by scholarly teams operate as open-access resources, which makes them fully consistent with the principles of Open Science and positions them as an important component in the development of this academic and organisational movement. It is worth noting that the monograph under review was published on the same basis, since it is freely accessible online in its entirety. The authors rightly observe that modern encyclopedias could serve as a significant channel of communication between scholars and the broader public. Through encyclopedic articles, researchers have the opportunity to present their knowledge in clear and accessible language, thereby popularising their academic contributions and promoting scientific culture more broadly. Yet the situation in Ukraine remains far from ideal. As the authors point out, and as illustrated by the experience of the *Encyclopedia of Modern Ukraine*, attracting prominent scholars to contribute high-quality encyclopedic articles is a difficult task. Only a small proportion of researchers agree to participate in such projects, and even fewer do so on their own initiative. Editorial teams invest significant effort to ensure the steady preparation of the EMU. This is not unique to the EMU but characteristic of virtually every encyclopedia project. As a result, many initiatives have remained unfinished. According to the authors, the situation might improve if encyclopedic articles were assigned academic credit and counted toward researchers' evaluation and certification. At present, however, academic assessment in Ukraine is tied almost exclusively to quantitative indicators of publication activity in journals indexed in Scopus or Web of Science, which is not always an appropriate criterion for the social sciences and humanities.

The monograph also addresses a range of issues related to the factors that shape effective communication between editorial teams and the scholars or other experts who agree to prepare encyclopedic entries. In practice, a considerable amount of time passes between commissioning an article and receiving its final version, and during this period numerous communicative exchanges take place. The success of these exchanges affects both the quality of the article and the contributor's willingness to continue collaborating with the editorial office. Since these processes are scarcely described in the academic literature, the monograph sheds light on an important yet understudied dimension of encyclopedic practice. The authors also draw attention to other communication-related challenges, including how editorial teams should respond to critical comments on social media or to the numerous suggestions that arrive by email proposing changes to existing entries. Such suggestions are often of a kind that, if accepted, could alter the conceptual framework or methodological principles on which an encyclopedic project is based.

In conclusion, and in emphasising the importance of the monograph under review, it is worth noting that scholarly examination of the contemporary development of encyclopedic practice carries significant value worldwide, and particularly within the European Union. The preservation of national cultures and identities, as well as the exchange of this knowledge among European societies, is one of the priorities of EU cultural policy. In this

context, “national encyclopedic projects are regarded as reliable sources for the accumulation and transmission of such information” (Dziuba, 2021, p. 10).

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