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Encyclopedia industry under fire: reflections upon the monograph “Ukrainian encyclopedias in current socio-communicative challenges” (Kyiv, 2024)

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Abstract

The Ukraine’s encyclopedia industry has faced several new challenges as a result of the current war, including funding issues, personnel shortages, and limited access to verified information sources. Based on the monograph *Ukrainian Encyclopedias in Current Socio-Communicative Challenges* (Kyiv, 2024), the authors examine the difficulties that the industry has encountered amidst Russian aggression. The study emphasizes the importance of encyclopedias in affirming national identity and countering harmful disinformation, including anti-Ukrainian narratives. The role of the Encyclopedia of Modern Ukraine in this process is highlighted.

Keywords

encyclopedia, Ukrainian encyclopedias, Russian war against Ukraine, social communications, cultural resistance.

The challenges faced by encyclopedia studies encompass not only methodological questions of encyclopedia assembling but also the conditions under which editorial teams operate and the various challenges they encounter, including those of a socio-communicative nature. A recent collective monograph (Ishchenko & Stepanenko, 2024) published by the Institute of Encyclopedic Research of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine falls into this category of research. The authors focused on describing and analyzing various socio-communicative challenges. However, in our view, the primary challenge for the current state and future advance of the Ukraine's encyclopedia industry is undoubtedly the Russian war. The authors began preparing the monograph at the height of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The invasion of the enemy country has significantly impacted Ukrainian science as a whole. Naturally, projects that strengthen the country's defense capabilities have become a priority. In the social sciences and humanities, "defense research and development" includes studies aimed at "forming the humanitarian component of national security" (Vermenych, 2024, p. 30), protecting the state's cultural and informational environment, enhancing the cognitive resilience of citizens tied to their national identity, and bolstering national resilience — the ability of society "to address internal problems and conflicts as well as external crises and challenges" (Pyrozhev et al., 2024, p. 61). In essence, these studies contribute to the consolidation of the Ukrainian nation.

If the 20th century was largely defined by armed conflicts, the first half of the 21st century has seen a rise in hybrid forms of aggression. This trend is driven by the relative stability of the post-World War II international security system, which has rendered large-scale armed confrontations between major powers unacceptable. As a result, other forms of aggression, such as economic, political, and informational, have become increasingly prevalent (Strelbytskyi & Hryn, 2023, p. 47). Currently, the Armed Forces of Ukraine are repelling Russian aggression on the battlefield, while Ukrainian cultural space is witnessing a consolidation of national identity and resistance to information warfare (albeit with some delays and opposition from biased citizens). This process involves purging society of the distortions and myths that empires have imposed for centuries. It is taking place across the country in various forms, from renaming streets and settlements to the disposal of ideologically harmful Soviet-era literature by local libraries.

Meanwhile, among the discarded literature, there are often significant reference books such as the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. Under such conditions, the task of Ukraine's humanities is to propose ideas, developments, and products capable of replacing phenomena and objects harmful to nation-building and serving as a factor of national consolidation. In previous historical epochs, Ukraine lacked the conditions for the development of encyclopedic endeavors, while in Soviet times, although it achieved certain gains, it had an ideological character and a fragmented manifestation. Soviet encyclopedism was not based on a sufficiently broad scientific basis, ignored entire chains of prohibited topics and names, and did not rely sufficiently on world experience. Therefore, the act of discarding Soviet encyclopedic publications by Ukrainian librarians is logical.

Instead of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* and the *Ukrainian Soviet Encyclopedia* on the shelves of Ukrainian libraries in villages, towns, and big cities, schools, and universities, there should be a complete set of volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Modern Ukraine* (EMU). It is a multi-volume contemporary general encyclopedia, to the preparation of articles for which thousands of experts have been involved. This work, with the release of its first volume in 2001, provided the country with a comprehensive, all-encompassing reference

source of knowledge about Ukraine and Ukrainians, covering achievements in various spheres of life (culture, economy, industry, politics) and previously silenced topics, thereby “the EMU contributes to the affirmation of Ukraine as an integral part of the Euro-Atlantic civilizational world” (Zhelezniak & Ishchenko, 2023). The monograph in question provides numerous examples to illustrate this fact. Equally interesting and indicative is the fact that the EMU website has been included in the register of websites banned on the territory of the Russian Federation, which can only mean one thing: the EMU, Ukrainian national encyclopedism as a whole, is an information weapon capable of contributing to the resistance to Russian aggression. The fact that the volumes of the EMU are protecting not only the cultural space of Ukraine is also demonstrated by the story of the library in the village of Ivankiv — there, “in the spring of 2022, the first volume of the encyclopedia literally stopped an enemy bullet, preventing it from hitting its target” (Zhelezniak, 2023).

Unfortunately, over the years of the full-scale war, state funding for this project has proven insufficient for the EMU editorial office to continue printing the next encyclopedia volumes. As a result, Ukraine’s libraries remain without volumes of the national encyclopedia beyond the letter “O”. In contrast, S. Kulchytskyi argues that, in the current context, state support for institutions—particularly those capable of countering the propaganda of the “Russian world” — should be intensified (2023, p. 6). However, the reality paints a different picture: most scientific institutions face severe financial shortages, reduced work schedules, a lack of young talent, and outdated technical resources. “The state’s underestimation of the role of scientific research undermines Ukraine’s development and delays the prospect of a victorious end to the war” (Skrypniuk, 2023, p. 8).

Despite numerous obstacles and challenges, the tradition of Ukrainian academic encyclopedism — established by luminaries such as Ivan Franko, Mykhailo Hrushevskiy, Fedir Vovk, Agatangel Krymskiy, Oleksandr Rusov, Stepan Rudnytskyi, Ivan Rakovskiy, Zenon Kuzelia, and Volodymyr Kubijovyč (Zhelezniak, 2024a, p. 8)—continues to evolve, even in the face of the hardships of war. The war has displaced many scholars, and as of early 2023, Academician A. Zagorodnyi reported that “11% of scientists at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine remain outside the country. Every day of the war brings new challenges, compelling us to mobilize resources and seek new opportunities” (2024, p. 10). Overall, the war, which began in 2014, has been “particularly cruel, destructive, and cynical. It has starkly exposed the chasm between Ukrainians and Russians, long obscured by deceitful stereotypes of fraternal nations. The former embody democracy, peace, and progress, while the latter represent totalitarianism, aggression, and decline. For centuries, Russia, irrespective of its political structure — whether imperial or communist — has exploited Ukraine: seizing territories, extracting minerals, exporting archaeological finds, destroying ancient monuments, appropriating history, culture, and language, and, most grievously, hunting down talented Ukrainians, depriving the nation of its elite” (Zhelezniak, 2024b, p. 195). These critical insights, long substantiated by scholars (e.g., see Mykhalchuk, 1994), demand broad dissemination in an encyclopedic format. The ideas presented in this monograph aim to contribute to that effort.

“Historically, encyclopedic projects have always served as markers of civilizational and scientific-technological progress, as well as the intellectual and spiritual development of humanity. One need only recall the significance of the renowned work of the 18th-century French Encyclopedists for European culture. Since then, encyclopedias have been perceived as comprehensive summaries of theoretical and practical achievements in specific fields of knowledge or as records of the economic, political, social, and cultural development of

human civilization at a given time. In today's rapidly expanding information environment — characterized by the proliferation of sources, means of dissemination, and modern forms of communication — encyclopedic publications have somewhat lost their prominence within the vast and diverse information landscape. Nevertheless, their importance remains undiminished", as noted by Mykola Zheleznyak, the scientific editor of the monograph (p. 9). This situation poses a challenge not only to encyclopedic endeavors as a professional and scientific publishing activity — particularly during the challenging period of resistance to the Russian invasion, which has placed significant strain on publishing — but also to society as a whole. Often, society favors information of dubious origin and content over scientifically verified knowledge. At the same time, it is precisely now that encyclopedias can assume renewed significance. As repositories of a nation's cultural and historical wealth, testaments to its achievements and struggles, and treasuries of timeless knowledge, they represent a generational legacy. In this context, encyclopedias could play a vital role as information platforms for honoring Ukrainian soldiers and defenders, fostering patriotism among Ukrainian citizens, and preserving the enduring values the nation seeks to pass on to its descendants.

The monograph "Ukrainian encyclopedias in current socio-communicative challenges" is highly relevant, given the need to analyze the challenges associated with the increasing use of encyclopedias in contemporary society. Addressing these challenges can contribute to the more effective dissemination of reliable knowledge among population. In the context of the ongoing war, these issues remain critically important and have become even more pressing. Ukrainians' reliance on verified sources of information is crucial for the country's information and cultural security, as it helps counter hostile disinformation — primarily propagandistic ideological discourse — thereby fostering national unity. The information front in this confrontation is of paramount importance to Russia, aiming to destabilize Ukrainian society, incite civil strife, sow identity conflicts, prevent national cohesion, and weaken patriotism and faith in victory. All of these factors influence public sentiment and decision-making in Ukraine, and ultimately, the nation's ability to defend its sovereignty and rebuild after the war.

The further blooming of modern-day encyclopedias hinges on the ability of those who do them — such as editorial offices¹, publishing houses, and research institutions — to ensure the effective dissemination of reliable information. This forms the central issue addressed in the monograph. The authors do not claim to offer a comprehensive solution to the challenges facing contemporary encyclopedias (which also include socio-communicative concerns). Instead, they aim to initiate further scholarly work, attempting to identify and outline key questions while introducing new approaches to the theoretical foundations of encyclopedia studies.

¹ By the way, in fateful February days of 2022 (two days before the Russian attack), the Institute of Encyclopedic Research and all Ukrainian academic community suffered a loss — Ivan Dziuba, whom the pages of this journal had recently congratulated on his 90th birthday (Mušynka et al., 2021), passed away at the age of 91.

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