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STUDENT MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION PROJECTS IN TIME OF WAR: CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS (BASED ON THE SURVEY RESULTS)

STUDENCKIE PROJEKTY MEDIALNE W CZASIE WOJNY: WYZWANIA I OSIĄGNIĘCIA (NA PODSTAWIE WYNIKÓW ANKIETY)

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Abstract:

The study aimed to find out how working on educational and work-integrated projects helps young students implement professional knowledge and skills, improve themselves, find life meanings in the maelstrom of war, show resilience, and tell the world about Ukraine's struggle. For this purpose, two short surveys were conducted from October 11 to November 2, 2024, using a purposive sampling method with the help of Google Forms: "Student Projects in Time of War" (Survey I) (41 respondents) and "Student Projects in Time of War 2 (Cases)" (Survey II) (11 respondents), the results of the second one became the empirical basis for a qualitative case study. Almost half of the respondents implemented 5 to 10 projects during the full-scale invasion. Blackouts and constant bombardment caused the most problems for project implementation. Among others, the respondents mentioned: depression, stress, anxiety, lack of sleep, deaths of friends and loved ones, burnout, moral exhaustion, demotivation, and loss of meaningful life guidelines. Most of the student projects are one way or another related to the war and the consequences it has caused, including problems of adaptation, resilience, living with and overcoming war and psychological trauma, and employment challenges. The students also focused on the need to help the military and civilians, and the country as a whole, and sought to share Ukraine's values and culture with the world, as well as to tell about Russia's crimes against Ukraine and Ukrainians.

Keywords:

Project-Based Learning, Social Importance, Professional and Personal Development, Way to Normalize the World, Resilience.

Abstrakt:

Celem badania było ustalenie, w jaki sposób praca nad projektami edukacyjnymi oraz edukacyjno-zawodowymi pomaga młodzieży studenckiej wykorzystywać profesjonalną wiedzę i umiejętności, rozwijać się, odnajdywać sens życia w obliczu wojny, wykazując rezyliencję i przekazując światu informacje o walce Ukrainy. W tym celu przeprowadzono dwie ankiety w dniach 11 października – 2 listopada 2024 roku metodą doboru celowego za pomocą formularzy Google: „Studenckie projekty w czasie wojny” (41 respondentów) oraz „Studenckie projekty w czasie wojny 2 (studia przypadków)” (11 respondentów). Wyniki drugiej ankiety stały się podstawą do przeprowadzenia jakościowego studium przypadku. Prawie połowa respondentów w czasie pełnoskalowej inwazji zrealizowała od 5 do 10 projektów. Najwięcej problemów dla realizacji projektów spowodowały blackouty oraz ciągle bombardowania. Wśród innych problemów respondenci wymieniali: przygnębienie, stres, niepokój, brak snu, straty wśród znajomych i bliskich, wypalenie, wyczerpanie moralne, demotywację, utratę orientacji życiowych. Przeważnie studenckie projekty, tak czy inaczej, związane z wojną oraz jej skutkami, w tym z problemami adaptacji, rezyliencji (odporności psychicznej), przeżycie i przewyższanie traum wojennych i psychologicznych oraz wyzwaniem związanym z zatrudnieniem. Studenci skupili się na potrzebie niesienia pomocy wojskowym i cywilom, na kraju jako całości, pragnęli opowiedzieć światu o wartościach i kulturze Ukrainy, a także o zbrodniach rosyjskiej wobec Ukrainy i Ukraińców.

Słowa kluczowe: uczenie się projektowe, znaczenie społeczne, rozwój zawodowy i osobisty, sposób normalizacji świata, odporność (rezyliencja).

Introduction

Modern Ukrainian students have to study and work in the context of a full-scale Russian invasion¹. This presents additional challenges for them, beyond the immediate educational and work tasks aimed at developing their professional and personal competencies: to survive², adapt to the wartime conditions, cultivate resilience, and find their ways to normalize their world in order to remain productive and maintain their mental health³.

¹ It should be remembered that Russia's invasion of Ukraine began in 2014, and the full-scale invasion began on February 24, 2022.

² To illustrate, on the night of November 2 to 3, 2024, a building of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, which houses the Educational and Scientific Institute of Journalism and the Educational and Scientific Institute of International Relations, as well as one of the student dormitories, was destroyed by Russian drones. It should also be noted that since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, this is the third case of university buildings' destruction due to Russian missile and drone attacks.

³ One of these ways is reading, as examined earlier: Ryzhko, O. (2022). Czytanie w czasie wojny wśród nastoletnich blogerów – komunikat z badań [Results of the “Reading in the time of war” target survey of teenage bloggers]. *Youth in Central and Eastern*

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One way young people normalize their world is by learning through the development of real projects. It is worth noting that the project-based approach to learning is often included in the very curricula, such as the “Media Communications in Business” program⁴, whose students participated in the survey for this study. Typically, work on a project covers all stages of its preparation and implementation (offline or online): from defining the idea and purpose of the activity to implementing measures to prepare, promote, conduct, analyze, and report on the project. The term “project” is understood here as “temporary measures aimed at creating a unique product, service, or achieving a result” (Higney, 2023) or, more broadly, “temporary activities aimed at creating a new product or service with clearly defined resources, start and end dates” (Prosnitskyi, 2024).

To understand the specifics of young people's work on these projects, two short surveys were conducted: “Student Projects in Time of War”

⁴ “Media Communications in Business” curriculum. Obtained from: http://labs.journ.univ.kiev.ua/vsr2/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/mediakomunikatsiyi-v-biznesi_2022_opp-onovl-2023.pdf (downloaded on 11.12.2022).

(hereinafter referred to as Survey I) and “Student Projects in Time of War 2 (Cases)” (hereinafter referred to as Survey II). These surveys were conducted among undergraduate and graduate students of the Educational and Scientific Institute of Journalism (ESIJ) of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Students from this particular institute were chosen for the survey because they are, or will become, professional communicators whose responsibilities include objectively covering events related to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

This study is local, qualitative, exploratory in nature. It aims to demonstrate that student projects serve as effective preparation for the types of projects that will await young professionals once they graduate. As Valerii Pekar rightly emphasizes: “To win the war, we have to implement thousands of projects. Further recovery and modernization of the country will require the implementation of tens of thousands of projects. In the rear and on the front lines. With the implementation of EU norms and NATO standards. In manufacturing, logistics, construction, reforms, institution development, culture, diplomacy, etc.” (Pekar, Prosnyskyi, 2024).

Methodology

The aim of the study is to examine how working on educational and work-integrated projects helps young students to realize their professional knowledge and skills, improve themselves, find life meanings in the maelstrom of war, demonstrate resistance, and share Ukraine’s struggle with the world.

The survey was conducted from October 11 to November 2, 2024, using a purposive sampling method via Google Forms. Information about the survey was distributed through closed student groups, and the student parliament chat of the Educational and Scientific Institute of Journalism. The snowball sampling method was

employed, ensuring voluntary participation and aligning with the study’s objectives, as the focus was on qualitative parameters. Survey I was completed by 41 respondents. Among other things, this survey prompted participants to discuss a project that was particularly valuable to them, which was explored separately in Survey II. The second survey involved 11 respondents, and the collected information served as qualitative case study.

The questionnaire method was used to gather primary information and assess respondents’ perspectives on the research problem (Romakh, 2020). The first questionnaire (anonymous) contained 10 questions: 1 closed, 6 open-ended, and 3 multiple-choice. The second questionnaire (requiring authorization) contained 11 open-ended questions, reflecting the nature of the study, as it focused on case descriptions.

To process the information obtained, the following methods of generalization and information analysis were applied: systematization, grouping, and both qualitative (text analysis, classification) and quantitative (digital data) approaches. The results are presented in the form of a detailed verbal description.

Results of the study

Based on the identification questions of Survey I, the following was found (Table 1).

Thus, female students dominate among the respondents. Most of the respondents are 20 years old or older and are 4th year bachelor’s and master’s students. This is logical, as they are more involved in projects, having already the knowledge and skills necessary for successful implementation. The vast majority are future producers and communicators, which is again logical, since working with projects is one of their core professional competencies. Nearly half of the respondents have implemented between 5 and 10 projects during the full-scale invasion.

Table 1

Identification data and quantitative index of projects

Categories		%
Gender	Female	85.4
	Male	14.6
Age	17–19 years	29.3
	20–24 years	70.7
Year	1st	7.3
	2nd	7.3
	3rd	9.8
	4th	51.2
	1st year of master’s degree	14.6
	2nd year of master’s degree	9.8
	Curriculum	Media production
	Publishing and media editing	14.6
	Journalism and social communication	17.1
	Advertising and public relations	4.9
	Audiovisual arts	2.4
	Media communications in business	22.0
Number of educational and work-integrated ⁵ projects implemented since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine	1–4	36.6
	5–10	48.8
	11–15	4.9
	16–20	2.4
	over 20	7.3

The next two questions were key. Students were asked to name the most important projects they worked on and explain their significance. They were also asked describe the most significant obstacles they faced (including adapting to new life circumstances⁶ due to the war) while working on their projects (respondents could select several options).

Among the most important projects they named the following: Arca Production (creation

and production of Ukrainian student films); an international youth exchange within the Erasmus+ program on media literacy; an educational project for “displaced children with elements of adaptation to new countries (Inscience), organization of cultural and educational events by Projector, and the MetaHata career meta-festival by Lezo”; “Dovidnyk Pereselentsia (‘The IDP Handbook’), a Telegram messenger channel⁷, that

⁵ These are projects that students carry out for their employers, but as part of their studies, such as master’s projects.

⁶ This is because some students were forced to leave Ukraine but continued to work on their projects.

⁷ This is a project implemented in 2023. Currently, the use of the Telegram messenger in educational and training work at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv is prohibited due to a potential security threat, according to the order of Rector V. Buhrov No. 889-32 of 01.11.2024.

provided information on legal, humanitarian, and financial assistance to IDPs; projects to promote Ukrainian business; production of young Ukrainian performers; production of young writers; ORNAMENT, a journal about Ukrainian culture; “Strichka” (Film) film journal; a cross-media project about Ukrainian design; Vatra Media, a media about contemporary Ukrainian culture; the “Sontse pid skroniamy” (Sun Under the Temples) book and its podcast “Frustratsiia” (Frustration); a website about Gareth Jones, a Holodomor (the Ukrainian Famine) investigator in Ukraine; the creation of a university psychological service; a project on the deportation of Ukrainian children by Russia, a data project on the location of Russian troops in the occupied territories, research on the de-occupied territories and recovery; photo exhibitions “Oholena pravda na svitlynakh”

(Naked Truth in Photographs) and “Ukrainska medytsyna voien” (Ukrainian Medicine of Wars) by photographer Oleksandr Harvat, and others.

These projects are important to respondents because they align with their professional aspirations in fields such as filmmaking and production. Through these experiences, they have learned to work in teams, manage projects, and contribute to socially meaningful initiatives. As one respondent noted, their work contributes to “something that helps either the country or the people in this country, or the military, or promotes the development of culture and increases interest in it and history, etc.”.

The challenges that hindered the implementation of these projects are summarized in the table 2 below. It should be noted that respondents could select multiple options.

Table 2
Obstacles to project implementation

Categories	Number of mentions
Constant bombardment	20
Blackouts	34
Forced relocation within Ukraine	8
Forced relocation abroad	5

As seen in the results, blackouts and constant bombardment posed the most significant challenges. Additionally, both those in Ukraine and those abroad struggled with blackouts, as they were unable contact project team members who remained in Ukraine.

Among other difficulties, the respondents mentioned the following: depression, stress, anxiety, lack of sleep, deaths of friends and loved ones, burnout, moral exhaustion, demotivation, and a lack of understanding of how to live further (loss of meaningful life guidelines). Those who were forced to leave Ukraine also faced such problems as, for example, “the need to implement a project for Spanish schoolchildren, some of whom supported Russia” or dissonance in the perception

of reality due to the inability to comprehend and accept the fact that people are being killed in Ukraine, while “people abroad live normal lives.”

A follow-up question clarified the countries where some respondents had relocated. Students from the ESIJ, fleeing the Russian invasion, found themselves in the following countries of temporary residence: Belgium, Great Britain, Spain, Italy, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.

The final two open-ended questions were designed to encourage further elaboration. One invited respondents to share more details about a specific project (Survey II), while the other where asked to leave an e-mail if they wanted to receive a link to the published study results (22 participants agreed).

And now let's move on to Survey II, which had eleven respondents. It resulted in 11 case studies, but due to article length limitations, only will be presented.

Case 1. Psychology of Work – Psychological Service of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv⁸.

Author of the project: Daryna Parkhomenko.

Number of people involved: 8.

Years of implementation: 2023–2024.

Aim: to develop students' ability to be competitive in the labor market (including in emergency situations), ability to focus, prevention and overcoming stressful conditions in connection with job search and employment.

Description: This project is a collaboration between the Psychological Service and the Department of Employment Promotion and Work with Graduates, addressing employment psychology. It covers topics such as creating a resume, passing interviews, and preventing and solving the problem of professional burnout.

Challenges: limited financial and human resources; difficulties with conducting trainings due to power outages and lack of connection (for online events) and the inability to create safe conditions for a large number of participants in offline events.

What helped not to give up: "Each time there were more and more people present at the events. Active, interested, with questions. We felt responsible and needed by people, we received grateful feedback at the end of each event, reactions to posts, which inspired us to work despite everything."⁹

Project value: "The opportunity to help and support students who are just starting their career paths, because they are the future of Ukraine,

young professionals who have to develop and restore the country."

What the project taught: "To believe in yourself, to work proactively to compensate for possible threats, and to follow the important tips we tell people about – to be able not only to work but also to recover, because it is important even [especially] in times of war."

Case 2. Arca Production.

Project author(s): Anna Kovalenko, Dariia Chechylo, Mariia Romanchuk, Arina Ponomarova.

Number of people involved: 4

Years of implementation: 2023–2024 (ongoing).

Aim: to create audiovisual products and support student films in Ukraine.

Brief description: Arca Production is a media project focused on creating short films, with plans to expand into documentaries, advertising, and music videos.

Challenges: Limited technical capabilities, small budget, organizational issues.

What helped not to give up: "The Arca Production project is actually just starting its own story. On November 5, our first short film appeared on YouTube¹⁰. Our boundless love for cinema and the support of our circle help us not to give up."

Project value: "It helps us to acquire the necessary skills in the field we want to develop in – filmmaking, from directing and cinematography to scriptwriting, acting, and producing film projects."

What the project taught: "Filmmaking is not done at the expense of one person's desire. You need to find a team with whom you will look in the same direction and move step by step, towards your goal."

⁸ The project was implemented on the platform of the Psychological Service https://t.me/psy_service_knu under the #PsyOfWork hashtag.

⁹ Hereinafter, fragments of the text in quotation marks are the direct speech of the project authors.

¹⁰ Link to watch the film: https://youtu.be/gOUE_sAmzFA?si=G5tEpW2pgGNcdLCN; the project information platforms: <https://www.instagram.com/arca.production?igsh=djkiZmVkMzE2em4z>; <https://www.youtube.com/@arca.production>.

Case 3. The short documentary “Hide and Seek”¹¹.

Author of the project: Anastasiia Kuzmenko.

Number of people involved: up to 15 people in the core multicultural team, including members from Germany, Great Britain, China, Japan, and Ukraine.

Years of implementation: 2024.

Aim: to show the feelings and thoughts of Ukrainian youth during the war and to help viewers better understand Ukrainians living through different experiences.

It is worth noting that according to the results of recent studies, “the values of universalism¹², benevolence (kindness), security, and conformity” are dominant among Ukrainians (Starodubska, 2024).

Description: The story follows two Ukrainian friends separated by war: Arsalan, a 22-year-old actor who lives in Frankfurt after staying in a refugee camp, and Nastia, a 21-year-old journalist and media producer who remained in Ukraine. They reflect on the different paths their lives have taken and discuss themes of forced displacement, identity, and the emotional impact of war on young people.

Challenges: securing funding, working with unmotivated team members.

What helped not to give up: “The need to remember the mission of the project and understand what impact we want to have after its implementation, what discussion to provoke and what messages to convey. Not to lose Ukraine from foreigners’ sight, to remain creative, sincere and to convey important thoughts and ideas in contrast to those spread by Russians (such as the film *Russians at War*, which was presented in Venice, or the film *Invasion*, which is a powerful audiovisual work in itself, but the messages of the director and producer about the «wrongness» of canceling Russian language and culture in Ukraine, the

¹¹ Instagram page of the project: https://www.instagram.com/hideandseek_documentary?igsh=MWdxMmI-1YzIxbmE1Yw==

¹² This refers to Schwartz’s system of 10 value domains.

thesis that the Russian language has historically been in Ukraine, and other pro-Russian narratives that they broadcast to a wide audience (London Film Festival, 16. 10.2024) force us to fight for the information light and become those who convey opinions based on history and facts, rather than emotions and historical inaccuracies).”

Project value: “The opportunity to tell foreigners about my feelings during the war, to enter the international arena and the discussion about changes in society from the beginning of the full-scale war, to have representatives from various countries in the team who are sincerely interested in the work, appreciate it and love it, and to create and search for new approaches to storytelling and communication about Ukraine.”

What the project taught: greater responsibility, openness in communication, and belief in her own abilities.

Conclusions

As it can be seen, most student media and communication projects are in one way or another related to the war and its consequences. These include issues of adaptation, resilience, living with and overcoming war and psychological trauma, employment challenges, helping the military and civilians, as well as the urgent need to help their country, thereby bringing victory in the war closer, to tell the world about the values and culture of Ukraine, as well as about Russia’s crimes against Ukraine and all those who live in Ukraine, who, regardless of their origin, think and feel Ukrainian.

These project implementation cases highlight three trends among students that determine their lives, studies, work, development, and resilience:

- 1) to look back at the war every second and speak about the destructive impact of the war on all spheres of youth life;
- 2) to understand that the war is ongoing, but to try to take care of themselves and their loved ones, focus on their own productivity and

seek opportunities for self-development and help others;

- 3) a kind of “bracketing the war out” (as a form of escapism or a fatal acceptance that the deaths of loved ones, air raids, bombardment, black-outs, despair, anxiety, and depression are a new reality that cannot be avoided): to leave only the need to study and work while alive.

We will not be able to take care of our own mental health if we do not look for ways to normalize life during the war, such as reading or working on socially significant projects, but this “bracketing the war out”, excessive normalization, is frightening because in extreme cases it can lead to neglect of one’s own safety and death.

Furthermore, based on the data obtained, the following recommendations can be made for educators seeking to implement the project-based approach to learning in wartime.

1. At the outset, provide students with a clear understanding of what a “project” is (Higney, 2023), how to manage it within the context of Ukrainian realities, including those of wartime (Prosnitskyi, 2024), and how to overcome crises (Bereshchak, 2023; Coleman, 2023).
2. To prevent overload and emotional burnout, the number of projects to be implemented should be determined based on the overall academic workload of students, as outlined in the curriculum and course requirements. For instance, the primary focus for 4th-year bachelor’s students is the implementation of a qualifying innovative project.
3. Before beginning work on the project, conduct training on the use of mental health strategies (e.g., coping strategies, mindset, enhancing virtues¹³), strengthening resilience with the “zone of control” theory (Webb, 2021), and overcoming war trauma, both at the individual

level (Kolk van der, 2022; Herman, 2019) and the collective level (Stanchyshyn, 2022).

4. Offer projects that help to overcome the challenges of all three dimensions of loneliness: intimate, relational, and collective (Murthy, 2020), and are aimed at professional fulfillment, team/collective work, the sustainable development of national identity, and personal growth, transmit cultural values and achievements, have social significance and are socially responsible. This will enhance students’ self-esteem and sense of self-worth, and, in turn, foster resilience.

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¹³ Zberihaimo psykhologichnu stiikist: try stratehii [Maintaining psychological resilience: three strategies]. Obtained from: <https://phc.org.ua/news/zberigaymo-psikhologichnu-stiikist-tri-strategii> (downloaded on 11.12.2024).