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## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN THE SEARCH FOR MISSING PERSONS DURING WARTIME

## ROLA MEDIÓW SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWYCH I KOMUNIKACJI W POSZUKIWANIU OSÓB ZAGINIONYCH W CZASIE WOJNY

### **Abstract**

The study examines the role of social media in the search for missing persons during the full-scale war in Ukraine, highlighting its multifaceted functions in operational coordination, documentation, and memorialization. It focuses on the initial weeks of the conflict when official mechanisms for registration and search were partially paralyzed or inaccessible, and social platforms emerged as primary channels for rapid information exchange. Social media facilitated real-time reporting of disappearances, enabling families, volunteers, and civic organizations to synchronize their efforts and create decentralized digital networks for identifying missing individuals. The analysis demonstrates how social media platforms served as dynamic repositories of information, where posts documenting personal data, photographs, and circumstances of disappearance contributed to the formation of digital archives with long-term relevance.

The study further examines the documentary and identification functions of social media, using the cases of Mariupol and Bucha as illustrative examples. These cases highlight the critical evidentiary and memorial significance of social media, demonstrating that platforms can serve as indirect identification tools when traditional procedures are unavailable or delayed.

The research also examines the risks tied to public search activities, particularly regarding military personnel, where the excessive dissemination of sensitive information can compromise operational security. The study underscores the importance of media literacy, coordination with official institutions, and strategic communication to balance humanitarian objectives with safety concerns. Overall, the article presents the first systematic scholarly analysis of social media as a tool for searching for missing persons in wartime, highlighting its dual role in enabling immediate humanitarian responses and creating long-term digital archives for legal, memorial, and analytical purposes.

**Keywords:** social media, missing persons, wartime, digital archives, humanitarian response, operational security, collective memory

## Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje rolę mediów społecznościowych w poszukiwaniu osób zaginionych podczas pełnoskalowej wojny na Ukrainie, uwydatniając ich wieloaspektowe funkcje w zakresie koordynacji operacyjnej, dokumentacji oraz upamiętnienia. Treści koncentrują się na początkowych tygodniach konfliktu, kiedy oficjalne mechanizmy rejestracji i poszukiwań były częściowo sparaliżowane lub niedostępne, a platformy społecznościowe stały się głównymi kanałami szybkiej wymiany informacji. Media społecznościowe umożliwiały natychmiastowe zgłaszanie przypadków zaginięć, pozwalając rodzinom, wolontariuszom oraz organizacjom obywatelskim synchronizować działania i tworzyć zdecentralizowane sieci cyfrowe w celu identyfikacji osób zaginionych. Analiza wykazuje, że platformy społecznościowe funkcjonowały jako dynamiczne repozytoria informacji, w których posty dokumentujące dane osobowe, fotografie i okoliczności zaginięcia przyczyniały się do powstania archiwów cyfrowych o długoterminowym znaczeniu. Artykuł dodatkowo analizuje funkcję dokumentacyjną i identyfikacyjną mediów społecznościowych, wykorzystując przypadki Mariupola i Buczy jako przykłady ilustracyjne. Przykłady te podkreślają istotne znaczenie dowodowe i upamiętniające mediów społecznościowych, wykazując, że platformy mogą służyć jako pośrednie narzędzia identyfikacji w sytuacjach, gdy tradycyjne procedury są niedostępne lub opóźnione. Artykuł porusza również zagrożenia związane z publicznymi działaniami poszukiwawczymi, szczególnie w odniesieniu do personelu wojskowego, w przypadku których nadmierne rozpowszechnianie wrażliwych informacji może zagrozić bezpieczeństwu operacyjnemu. Podkreślono konieczność kompetencji medialnych, koordynacji z instytucjami państwowymi oraz strategicznej komunikacji w celu pogodzenia celów humanitarnych z wymogami bezpieczeństwa. W rezultacie artykuł przedstawia pierwszą systematyczną analizę naukową mediów społecznościowych jako narzędzia poszukiwania osób zaginionych w warunkach wojny, ukazując ich podwójną rolę w umożliwianiu natychmiastowej reakcji humanitarnej oraz tworzeniu długoterminowych archiwów cyfrowych o znaczeniu prawnym, upamiętniającym i analitycznym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** media społecznościowe, osoby zaginione, wojna, archiwa cyfrowe, reakcja humanitarna, bezpieczeństwo operacyjne, pamięć zbiorowa

## Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022 led to a significant transformation in search activities due to the disruption of conventional communication channels and the limited functionality of state registries. Social media, which had primarily served informational or social purposes, emerged as the main means of interaction among families of missing persons, the public, and government institutions. This shift enabled rapid information exchange and real-time coordination. The lack of effective institutional mechanisms forced citizens to take responsibility for data collection, resulting in the creation of digital repositories that gained evidentiary significance.

“Armed conflict presents a multitude of risks to civilians, prisoners of war and others caught in the middle of hostilities.”<sup>1</sup> As of mid-2025, the Unified Register of Missing Persons included over 70,000 individuals, both military personnel and civilians, among whom were more than 2,400 children. Of these, 30,000 had been reported missing since 2024. By January 1, 2025, the search for 9,255 individuals had been concluded, either because they were found alive or their remains were identified. Currently, approximately 59,000 Ukrainians remain listed as missing.<sup>2</sup>

The expansion of information shared through online platforms has created a new form of digital registration for missing persons, independent of official systems. Posts that include messages, photographs, and detailed accounts of disappearances generate archival datasets that can preserve information over long periods and serve as a foundation for subsequent event analysis. Social media, therefore, acts as a space where collective memory is built, preserving testimonies about individuals’ fates during crises and enhancing the value of these digital resources for scientific and legal investigations.

Public engagement in search processes through social networks demonstrated significant mobilization. Families of missing persons, volunteer organizations, and civic groups communicated directly, shared information, and coordinated actions, forming collaborative networks that took on responsibilities typically managed by formal institutions during wartime. These platforms not only provided social support and fostered solidarity, but also enabled participants to exchange knowledge and experiences, enhancing search efficacy while alleviating the psychological burden on families.

The documentation of disappearance events in digital spaces performed an evidentiary role. Posts recorded information about the time, location, and circumstances of disappearances, creating material suitable for scientific, memorial, and legal practices. Archiving data on social media permitted the reconstruction of events after extended periods and facilitated a comprehensive analysis of search, communication, and documentation processes.

The participation of a wide user base in search campaigns increased public awareness and reinforced collective responsibility. The broad dissemination of information, verification of data, and mutual support produced an effect of mass solidarity, intensifying societal attention to missing persons and promoting the development of cultural and social practices for responding to crisis situations.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Ulbricht, J. Rizk, *How harmful information on social media impacts people affected by armed conflict: A typology of harms*, „International Review of the Red Cross” 106 (926)/2024.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ccl.org.ua/posts> (date of access: 07.01.2026).

Consequently, research on the role of social media in search operations retains relevance from both humanitarian and scientific perspectives. The examination of digital platforms elucidates how mechanisms of communication and interaction among citizens and state structures evolve under crisis conditions, highlights their significance as tools for locating and recording individuals, and delineates the social and evidentiary functions emerging in the formation of collective memory.

The article employs qualitative research methods, utilizing content analysis of social media materials related to the search for missing persons, case study analysis of selected wartime contexts, and qualitative analysis of user-generated content and public communications. This methodological combination serves as a foundation for examining the communicative, documentary, and coordination functions of social media in armed conflict situations.

In order to systematize the analytical framework of the study, the article focuses on three interconnected analytical dimensions: the operational use of social media in the search for missing persons during the initial phase of armed conflict; the documentary and identification functions of digital platforms under conditions of institutional disruption; and the impact of public search practices on operational security, particularly in relation to military personnel.

Based on the qualitative analysis, the study presents the analytical thesis that social media during wartime functions simultaneously as decentralized search infrastructures, digital documentation systems, and long-term archival environments, blending humanitarian roles with evidentiary and memorial purposes.

### **Social Media as a Primary Tool for Searching for Missing Persons in the First Weeks of the War**

The initial weeks of the full-scale invasion were characterized by widespread panic among the population and a sharp disruption of conventional communication channels. During this period, social media emerged as the primary tool for the rapid exchange of information, functioning as a *de facto* preliminary register of missing persons. These platforms served as the main channel for immediate reporting of disappearances, creating digital spaces for documenting cases, sharing data, and facilitating interaction among citizens, volunteers, and governmental institutions. Each reported case contributed to the formation of a networked structure, operating as a primary register capable of encompassing a wide spectrum of individuals regardless of their official

status, which proves that “social media in relation to the search for missing persons is understudied”<sup>3</sup>.

Other platforms, including TikTok and Instagram, were utilized to a limited extent, as their audience was predominantly younger, and the platform formats and algorithms did not favor the mass exchange of critical information. In contrast, Facebook provided extensive reach and convenience in disseminating textual reports and photographs, allowing for a prompt response to new cases of missing persons. The emergence of dedicated channels in messaging applications, particularly Telegram, created additional nodes for collecting and disseminating information, where users could post details about disappearances, geographic coordinates, and identifying characteristics.

Posts on Facebook served as quasi-digital archives, preserving data on missing persons while allowing users to verify and refine information. The structure of these networks facilitated the synchronization of efforts among families, volunteers, and civic organizations, creating a collective search effort that integrated diverse social strata and user groups. These platforms functioned as an interactive space, ensuring accessibility and transparency of information during the complex early stages of the conflict.

Given the lack of operational state resources and the limited functionality of official structures, social media maintained the continuity of search processes by recording changes in the status of missing persons and clarifying circumstances. They formed dynamic digital registers, where each message held practical significance for organizing searches and monitoring information. This systematization of data during the first weeks of the war laid the foundation for the subsequent identification of individuals and demonstrated the role of social platforms in facilitating a rapid response to a humanitarian crisis.

## **Mariupol as an Example of Mass Public Search for Missing Persons**

Mariupol emerged as a central point for public search activities in the initial weeks of the war, as the city’s blockade resulted in a significant number of civilian casualties and disappearances. Families published information about entire households, photographs, and circumstances of disappearance on open Facebook groups, generating extensive digital archives that served both search and documentation functions. Examination of these platforms demonstrates

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<sup>3</sup> S. Ciobotaru, *Exploring the effectiveness of social media appeals in the search for missing persons* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Portsmouth), 2022, p. 50.

how society mobilized to collect information and support one another, while digital networks ensured the preservation of critical records during a humanitarian crisis.

Among the primary Facebook groups dedicated to searches in Mariupol, the *Поиск родных и близких Мариуполь 2022* (ENG: Search for Relatives and Loved Ones Mariupol 2022)<sup>4</sup> group currently counts approximately 130,000 participants. In the early months, the group exhibited extremely high posting activity, with hundreds of messages appearing daily about missing individuals and entire families. Each post included photographs, contact details, and brief biographical notes, creating a comprehensive digital record of events and facilitating collective search efforts. Other communities, including *Поиск близких Мариуполь* (ENG: Search for Loved Ones Mariupol) and the blogger *Mariupol Destruction and Victims*,<sup>5</sup> remain active today, supporting ongoing search campaigns.

The dynamics of posts in these groups reveal clear trends. Posting intensity peaked during the first weeks of the war, reflecting an urgent need for public information dissemination. The constant flow of messages facilitated verification and clarification through comments, allowing participants to update data in real time. Despite the passage of more than four years, these communities continue to function, with posts about missing persons still appearing, highlighting the enduring relevance of digital public platforms for search operations.

Telegram channels played a complementary role by providing centralized coordination and access to a broad audience. One of the most active channels currently has 37,500 subscribers and shares reports about missing individuals in Russian-occupied territories and areas of active combat. The channel combines operational information with documentation, allowing families, volunteers, and the public to obtain updated data on missing persons and coordinate search activities across multiple regions.

Analysis of this data highlights several trends: the collective mobilization of society during the crisis; the prolonged functionality of digital platforms even years after the start of the war; the expansion of content from civilian to military cases; and the integration of multiple platforms to maximize coverage and speed of response.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/findmariupol/?ref=share> (date of access: 07.01.2026).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1AU3LAFhKg/> (date of access: 07.01.2026).

Table 1. Key platforms and their characteristics

Platform/Group	Audience/ Subscribers	Main Activity	Content Type	Current Activity
Facebook <i>Поиск родных и близких Мариуполь 2022</i> (Search for Relatives and Loved Ones Mariupol 2022)	~130,000	Searching, documentation	Photos, biographical data, family groups	Active; some posts continue today
Facebook <i>Поиск близких Мариуполь</i> (Search for Loved Ones Mariupol)	<50,000	Searching	Photos, family-related messages	Active; partially restructured
Blogger <i>Mariupol Destruction and Victims</i>	~15,000	Documentation, searching	Photos, witness accounts, commentary	Active
Telegram channel <i>Пошук зниклих</i> (Search for Missing Persons)	37,500	Operational information	Reports of missing persons, combat zones	Active; daily updates

Mariupol demonstrates how digital social networks and messaging platforms can create an effective communication infrastructure in crisis conditions. Facebook provides broad public visibility, while Telegram coordinates efforts among volunteers and the public, enabling rapid responses to new cases of disappearance and sustained collective searches over time. These platforms contribute to documenting events and preserving collective memory under wartime conditions.

### Documentary and Identification Functions of Social Media

Social media perform a significant documentary function in the context of war, as user-generated content frequently acquires the status of digital evidence and enables the reconstruction of factual chronology. Information published in open-access spaces records circumstances of disappearances, locations of individuals, and consequences of hostilities, forming material that may later be used for official verification, analytical purposes, or identification procedures. This function renders social platforms critically important during periods when conventional mechanisms of data collection and processing remain limited or delayed.

The situation in Bucha following the liberation of the city may serve as an illustrative example, where the publication of photographs from sites of mass killings enabled relatives to establish the identities of the deceased. The images documented both the circumstances of the crimes and the physical

condition of the bodies, providing opportunities to compare visible details with descriptions of missing persons and physical characteristics remembered by family members. The dissemination of these materials through social media informed the public about the scale of atrocities while simultaneously serving as a means of indirect identification in conditions where formal state procedures were temporarily inaccessible or required extended time frames.

Particular attention should be given to the case in which a daughter identified her mother based on distinctive details of a manicure visible on a photographed hand.<sup>6</sup> This case demonstrates that social media can function as an indirect identification resource, providing families with credible information regarding the fate of relatives even in situations where physical access or conventional identification remains impossible. Instances of this nature emphasize the relevance of digital platforms for moral and legal support during periods of extreme crisis.

Social media platforms further contribute to the accumulation and systematization of materials into digital archives that preserve the chronology of events and the circumstances surrounding death or disappearance. These archives facilitate the monitoring of status changes for missing persons, allow for comparisons of collected data with other sources, and help establish an evidentiary foundation for further analysis. This accumulation of information supports immediate assistance to families while also enabling scholarly and legal examination of wartime events.

In conclusion, social media – in wartime contexts – fulfills a dual function involving the documentation of facts and the support of identification processes related to missing or deceased individuals. They ensure access to critical information, reduce temporal gaps between events and their documentation, and establish conditions for collective oversight and data verification. These functions demonstrate the capacity of digital platforms to operate as enduring instruments of documentation and identification under conditions of armed conflict.

## **Social Media as a Long-Term Archive of the War**

“Social media networks have played a significant role in supporting the Ukrainian population, allowing citizens to share firsthand accounts of the conflict and fostering a sense of community and solidarity.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [https://zaxid.net/zhinka\\_z\\_chervonim\\_manikyrom\\_n1540534](https://zaxid.net/zhinka_z_chervonim_manikyrom_n1540534) (date of access: 07.01.2026).

<sup>7</sup> J. Ye, N. Jindal, F. Pierri, L. Luceri, *Online networks of support in distressed environments: Solidarity and mobilization during the Russian invasion of Ukraine*, arXiv, 2023, <https://arxiv>.

Posts created at the onset of the full-scale invasion in 2022 continue to perform a critical informational function several years after their publication. They preserve data about missing individuals, the circumstances of their disappearance, and search outcomes, enabling researchers, state institutions, and families to reconstruct the chronology of events. These materials provide a foundation for analyzing disappearance patterns, identifying local crisis zones, and evaluating the effectiveness of societal and organizational responses.

Social media serves a confirmatory function concerning the circumstances surrounding deaths, as many posts include photographs, video recordings, eyewitness accounts, and other details that document the effects of hostilities. In situations of limited access to official sources, digital platforms act as reliable tools for event documentation. Information shared on Facebook, Telegram, and other channels enables accurate event reconstruction, comparison of testimonies, and identification of individual cases that may not be recorded in official registers.

This data constitutes material for evidentiary purposes, utilized in legal proceedings, including the investigation of war crimes and the accountability of persons involved in criminal actions. Archives generated by social media users make it possible to trace chains of events, establish the time and location of specific incidents, and corroborate information about victims. Combined with official sources, they form an integrated evidence system accessible to both national and international institutions.

Social media also fulfills a memorial function. Publications by families, volunteers, and civic activists preserve the memory of missing and deceased persons, reconstructing individual narratives, emotional contexts, and social connections. The collective memory formed on these platforms contributes to public awareness of the scale of the tragedy and maintains moral links between families, witnesses, and the wider audience.

Content posted on these platforms represents a long-term resource for scientific studies, sociological research, and humanitarian analysis. It allows for the reconstruction of civilian displacement processes, examination of societal responses to crises, and evaluation of communication strategies during emergencies. This analytical value transforms social media into an instrument for the comprehensive investigation of wartime phenomena.

The decentralized nature of archives created by users ensures resilience to censorship and information blockages. Posts distributed across multiple platforms and groups form an extensive network that preserves data even if

individual channels or pages are lost. This highlights the importance of public participation in creating a reliable archive that reflects real events and circumstances of the war with detailed accuracy.

Ultimately, social media emerges as a long-term information repository, performing documentary, identification, and memorial functions simultaneously. They provide access to critical data, support legal and social processes, and contribute to the formation of collective memory regarding the war. The sustained relevance of these materials demonstrates that digital platforms can operate as enduring archives, independent of official structures and procedures.

### **Risks of Public Searches for Military Personnel on Social Media: Operational Security Perspective**

During wartime, public searches for missing persons on social media, especially regarding military personnel, carry not only informational and ethical risks, but also direct threats to operational security. Relatives of missing soldiers, facing psychological strain and uncertainty, often launch large-scale information campaigns on social platforms, sharing photographs, personal data, and details surrounding the disappearance. However, these actions can lead to unintended consequences.

Military practice shows that, in certain situations, personnel may conduct combat or reconnaissance tasks without identifying insignia, using civilian clothing or operational cover stories. In such cases, capture by an adversary does not automatically confirm combatant status. Publicly sharing information on social media that identifies specific individuals as military personnel can compromise operational cover, providing adversaries with additional confirmation of the detainees' military affiliation.

Real-world examples indicate that the widespread circulation of search posts explicitly labeling individuals as military personnel has deprived captured soldiers of opportunities to evade captivity or improve their conditions. As a result, social media, initially intended as a tool for assistance, can elevate the risk to the life and safety of missing personnel.

In this context, media literacy among relatives and the public, as well as an understanding of the limits of permissible disclosure during wartime, becomes crucial. Searches conducted via social media require coordination with official authorities, adherence to guidelines for protecting sensitive information, and awareness that excessive visibility may pose risks equal to or greater than the dangers of informational silence.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of social media in search operations during wartime depends not on the volume of posts or audience reach, but on the prudence of communication decisions and the balance between public interest and the imperatives of operational security.

## **Conclusions**

The analysis of social media in the context of searching for missing persons during the full-scale war reveals that digital platforms serve multiple functions, integrating operational, documentary, and memorial dimensions. They provide access to current information about missing individuals, facilitate coordination among families, volunteers, and civic organizations, and contribute to the formation of collective memory regarding tragic events. During the initial weeks of the conflict, social media operated as a flexible tool, compensating for limited access to official registers and enabling rapid responses to changes in the status of missing persons.

Engagement with social media in search activities necessitates awareness of potential risks, particularly concerning military personnel. Publicly disseminating information about missing individuals through open channels can compromise operational security, endanger the lives and health of service members, and impact mission outcomes. Case studies indicate that excessive visibility of information without coordination with official institutions can lead to unintended consequences, highlighting the importance of media literacy and responsible conduct during public searches in crisis situations.

Social media also generates long-term digital archives that preserve the chronology of disappearances, confirm circumstances of death, and create an evidentiary basis for legal and memorial processes. These archives arise from collective citizen activity and demonstrate the significance of decentralized resources during crises. Ultimately, social platforms function as a comprehensive tool that combines operational coordination, documentation, and memory preservation, underscoring their role in humanitarian, legal, and scholarly efforts under wartime conditions.

## **Contribution**

This study provides the first systematic analysis of the role of social media in the search for missing persons within the context of a full-scale armed conflict, integrating operational, documentary, and memorial dimensions into the scholarly discourse. Previous research has primarily focused on general mechanisms of communication, information security, and humanitarian

aspects of warfare, whereas a comprehensive examination of social platforms as instruments for locating missing individuals and creating digital archives has been largely absent. The article demonstrates that social media performs a dual function: facilitating rapid information exchange under critical conditions and generating a long-term evidentiary record relevant for legal procedures, identification, and collective memory, thus revealing the potential of digital platforms as tools for humanitarian and social analysis.

Furthermore, the study highlights specific risks and limitations associated with public search campaigns, particularly concerning military personnel, emphasizing the importance of media literacy and coordination with official institutions. The examination of the cases of Mariupol and Bucha combines empirical observation with theoretical reflection, illustrating the interactions among citizens, volunteers, and state authorities in crisis situations. The findings establish a foundation for future research in digital humanitarianism, social technologies during wartime, and the role of media in constructing collective memory and evidentiary frameworks for war crimes.

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