

# Women in Ukraine: How are they using media since the full scale invasion?



**This research briefing<sup>a</sup> explores the media and communication habits of women across Ukraine, against the backdrop of the full-scale invasion by Russia that started in 2022. It outlines how women use media platforms, the media content they engage with, and their experiences of mis- and disinformation.**

Over the course of this war, the media landscape in Ukraine has changed dramatically. Digital has taken over from TV as the preferred media platform, and messenger services such as Telegram have proliferated and become hugely popular ways to access information quickly.<sup>1</sup> Telegram has been used by official media sources which is highly valuable to Ukrainians. At the same time, unofficial Telegram channels also enjoy great popularity among Ukrainians because they can publish information faster than official media, as they are not subject to the same journalistic standards and can share unverified information. There are also Russian Telegram channels that pretend to be Ukrainian but actually spread disinformation and fake news.<sup>2</sup> Alongside this, there has been a huge drop in media advertising revenues and many media outlets have shut down or suspended their activities. In occupied areas, Ukrainian media outlets have had to shut down owing to the destruction of media and communications infrastructure and the intimidation of Ukrainian journalists.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>a</sup> This briefing is part of a series of three, see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/briefings/europe/ukraine/gender-perceptions/>

At the same time, the war has sparked huge population movements, forcing many Ukrainians – particularly women and children – to flee internally or into neighbouring countries. Inside Ukraine, women are experiencing a range of impacts from the war depending on their age, location and internally displaced person (IDP) status. Many are taking up new roles and responsibilities, including sole responsibility for themselves and their families.

Even before the invasion, evidence shows that the media sphere in Ukraine was dominated by men talking to men about men. In 2020 The Institute of Mass Information and Detector Media conducted a one-month review of gender representation in Ukrainian media and found that women featured in only 28% of materials, a third as much as men. This reflects global evidence that women tend to be under-represented in media content. According to the 2020 Global Media Monitoring Project, women make up only 25% of the people heard from, read about or seen in newspaper, TV and radio news. In addition, women working in journalism and the media in Ukraine have found themselves torn between risking their lives to stay and do their jobs, or take their families and flee.

Research shows that women suffer from lack of information in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.<sup>4</sup> The challenges in women’s representation in the media in Ukraine mean that women are less likely to access news and information that reflects their particular needs and realities. To ensure that they develop content for women which is engaging, relevant and inclusive, media outlets must have a comprehensive understanding of how diverse groups of women across Ukraine use media platforms, engage with media content and experience mis- and disinformation.

Oleksandra Matviychuk, head of the board of the Centre of Civil Liberties, is seen on screen while a woman monitors the live broadcast as she speaks to journalists at a press conference in Kyiv



ED RAM/GETTY IMAGES

# Methodology

This briefing is based on the findings of multi-method BBC Media Action research conducted in Ukraine in late 2022 and early 2023. The Ukrainian research agency InfoSapiens carried out most of the quantitative and qualitative research.

Table 1: Research methods, aims and samples

Method	Sample	Purpose
<b>Quantitative telephone survey</b>	<p>A nationally representative survey of just over 1500 women living in Ukraine in territories controlled by the Ukrainian government.</p> <p>A similar survey was conducted with 500 men, though this smaller sample means the findings are not as representative.</p>	To measure key impacts and actions taken because of the war, as well as media consumption habits, content preferences and attitudes towards misinformation and gender equality.
<b>Quantitative online survey</b>	A survey of over 200 women living in non-government controlled areas (NGCAs).	To measure the same questions as above, but using a different method to reach women in NGCAs as most Ukrainian mobile phone operators in Russian occupied areas have been cut off.
<b>Online focus group discussions (FGDs)</b>	<p>8 FGDs with women:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 with internally displaced persons (IDPs)</li> <li>• 4 with non-IDPs</li> </ul> <p>4 FGDs with men:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 with IDPs</li> <li>• 2 with non-IDPs</li> </ul>	<p>To examine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How the impacts of war were being experienced on a day-to-day basis</li> <li>• Perceptions of media and communication, especially to gain a deeper understanding of how women and men felt about the changing role of women during the conflict, and how gender roles and attitudes may be changing.</li> </ul> <p>Visual stimuli showing women taking up different roles in the war were used to stimulate part of these discussions to unearth more ingrained attitudes around gender roles.</p>
<b>Online and face-to-face, in-depth interviews (IDIs)</b>	<p>9 IDIs with female respondents from relatively vulnerable groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 with women with disabilities</li> <li>• 3 with women from Roma communities</li> <li>• 3 with women who live near the conflict front lines or in NGCAs</li> </ul>	To examine the same issues as the FGDs to gain a more individual narrative experience of how women have been affected by the war.
<b>Key informant interviews (KIIs)</b>	8 KIIs with women leaders working in the humanitarian, civic and media sectors.	To generate a broader perspective from experts on the impacts of the war on women, and what these changes might mean for gender equality in the future.

## Key findings

### The media platforms women in Ukraine use

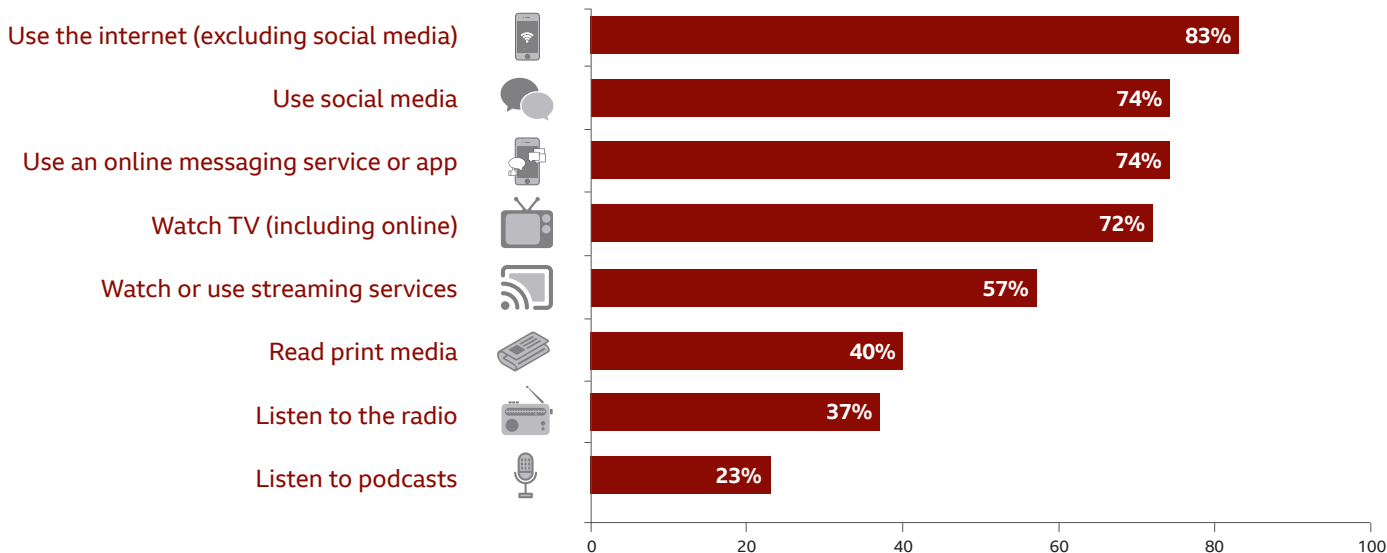
#### ■ Online media is the most effective way to reach women in Ukraine

Since the full scale invasion, getting important information quickly has been a priority for people affected by the war. As such, online media – internet, social media and messenger apps – have become the most popular media platforms among men and women in Ukraine, overtaking TV as the main media platform.<sup>5</sup> The war has also seen huge levels of displacement meaning that as men and women have moved around the country (or left it completely) their reliance on traditional media such as TV and radio declined, as they could not take these items with them. BBC Media Action’s nationally representative survey of women in Ukraine echoed this finding. Women’s most accessed types of media are the internet (cited by 83% of survey respondents), social media (cited by 74%) and online messaging (74%). These findings were reflected in the survey of men too – 86% were using internet, 68% were using online messaging and 64% social media.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>b</sup> Data from the men’s quantitative survey is indicative only – it should not be directly compared with the women’s sample, which was larger and more nationally representative.

But this trend differs by demographic. Women aged over 55 and women living in rural areas were significantly more likely to say they relied on traditional media platforms such as TV and radio. For example, 79% of women aged over 55 reported watching TV, compared with 62% of women aged 18–34. And 79% of women in rural areas said they watched TV, compared with 68% of women in towns and cities.

Figure 1: Media use by women in Ukraine



Q. How frequently do you do the following, if at all. At least monthly or more frequently?

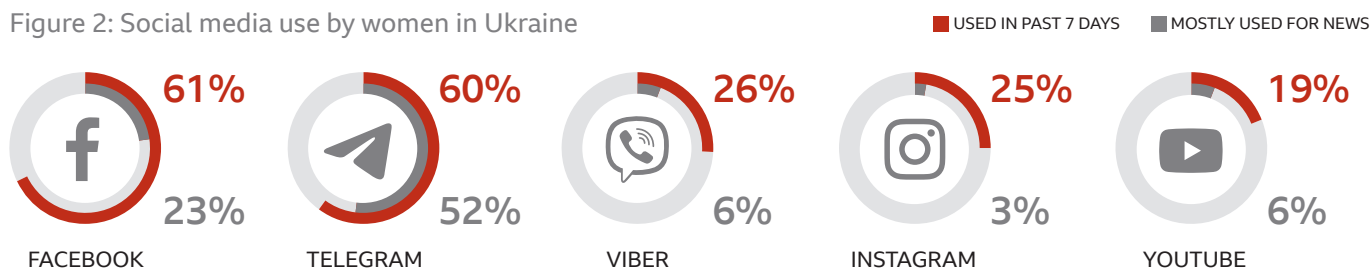
Base: all respondents – nationally representative telephone survey of women (n = 1535)

### ■ Telegram is popular for providing concise and local information

Among women who used social media, Facebook and Telegram were used at almost equal levels but they relied on Telegram much more than Facebook for news (52% of social media users used Telegram for news, versus 23% who used Facebook for news). Women aged 18–34 were significantly more likely to report having recently used Telegram for news (68%) than women aged 35–54 (53%) or 55+ (32%).

In the qualitative research, women mentioned Telegram as their key online source for news and information. They felt it was useful because it provides news in a concise way and because they can also get information from very local Telegram groups. Women said they used TikTok and Instagram more for entertainment than for news and information. Women also talked about having consumed social media content made by people who are actively fighting or living near the war’s frontlines. Telegram has enjoyed huge increases in use in Ukraine since the beginning of the war,<sup>6</sup> with key figures including the president broadcasting on their own Telegram channel. However, there have been concerns that with so many channels and little policing of its content, Telegram has also become a key space for misinformation.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 2: Social media use by women in Ukraine



Q. What social media platforms have you used in the last seven days for communication or to get information? And which social media platform do you mostly get your news from?

Base: all social media users – nationally representative telephone survey of women (n = 1136)

## Media content that women in Ukraine engage with

### ■ Positive news engaged women but many were overwhelmed by the flow of online content

In terms of top content preferences, Ukrainian women mostly consumed news and current affairs, followed by entertainment content. More than three-quarters (76%) of women survey respondents said they had consumed news and current affairs in the previous week, and more than half (56%) had consumed entertainment content in that period. This trend was also seen in the men's data – the top content they consumed was news (74%), followed by entertainment content (44%) – though at a lower rate than women.

In the qualitative research, women said that they had started engaging in news and current affairs much more since the start of the war. They were interested in updates on how the war was affecting their local areas (or, for IDPs, where they used to live), information on electricity blackouts, progress at the frontline, and the support Ukraine was getting from other countries. They also discussed how they liked good news about the progress of the war. The only information gap they reported feeling was information about Ukrainian military losses, but they understood why that information was not shared.

**“ Because there are many eyewitnesses there now, a lot of information, and there one can find night and morning news...[in reference to online news and information]. ”**

*Woman in-depth interview participant aged 39, living in a NGCA*

However, consuming lots of news and information about the war sometimes had a negative impact for some women. Young women talked about how endless scrolling through social media meant that they experienced an overload of sad stories. Research participants also gave examples of media content or stories that caused anger, such as women who collaborated with the Russians or men who fled mobilisation, that had been amplified on social media.

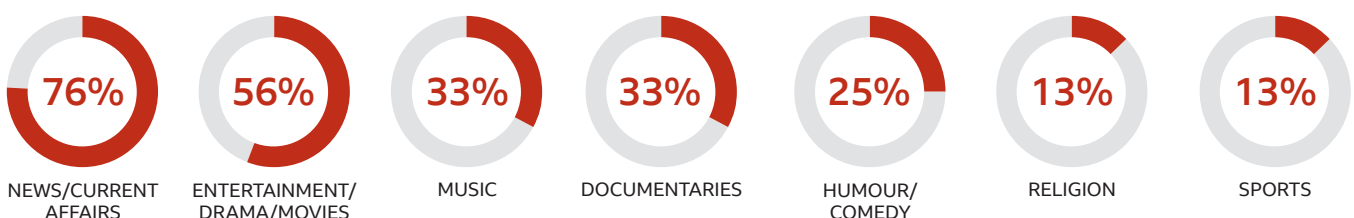
**“ Sad news from any part of Ukraine – not just the South, but the East because I have a lot of friends there... Eventually, I unfollowed most Telegram channels and left just the ones I go to every day. When the war started, you could scroll through all day long. ”**

*IDP woman focus group participant, aged 25–41*

Women mentioned using several types of media content to entertain themselves or help them switch off, including:

- Drama series, movies, entertainment or comedy shows, such as The Bachelor, MasterChef, Liga Smikhu (The League of Laughter), Kvartal 95, and stand-up comedy shows
- Short comedy videos about the armed forces, children or animals on TikTok, and/or Instagram
- Videos on topics they found interesting for them, such as nature, beauty, science, history, travel or culinary blogs, and Ukrainian music

Figure 3: Media content consumed by women in Ukraine



Q. Thinking about the last week, have you watched, listened or consumed any of the following types of content?

Base: all respondents – nationally representative telephone survey of women (n = 1535)

## Women’s information needs and trusted information sources

In the survey, 29% of women said they did not know what practical information they needed and 26% felt they had enough information. This echoes recent research by NDI that found 74% of Ukrainians did not feel they were missing any information about war and recent events.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, 80% of women respondents to the BBC Media Action survey felt that the news in Ukraine is relevant and supports them to make decisions. While this indicates that women in Ukraine have access to a huge amount of information, women participants in the qualitative research talked about how this was overwhelming. Indeed, the main barrier to information women talked about was not having good enough internet access (74% of survey respondents stated this). This was echoed in the qualitative research, where women reported that their main barrier to accessing information were electricity and power outages.

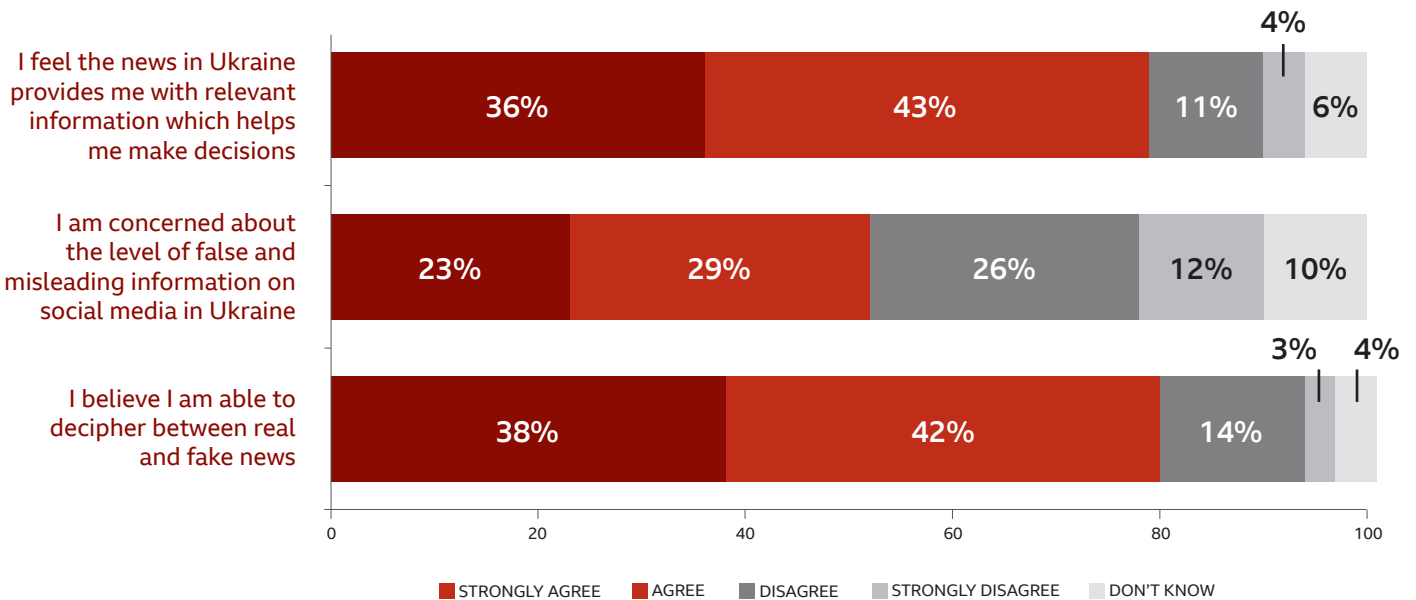
However, women did cite examples of information that they currently lacked. For example, female IDPs wanted practical, survival knowledge such as what to pack in an emergency, how to avoid missiles and hide safely, and how to cope with the war’s impacts on their mental and physical health. Women also talked about wanting practical information such as how to deal with blackouts, how to handle generators – they appreciated information presented as ‘life hacks’ to deal with such everyday issues. Some women had an appetite for content

**“ All this information exists. It’s just that many scroll through it or switch to different channels. But this is a matter of your awareness as a citizen. ”**

*IDP woman, focus group participant, age group 18–24*

featuring inspirational news or stories that shows the resilience of others, such as people helping each other or injured veterans returning from the front and carrying on normal life. Young women stated that any media content would need to be high quality and specific to cut through ‘mindless scrolling’ of social media content on mobile phones.

Figure 4: Attitudes to media among women in Ukraine



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

Base: all respondents – nationally representative telephone survey of women (n = 1535)

Though disinformation has been rife during the war in Ukraine, especially on social media,<sup>9</sup> just over half (52%) of women are concerned about this. Younger women were slightly more concerned about this than their older peers, possibly linked to their higher use of social media. Perhaps this muted level of concern about the prevalence of fake news online is related to the fact that women expressed high levels of confidence in their ability to decipher between real and fake news – 80% believed they could do so. In the qualitative research, women reported having stopped consuming Russian media content as they did not trust it.

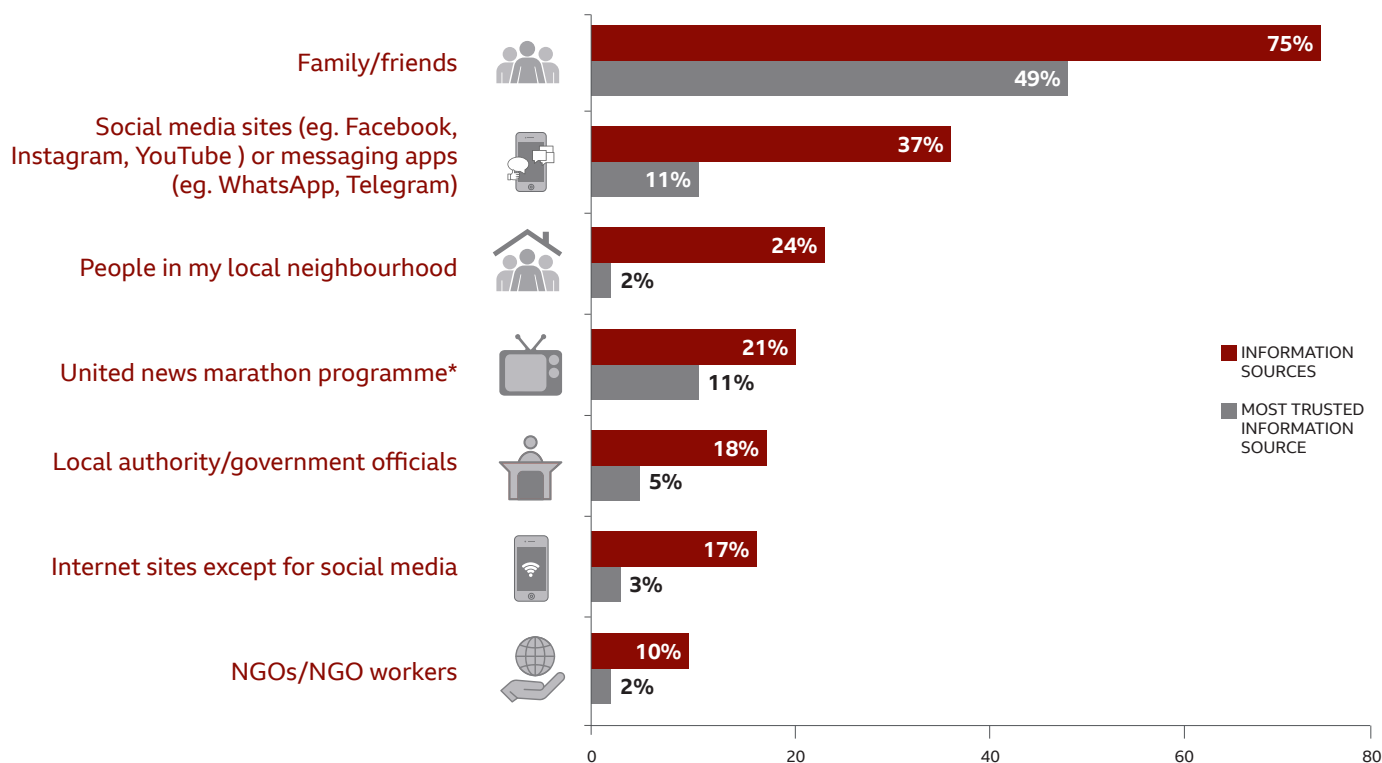
**“ I trust television. The only thing is that there is not complete information, and you have to read it also somewhere else. ”**

*Non-IDP woman focus group participant*

Across all sources of news and current affairs information, Telegram was the most trusted by women in Ukraine (28% named it as their most trusted source of news and information). In the qualitative research, women also stated they could trust information from key officials such as the president, the military and security experts. Women mentioned cross-referencing sources as a way to verify information.

In contrast, women said their main sources for practical information to help them make decisions were friends and family (cited by 75% of survey respondents), who were also their most trusted source on this issue. This was particularly marked among older women. Social media played a more important role in providing practical information to younger women. Women aged 18–34 were significantly more likely to get practical information from social media (54% stated they did this, compared with 23% of women aged 55+).

Figure 5: Practical information sources for women in Ukraine



\* The United News marathon is run by leading commercial channels, the public broadcaster Suspilne and the state TV channel Rada. It is Ukraine’s pooled national TV news service covering the war against Russia.

Q. Where or who do you usually go to for practical information you need to help you make decisions at the moment?

Base: all respondents – nationally representative telephone survey of women (n = 1535)

## Women living in NGCAs

### ■ Challenges getting online

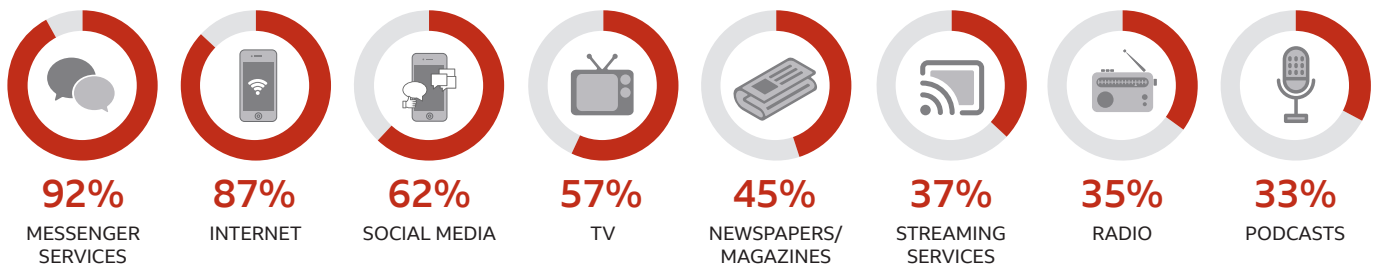
Areas of Ukraine occupied by Russian forces (NGCAs) have limited access to information from the rest of Ukraine as the occupiers cut off internet access and mobile networks. Thousands of Ukrainian telecommunications providers' base stations, fibre-optic lines and broadcasting antennas have been destroyed. And in some areas of southern Ukraine, Russia has rerouted internet traffic through its own providers, subjecting such connections to Russian surveillance and censorship.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, it is estimated that the number of internet users across Ukraine has shrunk by 16%.<sup>11</sup> In occupied areas, people can still access Ukrainian media outlets if they have a satellite dish and can access Ukrainian internet via virtual private networks (VPNs). In early 2023, Russia introduced a free package of satellite channels for people living in occupied areas, which critics say has been an attempt to create a "digital ghetto".<sup>12</sup>

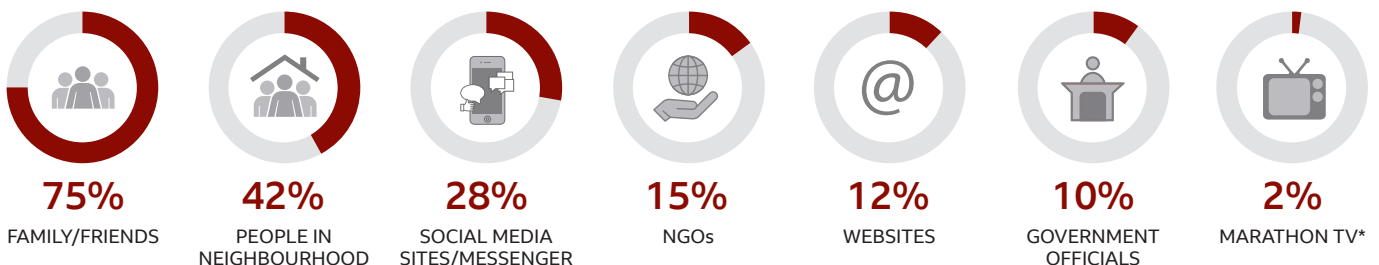
In the qualitative research women from NGCAs talked about some of the challenges accessing the internet and mobile phone connections. They listened to radio or used VPNs to access the internet but still had safety concerns about using phones and posting content on social media that was supportive of Ukraine, for fear of Russian reprisals. For example, one research participant said that mobile signals and Viber were bugged by the Russians in her area. She felt she had to delete some of her groups and chats, and stop posting on Facebook, for safety reasons. She said at the initial stage of the war, many local people were cheering for Ukraine's victory or military progress on social media. As a result, Russian troops took these people – primarily men – to their interrogation sites and beat them.

Figure 6: Information sources for women living in NGCAs

### MEDIA USE



### PRACTICAL INFORMATION SOURCES



\* The United News marathon is run by leading commercial channels, the public broadcaster Suspilne and the state TV channel Rada. It is Ukraine's pooled national TV news service covering the war against Russia.

## ■ Media access and use

The vast majority of women in NGCAs spoke Russian as their first language (81%), compared with just 15% of women in the nationally representative sample of women in the rest of Ukraine. Nearly one-third (32%) of women in NGCAs were IDPs, versus 14% in the rest of Ukraine.

Women living in NGCAs also had different media consumption habits than those elsewhere in

Ukraine. Firstly, entertainment content was their main form of recent media content (58% of women in NGCAs had consumed this in the previous week). News and current affairs came second (cited by 46%, compared with 76% in the rest of Ukraine).<sup>c</sup>



Members of the production team record “Yes, I am a woman” films

COURTESY OF SUSPILNE

The main broadcasters female TV viewers in NGCAs reported accessing were the online Ukrainian TV channels 5 channel, Espresso and Pryamiy – as most Ukrainian channels are not available to audiences living in the occupied territories. But the top TV channels these women accessed were Russian ones – 60% of female TV viewers in NGCAs watched Russian broadcasters and 38% of them relied on Russian channels for news. For news and current affairs, Telegram was also the top source of news for women social media users in NGCAs, though at a lesser level than elsewhere in Ukraine (44% of social media users versus 52% in the main survey). Telegram was also the most trusted news source for women social media users – 30% of whom trusted it the most.

Women in occupied areas of Ukraine relied on people around them for practical information, 75% said they rely on family and friends for this, and 42% said they rely on people in their local neighbourhood. In contrast, just 24% of women in the rest of Ukraine relied on people in their local neighbourhood. This indicates how important news and information from the local community is to women living in NGCAs.

As they struggled to access news and information, women living in NGCAs said they tried to access both Ukrainian and Russian news to compare them. These women also talked about challenges in accessing trustworthy content – they felt it was difficult to completely trust news and information from media sources on either side of the conflict. Women in NGCAs were much more concerned about fake news than their peers in the rest of Ukraine but less confident in their ability to identify it – the opposite pattern to women elsewhere in the country. In NGCAs, 80% of women were concerned about the level of false and misleading information compared with 52% of women in the rest of Ukraine. However, women in occupied areas were much less likely to say they felt able to distinguish between real and fake news (61% compared with 80% in unoccupied regions). Furthermore, one in five women in NGCAs answered ‘don’t know’ when asked about their confidence to distinguish between real and fake news.

**“ That’s why I am only surfing now but there is nothing to see because no one posts anything. People are scared. I just communicate with people about everyday things.... We are in an absolute information vacuum. ”**

*Woman, in-depth interview participant, aged 50, living in a NGCA*

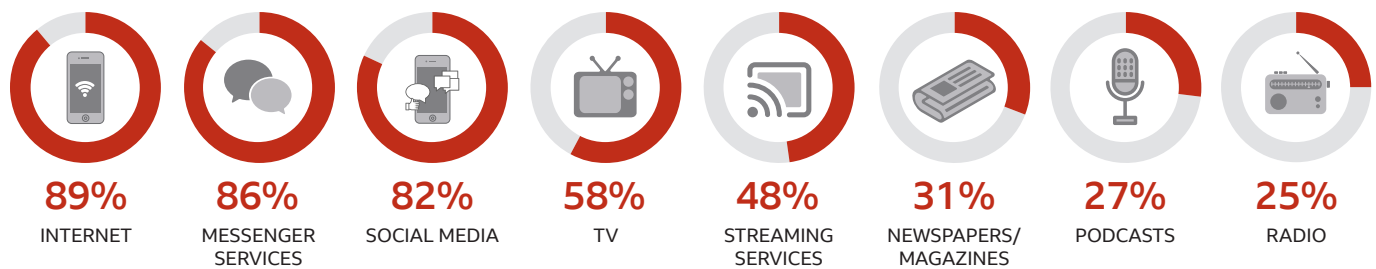
<sup>c</sup> Note that the sample of women living in NGCAs was collected via online surveys (rather than telephone surveys) and did not aim to generate a representative sample (compared with the nationally representative sample in the rest of Ukraine). As a result, direct comparisons should be treated with caution.

## Women who are IDPs

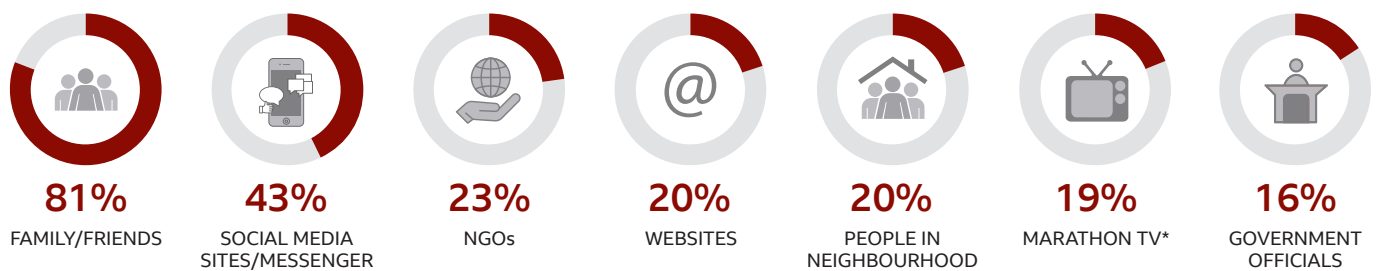
Women who are IDPs<sup>d</sup> made up 14% of the nationally representative sample. This group was mostly young (38% were aged 18–34) or middle-age (35% were aged 35–54). Compared with the nationally representative sample as a whole, women IDPs were more likely to have children aged under 18 (43% versus 31% in the overall sample) and were slightly more likely to speak Russian as their first language (23% compared with 15% overall).

Figure 7: Information sources for women who are IDPs

### MEDIA USE



### PRACTICAL INFORMATION SOURCES



\* The United News marathon is run by leading commercial channels, the public broadcaster Suspilne and the state TV channel Rada. It is Ukraine's pooled national TV news service covering the war against Russia.

Women who are IDPs are a transient population as they have moved across Ukraine and settled into new communities. In terms of media use, women IDPs were significantly more likely to report that they relied on social media, the internet and online messaging apps than those who have not been displaced. In focus group discussions, women IDPs talked about how they used social media to find out what was happening where they used to live. Telegram is particularly popular among this group – 65% said they used Telegram for news and current affairs compared with 49% of non-IDP women. For practical information, 81% of women IDPs reported being relying on family and friends. Interestingly, displaced women also reported a higher than average reliance on social media and messenger apps (43% versus the average of 37% across the whole sample).

**“ I now like Kharkiv Life [Telegram channel] because the information is reliable and very fast. And the summary for a day is short but understandable. ”**

*Woman IDP focus group participant*

<sup>d</sup> Women who have moved, as a result of the war, to a different oblast (province) or a different place in the same oblast since the war began.

## Recommendations for media and communication initiatives

The findings of this study show that women (and men) in Ukraine rely heavily on social and online media for news and information about the war that affects their lives. However, TV and radio remain key media platforms for groups such as older women and those in rural areas.

Women across Ukraine feel they have a lot of accessible information about the war or any other topic they need, but this can be overwhelming and risks obscuring information that could be most useful to them.

The data has shown that women who are in NGCAs have a very different information environment, with much more limited access to information. This group is also concerned about, but lacks the confidence to identify, fake news – indicating they are at risk of mis- and disinformation.

The following recommendations, based on the findings of BBC Media Action research, aim to help media and communication practitioners address the media and communication needs of women in Ukraine.

- **There is scope for news and information that provide practical information to help women cope with the impacts of the war.** This information should be tailored to women's specific needs, and not replicate the already plentiful general news about the war. Practical and inspirational Lifeline-style<sup>e</sup> programming that uses key elements of effective media campaigns (such as branding, creating a linked series of content and using engaging/humorous elements) to cut through the noise of social media would be helpful.
- **Women said they felt overwhelmed by sad content about the war and wanted to see inspirational content featuring people being resilient in the face of challenges.** Media outlets and content producers should be careful about how stories, content and programmes portray women – avoiding stereotyping in which women are portrayed as passive victims and sufferers. Content that reflects women's courage, leadership, resilience and their role in peacebuilding and recovery is needed. Content which meets women's demand for entertainment content is also very important for attracting and retaining a female audience.
- **Partnerships with independent media outlets or humanitarian organisations designed to serve women living in occupied areas (NGCAs) need to create high-quality news and informative content in Russian that can be disseminated online or via social media in order to reach women in these areas.**
- **Telegram is a key source of news and information for women across Ukraine but there are concerns that its top channels and their content do not reflect professional journalistic standards and in fact feature misinformation.** Media partnerships between professional media outlets or bodies who can work with the most popular Telegram channels or creators could help to ensure that the platforms that reach the most women in Ukraine provide them with the best quality, balanced news and information.
- **Though women across Ukraine are concerned about fake news and misleading information (albeit to varying degrees), more research is needed to understand the granular impact of how women are being affected by the wider environment of information disorder.** Research on how women experience mis- and disinformation, the impact it has on their lives, and their concern about how it may affect them in the future is key to understanding this in detail. This could help the wider Ukrainian media to assess how to rebuild a viable media sector that can challenge and counteract information disorder, especially in occupied or previously occupied areas.

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<sup>e</sup> Lifeline programming is special media programming for people who are affected by humanitarian crises. It aims to give them a voice and provide timely, relevant and practical information to help alleviate their suffering and assist with their recovery.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Internews (2022) Ukrainians Consume More News, Are More Resilient to Disinformation, and Trust Their Media More During Russia’s War in 2022 [Online] Available at: [https://internews.org/ukrainians-consume-more-news-are-more-resilient-to-disinformation-and-trust-their-media-more-during-russias-war-in-2022/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=ukrainians-consume-more-news-are-more-resilient-to-disinformation-and-trust-their-media-more-during-russias-war-in-2022](https://internews.org/ukrainians-consume-more-news-are-more-resilient-to-disinformation-and-trust-their-media-more-during-russias-war-in-2022/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=ukrainians-consume-more-news-are-more-resilient-to-disinformation-and-trust-their-media-more-during-russias-war-in-2022)
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- <sup>4</sup> Perez C.P. (2019) Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men. Chatto & Windus, London 2019.
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- <sup>7</sup> NPR (2022) Telegram is the app of choice in the war in Ukraine despite experts’ privacy concerns [Online] Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/14/1086483703/telegram-ukraine-war-russia>
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**Cover image:** Women try to communicate on a mobile phone outside a destroyed building waiting for humanitarian aid to arrive in Iziun. (Paula Bronstein /Getty Images)

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