

# Cancel Culture as a Discursive Event: on the Use of CDA in Social Media Research

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## Abstract

The article reveals the methodological possibilities of critical discourse analysis for studying communication phenomena and processes unfolding in social media. Using Fairclough's CDA, supplemented by Martin and White's Appraisal Theory, the phenomenon of cancel culture as a discursive event accompanied by a high level of digital activism was investigated. In particular, the interconnectedness of the factors "text – discursive practices – social practices" was observed in the specific case of Cancel Culture – "Farion-hate". The multivariate evaluation model demonstrated social pressure in the discursive field of social media, a gradual increase in the Disclaim index, which is an indicator of cancelling, and the development of the "zero-sum game" effect. It has been proved that social media is a communication and discourse structure that causes social change.

## Keywords

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), Martin and White's evaluation model, Cancel Culture, social media, discourse, comments

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays the vast majority of social and communication practices take place in the Internet space, in particular in social media. Social change is driven by semiosis, in which ordinary users of social media are actively involved. Their role in legitimising the decisions of governmental institutions is realised through the polyphony of online discourse, where each statement interacts with others, is agreed or disagreed with, and through cumulative effects ensures the influence of public opinion.

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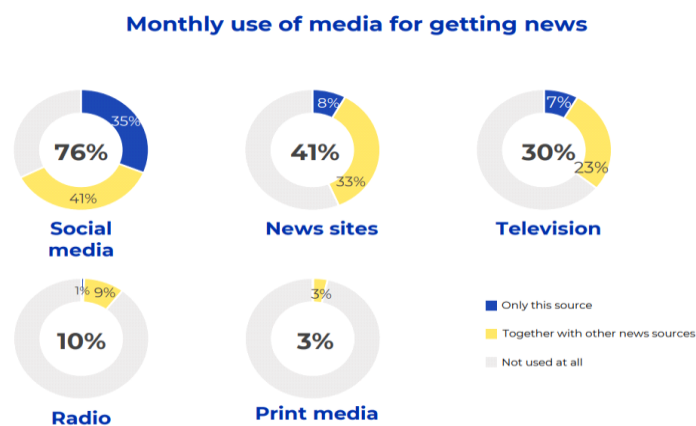
The polyphony of the network not only testifies to the varied visions, but also provides situational solidarity among users. According to T. Bartlett and G. O’Grady, the expression of attitudes is not solely a matter of the speaker commenting on the world but is actually an interpersonal matter, as the primary reason for expressing an opinion is to evoke a response of solidarity from the listener [1].

Niall Ferguson, the author of “The Square and the Tower”, believes that no person is an island. In networks, each individual can be assessed in terms of centrality based on the degree (number of connections) and intermediacy (potential to become a link between communication nodes) [2]. The higher the indicators a user has as a participant in a particular communication event, the greater influence his/her statements exert on the situational community, and the higher the effectiveness of the action he/she had caused in the society.

As we noted in our previous study, social media form an ecosystem with a high potential to influence public opinion [3]. The discursive nature of this influence is evident, because, on the one hand, discourses create online communities, and on the other hand, online communities produce discourses that unfold in social practices.

According to N. Fairclough, a text as a product tends to absorb the characteristics of the social environment in which it was created. As the social context changes over time, the discourse follows the same change. Discourse, according to N. Abdul-Razzk and H. Khalil, also affects how ideas are put into practice and used to organise the behaviour of others [4].

Ordinary users play an active role in discursive processes, as they have the potential to express opinions and assessments thanks to technology. According to Xiaoyi Bi, social networks form “a communicative structure where users can change existing agreements through a variety of communication means” [5]. The online presence of people is constantly growing. According to a recent InMind research, in 2023, 76% of surveyed Ukrainians sought information from social networks (Figure 1).

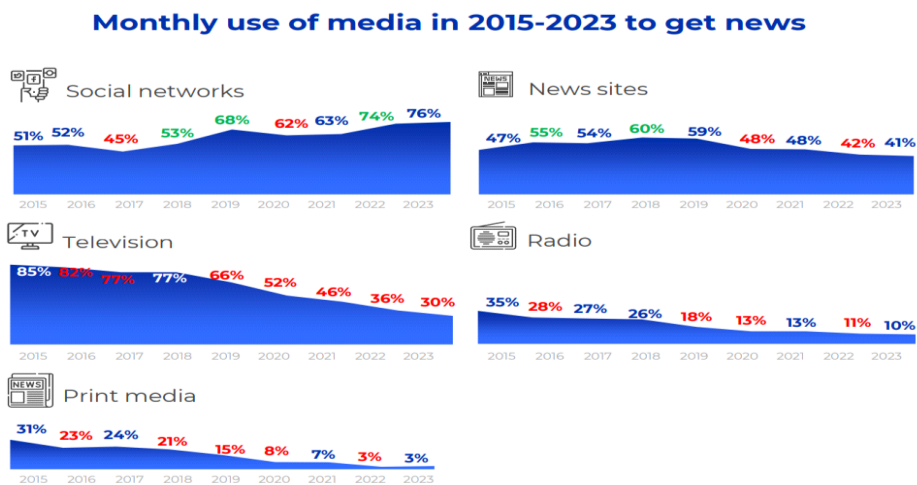


**Figure 1:** Monthly use of media for getting news [6]

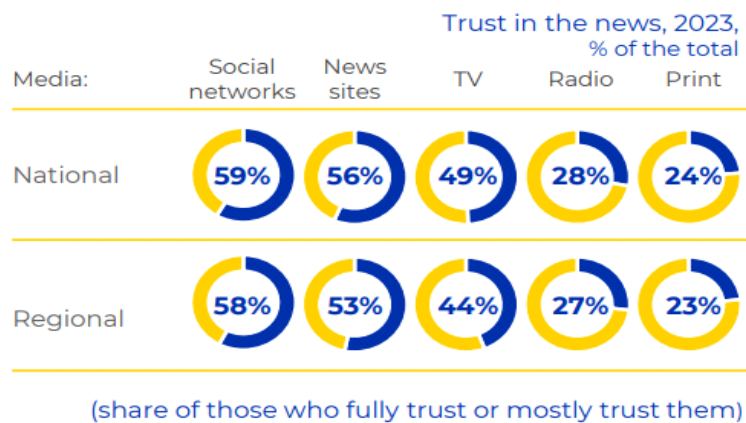
The dynamics of changes in the structure of media consumption in favour of online information products is positive (Figure 2).

The factor of trust in online content also determines its influence, as it allows communicators to create messages that are perceived by users as a “guide to action”.

According to the InMind-2023 study, the level of trust Ukrainians have in social media news content is higher compared to other media, including traditional ones (Figure 3).



**Figure 2:** Monthly use of media in 2015-2023 to get news [7]



**Figure 3:** Trust in the news in 2023 [8]

Discursive practices in the online environment are directly related to digital activism. According to Meredith D. Clark, “Social media allows hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of ordinary people to use online collectivity and a sense of immediacy to demand certain powerful figures to be reportable” [9]. The most expressive manifestation of such collective condemnation is Cancel Culture, in which online activists, according to P. Norris, “use social pressure to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (of individuals or entities) accused of offensive words or actions” [10]. Cancel Culture is implemented on social media and is a way to quickly condemn and punish others without taking into account the full picture of what is happening [11].

## 2. Related works

Cancel Culture is empirically investigated using CDA. The methodological basis is the theories that focus on the states of interpersonal tension within society through the identification and analysis of antagonistic discourses. This includes, in particular, relational dialectics [12], which highlights the process of growing a social crisis as a “confrontation of competing voices” that culminates in a “zero-sum game” [12].

The communicative feature of Cancel Culture in the context of the dialectical approach is the impossibility of consensus between opponents: the discursive orientation of their behaviour and the “erasure strategy” used by them are aimed at the complete nullification of the Other. This is a pragmatic approach of Pilar G. Blitvich, who proposes to consider cancelling by applying a three-layered discursive analysis at the micro-, meso- and macrolevels. The researcher especially focuses on meso-level communication units related to discursive interaction within groups and communities [13].

The starting point in this case is N. Fairclough’s CDA, which offers a different three-dimensional analysis through:

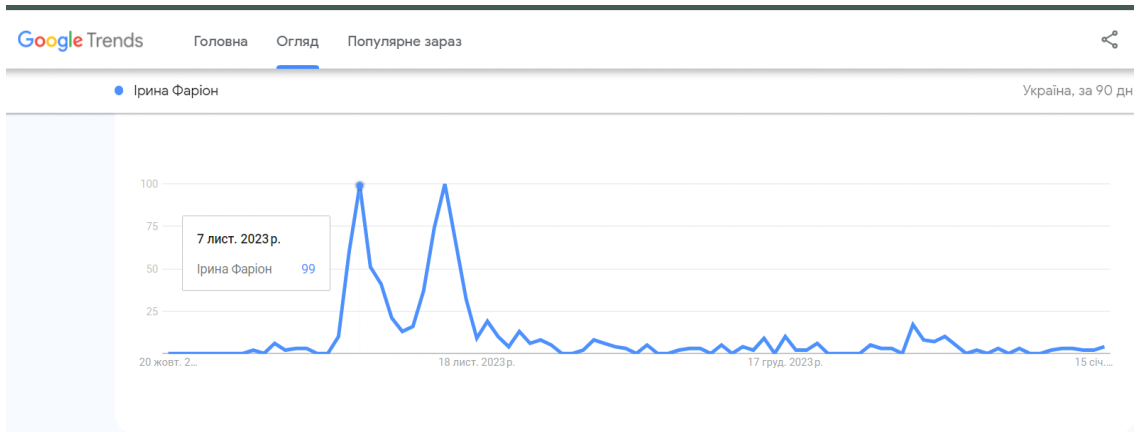
- A discourse that denotes semiosis as an element of social life
- Discourse representing certain linguistic practices
- discourse that reflects non-verbal semiotic modes of action

All three elements of discourse meaning are interconnected and internalise each other. This approach allows us to reproduce the transition from linguistic discursive practices to extra-linguistic modes in social semiosis.

Social media discussions that lead to cancelling are investigated through multimodal critical discourse analysis (CDA) by G. Bouvier and D. Machin [14]. Simon Statham suggests studying discursive events in social media with the help of CDA [15]. The relationship between discursive and social structures based on the empirical material of comments in social networks is studied by T. Khraban [16].

## 3. Methods and materials

As empirical material for CDA of Cancel Culture, we used the Ukrainian linguist Iryna Farion’s discursive field of cancelling, which led to her dismissal from the university. The quantitative characteristics of cancelling as a collective condemnation are evidenced by Google Trends data. The first discourse wave related to the airing of the programme “Rendezvous with Yanina Sokolova” started on November 5, 2023 (=10 for the search term “Iryna Farion”) and peaked on November 7, 2023 (=99). It was in this programme that Iryna Farion made public discriminatory remarks regarding Russian-speaking Ukrainian military personnel. The second discursive wave was launched on November 14, 2023 (=74) in connection with a student rally for the dismissal of linguist Iryna Farion from Lviv Polytechnic National University and reached its peak on November 15, 2023 (=100) (Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Dynamics of interest in the search term “Iryna Farion”, the time period October 20, 2023 – January 20, 2024 [17].

In order to study “Farion-hate” as a networked communication phenomenon, we used the method of critical discourse analysis, supplemented by the methodological guidelines of Martin and White’s Appraisal Theory. The heuristic value of CDA in modern communication studies has been proven by many scholars who point to the growing role of the method in connection with new forms of communication [18],[19],[20]. We associate its methodological potential with the following characteristics.

The purpose of CDA is to explicate discourses that support certain public initiatives, challenge the status quo, and influence social relations. Such goal-setting is important for the phenomenon of Cancel Culture, which is essentially a revisionist practice of digital activism.

N. Fairclough’s CDA shows how discourse becomes a powerful tool for social change. It involves a triangulation of factors: texts, discursive practices, and social practices. The analysis of social practices that accumulate the norms and standards of society contextualises the texts under study. The Fairclough’s model is useful when the task is to identify what the sender of the message aimed to convey to the recipients and what behavioural response he expects in return.

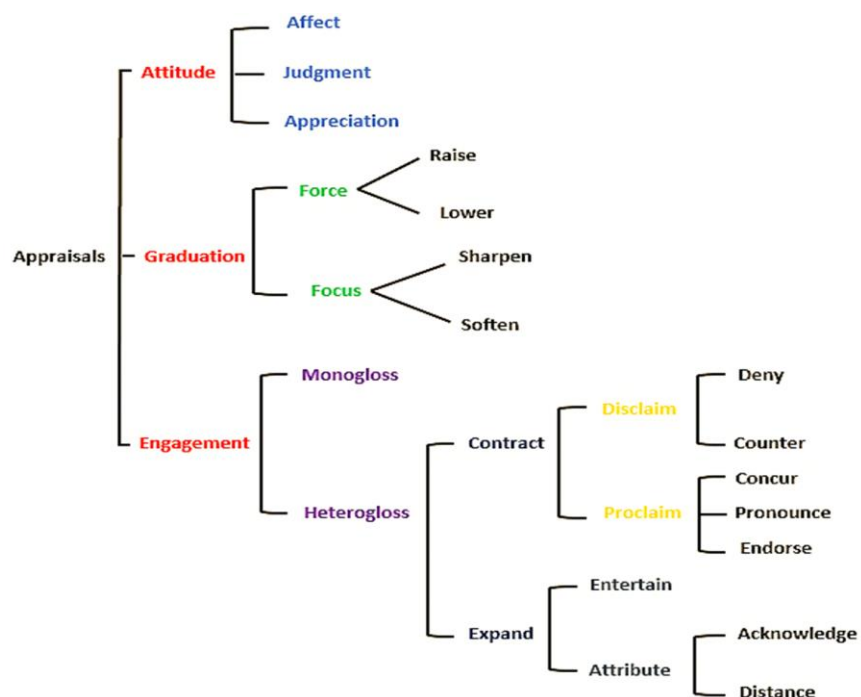
Due to its polyphony the “text + comments” format inspires a special way of reading discourse by network users. Usually, the recipient has the opportunity not only to read the content of the main post, but also to compare different points of view presented in the comment pool. The recipient enters into a field of discursive tension between different voices of judgement. The communication structure created by the comments guides other users’ perceptions of the object of cancelling.

The constructivist orientation of CDA allows us to trace the simultaneous construction and reproduction of social reality in the process of social interaction. Martin and White’s Appraisal Theory, which we use to complement the CDA methodological approach, is an extended version of M. Halliday’s functional linguistics, focused on how users share meanings in different social contexts [21].

It appeals to “a tradition in which all statements are perceived as a certain position or attitude” [22] and Bakhtin/Voloshinov’s notions of dialogism and heteroglossia, according to which any communication means influence and is oriented towards the responses of real/imaginary recipients. Appraisal Theory allows for identifying “the existence of

authors/speakers in texts, as they demonstrate an attitude towards both the material they provide and those with whom they communicate” [23].

The evaluation model proposed by J.R. Martin and P.R.R. White is based on three components – Attitude, Engagement, Graduation – and provides a multi-level analysis of the discourse. The model allows us to trace how communicators gather the public around their values in the polyphonic space of the network, by actualizing the topical statements. The taxonomy reflects a set of resources for influencing recipients at each level. The model is modular, which allows analysing its individual branches in accordance with the research objectives. Martin and White’s taxonomy is actively used in studies of evaluative discourses in the online commentary space [24], which makes it possible to use this methodological tool to study discursive practices of cancelling as a predominantly networked phenomenon (Figure 5).



**Figure 5:** J.R. Martin and P.R.R. White’s evaluation model [22]

We focus on those components of the model that characterise the attitude towards the object of cancelling. We assume that “all categorical statements are intersubjective, and therefore as attitudinal as statements containing more explicit markers of point of view or attitude” [22]. The combination of Fairclough’s CDA with the Martin and White’s evaluation model allows us to substantiate the cause-and-effect relationships in the specific phenomenon of cancelling by demonstrating the interdependence of discursive and social practices.

We proceed from the situation of polyphony typical for network communication and observe the polarisation of users’ opinions in the context of discursive tension in the infospace.

**Attitude** identifies the evaluative and emotional reactions of users through the relevant markers. In particular, *affect* generalises emotional responses to the object of online attention;

*judgement* includes behavioural evaluations; *appreciation* indicates admiration, respect and recognition of the object of judgement. The communication situation of cancelling is characterised by a high degree of negative modality discourse.

**Engagement** reflects the resources of dialogistic positioning of online discourses. J.R. Martin and P.R.R. White include in this category “meanings which in various ways construe for the text a heteroglossic backdrop of prior utterances, alternative viewpoints and anticipated responses”. *Monogloss/geterogloss* categories are fundamentally important for CDA of cancelling as they allow us to assess the level of opposition/solidarity of commentators in the network.

In the monogloss subsystem, we also pay attention to the *disclaim/proclaim* categories, which are important for CDA of cancelling. Disclaim includes textual voices that position themselves as a *denial/countering* of the object of the main judgement. Proclaim has three subcategories: *concur* (alignment), *pronounce* (emphasis of authorial intervention) and *endorsement* (sourcing warrantable external sources). Proclaim characterises the object of judgement as fully justified, generally accepted, and reliable.

J.R. Martin and P.R.R. White associate the category of **Graduation** with “the mechanisms by which speakers/writers graduate either the strength of an utterance or the focus of the categorisation through which semantic meanings are identified” [22]. In our study, we focus on the *Force* subsystem. It is associated with the category of intertextuality, which is very important for CDA and characterises the level of resonance of a message. The wider the range of objects correlated in the comments with the topic of the main statement, the higher the level of discursiveness, directive nature and influence of the communication event.

In order to understand the course of the discursive event of Cancel Culture, the concept of echo chamber is also important [25]. It denotes the epistemic environment where social media users are confronted with views they share. The canceling wave is formed by mechanisms of self-reinforcement, propelling a group of like-minded individuals towards increasingly extreme positions [26].

## 4. Experiment

We put forward the hypothesis that a high level of discursiveness of a media topic causes social changes and prove it by applying CDA to communication objects in the extended format “discourse of the main message + discourse of comments”. Through the analysis, we show that the impact of social media on society is exerted through discursive practices.

In order to trace the discursive struggle aimed at achieving the “zero-sum game” effect typical of Cancel Culture, we used empirical data from social media and facts that testify to the extra-linguistic circumstances of cancel culture. The communication situation of cancelling, which became known as Farion-hate, was analysed: a linguist and politician known for her radical statements on the language issue made offensive remarks about the soldiers of the Azov regiment who do not speak Ukrainian. Iryna Farion voiced her opinions on November 4, 2023 in the programme “Rendezvous with Yanina Sokolova” on Channel 5. The linguist’s statements caused a wave of moral outrage in society. We associate the first stage of cancelling with the resonance of the programme, represented directly by the array of comments under the scandalous video. The second stage showed the expansion of the online reaction, which was reflected in dozens of posts by influencers during November 5-14, 2023.

These were statements that harassed Iryna Farion and called for her “cancelling” (from being fired from her job to the physical destruction). On November 14, 2023, a student rally took place in Lviv (the third metadiscursive stage of cancelling). On November 15, 2023 Iryna Farion was dismissed from her position as a professor of the Ukrainian language department at Lviv Polytechnic National University. Two discursive waves of public outcry correspond to the three stages of cancelling, as evidenced by Google Trends.

Through discursive practices, we have studied how public opinion was mobilised in social media and how the demand for appropriate action was articulated to decision-makers.

## 5. Result and Discussion

Using the Martin and White’s evaluation model we have analysed the array of comments under the original video “Rendezvous with Yanina Sokolova” posted on YouTube by Channel 5. Out of 7102 comments, we identified those directly related to the object of cancelling – Iryna Farion (116 comments were about the programme host and contained sharp criticism of her journalistic tactics in communication) and narrowed down the dataset to the first 520 comments to capture the initial reaction to the canceling trigger (Table 1).

**Table 1**

Analysis of the attitude to I. Farion as an object of cancelling in the comments to the Channel 5 programme “Rendezvous with Yanina Sokolova”

Attitudinal analysis	Values		Occurrences	Percentage
	+	-		
Affect	145	338	483	93%
Judgment	10	15	25	5%
Appreciation	12	-	12	2%
Total	167	353	520	100%

Based on the data presented in Table 1, the analysis shows that affects dominate the array of comments, divided into positive (30%) and negative (70%) ones. The negative comments represent manifestations of public shame and social alienation, inherent in the canceling discourse practices (Table 2). The use of demeaning and offensive language demonstrates the commentators’ attitude towards the object of ostracism. The discourse of the comments demonstrates polyphony in almost every expression: 95% of the comments form branches where the majority neutralizes the minority discursively. Defenders of I. Farion’s position are condemned. Through the polarization of the online space according to the Us/Them formula, group thinking is activated, where for every “pro” voice, there are several “against” voices situationally. The dominance of the affective component over judgment is characteristic of the initial stage of canceling wave unfolding.

**Table 2**

Manifestations of attitude in comments

Types of Attitudes	Extract from the text
Affect /	“She probably needs to be put in a tank to fight, not to divide Ukrainian



negative	society”
Social alienation	“Law is “pro” insulting soldiers! This is a crime, not just piggishness. Farion should be behind bars”.
Affect / negative	“Mrs Farion behaves like a mole-rat”
Public disgrace	“Victory will come when such a smart mop picks up real arms and shows her patriotism not by wagging her tongue, but on the battlefield!”
Affect / positive	“Iryna Farion is like Zaluzhnyi on the language front”
Judgment	“Iryna Farion always energizes for the fight!”
	“I hope Mrs. Farion will apologize to the Azov soldiers. The Ukrainian language should be the only state language, and no one disputes that, but shameful statements against the best soldiers of our country are simply unacceptable. To demean the honor and dignity of the military is the lowest act possible!”
	“An example of how to desecrate meanings with rude behavior”
	“There are artists who take tools and spend a long time carving something out of wood. Eventually, some sort of artwork emerges, a result of their effort. Farion takes an axe and quickly turns everything into splinters.”
Appreciation	“Thank you, Ms. Irina, right to the heart as always.”
	“I highly respect Irina Farion. I agree with every word she says!”

The quantitative analysis based on the Engagement category, which reflects the discursive potential of interaction among commentators, indicates a very low level of intersubjectivity in the comments: heteroglossia in the analyzed expressions amounts to 12%, while monoglossia is correspondingly at 88%. Heteroglossic comments are accompanied by modal verbs, or indicate the commenter’s willingness to accept the fact of other voices (“I cannot agree with some of the theses”, “I can understand you”, “I agree”). On the other hand, monoglossic comments are characterised by categorical and unequivocal language (Table 3). In the monoglossic subsystem, the Disclaim indicator is prominent (70%). It reflects the subject’s rejection of the main statement: “Farion behind bars”; “This is not a teacher! What swear words come out of her mouth. Zero culture! This person has no right to teach children”; “I don’t want to hear or see her at all. We have tolerated her for too long”. In contrast, the Proclaim indicator records acknowledgment and agreement (Table 3).

**Table 3**

Manifestations of engagement in comments

Types of engagement	Extract from text
Heterogloss	“I can understand you. After all, Iryna Dmytrivna is a scientist. Let’s grow towards the sun of knowledge by listening to smart people.”
	“I’m glad that in our country there is someone who argues all this with historical facts.”
Monogloss	“Send Mrs. Iryna to the trenches for a week. She’ll lose her tongue on the first day!”

“Farion is a mad creature who is sowing discord among the  
Ukrainian people during this bloody war!”

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In the comment threads with a pronounced Disclaim indicator, we observe the processes of radicalisation of the expressed position, which is a typical discursive manifestation of echo chamber.

We narrow down the Graduation category to the Force subsystem, which, in turn, is associated with the characteristic of intertextuality of the discursive field of comments. As we noted in our previous study, “appeal to arguments, facts and characters outside the chronotope of the basic message implies the expansion of the contextual framework of the communication event” [3], and thus ensure its resonance and influence on public opinion. In the array of comments, we find appeals to broader topics of history, education, and culture. In Iryna Farion’s reception, we find biographical references to Taras Shevchenko, Mykola Hohol, Lesia Ukrainka, Stepan Bandera, and Lina Kostenko. The reception intertextuality, which shows the multidimensionality of the topic raised in the primary post, reaches 62%.

The second stage of cancelling is characterised by quantitative dynamics: a series of critical posts appear on social media, the modality of expressions intensifies, the position of those who interact with like-minded people in the online space is strengthened, and echo chamber mechanisms work.

Key communicators of the Ukrainian network space reacted to Iryna Farion’s negative statements: an Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets (a post dated November 7, 2023 in the Telegram channel accusing I. Farion of discriminatory language behaviour and calling on the relevant authorities to verify the information and respond appropriately); a Deputy Commander of the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade Maksym Zhorin (a post dated November 6, 2023 in the Telegram channel calling on law enforcement agencies to react to I. Farion’s activities); a defender of “Azovstal” Kateryna Polishchuk/Ptashka (a post dated November 6, 2023 in Instagram positioning I. Farion as an enemy of Ukraine); a journalist Vakhtang Kipiani (post dated November 7, 2023 on Facebook accusing I. Farion of harassment and discrimination against Russian speakers); a boxer Oleksandr Usyk (a poem of November 7, 2023 on YouTube channel accusing I. Farion of a hostile attitude towards Ukrainians and Ukraine).

The resonance of the statements of these communicators far exceeds the average resonance of their posts. For example, with an average coverage of 61,363 subscribers on the Telegram channel “Zhorin Tretia Sturmova” (Third Assault Brigade), according to TgStat [27], the coverage of the post-reaction to the Farion-hate reached 241,700 subscribers. With an average of 474 comments per post, Zhorin’s post reactions triggered 5,244 comments.

Applying Martin and White’s evaluation model, we have identified the discursive features of the first 500 comments. In the category of Attitude, we observe a significant predominance of statements corresponding to the Affect system (98%) with very low expression of Judgment (2%) and no expression of Appreciation (0%). 99% of emotional exclamations are negatively connotated and contain signs of cyberbullying towards Irina Farion: “old hag”, “nit”, “fool”, “city madwoman”, and so on. The categorical nature of the comments is also evidenced by the very low level of heteroglossia (3%). Only a few statements indicate the willingness of commentators to consider the presence of other voices (“If Farion expressed herself adequately, I would fully share her opinion”). At the same time, the Monogloss indicator has a high level of expression of Disclaim (80%), which directly indicates the process of canceling

the individual: “Farion – behind bars”, “Throw her out!”, “Isn’t there anyone in Lviv who can put her in her place?!”, “She’s already signed her own death warrant”, and so on (Table 4).

**Table 4**

Analysis of the attitude to I. Farion as an object of cancelling in the comments to Maksym Zhorin’s post dated November 6, 2023 in the Telegram channel “Zhorin Tretia Sturmova” (Third Assault Brigade)

Attitudinal analysis	Values		Occurrences	Percentage
	+	-		
Affect	5	485	490	98%
Judgment	-	10	10	2%
Appreciation	-	-	-	0%
Total	5	495	500	100%

The Force subsystem of the Graduation category shows a high level of interactivity – 75%: commentators predominantly appeal to historical and cultural facts to support their position. At the third stage of cancelling, a metadiscursive event occurs, namely a student protest rally for the dismissal of Iryna Farion from her position as a university professor. The protest action takes place within the discursive framework of cancelling, prepared by the previous discursive waves: participants use slogans such as “Get Farion out of the Polytechnic”, “Get the communist Farion out”, “Shame on Farion”, and so on.

## 6. Conclusions

CDA illustrated the fact that social media is a communicative structure that causes social change. Network activism has a discursive nature, as it influences decision-making institutions through statements that gather solidarity recipients. Fairclough’s CDA, supplemented by Martin and White’s Appraisal Theory, allowed us to observe the interconnectedness in the triad of factors “text – discursive practices – social practices” in the specific case of Cancel Culture – “Farion-hate”. The multidimensional evaluation model showed social pressure in the discursive field of social media through the high level of the Affect indicator with the simultaneous low expression of Judgement and Appreciation.

The discursive wave of cancelling, supported by the echo chamber mechanism, was accompanied by a low level of heteroglossia in comments, indicating commentators’ refusal to perceive other voices, the categoricity and the unappealable nature of their position. We observed an increase in the Disclaim score, which is an indicator of cancelling in online discourse. Its high level of intertextuality showed that the discourse unfolding around a certain topic is capable of absorbing characteristics of the social environment in which it was created.

CDA of cancelling revealed the nature of its dynamics: as the discourse transitioned from the first to the second stage, it became increasingly radicalised, preparing the ground for the “zero-sum game” effect. The case study showed how the “moral emotions synergies” (P.G. Blitvich) express group orientation and will.

CDA of comments also showed how the polyphony of the network is reduced to the confrontation of friend / foe in conditions of social tension. The communication structure of

cancelling polarizes users, radicalizes their assessments and perceptions, and controls the reception of the cancelling object. The analysis confirmed Halliday's point that every statement implies a certain position; it demonstrated that the instructional nature of cancelling depends on the high level of solidarity among social media users.

Critical discourse analysis, methodologically complemented by Martin and White's taxonomy, has a significant heuristic potential for studying networked communication phenomena that unfold in social practices.

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