

SECTION: MILITARY AFFAIR

DOI 10.70286/ISU-11.02.2026.021

TARGET AUDIENCE ANALYSIS: THE ROLE OF BARRIERS IN DETERMINING ACCESSIBILITY

Skarzhynets Andrii

Postgraduate student

Department of Information Warfare

National Defence University of Ukraine, Ukraine

Modern hybrid conflicts move confrontation into the realm of perception, trust, and behaviour. Information operations are no longer merely an adjunct to combat actions; they are a tool for shaping the conditions required to achieve military and political objectives. Planning information operations (hereinafter IO) in accordance with NATO standards is based on a behaviour-centred approach: what matters is not only facts and messages, but also the expected cognitive effect and the tracking of behavioural conditions of audience groups [1]. In AJP-10.1, IO is treated as a staff function comprising four interrelated components – analysis, planning, integration, and assessment [2] – where analysis is directly linked to observing audiences and refining the commander’s intent.

Under these conditions, target audience analysis (hereinafter TA) is decisive for selecting channels, tempo, and forms of influence, as well as for the timely adjustment of the commander’s intent based on assessment results. In practice, TA analysis is often dominated by demographic characteristics, nominal channel reach, and descriptions of the media landscape. However, the experience of the Russian-Ukrainian war shows that the mere existence of a channel is far from guaranteeing real reach of the required audience. For this reason, the study emphasizes the indicators of the TA accessibility model.

Target audience accessibility (hereinafter TAA), in an applied sense, describes how effectively a message can reach an audience and influence its thoughts, feelings, and behaviour; this concerns not only technical delivery, but also the social, cultural, and psychological conditions of perception [7]. Such an understanding of TAA makes it possible to interpret it as a comprehensive characteristic of the real reachability of an audience segment in a specific environment and at a specific time.

Within TA analysis, determining TAA is one of the key stages because it links the “portrait” of a TA segment with a practical plan of action: which channels to choose, with what intensity to act, which message formats to use, and how to assess results. NATO doctrinal approaches emphasize the need for audience segmentation and analysis in order to optimise influence and achieve behaviour-centred objectives, as well as the importance of an assessment cycle to adjust actions [3].

The review of scholarly works showed that analysts most often focus on the “positive” dimensions of TA accessibility:

- the availability and popularity of channels;
- reach and scaling potential;
- contact frequency and message repetition;
- the way the channel is used (for news or entertainment);
- engagement (active/passive consumption) and type of access (individual/group).

This focus is logical because it enables channels to be compared and supports initial media planning. However, in the real context of war and intense competition in the information environment, this is no longer sufficient.

The key methodological problem in practice is that an available channel does not guarantee real reach. Between the plan and actual contact with the audience, there is always “friction” – a set of constraining factors-barriers that reduce the probability of delivery, noticeability, perception, or the legitimate use of the chosen channel.

A barrier, in the context of determining TAA, is any factor of the environment, platform, legal regime, or social interaction that turns potential access into partial access or inaccessibility for a specific TA segment within the chosen channel [7]. In this definition, barriers are precisely a “minus for accessibility”: they do not describe the audience as such; they describe obstacles along the “message-channel-TA segment” pathway.

Studies [3-5, 7] outline typical barriers that are advisable to consider during TA analysis.

1. Infrastructure barriers. These are constraints related to communications, electricity supply, devices, and the physical availability of networks. For example, for Ukraine, the large-scale damage to digital infrastructure and energy infrastructure is relevant, directly affecting the accessibility of information channels in certain areas and periods.

2. Platform and algorithmic barriers. These are constraints related to platform rules, internal moderation, algorithmic ranking, blocking, and shadow restrictions (“shadowban”). In addition, within social media environments, reach and reaction indicators may be distorted due to inauthentic activity by bot farms, complicating the assessment of real TA accessibility.

3. Saturation barrier [7]. This barrier is associated with the oversaturation of a specific channel with messages (not to be confused with “audience fatigue” as a psychological state). Under high saturation, the visibility of an individual message decreases, the “lifespan” of content shortens, and narrative competition and noise increase. Prolonged saturation may also produce secondary effects in the form of selective avoidance of certain topics by audiences, which is recorded in Ukrainian studies of media consumption during the war [4, 6].

4. Legal and regulatory barriers. These are limits of permissibility, such as restrictions under martial law, regimes of access to personal data, and the policies of the platforms themselves. The legal barrier is fundamentally important because an “effective” channel may be unacceptable due to legal risks and legitimacy risks, which directly affects trust in the channel.

5. Sociocultural barriers. These are barriers related to language, symbols, local norms, trust in the source, and the level of TA media literacy. They are often decisive: a channel may be technically accessible, yet effectively closed due to distrust or a mismatch with the cultural code.

Thus, determining target audience accessibility is not an auxiliary but a foundational stage of TA analysis, directly affecting the quality of channel selection and the controllability of IO planning. The synthesis of NATO doctrinal approaches to working with audiences and analysing the information environment, together with the practical challenges of the Russian-Ukrainian war, indicates the need to move from the “potential availability of a channel” to the “operational accessibility of TA segments.” Accordingly, barriers must be an obligatory component in determining target audience accessibility. Accounting for them improves the accuracy of analysis, reduces the risk of erroneous channel selection, and lowers operational and legal risks in implementing the IO plan.

References

1. NATO Standardization Office (2023). Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications (AJP-10, Edition A Version 1) assets.publishing.service.gov.uk URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6525459d244f8e00138e7343/AJP_10_Strat_Comm_Change_1_web.pdf
2. NATO Standardization Office (2023). Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations (AJP-10.1, Edition A Version 1). assets.publishing.service.gov.uk URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/650c03bf52e73c000d9425bb/AJP_10_1_Info_Ops_UK_web.pdf
3. Bay, S., & Fredheim, R. (2022). Social media manipulation 2021/2022: Assessing the ability of social media companies to combat platform manipulation. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. Stratcomcoe.org URL: https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/download/Social-media-manipulation-2021_2022-F.pdf
4. Freedom House (2024). Ukraine: Freedom on the Net 2024. Key Developments, June 1, 2023 – May 31, 2024. Freedomhouse.org URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/freedom-net/2024>
5. Media Development Foundation (2025). Information Fatigue as a Window of Opportunities: A Chance for Regional Media During the War and Beyond. Mediadevelopmentfoundation.org URL: <https://www.mediadevelopmentfoundation.org/en/research/information-fatigue-as-a-window-of-opportunities-a-chance-for-regional-media-during-the-war-and-beyond/>
6. IREX (2024). Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE): Ukraine 2024. Irex.org URL: https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/VIBE_2024_Ukraine.pdf
7. Skarzhynets, A. V. (2024). Mathematical modeling of target audience accessibility in information and psychological operations. In *Moderní aspekty vědy: Svazek XLVIII. Díl mezinárodní kolektivní monografie* (pp. 72–77). Mezinárodní Ekonomický Institut s.r.o. Perspectives.pp.ua URL: <https://doi.org/10.52058/48-2024>