Ukraine's Media during Revolution, Annexation, War and Economic Crisis

https://www.e-ir.info/2016/04/20/ukraines-media-during-revolution-annexation-war-and-economic-crisis/

MARTA DYCZOK, APR 20 2016

This is an excerpt from *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Broadcasting through Information Wars with Hromadske Radio* by Marta Dyczok

Available now on Amazon (UK, USA, Ca, Ger, Fra), in all good book stores, and via a free PDF download. Find out more about E-IR's range of open access books here

Revolution, annexation, war, and economic crisis are not ideal conditions for independent media to operate in. But, that's the reality Ukraine found itself in after the Euromaidan protests of 2013-2014 – and society needed accurate information and objective analysis more than ever.

The years 2014-2016 were challenging for all Ukrainians, including journalists. When the difficult and deadly domestic protests ended, the country found itself on the receiving end of a hybrid war coming from Russia. Part of the Kremlin's strategy was weaponizing information and the term 'information war' gained entirely new dimensions. Journalists faced new threats. State censorship within Ukraine largely ended, but journalists faced new risks to their physical safety and lives. Initial unity and enthusiasm for change in the media sphere gradually got bogged down, and many began wondering had anything changed? One bright spot on the complex new landscape was Hromadske Radio (Public Radio Ukraine), which produced ever more quality programing.

On 22 February 2014 the Ukrainians, who had protested for months, felt they had won when corrupt president Victor Yanukovych fled the country. After standing through the cold and snow these people felt that they had gained a new chance to reform their country and continue on the road to membership of the European Union.

Victory had come at a high price. Protesters and journalists had been beaten. Over 100 were killed. Ukrainians buried their dead, selected an interim president and government, set a date for new elections and looked forward. Although not all Ukrainians supported the protests, the drama of those events caught the world's imagination. A film about them later received an Oscar nomination.[1] But, at the time, few could have anticipated that within days Ukraine would face a new, deadlier, threat that would cost thousands of lives and displace millions from their homes.

On 26 February 2014 heavily armed masked soldiers with no insignia on their uniforms began taking over government buildings in Crimea. They surrounded military bases and mass media outlets. It gradually became clear that these were Russian troops. The soldiers ousted Crimea's elected legislature, installed a new government, organized an event they called a 'referendum', and announced that over 95% of the population voted to join Russia. By 16 March 2016, Russia's annexation of Crimea was complete.

Around the same time, violence began in eastern regions of Ukraine that bordered Russia. Crowds stormed government buildings, took them over, and hoisted Russian flags. Who were in the crowds? According to eye-witnesses and later investigations, it was a combination of local Ukrainians, people brought in from elsewhere (presumably Russia) and Russian special operatives. One key figure was Igor Girkin, a Russian military and intelligence officer, who took the *nom du guerre* Igor Strelkov, and had participated in the Crimean events before

Ukraine's Media during Revolution, Annexation, War and Economic Crisis
Written by Marta Dyczok

moving to Donets'k.

Ukrainian security services were slow to respond, in part because many of them had been penetrated by Russian operatives and were not loyal to their own state. So, ordinary Ukrainians began organizing voluntary battalions and pushing back.[2] Things escalated. And within months a hybrid war had erupted in the Donets'k and Luhans'k regions. Parts of both provinces came under control of anti-Ukrainian forces who set up entities they called the Donets'k and Luhans'k People's Republics (DNR and LNR). The first Prime Minister of the DNR was a Muscovite called Alexandr Borodai.[3]

The phrase 'information war' started to proliferate when the struggle for accurate information became a key part of the larger conflict. Russian media and government sources launched a sophisticated operation sending out mixed messages, half-truths, and deliberate distortions aimed at clouding the picture of what was really going on. Initially they denied being in Crimea. Then, the story changed. Russia admitted to sending troops there, but to protect ethnic Russians from Ukrainian right wing fascists.

All pro-Ukrainians were labeled fascists – including the new President Poroshenko. While it was true that there had been extreme right wing elements in the Euromaidan protests, they were a small fringe and were not in the interim or later elected government. The narrative about eastern Ukraine presented in Russian media was that pro-Russian separatists were rising up against an illegitimate fascist government in Kyiv that had seized power through an illegal coup – and that they wanted to join Russia too. Even after the 25 May 2014 presidential election, Russia continued to call Ukraine's government illegitimate.

The Kremlin deliberately and skillfully chose terminology and imagery that drew on the Soviet era glorification the Red Army's defeat of the bloodthirsty fascists and demonization of the Ukrainian national movement led by Stepan Bandera. Labeling people fascists and banderites evoked powerful negative emotional responses among people who were lukewarm towards the Ukrainian government. The larger goal of the information war was to de-legitimize Ukrainian authorities, cause panic and instability, and present Russia as a desirable alternative.

Blatantly untrue stories, aimed at fostering anti-Ukrainian sentiment, became a regular feature in Russian media that was as easily available in Ukraine as US media is available in Canada. One such example was the 12 July 2014 interview with a supposed refugee from Slavians'k, where Ukrainian forces had pushed back the DNR forces. Russian TV channel ORT aired an interview with a woman who identified herself as Galina who said that she's witnessed a public execution and crucifixion of a 3-year-old boy by Ukrainian soldiers. Western and Ukrainian journalists soon exposed that the story had been entirely fabricated – but people who only consult Russian media may continue to believe the story to be true.[4]

How did Ukraine's media respond to these events? It would be fair to say the reaction was mixed, and changed over time.

When President Yanukovych disappeared, state pressures on media disappeared too. The immediate reaction was that more comprehensive, balanced and objective information began appearing in Ukraine's media space. Investigative journalism enjoyed a brief revival. Most major media outlets began asking questions about what had happened during the Euromaidan protests. Why had so many people been killed? Who did the shooting? Who gave the orders? Who is investigating? These became common questions in the public sphere.

When the Russian invasion began, all major Ukrainian television channels began programing aimed at national unity. A new logo appeared on all their screens that read, "A United Country," in both Ukrainian and Russian. They also all agreed not to air Russian-produced entertainment programming that glorified the Russian Army or their Special Forces, or even the Soviet Red Army. The privately owned Channel 1+1 created an English language station which they called *Ukraine Today*. Its aim was to provide information from within Ukraine to the outside world and was launched on 14 August 2014.

Before that, Hromadske Radio was on the front lines seeking out and reporting on events in English whenever they

Ukraine's Media during Revolution, Annexation, War and Economic Crisis
Written by Marta Dyczok

could. Reporter Andriy Kulykov travelled to Perevalnie in Crimea on 5 March 2015, from where he sent a dispatch he titled, "'Unknown Soldier' Acquires New Meaning in Crimea".[5] Two weeks later he was in Donets'k, reporting how masked men carrying submachine guns came to the Donbas TV station,[6] and later how a crowd in the city center was shouting "Rossia!"[7]

Violence and war changed life for all Ukrainians, but it changed for journalists in a specific way. Issues of journalistic standards, ethics, censorship, self-censorship, and propaganda moved beyond conferences and round table discussions. They became linked to matters of national security, and in many cases, personal security. The phrase 'information war' became so widely used because the struggle for accurate information became a key part of the larger conflict.

Heavily armed masked men perpetrating violence didn't want the world to see what they were doing. So they targeted journalists, kidnapped, tortured, and even killed them.[8] 2014 became the deadliest year for journalists in Ukraine's modern history. Seven were killed, 25 arrested, 79 kidnapped or detained, 286 assaulted. At the time of writing, January 2016, journalist/fixer Maria Varfolomeyeva had spent a year under arbitrary detention by the self-proclaimed Luhans'k People's Republic.[9]

The majority of incidents occurred in Kyiv in the last days of the Euromaidan protests – in Crimea and the eastern areas where war broke out. That year, Ukraine was named one of the three most dangerous countries in the world for journalists.[10]

Needless to say, most journalists were unprepared for what they were facing. There wasn't a tradition of war journalism in Ukraine, much less of a war being fought on their own territory. Some had to flee their homes. Others headed out into the conflict zone without any training or proper equipment like helmets or bullet proof vests. Others lost sight of objectivity and took sides.

Ukrainian and international reporting of these events was uneven for many reasons. In some cases, comprehensive information was difficult (if not impossible) to obtain because access in the war zone was restricted by all sides. Many journalists in Crimea and areas of Donbas that came under control of the self-proclaimed Donets'k and Luhans'k People's Republics were detained. Others fled for their safety to areas controlled by Ukrainian authorities. For example, Serhii Harmash, Editor of the independent Donets'k on-line publication, *Ostrov*, had survived the Kuchma and Yanukovych era censorship but had to flee when his editorial office was shot at in March 2014. Ukrainian television and radio were taken off the air, as was the independent Crimean Tatar TV station ATR.[11]

There were also issues of terminology and effectiveness. Russia was denying any involvement, calling events "referenda" and "civil war" in Ukraine. It did a very good job of getting its message out to international media outlets in the early months of the conflict. For their part, the new Ukrainian authorities called their actions an "Anti-Terrorist Operation" (ATO) rather than a war, and initially did not do a very good job of getting their message out to their own citizens or the international community.

Ukrainian civil society stepped up. In March 2014 a group of PR experts created the Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC) which they envisioned as a temporary platform where government officials could meet with journalists and provide information. It became the place where the spokesperson for Ukraine's ATO operation, colonel Andriy Lysenko, gave daily press briefings. "In face of what was going on, we put our careers on hold and created this center," co-founder Natalya Popovych said. "At the time, we thought it would be only for a few weeks."[12]

Although Ukrainian state efforts in the information war improved, the UCMC continued to exist two years later. A group of journalists and scholars set up a project called StopFake, in which they monitored fake news about Ukraine coming from the Kremlin and setting the record straight. After Petro Poroshenko was elected president on 25 May 2015, the government information services (press bureaus) gradually began to work more effectively. However, the grass roots initiatives continued to exist and play an important role.

Two controversial state moves were introduced after Poroshenko became president. Russian television and radio

Ukraine's Media during Revolution, Annexation, War and Economic Crisis
Written by Marta Dyczok

broadcasts into Ukraine were banned and the Ministry of Information Policy was created. The decision to take Russian media off the air in Ukraine came in the summer of 2014. This came after Ukrainian television was taken off the air in Russian controlled Crimea and the parts of Donets'k and Luhans'k that came under control of the self-proclaimed Donets'k and Luhans'k Peoples Republics. The decision was taken by the National Council on TV and Radio Broadcasting, the state regulatory agency of the broadcast sphere. It was hotly debated and opposed by many journalists, but the justification given by the regulator was that Ukraine had to fight against the disinformation campaign by blocking. This was only partially successful, since Russian media is available on the internet or through satellite dishes.

Equally controversial was president Poroshenko's decision to create a Ministry of Information Policy in December 2014. The rationale presented at the time was that the state needed to coordinate information strategy in conditions of war. The new ministry was charged with the task of ensuring that accurate information was available both to Ukrainian society and the world, and to ensure that disinformation was challenged and corrected. A number of steps were taken by the Ministry. A document on Ukraine Information Security Concept was produced, which explained: "The main objective of the information security system is to sustain such development preventing negative impacts of third party interference."[13] A system of embedded journalism was introduced with the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and steps were taken to renew broadcasting in parts of Donbas. There was also an announcement that the Ministry would create a broadcaster to provide foreign language news about Ukraine internationally, and the platform was launched in October of 2015.[14] It was not clear whether the necessary financial resources for this venture would be forthcoming, or how it would significantly differ from the private English language TV channel *Ukraine Today*. Overall the Ministry faced much criticism and the Minister, Yuriy Stets, resigned after one year.

Perhaps the most important thing was that the structure of the media system remained basically unchanged. The large private media corporations that accounted for approximately 90% of the media landscape remained intact, with the same owners. Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's richest man who hails from Donets'k, largely disappeared from the public sphere once things heated up in the Donbas and his role in the events became a subject of public discussion. But, he remained the owner of Media Group Ukraine. Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Lyovochkin, allies of the fugitive former President Yanukovych faced investigations for corruption in both Ukrainian and international courts, yet they reportedly continued to own INTER – Ukraine's largest media corporation. And, Petro Poroshenko, who became president in May 2015, refused to give up ownership of TV Channel 5.

Although right after the Euromaidan protests the private media corporations aired content aimed at promoting national unity, gradually they went back to reflecting and promoting the interests of their owners. This was especially visible during elections, when certain candidates and parties received excessive, or unfair, media coverage on these channels. A Ukrainian media content monitoring report issued in January 2016, almost two years after the Euromaidan revolution, concluded that the major TV channels had reverted to the same as they had been during the Yanukovych regime.[15]

Yet, there was one positive change. State owned media began transforming into public broadcasters – even if not as quickly as many would have liked. Things began enthusiastically in the spring of 2014 when the successful and charismatic journalist from Kharkiv, Zurab Alasaniya, was appointed director of the state TV company. He immediately began introducing changes. Censorship of the news ended right away. New programming was introduced, plans were made for a new management and regulatory structure of the company. But, the process got bogged down in bureaucratic and legal issues. Two years later it was still incomplete. Alasaniya said numerous times, "I'll oversee this process and make sure Ukraine has public broadcasting even if it kills me."

Hromadske Radio has been part of the transition to public broadcasting, but in a different way. They worked bottom up rather than top down. They stuck to their original manifesto from the summer of 2013 to provide objective information to Ukrainian society and remain free from editorial interference, and they kept innovating. Right after the revolution they began talks with the state national radio company and in February 2014 received two daily prime time broadcast hours. They began airing a talk show they called 'The Community Wave' in addition to continuing their on-line podcasts. To support their efforts, they organized fundraising events, crowdfunding projects, applied for grants and invited donations through their website. Gradually they increased their staff, put in bids for tenders to gain airtime

Ukraine's Media during Revolution, Annexation, War and Economic Crisis
Written by Marta Dyczok

on FM frequencies, and increased their audience reach.

One area they targeted were the territories that were not controlled by Ukrainian government authorities. Their aim was to reach out to Ukrainians who had little access to Ukrainian information and were being barraged by Russian media. In the autumn of 2015 Hromadske Radio introduced a new live show called Kyiv-Donbas, which they produced in Russian – aiming to counteract the information war coming from Russia. By the autumn of 2015 they succeeded in winning public tenders to broadcast on local FM frequencies in the Donets'k and Luhans'k provinces.[16] On 1 February 2016 another new project was launched – a two-hour live morning talk show which they called 'The Morning Wave', broadcasted every day.

In all their programming they aim to maintain journalistic standards – for example using the phrase 'Ukrainian forces' rather than 'our troops' when reporting on the war. Being independent, they face two main challenges: they need to secure steady financing and navigate the complex relationship with the transforming national radio company. Retaining full editorial freedom while remaining part of the complex reform process with a state bureaucracy is no easy task. But, their vision is that in the future they will succeed in winning a tender for one of the three national frequencies owned by the company for their own programming. At the time of writing, they were exploring another new initiative. A regular English language program. They have invited me to participate in it.

Notes

[1] Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom, directed by Evgeny Afineevsky, 2015, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4908644/ and http://oscar.go.com/news/nominations/winter-on-fire-ukraines-fight-for-freedom-gets-best-documentary-feature-film-oscar-nomination-2016

[2] Here is a short report about one of these volunteers for PRU: 24 June 2015, Two Oaths a Year Apart. Marta Dyczok from Odessa Region on a Soldier's Wedding.

http://hromadskeradio.org/node/20718. Some of the volunteer battalions were made up of nationalists, which added fuel to the Kremlin's information war.

[3] See http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-27211501

[4] http://www.wsj.com/articles/arkady-ostrovsky-putins-ukraine-unreality-show-1406590397 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xf8Gt2Wnv74

[5] Andriy Kulykov reporting from Pereval'ne in Crimea 5 March 2014, "Unknown Soldier" Acquires New Meaning in Crimea, https://soundcloud.com/hromadske-radio/unknkown-soldier-acquires-new

[6] Donbas TV Channel: Working Amid Trouble. Andriy Kulykov Reports from Donets'k. 11 March 2015, https://soundcloud.com/hromadske-radio/donbas-tv-channel-working-amid

[7] "Russia," The Battle Cry of March 16. Andriy Kulykov Reports from Donets'k, 16 March 2015, https://soundcloud.com/hromadske-radio/russia-the-battle-cry-of-march

[8] For example see, Marta Dyczok, "Masked Men vs. Journalists in Ukraine," Wall Street Journal, 29 April 2014, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304393704579528101344061812

[9] See report by the International Federation of Journalists, http://www.ifj.org/nc/news-single-view/backpid/1/article/ukraine-one-year-in-jail-free-journalist-maria-varfolomeyeva/

[10] Data collected by the Institute of Mass Information in Ukraine, http://imi.org.ua/en/, used in the Freedom House Report on Freedom of the Press, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2015#.VqPn5oUrLIV

[11] They continue to be available online.

[12] Interview with UCMC co-founder Nataliya Popvych, Kyiv, July 2014.

[13] See http://www.osce.org/node/175051

[14] See http://www.telekritika.ua/pravo/2015-06-24/108602

[15] Iryna Andreitsiv, "Stari Pisni Pro Holovne," [The Same old Song], *Media Sapiens*, 24 January 2016: http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/monitoring/daily_news/stari_pisni_pro_golovne/

[16] See http://hromadskeradio.org/en/2015/11/11/gromadske-radio-rozpochynaye-efirne-movlennya-na-donbasi

---

About the author:

Marta Dyczok is Associate Professor at the Departments of History and Political Science, Western University, Fellow at the University of Toronto's Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (CERES), Munk School of Global Affairs, Adjunct Professor at the National University of the Kyiv Mohyla Academy. She was a Shklar Research Fellow at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (2011) and a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington DC (2005-2006). Her latest book is *Ukraine's Euromaidan*. Previous books include: *Media, Democracy and Freedom. The Post Communist Experience* (co-edited with Oxana Gaman-Golutvina, 2009), *The Grand Alliance and Ukrainian Refugees* (2000), and *Ukraine: Change Without Movement, Movement Without Change* (2000). Her doctorate is from Oxford University and she researches media, memory, migration, and history.