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STRATEGIC SECURITY ANALYSIS

Ukraine: Media in a Time of War

by Gaetan Vannay

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Modern news reporting has been characterized by the following trend: whenever a country goes to war, so do its major news organizations. Such engagement is considered 'patriotic'. Covering a conflict in one's own country is a particularly difficult proposition; indeed, it constitutes a moral dilemma, since the reporter is also a citizen. Does one tell the truth, and nothing but the truth? Or does the country's defence come first? And, if so, how, and with what implications?

Ukraine is no exception to this rule. While the cease-fire implemented by the Minsk 2 agreements continues to hold in the conflict zone in the east of the country, the Ukrainian government favours the control of information and the use of counter-propaganda to oppose Russian propaganda, despite having passed laws in favour of press freedom. This constitutes a difficult context for the practising of independent journalism.

One must also consider the fact that Ukraine is characterised by a culture of journalism and press freedom that is still fragile, and which has not been able to implant itself properly as a result of the upheavals of the post-Soviet period. Yet a demand for journalism with professional standards is to be found among Ukrainians, as can be illustrated by the establishment of small, independent media outlets – even if their audience/readership is still minimal. The media played a central role in the

escalating conflict in Ukraine, and they could play an equally important role in the country's reconstruction, given the application of proper reforms.

1 Old Habits Die Hard

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Ukrainian media gained the freedom to develop and to earn money from advertising. The years between 1995 and 2004 constituted an era of rapid growth for the media, but simultaneously censorship and pressure on journalists grew. The government acquired more and more control over the editorial lines of both state and private media. Older Ukrainian journalists remember the *temniki* – i.e. the theme of the week (a contraction of *tema nedeli*) that they had to develop in the news – which was received from top government officials.

KEY POINTS

- Ukrainian journalists have been struggling with the question of how to do their jobs during a war in which the media have played an outsized role, and in a historical context that fosters weak standards of journalism.
- In the context of war, media outlets that are not sufficiently 'patriotic' are pressured by state structures, although in 2015 the Ukrainian parliament enacted and the president signed into law legislation to create a more professional media landscape.
- Faced with such a media environment, a new generation of journalists is trying to train itself and create media outside the current system with professional standards of journalism.
- The Ukrainian government denounces Russian propaganda as a key cause of the war, but responds in the same way, while media that respect professional standards could have helped Ukraine to avoid or limit the conflict and would be useful for post-war reconstruction.

Protests against censorship were a leading force in the Orange Revolution, and the situation improved to some extent after 2004. Ukraine's media market became ostensibly richer, diverse and free from overt state censorship or heavy-handed government intervention, but political pressure on newsrooms was replaced by pressure from the economic and political interests of the media's owners. In 2010 four oligarchs – Viktor Pinchuk, Dmytro Firtash, Ihor Kolomoisky and Renat Akhmetov – controlled three-quarters of the television market at the time.¹ The owners of the main media had their major assets in businesses other than journalism (steel production, coal mining, chemicals, agriculture, manufacturing, and so forth). As a result, they perceived the media as an instrument of political influence for their own political or economic gain rather than an independent, self-sufficient business.

From 2004 onwards, however, little fundamental structural change has occurred in the existing Ukrainian media: the owners have remained the same oligarchs, state-owned media have continued to exist in the same way as previously, and many editors and managers still hold the same positions.

2 Inadequacies in Practice and Training

Media training has not evolved in Ukraine in the post-Soviet period. As a result, the country's media have lacked professional journalists. The media market has been developing too rapidly for schools of journalism to improve the quality of their graduates and train enough students to become journalists. As a result, many journalists have entered the profession with little or even inappropriate training. Journalism schools were also too conservative to teach their students the international standards of journalism as presented by the preamble of the Code of Ethics of the American Society of Professional Journalists, which states the following: “[P]ublic enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty.

¹ oDR, “Media Serfdom in Ukraine”, Otar Dovzhenko, lecturer at the School of Journalism, Ukrainian Catholic University of Lviv, 6 May 2015.

Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility.”²

In private conversations editors recognise this weakness, but do not dare to state it publicly – at least for the time being. The younger generation of journalists who have not experienced the journalism of the previous era have clearly identified this lack of professionalism in most Ukrainian schools of journalism. Private initiatives have emerged to compensate for these shortcomings, and courses, seminars and the like are organized to which foreign journalists are invited to provide training. Participants have to pay to attend, but this does not prevent their participation.

After the events of 2013-2014, the so-called ‘Second Revolution’ and the ousting of President Yanukovitch, and particularly after the war broke out in Eastern Ukraine, an additional factor has emerged to restrain media freedom that inexperienced and untrained journalists have found difficult to oppose – patriotism.

3 Truth: Always the First Casualty of War

Ukrainian journalists have been struggling to do their jobs during a war in which the media have played an outsized role. They are journalists, but they are also citizens of their country, and as such wish to support the troops in the east and defend the nation. After the events in Kiev's Independence Square and Russia's seizure of Crimea, the Russian media were instrumental in convincing Eastern Ukrainian inhabitants that they were in danger. As a result there is a temptation for individual Ukrainian journalists and media holdings or groups to become involved in the media war and produce Ukrainian propaganda to counteract Russian propaganda. Today, most main Ukrainian media show a patriotic bias. And as if the pressure to be patriotic were not enough, the government also steps in.

Non-governmental organisations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have reported many cases of journalists and the media being threatened for not being sufficiently patriotic – as was the case, for instance, for the well-known journalist and one of Ukraine's most influential television hosts, Savik Shuter, who found himself under pressure

² American Society of Professional Journalists, “SPJ Code of Ethics”, revised 6 September 2014, www.spj.org.

for having invited on air a Russian journalist who criticized the Ukrainian government for killing civilians in a “fratricidal war”. Ukraine’s National Council for Television and Radio Broadcasting issued Shuter with a warning for violating a law against war propaganda and the incitement of hatred. In the current atmosphere, Shuter said in an interview in *The Economist*, his attempt to bring balance to the discussion proved to be a step too far.³

Another example is the case in which a court in the western city of Ivano-Frankivsk extended a blogger’s pre-trial detention by another two months. This individual is facing up to 15 years in prison on charges of high treason and obstructing the activities of the Ukrainian armed forces in connection with a YouTube video in which he urged his fellow citizens to oppose conscription.

In 2015 Ukrainians became more critical of the media’s ability to provide objectivity and present opposing viewpoints. Compared to 2014, there was an 8% decrease in the number of people who said they were satisfied with the objectivity of television news.⁴

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatovic, visited Kiev for four days in March 2015. While noting the need for Ukraine to safeguard its national security and counteract hostile propaganda, “she reiterated her call on the authorities to observe international media freedom standards and OSCE commitments on media freedom, stressing the need for proportionality of any restrictions”.⁵

To be fair, one should point out the adoption of laws whose application could improve media independence, but these are long-term reforms that will have no immediate effect and which still have to be implemented. On 17 April 2015 Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko signed a bill that defines the legal status of and provides the basis for the creation of a potentially independent public broadcasting organization. And on 10 September of the same year he signed a law designed to ensure the transparency of media ownership in Ukraine.

However, of immediate concern is the report that, according to the Ukrainian newspaper *KyivPost*,⁶ the Ukrainian government has drawn up draft

legislation to establish Ukraine Tomorrow, a state-owned foreign broadcasting company to counter Moscow’s Russia Today network. This shows the Ukrainian government’s growing frustration in the face of what it denounced as “the Russian propaganda war machine”. Rather than countering propaganda with truth, the Ukrainian government’s attempts to hijack the information space have themselves become an issue.

4 New Media

The development of the Internet and the new communication technologies, coupled with the political awareness and interest born among a young generation of Ukrainians in 2004, has led to the emergence of new media that claim some real political independence. This generation wants to break away from the old system. Similarly, it tries to stay free of oligarchic money; examples of these new media are Hromadske, Ukrain’ska Pravda, Insider and Slidstvo.info. In February 2015 five oligarchs controlled more than 60% of the audience of Ukrainian television viewers through their ownership of TV channels.⁷ This actually represents an improvement: as noted above, in 2010 four oligarchs controlled three-quarters of the television market. The newly arrived oligarch in the media game is Ukrainian President Porothenko with his Channel 5 television channel.

These young journalists are not only tech savvy, but also deeply aware of the gap between what they are taught about journalism in Ukraine and the professional standards that apply in long-established democracies. In the same way in which they are creating new media to bypass the old system, they are organising courses, seminars, and workshops at which foreign and experienced journalists are invited to teach the best practice of the profession; they are also attempting to apply these new skills in the media they have created or are working for. They have not only created these new media, but have also built websites that monitor media coverage and provide online social networking services that allow like-minded journalists, experts and editors – both Ukrainian or foreign – to get in touch and collaborate.

Some young journalists the author met in Ukraine say they do not want to work for Kolomoisky, Firtash, Pinchuk or any other oligarch. Instead, they dream of their own start-ups, which they hope will become part of Ukraine’s new media business landscape. However, the old and easy

3 The Economist, “Ukraine’s Media War: Battle of the Memes”, 12 March 2015.

4 Internews, “Annual Media Consumption Survey”, 5 October 2015.

5 OSCE press release, 19 March 2015.

6 *KyivPost*, 15 July 2015.

7 Ukraine Television Industry, February 2015.

way is sometimes still too much of a temptation: even the founders of successful new media have ended up as political advisers to well-established Ukrainian politicians.

The financial resources of these media projects are limited and they will not change the Ukrainian media game in the immediate future, but their dynamism is undeniable, even if many of them are web-based – which is not the main source of information in Ukraine. In 2015, 85% of Ukrainians acquired information through television and 51% consulted the Internet, which is 6% more than a year earlier.⁸ The number of people using the Internet continues to rise, but change will not happen overnight. If they continue to serve their owners in the standard way, the old media might stay in business for a long time to come.

5 No Future?

Just before the war broke out in Eastern Ukraine, the cities of Lviv in the west of the country and Donetsk in the east shared a common grievance against the capital, Kiev: a glaring lack of decentralization, and the impression of being misunderstood and neglected by the capital.⁹ However, for the inhabitants of these cities to be aware of their shared concern a media outlet would have had to talk about Donetsk to the people of Lviv, and vice versa. A sense of belonging, of sharing the same criticisms of Kiev might have made the division of Ukraine more difficult through unbiased media coverage.

But which media could have fulfilled this role?

State radio and television are not a public service, but a state media monopoly, and therefore exist

to praise the merits and achievements of those in power. Their audience is negligible – 0.9% in February 2015 for state television, for example.¹⁰ However, the new media outlets, born from the movements of 2004 and 2014 – “a burst of civic initiatives aimed at cleaning up and renewing the country” – do not yet have the necessary audience or financial means to make a major impact. Mostly based in Kiev, they do not even have the funds to send reporters outside the capital, and reports from the regions are very rare. Private media outlets also pursue the interests of their owners. A view of the inner reality of the country is missing, creating an information void that is easy to manipulate for propaganda purposes.

On 7 April 2015 the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatovic, welcomed the new Ukrainian legislation to foster the development of public broadcasting in the country, stating: “Public broadcasting should reflect the diversity of the entire population. I also strongly believe that true and independent public broadcasting has great potential to deter hostile propaganda by setting the standards of truth, pluralism and openness.”¹¹

However, despite the reforms adopted by parliament and signed into law by the president, all current government actions regarding the media are designed to limit media freedom and lower journalism standards even further, at a time when a communication channel linking all the inhabitants of Ukraine is much needed.

10 Ukraine Television Industry, February 2015.

11 OSCE press release, 7 April 2015.

8 Internews, “Annual Media Consumption Survey”, 5 May 2015.

9 RTS, May 2014.

About the author

Gaetan Vannay is Journalist-in-Residence at the GCSP. Gaetan has been a reporter for over 15 years, working for Swiss and international media. He has been reporting international crises since the early 2000s. He reported from Chechnya, Ukraine, Georgia, Zimbabwe, Ivory Coast, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Egypt, and many other places. Gaetan Vannay won Swiss and international awards and nominations for his reports. Specialist of Russia, where he studied, lived, worked and travels now regularly, he has also been focusing on Ukraine since 2003.

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