

The Ukraine Story in Western Media

Written by Marta Dyczok

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MARTA DYCZOK, APR 30 2015

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Introduction

Ukraine was all over the international headlines from the end of 2013 through summer 2014. The fast changing, complex story was usually narrated through rather simple frames and the greatest attention was devoted to issues with international significance. As the war in eastern Ukraine became protracted and Russia showed no signs of reversing its annexation of Crimea, the story began slipping from the international news.

When looking at how events in Ukraine were reported by western media, it is important to keep a few questions in mind. How was information collected and disseminated? How were media messages framed and by whom? What was the audience reaction, impact on public opinion? Media studies scholars have long noted that while media is often perceived as a powerful tool in shaping public opinion, audiences are active and respond to media messages in different ways based on their beliefs and underlying value systems (Hall, 1980). At the time of this writing, winter of 2014-2015, it seems that international public opinion remains divided over the causes and consequences of events, the character of the Euromaidan protests, Putin's sending Russian troops into Crimea, and the nature of the military conflict in eastern areas of Ukraine. This is partly due to the fact that a variety of representations were visible in media reports.

The diverse reporting on Ukraine reflects the nature of how global media organisations function. They operate in a 24/7 environment, are subject to budgetary pressures, and few have permanent correspondents in Ukraine. Also, they need to balance between attracting audiences, upholding the normative goal of objective reporting, presenting two sides of the story, and describing the news in simple, comprehensible narratives. As a producer explained to me just before I was going live on national Canadian television when the protests in Ukraine were beginning, 'Remember, you'll have 3 minutes to explain things to an audience that knows very little about Ukraine. Keep it clear and easily understandable.'

Equally important was the initial effectiveness of Russia's information machine. The Kremlin showed itself to be very skilled at quickly providing materials to international media outlets in the forms of press releases and statements by key Russian actors when news was breaking about Ukraine. Therefore, the framing and terminology used in international media reports was often shaped by these Russian sources. Russia directly reached out to western audiences with their English language TV Channel *Russia Today*, and paid major international newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Le Figaro*, *El Pais*, and others, to run their supplement, *Russia Beyond the Headlines* (Halby, 2014).[1]

Also, the messages coming out of Ukraine were sometimes mixed, or belated. When protests erupted in Ukraine, the

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then-government did its best to portray the protesters as rabble-rousing, fringe, fascist elements which were aiming to destabilise the country. The protesters were not a unified, cohesive group, and while many did attempt to get their message out to the international media, they were not always successful in doing so. The interim government did not do a very good job in presenting information to either Ukrainian or international media when they came to power in February, when Russian forces took control over Crimea, and when violence began in eastern Ukraine. This started to improve after Petro Poroshenko was elected president in May, but confusion remained. Ukraine officially continued to label its efforts in the Donbass as an 'Anti-Terrorist Operation' while repeatedly reporting on Russian military hardware and troops on its territory.

Competing Narratives

As already mentioned, there were variations among western media reports. Information and presentation is shaped by country of origin, the editorial policies of the media outlet, the form of ownership of the media outlet (public, private, independent), and type of medium (television, radio, newspapers, internet, social media). That being said, a number of general trends were visible, which I noticed while monitoring the news and in my own 104 media appearances in Canada, the US, Britain, Italy, Ukraine, Japan, Hong Kong, and Australia, to media outlets of all genres and formats, from national corporately-owned television to public broadcasters, small independent newspapers, and blogs.

Euromaidan Protests

Western media reports and images about Ukraine during the Euromaidan protests often focused on the dramatic: clashes between protesters and riot police, attacks on journalists, deaths of protesters, high-level meetings and announcements by politicians, President Yanukovich travelling to Moscow, Prime Minister Azarov resigning, Canada introducing visa restrictions for key government officials responsible for violence, or the 1 February Munich Summit on Ukraine. Narratives were usually framed in rather simple terms. A struggle between Russia and Europe, East and West Ukraine, police versus protesters.

Two main representations dominated the reporting and analysis during this period. One was that Ukrainians were making a pro-European choice, were prepared to brave the cold and face riot police to stand up for their European values in central Kiev. Reports using this frame focused on the size, creativity, and endurance of the protests, showing the music, EU flags, statements of support by European and North American officials. The other common frame was that Ukraine was divided between those in the west who wanted to be seen as part of Europe, and those in the east who preferred to remain closer to Russia. In these reports, attention was given to the pro-Yanukovich supporters who assembled in their own camps, and the nationalist symbols and chants used by some of the pro-European protesters.

Most media made efforts to use expert commentary and voices from Ukraine (National Public Radio, 2014). Yet much of the coverage did not clearly explain that the protests were coming from various parts of the country and sectors of society that transcended the simple East/West divide. For example, few reports noted that many protesters were chanting pro-European slogans in Russian. Or that public opinion polls showed widespread dissatisfaction with the Yanukovich ruling elite nationwide, including in Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk.

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming in international reporting was that the causes of violence were not adequately explored. Dramatic images of clashes were widely circulated, and made it onto many top-photos-of-2014 lists. However, the overwhelming majority of protesters were peaceful, creative, and only a small extreme element advocated violent methods. The radicals caught the attention of the cameras, as did their slogans and nationalist insignia. But few reports were asking the question: who instigated the violence?

Unexpected Regime Change, Interim Government, and Russia's Annexation of Crimea

In the end, the protests succeeded in ousting Victor Yanukovich – he fled the country and turned up in Russia a few days later. But the unexpected and fast-moving events from late February through early March 2014 created a rather

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sensational and sometimes confused picture in many international media reports at the time. 'Ukraine Protesters Seize Kiev as President Flees,' was *Time* magazine's headline on 22 February, with the sub-heading 'President Yanukovich escapes to eastern power base of Kharkiv and refuses to resign' (Frizell, 2014). In fact, when Yanukovich disappeared, parliament called an emergency session and, running a bit roughshod over the rules, hastily elected Oleksandr Turchynov as interim president and Arseniy Yatseniuk as acting Prime Minister. The way this occurred raised the question of legitimacy. Legitimacy remained a recurrent theme in many international reports until Poroshenko was elected president in late May, as did the question of whether the far right was on the rise in Ukraine.

This also permeated into the reporting on Russia's annexation of Crimea which followed shortly. Overall reporting on Crimea at the time events were unfolding caused much misunderstanding for months to come. To be fair, it was a difficult story to report on. It was fast-moving, Russia was deliberately clouding the issues with its actions and statements, Ukraine was reeling from the power struggle that Yanukovich's flight caused, and western journalists who arrived on site were intimidated, sometimes prevented from filming (Ormiston, 2014). The result was that many mixed messages reached audiences.

From initial reports, it was not entirely clear what was happening. Two days after the invasion began, on 3 March 2014, AP reported, 'Ukraine's mission to the United Nations is claiming that 16,000 Russian troops have been deployed in the strategic Crimea region, while Russia's UN ambassador told the council, Monday that Ukraine's fugitive president requested troops.' That same day, in a live broadcast, CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer repeated a claim by Russia's United Nations Ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, that Nazi sympathisers had taken power in Western Ukraine. His colleague, CNN International correspondent Christiane Amanpour, jumped in and said, 'You've got to be really careful putting that across as a fact. Are you saying that the entire pro-European Ukrainians are anti-Semites? That's what the Russians are saying, and that's what Professor Cohen is saying' (CNN, 2014). Confusing things further was the fact that the masked, heavily armed troops entering Crimea were not wearing any insignia and refused to identify themselves as Russian forces. So western reporters did not name them as Russians, and Ukrainians began calling them 'little green men.'

Dramatic images once again dominated reporting of the Crimea crisis, such as the standoff between unarmed Ukrainian forces carrying a flag and singing while facing masked men pointed machine guns at them and shot into the air (BBC, 2014). And the framing of the story lacked clarity. To an uninformed audience, it was not evident whether Russia was protecting ethnic Russians from an illegitimate fascist, right-wing government in Kiev, or whether Russia was invading a neighbouring country. The fact that Crimea's legitimately elected government was deposed at gunpoint was not highlighted, yet plenty of attention was devoted to the event called a referendum a few weeks later. Many media outlets ran headlines similar to that that by CTV on 16 March, 'Crimea referendum results show more than 95% of voters seek to join Russia' (CTV, 2014), while few cited public opinion polls from a few weeks before showed that support for union with Russia was around 41% (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2014). Many reports included the fact that Crimea had been transferred to Ukraine by Russia in 1954, far fewer noted that the peninsula was the Crimean Tatar homeland conquered by the Russian Empire in the 18th century.

The choice of images, terminology, information presented or omitted in many international media reports is one reason that the entire issue of what happened in Crimea, how, why, and the results, are still subject to debate.

War in Eastern Ukraine

The same is largely true about what was/is happening in eastern Ukraine, in the oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk. The beginning of the story was originally overshadowed by events in Crimea. Heavily armed, masked men began storming and taking over government buildings in Donetsk at the same time as the 'little green men' were taking over in Crimea. The OSCE Mission was issuing reports on the violence as early as mid-March. However, the story did not really start hitting the international headlines until April, when pro-Russian forces announced that they wanted a referendum like the one that was held in Crimea, and Ukraine began pushing back in what it labelled an Anti-Terrorist Operation.

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It was around this time that the phrase 'information war' began appearing regularly in the reporting and discussions about Ukraine. From April onwards, two distinct frames were visible. One was that pro-Russian separatists opposed the new government in Kiev, wanted to break away from Ukraine, and were prepared to use force to accomplish their goal. The other was that Russia was pursuing a hybrid war against Ukraine by sending in arms, funds, and personnel to fan the flames of separatism with the aim of de-stabilising the country and re-exerting control over it.

From April onward, reporting from the ground became difficult because journalists started being kidnapped by the heavily armed masked men (Dyczok, 2014).[2] This became evident to global audiences when Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 was shot down over Donetsk on 17 July. The international press corps rushed to the scene of the crash site, only to be denied access or given limited access, while being bombarded with contradictory versions of where the threat to safety was coming from and who shot the plane down.

Many reports presented the conflicting statements by Russian and Ukrainian sources. For example, the BBC reported that 'foreign volunteers, including Russians, have been fighting in Ukraine. Russia denies sending regular troops there. The Ukrainian government and the West say that Russia has sent heavy weapons and well-trained troops to help the separatists in eastern Ukraine' (Peter, 2015).

Fewer delved deeper into the underlying issues, questions, and evidence that might help shed light on the story. Pro-Russian separatist sentiment was widely written about, but rarely explained that although it existed since the country became independent in 1991, it hovered around 33-35% in Donetsk and 25% in Luhansk (KIIS, 2014). Few posed the question of timing – why did violence break out when it did? And the 20 November admission by Igor Girkin 'Strelkov', key organiser of the 'Donetsk People's Republic', that he served in the Russian Secret Service until 2013 and deliberately started armed conflict in Donetsk did not make it into many international reports (Prokhanov, 2014).

As the conflict dragged on, ceasefires and negotiations failed to produce results while numbers of casualties and internally displaced people grew, the story began to lose its immediacy and drama. It appeared in international headlines less frequently. Gradually there was more acknowledgement that some Russians were involved in what was still largely labelled 'the Ukraine Crisis.' Reports about right-wing resurgence dissipated after two elections (Presidential 25 May, and Parliamentary 26 October 26) showed that Ukrainians were not voting for right-wing candidates and parties. But the term 'Ukrainian civil war' continued to be regularly used.

Conclusion

Overall, it is difficult to assess what impact international reporting on the Ukraine story has had on public opinion worldwide. Some have argued that the normative rules of objective reporting – presenting all sides of the story, presenting only information that can be indisputably verified – have worked against the larger goal of providing an accurate picture of what is really going on in a situation where information is being used as a weapon (Lane, 2014; The Insider, 2014; Alex Shprintsen, CBC TV producer, in a series of conversations with the author).

Communication studies show us that one function of the media is agenda setting: not telling people what to think, but rather what to think about (McCombs, 2004). So when words and phrases like 'persecution of ethnic Russians,' 'referendum,' or 'illegitimate, right wing government' appear in reports, they remain in audiences minds. That said, they likely evoke a variety of responses because each person interprets media messages through her/his own value system.

Another role media plays is that it frames news into narratives that use familiar reference points to help audiences make sense of information in ways that are familiar (Entman, 1993, pp. 51-58). Often the Ukraine story was reported in easily recognisable portrayals of protesters vs. police, East vs. West, a new Cold War. Over time, this led to Ukraine increasingly being represented as an object of a power struggle between Russia and the US/EU, rather than an independent subject of international affairs. But, as historian Ivan Lysiak-Rudnytsky showed, Ukrainians have a way of turning things on their head and shifting the balance of power that can affect the course of history (Lysiak-Rudnytsky, 1981).

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[1] This information was confirmed by a member of the editorial staff of one of these newspapers in a private exchange with the author. He explained that this was done for revenue purposes.

[2] In the first three weeks of April, at least 18 journalists were kidnapped.

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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.