

Broadcasting through Information Wars with Public Radio Ukraine

Written by Marta Dyczok

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MARTA DYCZOK, APR 13 2016

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

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They didn't say they were fighting an information war. The term was not yet in vogue. But when in the summer of 2013 a handful of Ukrainian journalists created Hromadske Radio (translated into English as Public Radio Ukraine)[1], that's precisely what they were doing. The independent radio project was a reaction against state and corporate censorship that was stifling free speech in Ukraine during Victor Yanukovich's presidency (2010-2014). 'Listen. Think.' became their motto.

Each journalist pitched in some money. They set up a website and began posting podcasts online. The internet was the one place that no one could interfere with their editorial freedom. And, they began to provide accurate and unbiased information to Ukrainians.

The Hromadske Radio pioneers likely had no idea how important and successful their project would become. In less than a year they were broadcasting live on national airwaves and reaching audiences in the eastern war-torn areas of the country on FM frequencies. Part of their success was due to their efforts, and part was good timing. A few months after their first podcast aired (on 23 August 2013) the Euromaidan protests erupted in Ukraine and spread through the country. But, accurate news and good analysis was still hard to find on Ukrainian radio. Riding the revolutionary wave, friends of the Hromadske Radio team offered them free airtime on their commercial music station, *Evropa Plus*. On 1 December 2013, they began their first live broadcasts, a show they called the "Euromaidan Marathon".

This helped the situation since at times it was difficult to get a clear picture of what was really going in Ukraine during the Euromaidan protests – both for people within the country and those watching from abroad. In large part this was due to the mixed reporting in Ukrainian and international media which began during the protests in late 2013, and continued through the annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war in Donbas that followed.

With a few exceptions, such as Hromadske Radio, the Ukrainian media continued to suffer from state and corporate censorship throughout the winter 2013-2014 protests. President Victor Yanukovich's information machine downplayed the size of unrest and depicted those taking to the streets as unemployed rabble rousers with fascist tendencies. Thus, Ukrainian audiences received a rather distorted image of events as they unfolded.

The Western media did not have many permanent correspondents in Ukraine. Reports often focused on the dramatic and stories were usually framed in simple terms: east vs west, Russia vs Europe, police vs protestors. And, Russia engaged in a sophisticated distortion campaign against Ukraine which permeated into international media as well as into Ukraine.

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After Victor Yanukovich fled to Russia in February 2014, changes began in Ukraine's state owned media. Hromadske Radio was given two live hours on the national broadcaster Ukrainian Radio. At the time it was still owned by the state but had national broadcast reach. There was a lot to report on as Russia annexed Crimea and began a hybrid war against Ukraine.

Information warfare was a term that started being used around that time as it was an important component of all of these events. In February 2014 the Kremlin's disinformation campaign was broadened to distort the picture of what was really going on in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and the rest of the country. Journalists and mass media outlets became both players and pawns in the war. New challenges arose over how to counter a powerful international disinformation campaign about Ukraine coming from Moscow.

During these events, the Hromadske Radio team grew and they gradually received more airtime. By January 2016 they were producing eight hours of live broadcasts daily – in addition to continuing their podcasts and developing a news service. This was a refreshing success story on Ukraine's media landscape.

But, the struggle for accurate information within and about the country has much deeper roots. The journalists who created Hromadske Radio were following in the footsteps of other Ukrainians who had been working to create independent media. Ukraine had been fighting an information war for decades. Access to sources and control over the collection and dissemination of information are issues that Ukrainian journalists and scholars have grappled with for generations.

Before Ukraine gained independence in 1991, some denied the very existence of a separate people called Ukrainians and considered them part of Russia – little Russians, or younger brothers. During the Soviet era, a Ukrainian identity was acknowledged, but only within the context of a Soviet nation. The state owned and controlled all forms of media and there was no official room for alternative narratives.

A push for media change from below appeared during the *glasnost* years, when Mikhail Gorbachev started introducing reforms in the Soviet Union in 1985. Although there was an earlier tradition of independent minded journalists and intellectuals publishing *samydav* (*samizdat*), they had a limited reach. Once Gorbachev began loosening restrictions on society, the trend of alternative media grew. Ukrainians, like others in the USSR, began producing many new unofficial media outlets. One of the earliest examples was *Postup*, created in L'viv in 1989.[2] The trend intensified once Soviet state censorship was officially lifted with the May 1990 *Law on the Press and Other Forms of Mass Information*. [3] But, for the most part, independent media remained small and self-funded.

After Ukraine gained independence in 1991 many new challenges appeared. Amidst a crumbling economy, leaders of an old nation that had achieved modern statehood struggled to build the state. Further, they had to deal with the world's third largest nuclear arsenal and the fallout of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster which had happened on their territory during the Soviet period. One important question was how to create a media environment which would provide impartial information to society.

When Ukraine broke away from the Soviet Union most of its media system remained in state hands. They inherited this from the Soviet era, when no private media was allowed. In the early 1990s there were many discussions about how to transform the former communist media landscapes. Conventional wisdom at the time, and advice coming from western advisers, was that media needed to be taken out of state hands and transferred into private ownership so that the media could act as a watchdog of the state. That's precisely what happened. Most of Ukraine's media outlets were privatized during Leonid Kuchma's first term as president in the mid-1990s. This was part of his larger privatization drive – and to some degree he viewed state owned media as just another asset. Most of the major media outlets were transferred into private hands, including two of the three existing TV channels that had national broadcast reach. Kuchma kept one TV channel, called UT1, in state hands, and one radio frequency, UR1. But overall, only about 10% of the media remained state owned.

However, state media outlets were privatized in a non-transparent manner. This created a pattern of interdependency between political and emerging corporate elites which continues to the present day. The first private

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broadcast licenses were given to groups that had close contacts with the president. Thus, in 1995 UT2 became Channel 1+1, owned by controversial businessman Vadim Rabinovych, film-maker Oleksandr Rodnians'kyi, and cosmetics heir Ronald Lauder – who was then building a media empire in Eastern Europe. UT3 was sold to Yevhen Pluzhnikov, a Kyiv businessman and key member of the then powerful Kyiv clan and SDPU(o) party. He brought in the State Property Fund and Russian TV Channel ORT as business partners and called his channel INTER. These two TV stations remain the leaders on Ukraine's television scene to the present, although they have changed ownership over time.[4]

Smaller TV channels also appeared throughout the 1990s. They were eventually bought up by other powerful businessmen (often called oligarchs) and grew into large media holdings. StarLightMedia was created by Kuchma's son-in-law Victor Pinchuk. Media Group Ukraine was set up by Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's richest man who once bankrolled Victor Yanukovych's Regions Party. And Channel 5 TV was created in 2003 by a man who would later become president, Petro Poroshenko.

Media and politics are always connected. Politicians need media to reach voters and attempt to shape public opinion, and media owners need government licenses to broadcast and publish. In today's globalized world close relations between political and corporate elites are the norm, where both direct and indirect pressures are used to control the media. Or as Gramsci would call it, establish a hegemony over the Habermasian public sphere.[5] However, in Ukraine the media-politics relationship is complicated by the fact that media licenses were issued on the basis of political contacts. Both the new emerging businesspeople and politicians were engaged in corrupt practices that they wanted to conceal from the public. Thus, the media became an instrument in their power struggles amongst themselves and against the public interest.

During the later Kuchma years, censorship grew. One of the best known international examples is the disappearance of internet journalist Heorhii Gongadze in 2000. The president (Kuchma) was implicated in the case, although the real story of what happened is still not known. Growing censorship was one of the factors that fed public discontent that exploded in Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 when massive winter street protests captured the world's attention.

A wave of optimism spread when the protests succeeded and Victor Yushchenko survived a poisoning attempt and was elected president. After he came to power, state censorship loosened and steps were made to convert the remaining state owned media into public broadcasters. Yet, within a year his popularity declined as political infighting in his camp intensified. He began lashing out at journalists who exposed his son's lavish lifestyle and failed to deliver on the promise of giving up control over the remaining state media assets.

Another disturbing trend in Ukraine's media during Yushchenko's presidency was that while state pressures on journalists noticeably decreased, corporate pressures increased. Media analyst Nataliya Ligacheva called this "corporate temnyky", a practice where media owners dictated what topics were to be included or excluded from the public sphere.

After Victor Yanukovych was elected president in 2010, things got even worse. Corporate pressures remained and state pressures returned. By the summer of 2013, many analysts were writing that the situation with freedom of speech was worse than any time in Ukraine's modern history. And, that's when a number of grass roots media initiatives began to appear. They included Hromadske Radio, Hromadske.TV, Espresso.TV, Spil'no.TV. They all chose the internet as their platform. It was the one area that neither the state nor corporate world could control. And as it turned out, they were all well positioned to report on events in Ukraine when the Euromaidan protests erupted in November 2013.

I began receiving media calls in late 2013, when the Kyiv protests kept growing. Everybody wanted commentary, analysis. What was happening? What did it all mean? Where it was going? One call came from Ukraine. Iryna Slavinska phoned from Hromadske Radio in Kyiv. She interviewed me on how things looked from the Canadian perspective. Shortly afterwards, the radio project's co-founder Andriy Kulykov asked if I could do an English language report for them.

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I agreed, prepared my first ever podcast, and sent it off. It aired on 3 February 2014. Over the following year and a half, I prepared 42 reports from Toronto, Mississauga, Kyiv, the Carpathian Mountains, Hlibivka village, London (Ontario), Sumy in eastern Ukraine, Edmonton, Odessa, and Ankara, Turkey.

Notes

[1] See <http://hromadskeradio.org/en>

[2] See <http://kipiani.org/samizdat/index.cgi?245>. By coincidence, the newspaper's founder, Oleksandr Kryvenko, attempted to create Public Radio Ukraine in 2003.

[3] See Quigley, John, "Freedom of Expression in the Soviet Media," 11 Loy. L.A. Ent. L. Rev. 269 (1991). Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/elr/vol11/iss2/1>

[4] For an overview of early developments see, Dyczok, Marta, "Threats to Free Speech in Ukraine: The Bigger Picture," in Giovanna Brogi, Marta Dyczok and Oxana Pachlovska (eds.) *Ukraine Twenty Years After Independence: Assessments, Perspectives, Challenges* (Rome: Aracne, 2015); Dyczok, Marta, "Ukraine's Changing Communicative Space: Destination Europe or the Soviet Past?" in Larissa M. L. Zaleska Onyshkevych and Maria G. Rewakowicz (eds.) *Contemporary Ukraine and Its European Cultural Identity* (New York, M. E. Sharpe, 2009): 375-394

[5] Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci wrote about hegemony, the political or cultural dominance or authority over others, in his Prison Notebooks. It was translated by Lynne Lawner and published in English as *Letters from Prison* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). The public sphere is "an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action." This term became widely used after German philosopher Jurgen Habermas published his seminal study, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* in 1962. It was translated into English by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence and published as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

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.