



Ukraine media: defiance and truth-telling

The frontline struggle for
information and democracy

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Introduction

This independent evaluation of the Ukrainian media landscape and the key challenges facing independent journalism has been prepared by the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) and covers the period before and since the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022.

The report is based on desk research and a range of interviews with journalists, media practitioners, civil society stakeholders and experts both in-country and externally. The work was prepared and updated between September 2021 and May 2023 with initially interviews conducted on the ground in Kyiv as well as online.¹

The EJN has sought to include a broad spectrum of views and opinions from the media sector. A majority of interviews with practitioners were with journalists from independent online outlets.

This paper also draws upon the work of other media scholars and organisations who have examined the media landscape in Ukraine including the United Kingdom policy institute Chatham House, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) based in Paris and the US education and information support group IREX. Questions ranged from enquiries into business models, modes of governance, newsroom structures and hierarchies to factors which have an impact on practice and content.

Although this report does not claim to be a comprehensive study of the media in Ukraine it gives insights into challenges that the media face as news organisations strive for high standards of reporting at a time of war and when journalists are under pressure from political and commercial pressures.

The profound national crisis and the ordeal of the people of Ukraine has provoked an unprecedented outpouring of sympathy and international support. Journalists and news media are at the centre of the storm with many journalists and news staff among the victims of violence.

This report examines how the media landscape has undergone a rapid transformation. It highlights the role of assistance from the donor community – including international organisations, government-funded media development agencies and an outpouring of support and solidarity from journalism and media support groups around the world.

The report gives voice to the concerns and views of media leaders and journalists in Ukraine and outlines their strategies for a new beginning for news media and journalism once the war is over and peace is restored.

In spite of the conflict, work to promote quality journalism continues with practical programmes that seek to minimise the risks that journalists face and create an enabling environment for the future of information and democracy in Ukraine based upon international standards of ethical and accountable journalism.²

This report explores the environment in which journalism is practised to identify the needs of the media community and to better define the challenges of contemporary journalism. It is produced in partnership with the Evens Foundation and the Fritt Ord Foundation. The section on journalism education was supported by the DESTIN Journalism Education for Democracy in Ukraine: Developing Standards, Integrity and Professionalism Erasmus+ KA2 project.

¹ Detector Media, Texty, the Institute of Mass Information, Internews and journalism educators from universities including Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University.

² All reports and further information can be found on the EJN's website at: <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/>

Executive summary and recommendations

Before the war, Ukraine's media environment was complex, competitive, fascinating and diverse. Oligarch-owned outlets dominated the national media landscape with biased reporting that served the business and political interests of billionaires who used national television and radio to court power and influence.

Despite their editorial deficiencies, the oligarch stations have been the most popular in Ukraine as their well-funded programming looked highly professional.

A significant number of independent outlets as well as the public broadcaster followed the principles of ethical journalism and challenged the narratives broadcast by mainstream media but their audiences were often small and many relied on international donors for support.

While the pre-war conditions for news gathering were difficult and challenging, the news media crisis has intensified as journalists find themselves operating in an atmosphere of hostile and toxic communications laced with propaganda and deceptive handling of the facts.

Nevertheless, Ukraine's media landscape is no less fascinating since Russia invaded in February 2022 – but it has been completely transformed.

The cornerstone of the government's wartime media policy is the United News Marathon, launched on the very first day of the Russian invasion. The National Security and Defence Council decided it must be broadcast 24/7 on Ukrainian TV so the major channels take shifts, each showing it for six-hour stints throughout the day.

Ukraine's oligarch-owned media outlets, once fierce competitors in politics and business, as well as the public broadcaster *Suspilne* have united behind the effort. At the outset it was popular, but audiences have fallen recently and, with increasing worries over official news management, questions are being asked about the future of the initiative.

Meanwhile, viewers continue to drift away from televised news, a trend in place long before the invasion. Many prefer the immediacy of information on Telegram messaging channels and other social media rather than traditional outlets. Surveys conducted before the war showed that online and social media were more popular than TV as sources of news for the first time in 2019 and this trend has continued.³

Diana Dutsyk, the founder and executive director of the Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication, a teacher at the Mohyla School of Journalism and a member of the Commission on Journalistic Ethics, sums up the impact of change: "Everything that was before February 24 is now melting in the fire of war."⁴

The invasion has also had a devastating impact on the lives of many journalists with major concerns over the safety of media staff reporting the war.

At the same time the constant drumbeat of propaganda and the presence of disinformation poses deadly threats to media freedom and endangers public access to reliable information.

³ www.chathamhouse.org/2021/04/strengthening-public-interest-ukraines-media-sector/02-ukraines-media-landscape

⁴ Dutsyk was speaking to the T.G. Shevchenko Scientific Society in Canada for Ukrainians from the diaspora. Her speech is available here: <https://www.jta.com.ua/trends/yak-transformuiutsia-ukrainski-media-u-vohni-viyny-lektsiia-diany-dutsyk/>



Mass graves return in war-torn cities. Image: Serhiy Orlov / Just Click's With A Camera on Flickr (Public Domain Mark 1.0)

There is a pressing need to strengthen the capacity of journalists, to help them report freely and to minimise the risks they face.

Journalists at the national and international level demand more effective monitoring of attacks on free expression and particularly targeting of journalists in the media. Such violations should be fully investigated and, where war crimes are suspected, those responsible should be held to account.

Although war has made the mainstream media less politically biased and therefore more ethical, the sector is not as diverse, with the closure of 15 percent of television and radio companies,⁵ partly as a result of the near terminal decline in advertising which started during the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerated after the invasion. The advertising market decreased by 70 percent after war broke out, according to official figures.⁶

The turbulence triggered by the conflict has seen the disappearance of one of Ukraine's biggest media companies and thousands of employees have lost their jobs. According to the Ukrainian Media and Communication Institute this "reduces pluralism in the 'Ukrainian' way." At least, they argue, oligarchic media competed with each other and there was "a certain balance in the information field making total censorship impossible."⁷

In areas it controls, Russia has closed down TV and radio stations and is broadcasting anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda and fake news. Online media channels have suffered cyber-attacks, hacking and emailed threats of torture, arrest and persecution. Russia has destroyed or seized TV towers and shelled media offices. Territories it has occupied are subject to an information blockade.⁸

⁵ According to the National Council for Television and Radio Broadcasting.

⁶ <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/why-ukraines-steel-tycoon-closed-his-media-empire>; <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-economy/3530432-reklamnij-rinok-v-ukraini-cerez-vijnu-z-rosie-u-vpav-na-ponad-70.html>

⁷ <https://www.jta.com.ua/trends/yak-transformuiutsia-ukrainski-media-u-vohni-viyny-lektsiia-diany-dutsyk/>

⁸ <https://www.jta.com.ua/trends/yak-transformuiutsia-ukrainski-media-u-vohni-viyny-lektsiia-diany-dutsyk/>

Though the changes to the media landscape are profound, some things remain the same or have become far worse since the outbreak of war. Disinformation, for example, remains rampant on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides.

Disinformation, propaganda and artificial intelligence pose mounting threats to journalism around the world, but in the context of the war in Ukraine where Russia has deployed the full range of its information weapons the pursuit of truth-telling is fraught with pitfalls.

The Ukraine government has imposed restrictions on what can be reported about the war and when. Many journalists are complying for now by self-censoring for, what the government says is, the public good, but this leads to questions about whether some reporting is an accurate reflection of what is happening on the ground and journalists are increasingly demanding an end to restrictions on their right to report from conflict zones.

The government has also found itself at odds with large sections of the media community over the new information law which has led to protests from within Ukraine and from international observers in Europe and beyond that it may pose a threat to press freedom.

The new media law was adopted after years of preparation with the hope that it would bring Ukraine into line with European media legislation, but more may need to be done to achieve that.

Though they work in an imperfect system, the importance of Ukrainian journalists continuing to do the jobs in the best way they can is undisputed. "In the fog of war, local media is a lifeline for vulnerable civilians. This is especially true in our information age and against a global barrage of Russian disinformation. We cannot hope to bring a lasting end to this conflict without it,"⁹ wrote Dutsyk.

The challenges for journalism inside the country are considerable – to report accurately on the war and its consequences; to alleviate the humanitarian distress of citizens; and to support media efforts to increase the flow of reliable information to citizens that will reinforce the security and welfare of the community.

Wider issues of the socio-political crisis, crimes of war and the conditions for and eventual peace and protection of the sovereignty of Ukraine are also part of the media focus.

The immediate and urgent needs of news media have changed as has the news agenda. There is now, for example, an urgent issue of safety and the protection of journalists, but editorial objectives of independent and ethical truth-telling, even in a time of war, remain in place.

The question of how to strengthen, rebuild and create an enabling environment for journalism, particularly through initiatives to promote education and training for journalists and media staff has also arisen with calls for a complete review and renewal of the media education infrastructure.

This report provides background to the current media situation and identifies some of the current challenges journalists face. It also points to a number of actions that can help support the work of independent journalism in building a society rooted in respect for human rights.

These suggestions may help media to report on the ordeal of war and can also lay the foundations for a sustainable programme of media recovery and a renewal of commitment to information and democracy in the years to come.

⁹ <https://www.jta.com.ua/trends/yak-transformuiutsia-ukrainski-media-u-vohni-viyny-lektsiia-diany-dutsyk/>

Recommendations

The following recommendations focus on how to support journalists and media and point towards long-term solutions to some of the issues facing Ukrainian journalists. They particularly apply to media education, press freedom, media sustainability and quality journalism. They complement the detailed call for action which the EJNI has also helped develop with the Global Forum for Media Development and which is attached to this report (See Appendix).

1. Media safety

- Media safety is paramount. Further action must be taken to provide a safe reporting environment for journalists and news media including safety training, safety equipment and support for media people and their families who are the victims of violence.
- Donors must make clear that attacks on journalists are unacceptable and encourage the authorities to prosecute offenders and engage with press freedom projects such as the Council of Europe's platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists.¹⁰
- Those who attack journalists must be held to account and attacks on and killings of media personnel should be treated as war crimes and investigated as such.
- Aside from the targeting of news media in the conflict itself, politicians at the national and regional level must avoid fuelling hostility to journalism that may lead to physical attacks on the press, particularly those by ordinary citizens.

2. Executive and government action

- The government and military authorities should not impose undue restrictions on the right of journalists to report freely in the country, including in conflict zones;
- The government should ensure that the existing legislation governing is supportive of the creation of an enabling environment for free and independent journalism;
- The government should, in particular, take note of concerns expressed by local media leaders and by European-wide press freedom organisations regarding the information legislation passed into law in December 2022;
- The government should initiate a continuing dialogue with journalists and the media to address these and other concerns and to make such adjustments to the legal landscape as are necessary to make Ukraine compliant with international standards of media regulation; and
- The government should support effective and rigorous monitoring of violations of the rights of journalists and violations of free expression and should further support prosecution of those responsible for war crimes and human rights abuse.

3. International donor support

- Donors must continue and increase their support for Ukraine's independent media outlets;
- Further support should be provided to reinforce media watchdogs and organisations like the Commission on Journalism Ethics which is particularly crucial in the absence of a credible regulator; and
- Donors should strengthen business development training and longer funding cycles, recognising that in time of war urgent emergency assistance should be accompanied by long-term strategies for media development that will ensure the survival of professionalism in journalism and pluralism in media.

¹⁰ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/home>

4. Journalism and media development

- Editors and publishers of independent media across all platforms should experiment with new business models and continue work already begun on developing diverse sources of funding including crowd funding. Media houses in the regions must also adopt this culture of innovation.
- Respect for the standards and core values of ethical journalism – fact-based, honest and fair reporting, and accountable media – should be the benchmark for independent journalism across the Ukraine media landscape and should be encouraged, particularly during the period of conflict;
- Journalists themselves should be supported in developing the skills and awareness needed to understand better the threats posed by false news and harmful disinformation;
- Journalist unions and media support groups should work together to create a common front against all forms of disinformation and the dissemination of false information;
- Rules on transparency in media ownership and openness about political, cultural and business affiliations should be adopted and implemented in all media;
- Ethical journalism should continue to be taught and promoted by journalism unions and associations, media self-regulatory bodies, journalism schools and journalists themselves. People in journalism may not always be able to practice everything they learn but understanding the foundations of ethical journalism is essential to good reporting and building public trust in news media; and
- News media inside and outside Ukraine should continue to expose disinformation and should contribute to support actions in defence of the Ukrainian media, particularly through reporting on all Russian actions, including those involving Russian media organisations, which violate principles of impartiality.

5. Media literacy

- Better education of citizens on how to understand and engage with online media and recognise disinformation and hate speech across all platforms is needed. A media literate audience would encourage greater professionalism among journalists and provide a push for the inclusion of diverse voices that better represent all communities; and
- Wide reaching media literacy campaigns targeting all segments of the population in all regions of the country are important and should be carried out in collaboration with NGOs already supporting such work.

6. Special recommendations on education and training

A sound structure for the education and training of journalists and news media staff is a prerequisite for the creation of a system of journalism that is trustworthy and a bulwark of a democratic information landscape.

- Journalism curriculums must be reformed to focus on skills that are essential for modern journalists such as mobile journalism, data analysis, recognising disinformation and investigative journalism, and responsible use of artificial intelligence machines and other technical tools;
- Policymakers and education leaders should consider using the Collection of National Methodological Guidelines for the content, development and implementation of the BA and MA programmes in journalism developed within the Erasmus+ KA2 DESTIN project¹¹;

¹¹ See detailed guidelines in both Ukrainian and English: <https://www.destin-project.info/collection-of-national-methodological-guidelines-for-the-content-development-and-implementation-of-the-bachelors-and-masters-study-programmes-in-journalism/>



Photo ©Areipa.lt/Shutterstock

- At the same time, outdated media education theory modules must be identified, discarded and replaced with practical training fit for modern newsrooms including improving the practice of journalism through practical editorial guidelines that align with ethical codes and core professional values;
- Media practitioners should be consulted and fully involved in the development of new curriculums;
- Donors should consider funding skills development for lecturers, both in content and the way the lectures are delivered;
- They should also publicise professional development opportunities for teaching staff such as conferences and exchange programmes to allow Ukrainian educators to benefit from contact with international colleagues and see new ways of teaching;
- Round tables with educators, universities and representatives of the news industry should be organised to make connections and increase understanding between academia and practitioners;
- Teachers should be offered internships at local, regional and national media then asked to share their knowledge with colleagues and donors to improve the quality of journalism programmes;
- International projects should not duplicate each other. A dialogue between different projects including the Ministry of Education and all the stakeholders including industry representatives is needed; and
- Universities and media development organisations should work more closely with media outlets to develop work placement schemes, internships and on-the-job training opportunities.

¹¹ See detailed guidelines in both Ukrainian and English: <https://www.destin-project.info/collection-of-national-methodological-guidelines-for-the-content-development-and-implementation-of-the-bachelors-and-masters-study-programmes-in-journalism/>

Background

In Ukraine professional news media have been striving for independence, ethical space and a favourable environment for pluralism since the country's emergence as an independent state in 1991.

In the years following independence, media and journalism support groups worked inside the country to create an infrastructure for media freedom including independent professional groups of journalists and employers, ethical codes for journalistic work and an ethical commission to monitor and support free media.

Private television stations and newspapers emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and continued to develop throughout the 1990s as Ukraine transformed its economy and moved closer to western alliances including the European Union and NATO.

The media scene was vibrant but chaotic, and outlets frequently opened and closed.

Unlike other countries that emerged from behind the Iron Curtain, for example the Czech Republic, Ukraine's media sector attracted little interest from foreign investors. This opened the door for wealthy local businessmen to move into television and newspapers throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.¹² Ownership of the media became associated with political influence rather than financial profit.

As a result, oligarchs have come to dominate the media including television, online and regional outlets. Although Ukrainians remain largely unconcerned about media ownership they don't trust what they see and read in the press.¹³

Up until the outbreak of war a handful of oligarchs controlled the channels watched by approximately 76 percent of the television audience.¹⁴ They included Ihor Kolomoyskyi (1+1); Rinat Akhmetov (Ukrayina); Victor Pinchuk, the son-in-law of former Ukraine's President Leonid Kuchma (STB, ICTV and Novyi Kanal); and Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Liovochkin (Inter TV). Former President Petro Poroshenko owns Channel 5 whose editorial policy was openly pro-Poroshenko. These channels made only a few attempts at impartiality. Stories reflected the owners political and business interests with journalists well aware of the line they must take.

As one analyst said: "The majority of mainstream media – TV, radio, newspapers – they are owned by oligarchs. There are different categories of oligarchs – national calibre, local, regional. The person who defines the policy of the media is the one who pays the bills."

Television channels which focused primarily on broadcasting news talk shows have been popular, particularly with older viewers.

These channels are also controlled by oligarchs and promote their agenda. Those who disagree were not invited to contribute and guests carefully selected to parrot the views of the station owners. Younger audiences increasingly get their news from social media.

How a station's ownership has dictated the way stories are covered was revealed in a 2021 survey¹⁵ by Ukraine's Institute of Mass Information (IMI), a media watchdog, which looked at how the country's media reported on the Pandora Papers investigation, which revealed that President Volodymyr Zelensky and his inner circle had established a network of offshore companies. He was elected president in 2019 on promises to fight corruption.

¹² <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/04/strengthening-public-interest-ukraines-media-sector/01-introduction>

¹³ According to recent polls, 66.7 percent of Ukrainians trust voluntary organisations, 64.4 percent trust the church, and just 48.3 percent trusted the media. <https://ukraineworld.org/articles/ukraine-explained/fourth-estate-oligarch-style-key-facts-about-ukrainian-media>

¹⁴ <http://ukraine.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/indicators>

¹⁵ <https://imi.org.ua/en/monitorings/who-from-online-media-ignored-pandora-papers-investigation-on-zelensky-i41639>

Though many independent stations and websites, including the public broadcaster Suspilne, covered the story, TSN and UNIAN, that are part of the 1+1 empire which supports the president and were instrumental in his electoral victory, failed to mention Zelensky was named in the Pandora Papers. Other media-owning oligarchs also appeared in the Pandora Papers meaning the story was broadly ignored by these outlets, depriving the Ukrainian public of important information about their political and business leaders.

The support of oligarch-owned media has previously been essential for winning elections with all stations campaigning for the candidate favoured by their owner.

As one journalist put it, "The election of Zelensky was 100 percent because of the 1+1 channel. The channel openly worked for Zelensky. People believed his TV image. They think that if someone is playing the president on TV, if he became the president, he'd act the same."

In this context, Ukraine has been a difficult place for journalists to practise good and ethical journalism. Press freedom rankings for the country slipped to 97 out of 180 countries in 2021 according to the Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, which cited areas of concern such as "news manipulation, violations of the confidentiality of sources, cyber-attacks and excesses in the fight against fake news."

The focus of world attention and internal pressures for change may have had some impact, and there has been a marked improvement in the intervening period. In the 2023 index it was 79 out of 180 countries. RSF noted that since the invasion of 2022 Ukraine is caught up in an information war and "stands at the front line of resistance against the expansion of the Kremlin's propaganda system."¹⁶



New York NY USA – February 24, 2022: New York newspapers report on the previous nights invasion of Ukraine by Russian military forces. © rblfmr/Shutterstock

¹⁶ <https://rsf.org/en/ukraine>

War changes everything

With the advent of war Ukraine's media landscape remains diverse but partly in the grip of oligarchs who have been reorganising. They still own the majority of the national TV channels.

The invasion has had a big impact on the media, of course, disrupting their work and even jeopardising their economic survival. In territories under Russian control – Crimea, annexed in 2014, Donbas and areas occupied by the Russian army in 2022 – the Ukrainian media are silenced and often replaced by Kremlin propaganda.

Nevertheless, the war has given Ukraine media an opportunity to shine in a global spotlight.

Awarding the Pulitzer Prize to Ukrainian journalists last year, the Pulitzer board wrote: "Despite bombardment, abductions, occupation, and even deaths in their ranks, they have persisted in their effort to provide an accurate picture of a terrible reality, doing honour to Ukraine and to journalists around the world."¹⁷

The Russian invasion turned Ukrainian journalists into purveyors of lifesaving information to millions of citizens and refugees, often at immense personal risk.¹⁸

Overnight they became war correspondents, reporting from the frontlines of a conflict consuming their own towns, neighbourhoods and streets.¹⁹ They faced a massive responsibility, broadcasting which road was safe to travel, or the location of the nearest shelter. They were also essential for sifting through the immense amount of noise, misinformation and propaganda coming from both sides.

Most had never expected to be, or wanted to be, war reporters, nor had they received training on how to interview traumatised people or on how to cope with it themselves.

"A lot of people were just doing normal jobs of journalism, reporting on local community events and local politics," said a media development worker interviewed for this report. "They were just your usual kind of 'Sunday fete, a politician caught with his hand in the till' type of journalists. And suddenly they found themselves in a situation where probably they should get a flak jacket and a helmet and are reporting on devastating things happening to people in their own community, maybe people that they know."

Working without basic lifesaving equipment such as body armour, helmets and first aid supplies, Ukrainian journalists have paid a terrible price.

According to the Kyiv-based NGO the Institute of Mass Information (IMI),²⁰ Russia committed 462 crimes against journalists and media in Ukraine in the first nine months of the war. Eight journalists were killed doing their jobs; 20 were kidnapped; 14 went missing with the fate of two still unknown; 28 were shot; and 67 received death threats. IMI said eight editorial offices were seized by Russia and 216 closed down.

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/10/pulitzer-prize-for-ukraine-journalists-rewards-courageous-truthful-reporting>

¹⁸ <https://internews.org/blog/keeping-independent-media-in-ukraine-operational/>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/10/i-had-to-act-how-ukrainian-journalists-became-war-correspondents-overnight>

²⁰ <https://imi.org.ua/en/monitorings/russia-commits-462-crimes-against-journalists-and-media-in-ukraine-in-nine-months-of-the-war-i49271>



They're lying to you': Russian state TV employee Marina Ovsyannikova – later arrested – protests on air, March 2022. Screenshot: Al Jazeera Media Institute.

"I want to take a photo that would stop the war," wrote Maksim Levin, a renowned Ukrainian photojournalist who was executed with a shot to the head by the Russian military on 13 March.²¹

Although many of the media victims were killed by shelling or crossfire, it has been alleged that some, like Maksim Levin, were directly targeted by Russian forces, according to an investigation by RSF.²²

The killing of Began Batik, a Ukrainian journalist working with the Italian daily newspaper *La Repubblica* who was killed by a sniper in April 2023 and the death of French journalist Arman Soldin killed in a rocket attack in Ukraine in May, increased the toll of journalists killed as this report went to press. As of 10 May 2023 at least ten have been killed while covering the war, according to RSF and the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

These deaths raise again the question of impunity in the killing of journalists in Ukraine which has been a major issue for local media and international press freedom groups for many years.

The murders of investigative journalists Pavlo Sheremet, Georgi Gongadze and Vadym Komarov, for example, have still not been solved.²³ Sheremet, a journalist with the online paper *Ukrainska Pravda*, was killed by a car bomb in 2016. Investigative journalist Gongadze was abducted in 2000. His headless body was later found near Kyiv. Komarov, also an investigative journalist, died after being attacked in Cherkasy in central Ukraine in 2019.

International outrage over alleged abuses of international humanitarian law and war crimes committed by the Russian military have received much media attention, and observers are demanding that the killings of journalists such as Levin will also lead to independent international investigations and those responsible brought to justice.

²¹ <https://cpj.org/2022/07/awards-sevgil-musaieva-ukraine/>

²² <https://rsf.org/en/exclusive-rsf-investigation-death-maks-levin-information-and-evidence-collected-indicates>

²³ <https://rsf.org/en/ukraine>

The legal framework

Since the 2014 Maidan revolution, several sets of media laws have been adopted seeking to improve media transparency, access to information and the protection of journalists. The creation of the independent public broadcaster *Suspilne* in 2017 was one of the most significant of these reforms.

Steps were taken to promote the Ukrainian language and laws passed in 2019 have mandated that at least 75 percent of national television broadcasts be in Ukrainian as a way to counter Russian influence.²⁴

Ukrainian unions of journalists, supported by international press freedom groups and journalists' groups, have been critical of a new media law signed into law by Zelensky on 29 December 2022 which they warn will tighten control over media.²⁵

Although lawmakers did take into account many of the concerns expressed by critics of the proposed legislation and incorporated many suggested amendments, the new law has reinforced the powers of the existing media regulator, the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council of Ukraine (NTRBC), which critics say is already politically compromised.

Half of the council's members are appointed by the president and the other half by parliament, where his ruling party has the majority. Journalists fear the council will become an instrument for exerting undue political influence on the media.

The NTRBC can, among other things, impose fines, revoke licenses and temporarily block publications without judicial notice. The new law allows this body to regulate the whole media landscape with print, broadcast, radio and online press, as well as social media all coming under its radar.

The National Union of Journalists of Ukraine held meetings while the law was being drawn up involving up to 5,000 journalists and editors as well as government representatives. However, it says the government ignored the union's comments.

Alexie Pogorelov, president of the Ukrainian Media Business Association and a member of the Commission on Journalism Ethics, believes the media law needs revision. He says it should ensure a level playing field and equality of economic conditions for different types of community media. As it stands, he says, "this is absolutely the opposite."

"The law about media is violating the constitution of Ukraine from this point of view and needs to be changed," he said.²⁶

The European Federation of Journalists and other groups are also demanding that the government discuss these legislative changes with the National Union of Journalists and the Independent Union of Journalists.

"A state regulator that has so much power, to the point of dispensing with the courts, cannot be under the total control of the government," warned the president of the EFJ, Maja Sever. "The duty of solidarity with Ukrainians in the face of the Russian aggressor should not prevent us from criticizing laws that threaten freedom of the press and the right of citizens to access credible, pluralistic and independent information."²⁷

²⁴ The background to these cases and the problem of impunity is set out here <https://rsf.org/en/ukraine>

²⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39302909>

²⁶ Comments for this report, 11 May 2023.

²⁷ <https://www.rtl.be/actu/belgique/politique/le-syndicat-europeen-des-journalistes-preoccupe-par-la-liberte->

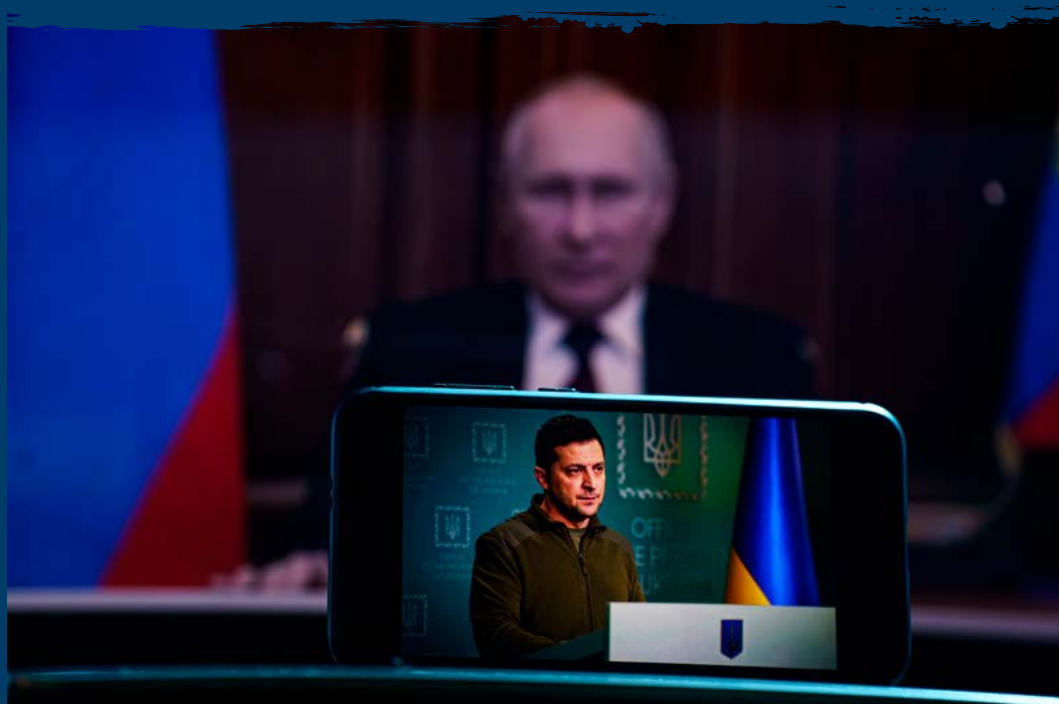
Public media and the United News Marathon

The transformation of the public broadcaster *Suspilne* from an old fashioned, Soviet-style state broadcaster into “the best alternative to the oligarch-owned TV channels” began in 2017 with a massive restructuring and partnerships with BBC and Deutsche Welle Akademie

Spending was cut, falsely inflated staff numbers reduced, and a new supervisory board appointed which included a majority of members representing civil society. *Suspilne* launched a popular digital news platform, and a greater emphasis was placed on quality journalism and editorial independence. One useful legacy of its days as a state broadcaster has been *Suspilne*’s country-wide network which includes two national TV channels, several national radio stations and local TV and radio in all the regions.

“The best thing in Ukraine media is *Suspilne*,” says one media analyst. “It is very good. It has big branches in the regions where usually all you get is the ‘you pay and they publish’ kind of journalism. *Suspilne* is not afraid of local politicians. It doesn’t take money. It’s an island of independent journalism.”

Suspilne’s reporting during the 2019 election campaign was recognised as the only media source with no signs of hidden political advertising - a common phenomenon in Ukraine known as ‘jeansa’ – a corrupt system where candidates pay for stories disguised as news.



Kyiv, Ukraine - 2022, March 7: Volodymyr Zelensky the president of Ukraine on TV. Russia president Vladimir Putin in the background. Photo © Rokas Tenys/shutterstock.com

Suspilne was rewarded by an increased audience share although its viewer numbers were still below that of the main oligarch channels whose programmes have better “outreach, quality of content and resources”. “The ambition was to be the BBC of Ukraine, but in terms of viewing figures, it’s currently more comparable to PBS in the US,” says another media analyst.

The network gained a fresh surge of popularity and new audiences when it joined the United News Marathon to broadcast around the clock with each channel taking a six-hour slot.

The marathon also included StarLightMedia, 1+1 Media, Rada and Inter Media Group which operate the most watched television channels in Ukraine. The broadcasters also agreed to decode their satellite signals to reach audiences around the world.²⁸

The marathon profoundly affected the oligarch owners who had previously used their channels as tools for political gain rather than for profit. By joining together, they surrendered their considerable influence on Ukrainian society and political life.

Joining the marathon was a huge shift for Ukraine’s oligarchs who have been competing fiercely for audiences since the country gained its independence from the Soviet Union. Prior to the Russian invasion, oligarchs controlled the channels watched by approximately 76 percent of the television audience and their support could make or break politicians.²⁹

“The way they were before, depending on what channel you watched, it depended on what opinion you received,” said one Ukrainian media analyst. “This marathon has really changed the tone sharply. In the first days after the invasion, they voluntarily decided to unite their efforts. It wasn’t inspired by the president or the office of the president.”

In the early days of the conflict, stations from opposite sides of the political divide, which had previously used the airwaves to promote the interests of their oligarch owners and political point scoring, instead focused on informing the public about the national emergency.

Media monitoring at the time found little evidence of the usual toxic speakers and biased journalism that had dominated national television stations prior to the invasion. As in the past, *Suspilne* was found to be the best in terms of balance and professional standards.

The marathon has been popular with older citizens even if, as surveys show, that most Ukrainians get their news from Telegram and other social media rather than traditional television outlets.

Millions of Ukrainians have left the country since 24 February or have been internally displaced which makes traditional ways of measuring viewership impossible.³⁰

An annual survey by USAID-Internews found that more than 60 percent of marathon viewers watch it every day with another 30 percent watching it every week. They told Internews they trusted the content and spoke positively about the quality of the analysis, promptness and reliability.³¹

²⁸ <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-pospilkuavavsya-z-ukrayinskimi-zhurnalist-73909>

²⁹ <http://ukraine.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/indicators>

³⁰ <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/why-ukraines-steel-tycoon-closed-his-media-empire>; <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3510895-z-ukraini-vid-pocatku-vijni-viihali-ponad-77-milijona-ludej-dani-mvs.html>

³¹ https://detector-media.translate.goog/infospace/article/205446/2022-11-29-iedyni-novyiny-dyvlyatsya-32-ukraintsiv-i-mayzhe-vsi-vony-doviryayut-informatsii-spilnogo-telemarafonu/?_x_tr_sl=uk&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=sc

Analysts agree that in the first months of invasion, the marathon was important to society and played a key role in providing reliable information but now many believe it has served its purpose and should be closed.

Ukraine's wealthiest men may also prefer a return to business as usual. The marathon profoundly affected the oligarch owners who had previously used their channels as tools for political gain rather than for profit. By joining together, they surrendered their considerable influence on Ukrainian society and political life.

In July 2022, Ukraine's richest man, Rinat Akhmetov, said Media Group Ukraine would hand over the licences for its television channels and print media to the government. Four thousand media workers lost their jobs at Media Group which owned more than 10 TV channels and online outlets.

Akhmetov blamed a law passed by parliament in September 2021 to curb the political influence of oligarchs on his decision to exit his media businesses. However, analysts point out Akhmetov's media assets were loss making before the war, and too costly to maintain when coupled with the destruction of his Azovstal plant in Mariupol, other damaged factories and a 98 percent collapse in advertising revenue.³³



Rinat Akhmetov. Photo via Facebook

³² <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/ukraines-richest-man-announces-his-holdings-exit-media-business-2022-07-11/>

³³ <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/07/20/i-am-not-going-to-be-an-oligarch>

Press freedom on the home front

Sirhiy Guz, a journalist and former leader of the independent union of journalists and now a member of the Commission on Journalistic Ethics and editor-in-chief of the *Clever City Kamianske* newspaper, says journalists are striving to protect press freedom while at the same time reporting on Russia's military campaign.³⁴

He says new rules governing the work of the media during wartime, severe restrictions on media access to the frontline areas and the consolidation of broadcast news through the United News Marathon are undermining the national consensus reached between media, society and government at the start of the invasion.

"Many Ukrainian journalists are now refusing to accept these kinds of restrictions," he says. "They increasingly declare (albeit mostly in private) the need for collective action against excessive state control."

He says Ukrainian journalists are dealing with a new balance of power as a result of the Russian invasion. "The state now has much more control over the country's media environment – from keeping certain channels off air to launching new ones."

Other channels have been switched off from the main networks, though they still broadcast by satellite or online. For example, three national TV channels – *Channel 5*, *Direct* and *Espresso* – were unexpectedly cut off from the main digital TV network in April 2022. Prior to the disconnection, the government had ordered them to work with other television channels as part of the United News Marathon.

While suspicion about the political underpinning of the channels' blocking continues, others are concerned about how the government's response to the war is amplifying the role of the state in the media sphere, in contrast to a pre-war push for "denationalisation".

All three channels were associated with former president Petro Poroshenko, a long-standing opponent of Zelensky.

In April 2023, Reporters Without Borders called on the Ukrainian authorities to restore the channels. "A year later, it is still impossible to establish who exactly, why and how this decision [to remove access] was made," RSF said.³⁵

While suspicion about the political underpinning of the channels' blocking continues, others are concerned about how the government's response to the war is amplifying the role of the state in the media sphere, in contrast to a pre-war push for "denationalisation".

Nastya Stanko, an experienced war reporter who currently works for the independent *Hromadske* website, believes some Ukrainian journalists are ready to give up their basic rights, because they think they need to protect society from bad news – and the authorities are taking advantage of this.

³⁴ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/author/serhiy-guz/>

³⁵ [https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2023/03/Ukraine percent20trois percent20chai percentCC percent82nes percent20bloque percentCC percent81es percent20depuis percent20un percent20an percent20Ukr_0.pdf](https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2023/03/Ukraine%20trois%20chais%20percentCC%20percent82nes%20bloque%20percentCC%20percent81es%20depuis%20un%20an%20Ukr_0.pdf)



Photo ©FOTO Eak/Shutterstock.com

But the state's control over Ukrainian media is frustrating for the country's journalists, says Guz. He points to recent polling by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation, a Ukrainian polling organisation, which carried out a survey of 132 journalists in January 2023 and found that:

- The proportion of journalists who believe systemic censorship exists in Ukraine has doubled from 12 percent in 2019 to 26 percent;
- 62 percent of respondents consider the United News Marathon a form of censorship; and
- 11 percent are in favour of continuing with the arrangement while 65 percent believe broadcasters should return to their normal work.³⁶

There have also been complaints, particularly among the thousands of international journalists accredited to cover the war, about the restrictions that have been placed on reporting. In the early days of the conflict, ordinary soldiers made regular social media posts about the fighting, but this has long since stopped, replaced by strict regulations about what can – and cannot – be filmed.

That includes military facilities, the movements of Ukrainian troops and machinery, where they are deployed, the operation of air defence forces and the locations of civil defence facilities. Journalists cannot film shelling or flying missiles, nor show anything that would identify where they have hit and the damage they caused until several hours afterwards.³⁷

"At first they were naïve and showed us everything," said one international journalist interviewed for this report. "With an accreditation you could see everything, then restrictions kicked in as they realised that they were giving away intelligence to the enemy. Now they show you what they want to show you. They need to maintain the correct image to keep support coming into the country.

³⁶ <https://zmina.info/news/zhurnalisty-nazvaly-osnovni-porushennya-svobody-slova-pid-chas-rosiyskoyi-voyny>

³⁷ Transformation of Media Literacy Sphere in Full-Scale War in Ukraine; Ukrainian Media and Communication Institute; February-June 2022; Diana Dutsyk, Dr. Dariya Orlova, Halyna Budivska.

Informing the population, which includes their own families, without terrifying them is one reason journalists might be self-censoring their reporting, says a local media analyst. That includes not criticising the president and his team and complying with the restrictions without complaint.

"It's not always as straightforward as good versus evil and the challenge is to be impartial."

RSF has expressed concern that "unjustified obstacles to the production of reliable and objective reporting persist in the field". It cited journalists forbidden to move around and being pressured to portray Ukrainian soldiers as victims, never aggressors. The government calls this self-regulation but RSF is concerned that it endangers the objective coverage of events.³⁸

Informing the population, which includes their own families, without terrifying them is one reason journalists might be self-censoring their reporting, says a local media analyst. That includes not criticising the president and his team and complying with the restrictions without complaint.

"Because none of us had covered death and atrocities in such volumes as we see now, we have to show it in such a way as to tell the truth to the world, but at the same time not to cause additional trauma to society and people who experienced the horrors of war. That is why journalists often resort to self-censorship when covering difficult topics."

The Commission on Journalistic Ethics has also spoken out in defence of the rights of journalists during wartime. "Armed forces and law enforcement agencies should maintain a reasonable balance between security and defence measures and the public's right to receive verified information from professional media," the commission said last June.³⁹

"It is unacceptable to give preference to certain media or journalists over others, to prohibit the work of some without explaining the reasons while allowing others."

³⁸ <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-urges-ukrainian-authorities-lift-arbitrary-restrictions-reporters-field>

³⁹ <https://cje.org.ua/statements/zayava-shchodo-neprypustymosti-tysku-i-zastosuvannia-podviynykh-standartiv-do-zhurnalistiv-iaki-vysvitliuiut-viynu/>

The “information war”

Prior to the invasion, the UK's *Guardian* newspaper described Russia's approach to Ukraine as a “hybrid war strategy based on sowing confusion and disinformation”.⁴⁰

Russia's “aggressive information war” with Ukraine began as a means of justifying its invasion of Crimea and Donbas in 2014⁴¹ and, according to research conducted by the EUvsDisinfo project, by 2019 nearly 40 percent of its disinformation campaigns targeted Ukraine.⁴²

Kremlin narratives broadcast via a network of websites, social media channels and messaging apps propagate anti-Western, anti-NATO narratives: that Ukraine is a corrupt and failed state; and that its people are poor and becoming poorer. Other overriding themes have been that the country is ruled by George Soros, the US, the EU and the IMF; and that a genocide of Russian people by Ukrainian aggressors is taking place in Donbas.

A February 2022 report into pro-Kremlin disinformation surrounding the then-threatened invasion of Ukraine found most disinformation was aimed at a Russian domestic audience such as stories about a chemical attack planned by the US in Donbas and reports that Ukraine was planning to deploy a nerve-paralysing agent in the region.⁴³

Analysts say that Ukraine is also successfully using propaganda to get its messages across, which can be summed up as ‘brave fighting men and women defying an evil, yet slightly clueless, invader’.

Russian disinformation about Ukraine has increased significantly and become much more aggressive since the war began say analysts “and often contains direct hate speech questioning the existence of Ukraine and Ukrainians and, thus, encouraging war crimes. Russia uses all possible modern media channels (including social networks and messengers) to share disinformation and propaganda.”⁴⁴

The psychological impact of this constant barrage of malicious and toxic information has to be measured but there can be little doubt that it raises public anxiety and reinforces the need for news media and independent journalism in Ukraine to provide a trustworthy stream of reliable information.

Although not on the same scale as the Russian information offensive, analysts say that Ukraine is also successfully using propaganda to get its messages across, which can be summed up as ‘brave fighting men and women defying an evil, yet slightly clueless, invader’.

In the early days of the war, social media buzzed with videos, pictures and memes of Ukrainians humiliating the Russians. They included a farmer towing away a Russian tank with his tractor which is now on a postage stamp; a man removing a landmine from the road with his bare hands; and videos set to patriotic music of the Ukrainian army capturing Russian tanks.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/14/the-guardian-view-on-megaphone-diplomacy-countering-russian-disinformation>

⁴¹ <https://euobserver.com/opinion/153115>

⁴² <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/how-to-fight-pro-russia-disinformation-ukraine>

⁴³ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/pro-kremlin-media-stoke-tensions-around-ukraine/>

⁴⁴ Transformation of Media Literacy Sphere in Full-Scale War in Ukraine; Ukrainian Media and Communication Institute; February-June 2022; Diana Dutsyk, Dr. Dariya Orlova, Halyna Budivska.

⁴⁵ <https://bit.ly/3P25E2R>; <https://bit.ly/3F7sSQr>; <https://www.voanews.com/a/ukraine-celebrates-its-tank-towing-farmers-/6678720.html>



Online speech by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on April 2022 from Kyiv, Ukraine. © Stock Holm/shutterstock.com

Some commentators have questioned whether they are 100 percent authentic or simply part of the domestic and international propaganda war being waged by both sides which has effectively weaponised social media.⁴⁶ False and misleading videos claiming to be from the conflict were uncovered as part of a BBC investigation.⁴⁷

According to one article from *Al Jazeera*, "neither side could nor should be trusted to reduce the fog of war, because both are fully engaged in psychological warfare, which is key to winning in Ukraine. In fact, both sides are propagating their own selective facts and myths, while censoring counterclaims, as each needs to maintain an appearance of progress."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuciu/2022/03/02/real-or-fake-video-of-farmer-stealing-russian-tank-landmine-removed-with-bare-hands-and-comparisons-of-putin-to-hitler-trending/?sh=4c48e1d543ec>; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuciu/2022/10/01/ukraine-uses-social-media-to-share-images-from-the-frontlines-while-russia-offers-rallies/?sh=5818472d6e2b>

⁴⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/60513452>

⁴⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/8/4/western-media-and-the-war-on-truth-in>

The ethical challenges

All journalists, whether those reporting for Ukrainian media or foreign correspondents, face a supreme test of professionalism when covering the war. The need to report accurately, to show humanity to the victims of violence, and to avoid surrendering control of the news to military or political players are just the most obvious of the ethical obligations facing media.

In Ukraine, where reporters work in a whirlwind of disinformation and propaganda, and where pressure to support the national war effort is understandable, the exercise of journalism requires even more attachment to professionalism and action to avoid hate speech, avoid deliberate incitement to violence and eliminate stereotypes in reporting.

One often neglected duty, for example, is to provide gender-sensitive reporting that shuns stereotypes or that limits and trivializes the lives of women in a situation where news coverage is profoundly gendered and largely male-dominated.

Men are asked to explain and interpret the conflict in many different roles: as combatants, warlords, experts and politicians. Women's opinions are rarely asked and if they are, it is usually from the perspective of victims.

A reliable stream of information from news media is essential to help the public who are often confused and overwhelmed by the abundance of rumour, speculation and false narratives found across the information landscape.

Integrating a gender lens into conflict reporting involves presenting verified information in a fair and balanced context, which gives voice to marginalised actors, without stereotypes.

With this in mind, Ukraine's public broadcaster *Suspilne* has worked with UN Women supported the preparation of guidelines on gender and conflict-sensitive reporting.

Providing an ethical focus requires news media to be more aware and to demonstrate attachment to the core values of reporting – accuracy, impartiality, independence, accountability and a sense of humanity.

As Hanna Chernenko, the Kharkiv-based frontline journalist said, "the main thing is not to cause trouble, not to harm and thus not to lose one's good name."

Clearly, trusted, accurate journalists are needed to separate truth from fiction. A reliable stream of information from news media is essential to help the public who are often confused and overwhelmed by the abundance of rumour, speculation and false narratives found across the information landscape.

Prior to the war, a survey by the Kyiv-based watchdog Detector Media⁵¹ found that 48 percent of the population had a low level of media literacy and couldn't distinguish fake news from genuine stories. Only 21 percent knew that *Suspilne* was the public broadcaster, with 35 percent believing there is no public broadcaster at all. Fifty-

⁴⁹ <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/07/guidelines-for-gender-and-conflict-sensitive-reporting-europe>

⁵⁰ <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2023/02/24/ukraine-it-happened-more-than-once-that-you-no-longer-ask-questions-you-just-listen-ukrainian-journalist-hanna-chenenko>

⁵¹ https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/186437/REPORT_MEDIALITERACY_INDEX-DM_EN.pdf

nine percent of respondents didn't care who owned news channels. Women were considerably less media literate than men.⁵²

The 2022 annual Internews-USAID survey – Attitudes of the population towards the media and consumption of different types of media – found that 83 percent of respondents were aware of the existence of false material but did not believe it was an urgent problem. Seventy percent were confident they could recognise it.⁵³

Despite the upheaval of war, nine universities from around Ukraine have continued developing online media literacy courses as part of the EU-funded DESTIN project.⁵⁴ The courses show participants how to filter out genuine news from fake and protect themselves from the influence of inaccurate information. This project also highlighted the development of standards, integrity and professionalism in the field of education and brought together 20 European institutions, including 10 Ukrainian universities and governmental and non-governmental organisations.⁵⁵

Another programme, in the same vein but with an eye firmly on the bottom line, was launched in May 2023 by Reporters Without Borders and the Microsoft news support organisation NewsGuard.

It rolls out a ground-breaking move to help media to independently certify their editorial standards and quality journalism through the Journalism Trust Initiative, which aims to build trust with the audience, but also opens the door to lucrative advertising opportunities for struggling Ukraine media.⁵⁶

A number of leading Ukrainian journalism outlets including *Hromadske*, *Lb.UA*, *Novynarnia*, *Hmarochos*, *Svoi City* and *Your City TV* have already agreed to be part of the initial round of 25 beneficiaries of the programme which is funded by the European Union delegation in Ukraine.

Ukraine's politicians have also been working to improve media literacy. The United News Marathon has been warning about the dangers of propaganda and disinformation, and the president and local officials regularly highlight the dangers of fake videos in their broadcasts across all information channels. The messages are getting through, in part because of the united communications policy which is fast and accessible through popular social media and messaging apps such as Telegram.

"By reinforcing communication with the population, the government and authorities at different levels have made an unconscious positive impact on the media literacy sphere"⁵⁷ which has "minimised the broadcasting of fake information and Russian narratives".⁵⁸

⁵² <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-zelenskyy-can-challenge-ukraines-media-magnates/>

⁵³ https://ms-detector-media.translate.google/trendi/post/30750/2022-11-29-doslidzhennya-internews-63-ukraintsiv-pid-chas-viyny-ne-vvazhayut-aktualnoyu-problemu-dezinformatsii/?_x_tr_sl=uk&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=sc

⁵⁴ <https://www.destin-project.info/media-literacy-outreach-courses/>; <https://examenarium.sumdu.edu.ua/promo/program/135>

⁵⁵ <https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/projects/destin/>

⁵⁶ <https://www.journalismtrustinitiative.org/news>

⁵⁷ Transformation of Media Literacy Sphere in Full-Scale War in Ukraine; Ukrainian Media and Communication Institute; February-June 2022; Diana Dutsyk, Dr. Dariya Orlova, Halyna Budivska.

⁵⁸ Transformation of Media Literacy Sphere in Full-Scale War in Ukraine; Ukrainian Media and Communication Institute; February-June 2022; Diana Dutsyk, Dr. Dariya Orlova, Halyna Budivska.

Telegram and the disinformation trap

Telegram, which has the interface of a messaging app but also carries news channels, is one major source of disinformation. Citizens use it to quickly find out what's going on with the war, friends and neighbours form groups about topics of common interest while Kremlin propagandists log on "to amplify key disinformation messages".⁵⁹

Telegram is hugely popular for both information and communication, and its use has increased significantly since the invasion, with far more Ukrainians getting their news from the messaging app than television.

A survey from May 2022 found that 76.6 percent of respondents used social networks as a source of information for receiving news compared with 66.7 percent who turned to television. Among social networks, Telegram was the most popular (65.7 percent), YouTube was second with 61.2 percent and Facebook in third with 57.8 percent.⁶⁰

Mainstream media outlets have bowed to the inevitable and now have their own Telegram channels along with local officials in small towns looking for the easiest, and quickest way to let people know what is going on in their communities.

Television is losing out to the speed at which Telegram can spread information about the war, some of which could be lifesaving. Journalists spend time searching for reliable sources and verifying information, observing the professional standards, which takes time,⁶¹ while Telegram channels can instantly distribute unsourced rumours.

Anonymous channels were always a feature of Telegram but have proliferated since the outbreak of war, some with millions of followers, which are far quicker than traditional outlets to publish news about missile attacks or evacuation routes.

Even before the war, Zelensky preferred Telegram and social media to mainstream outlets for communicating with voters. His Telegram channel⁶² has nearly one million subscribers and his Twitter account⁶³ nearly seven million followers. Social media is now the most immediate and reliable way for Ukrainians to hear from their president.

In the past Zelensky was criticised for cutting out traditional media but now is being praised for communicating directly with the people, particularly young Ukrainians who get their news from social media and Telegram rather than television.

When Russia claimed he had fled the country at the beginning of the war, Zelensky immediately appeared on social media from Kyiv, calm and very much in control, providing reassurance to the population, and the international community. He has continued to make regular updates that one media educator called "the daily show".

An actor before he was a politician, Zelensky has used his performance skills to speak directly to the people, rather than through the filter of media owned by rivals who may not support his agenda.

⁵⁹ <https://www.voanews.com/a/6423702.html>

⁶⁰ <https://www.jta.com.ua/trends/yak-transformuiutsia-ukrainski-media-u-vohni-viyny-lektsiia-diany-dutsyk/>

⁶¹ Transformation of Media Literacy Sphere in Full-Scale War in Ukraine; Ukrainian Media and Communication Institute; February-June 2022; Diana Dutsyk, Dr. Dariya Orlova, Halyna Budivska.

⁶² https://t.me/s/V_Zelenskiy_official

⁶³ <https://twitter.com/ZelenskyyUa>

"They are the master in these new channels of communication," said a Kyiv-based media analyst, "After February 2022 it was good that they did this communication in such a way because they knew how to inform people, how to bring the necessary important information to the people."

She believes the government's "one-voice" approach to communication is a radical change for the better. "This contributed to a sense of unity and helped to avoid mass panic in the first days of the war, and to resist constant information and psychological attacks."⁶⁴

Some local journalists have complained that Zelensky and his team pay more attention to Western media than Ukrainian outlets, granting interviews to foreign journalists in an attempt to influence their governments and persuade them to send weapons and other support.

One pragmatic commentator says the president has little choice but to court journalists from outside the country. "You have to make people hear the country's voice, and for the majority of people in the world, the country is represented by Zelensky," he said.



Photo ©tanuha2001/shutterstock.com

⁶⁴ Transformation of Media Literacy Sphere in Full-Scale War in Ukraine; Ukrainian Media and Communication Institute; February-June 2022; Diana Dutsyk, Dr. Dariya Orlova, Halyna Budivska

Solidarity and support for media

The wave of international sympathy and support for Ukraine in the wake of the war has seen unprecedented levels of solidarity and practical assistance for journalists, editors and news organisation.

Support from journalists' groups, publishers and media development organisations has ranged from providing helmets and safety equipment for frontline journalists to the provision of safe havens for refugee journalists and cash donations to help stricken media in the country survive.

Ukraine journalists working in Russia and Belarus joined a flood of independent media personnel who have had to flee from Moscow, Minsk and other news centres in the region in the wake of a political crackdown on free speech and independent journalism.

In Russia, many distinguished reporters and complete editorial boards of well-known outlets like *Novaya Gazeta*, *Meduza* and many other smaller media have fled to surrounding countries. In Russia alone, at least 1,000 journalists left their country in the 12 months since the war began, according to the recent report by the Net Freedoms Project, Setevye Svobody.⁶⁵

Alexei Pogorelov, president of the Ukrainian Media Business Association and a member of the Commission on Journalism Ethics, said newspaper publishers who are part of the global network WAN-IFRA were among the first responders.

"In early March 2022 they sent us a letter and said that they are already sending money to support Ukrainian media," he said.

Media support groups like the European Federation of Journalists have launched campaigns to raise funds to support Ukraine journalists and crowd funding campaigns to help journalists buy safety equipment, pay salaries, get insurance, flee the country or set up newsrooms outside Ukraine, which have also popped up across the internet.

One GoFundMe page to 'keep Ukraine's media going' had raised nearly £1 million by December 2022.⁶⁶ A crowd funder to support the *Kyiv Independent* newspaper had raised £6.7 million.⁶⁷

Free Press unlimited, the Dutch press freedom support group, launched Media Lifeline – a coalition to protect journalists and keep reliable information available in and around Ukraine.⁶⁸ They report that they have helped more than 1,000 Ukrainian journalists, as well as independent Russian journalists, to reach safety. MiCT, a non-profit organisation based in Berlin, has created the Media Makers Fellowship to provide a safe haven for media practitioners to continue their work.

One initiative led to a new media coalition that includes *Bonnier Media* (Sweden), *Danske Medier* (Denmark), *Gazeta Wyborcza Foundation* (Poland), *Medialiitto* (Finland), *Mediebedriftene* (Norway) and *Tidningsutgivarna* (Sweden). They set up the Ukrainian

⁶⁵ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RiYPt8dkQAOYW6Yz4cO9LP9oChbVeqSd/view>

⁶⁶ <https://www.gofundme.com/f/keep-ukraines-media-going>

⁶⁷ <https://www.gofundme.com/f/kyivindependent-launch>. The *Kyiv Independent* was set up by former staff of the *Kyiv Post* which was abruptly closed by its owner Adnan Kivan in 2021.

⁶⁸ <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/projects/media-lifeline-ukraine>

Media Fund to provide financial and material assistance to local media outlets, journalists and photojournalists. As this report was being finalised the fund had raised almost one million Euros.

The fund has focused on local and regional media because they have suffered most as a consequence of the war. Many outlets have seen a 40 to 80 percent drop in their income, lost their offices and equipment and can't afford to pay their staff.

The scramble to stand alongside Ukraine journalists in their hour of need has been important for their morale but has also underlined the momentous challenge ahead, which is to create a media environment during the war which will be a platform for sustainable media development for the future.

Nataliya Gumenyuk, an award-winning journalist and founder of the Public Interest Journalism Lab in Ukraine, says media support in the country needs to place less emphasis on commercial sustainability.

In an interview with the US-based Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) in July 2022 after she received the Democracy Award of the government funded National Endowment for Democracy, she said media support had to stop being tied to unrealistic short-term objectives of achieving commercial sustainability.⁶⁹

According to an analysis by CIMA, foreign donors provided almost \$150 million to support the development of Ukraine's media sector between 2010 and 2019. Although these resources have fostered a community of high-quality independent media outlets and cultivated an appreciation for free speech among the Ukrainian public, the gains could be at risk if the Ukrainian media sector is pushed by donors into a commercial model of sustainability, says Gumenyuk.⁷⁰

"For the last three or four years, quite a lot of discussion and funds were put into the idea and condition that media should be sustainable," she said. "An incredible amount of the donors' money was put into mediocre marketing managers to play the game as if they are commercially viable."

Her comments highlight a growing debate about the sustainability of news outlets. Media the world over have seen a rapid shift in advertising revenues toward social media networks with dire consequences for journalism.

UNESCO and global publishing organisations are examining the viability of other options and how other kinds of public support and philanthropy can be used to support journalism.⁷¹

These debates are critically important to Ukraine's media leaders who seek to set priorities for the long-term survival of media, even in the midst of the ongoing conflict.

Alexei Pogorelov says the media want to build upon the solidarity and support they have received so far. In particular, he highlights the importance of investigative journalism and the role of the media in combating local corruption around the receipt and dispersal of billions of international aid dollars. "News media need to be encouraged and empowered to monitor and encourage internal transparency over international assistance."

The major focus for media development for the future must be to strengthen local and regional media. "To rebuild Ukraine first of all, you have to rebuild and develop local communities," he said.

"To develop our communities we must develop effective local media. They must be effective and useful communication platforms to unite and to engage local people.

⁶⁹ <https://www.cima.ned.org/blog/to-support-ukrainian-media-abandon-the-sustainability-agenda/>

⁷⁰ <https://cmds.ceu.edu/sites/cmcs.ceu.hu/files/attachment/basicpage/1988/mimukrainefunding.pdf>

⁷¹ <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/solutions-towards-media-viability-and-data-transparency-explored-world-news-media-congress>



Female activist gives interview to Ukrainian TV channel, Uzhhorod, Ukraine in Apr 2022. © Attila Fedyk/shutterstock.com

"We have for five years been trying to improve local media from this perspective and frankly we are at the very beginning of this process," he said.

"We need to strengthen our efforts through cooperation with colleagues from European countries where such an expertise can be found.

"With such knowledge and donors' support we will help local media and at the same time foster community development. "This will be to create a very powerful tool not only to monitor how money is spent, but also to ensure the effectiveness of all the support that is directed towards rebuilding Ukraine."

This view is supported by Hanna Chernenko, a Kharkiv-based journalist and a member of the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine, who comes from the Luhansk region in the Donbas.⁷²

"Local media are really in need of help. Several television and radio stations have closed in Kharkiv. But the situation is extremely difficult for newspapers too. They, especially those who moved to territories that have today become front-line or freed ones, are the first to need assistance."

While the evidence suggests that the revival of some local newspapers is in doubt given the way the war has reinforced the impact of historical decline of local print journalism, the call for urgent and sustainable support for news media movement to restore local journalism is compelling.

Here are the frontline communities of Ukraine that have suffered most from the cruelties of war and who have been thrown into the shadows of an information war. Without access to reliable and truthful information they are most at risk from the threat of ignorance, poverty and fear that follows when journalism and truth-telling is put to the sword.

⁷² <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2023/02/24/ukraine-it-happened-more-than-once-that-you-no-longer-ask-questions-you-just-listen-ukrainian-journalist-hanna-chenenko/>

Conclusion

The media in Ukraine has entirely transformed in the 12 months since an early draft of this report was written. In particular, rival oligarchs have united to provide the public with united, timely and accurate information. But this has come at a cost to media pluralism, which dominated the landscape before the war.

With the United News marathon having passed its first anniversary and calls growing for it to end amid concerns of dwindling viewership, Ukraine's president may prefer to keep it going. Taking control of the country's main television channels has, after all, silenced many of his political rivals.

Some analysts worry he may be tempted to continue the marathon long after it has served its purpose, with major repercussion for press freedom.

There is little doubt that television news is on the wane, leaving messaging apps such as Telegram to take up the information slack and there are genuine fears that the public will face an information vacuum if Ukraine's chaotic and competitive media sector doesn't re-emerge.

The spread of both foreign and domestic disinformation via these often anonymous and unsourced outlets remains of grave concern.

Ukraine's journalists have suffered immense trauma since February 2022. Most were entirely unprepared for covering a war in their own communities and emotional support will be needed, both now and in the future, to help them cope with what has happened.

Flak jackets and helmets are important of course but will not help with their psychological trauma once the fighting has ended. If these brave journalists are to play their important role in rebuilding Ukraine, their sacrifices must not be forgotten, and their work must be supported.

Finally, looking at the current situation and future perspectives, a test of the Ukraine government's commitment to a free and fair media is likely to be the future of United News and the government's response to calls from within Ukraine for more dialogues on media law and policy and for more media support.

The plurality of media ownership, the quality of journalistic freedom, and the willingness of political leaders to create a media environment deeply rooted in the values of transparency and respect for human rights are all benchmarks for the democracy that the current conflict seeks to preserve.

A focus on solving the crisis facing local and regional media and fresh thinking on how to ensure the sustainability of the media is needed, but the broad outlines of a new independent media landscape are emerging in the wake of international solidarity and the resilience of defiant journalists on the ground.

Material for this report is drawn from extensive and a number of on the spot discussions and interviews with expert sources including interviews with:

| | |
|--|---|
| Bogdana Nosova | Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv |
| Roman Paziuk | Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University |
| Andriy Kulykov , Founder, presenter | Hromadske Radio (Destin partner) |
| Tetyana Fedoriv , Editor | Hromadske Radio (Destin partner) |
| Alexei Pogorelov , President | Ukrainian Media Business Association |
| Oksana Tkachenko | TCH 1+1 media channel (oligarch owned) |
| Roksolana Lisovska , Head of international news | Ukraine public broadcaster |
| Roman Kulchynsky | Texty.org.ua |
| Tetiana Pasova | Ukrainian parliamentary newspaper |
| Yuriy Zalizniak , Associate Professor, Ivan Franko National University in Lviv New Media department | DESTIN Lviv (regional media) |
| Igor Kossov , News Editor | Kiev Post |
| Oksana Romaniuk , executive director | Institute of Mass Information |
| Vadim Miskyi and Galina Petrenko | Detector Media, study on journalism education |
| Diana Dutsyk | Journalism trainer, Founder of Ukrainian Media & communication Institute, media expert |
| Vitali Ryback | Internews Ukraine |
| Gillian McCormack | Internews Ukraine |
| Mark Grant | Sky News |

APPENDIX

Recommendations for further action to assist and support the media in Ukraine

Adopted by members of the Global Forum for Media Development for May 3, World Press Freedom Day 2023

To international media and journalists:

- Fact-check all information that justifies and obfuscates the war in Ukraine and **avoid spreading the main narratives of Russian propaganda**.
- **Engage Ukrainian media and expert communities in communication and cooperation at the international level** so that the global information space is filled with facts and expert comments on the situation in Ukraine instead of Russian propaganda.
- **Develop mentoring programs for Ukrainian local media** which could include business management and strategic thinking support and training for editors on where to look for funding opportunities and guide them during the application process.
- **Assist in preventing the creation of media deserts in Ukraine** at the national, regional, and hyperlocal levels.

To private and public donors and funders of professional journalism:

- **Ensure media viability in the country by avoiding focusing on specific regions**. It is important to support the media not only from the regions near the frontline but from the whole of Ukraine. Additionally, it's dangerous to support only large and strong media organizations while leaving small ones to die without support.
- **Help Ukrainian media become financially independent**. Assist in developing a stable monetization system and new models of economic sustainability. Look for the formats of support that will ensure a long-term perspective and flexible approaches to the distribution of funds.

To the EU, EU member states, members of the Media Freedom Coalition and all states that care about the right to freedom of expression and access to information:

- Provide support to Ukrainian civil society and media organisations in **monitoring and influencing the constructive implementation of the media law**, understanding its long-term outcomes on the media sector, as well as ensuring that it does not restrict press freedom.
- Search and develop **opportunities for closer interaction and cooperation between Ukrainian and European media markets and media communities**.

To technology, telecoms, internet intermediaries and advertisers:

- **Ensure that content about war crimes and human rights violations is not lost**. Work on the transparency of the policy of the platforms to avoid unofficial restrictions and removal of the graphic content related to war and potential violations of human rights. Media outlets often practise self-censorship to avoid being banned or to prevent their accounts from being suspended.
- **Establish clear protocols and support for fair and effective content moderation practices**. By understanding key actors and sources of information, companies can better respond to crises and ensure that valuable information is preserved.

To media development and journalism support organisations:

- **Prepare a set of recommendations on how to build a sustainable plan for reconstructing Ukrainian media in the long run.** Bring media reconstruction in Ukraine to the agenda of major stakeholders responsible for donor coordination and preparing multi-stakeholder pooling of funds and scenarios for Ukraine to be rebuilt
- **Provide trauma-informed psychological support for Ukrainian journalists,** which means being attentive to how subtleties in programme design and implementation can either augment or diminish feelings of safety.
- **Focus on thematic areas or up-to-date national priorities.** It helps align coordination with sector-level reform or policymaking. Themes that resonate with a broad constituency of local stakeholders and that require urgent action are likely to secure greater ownership and engagement.
- **Map databases and share spreadsheets that provide stakeholders with an up-to-date overview** of the local media development landscape in Ukraine and empower them to make informed decisions on future projects. A centralised and searchable repository of studies, reports, and legislative documents is also likely to enjoy a good level of take-up.



Building Trust in Journalism in Central Eastern Europe

Ethics matter in telling the story of Ukraine

BY AIDAN WHITE

As the war in Ukraine continues, the devastation and human cost of the conflict is mounting. But as well as the human toll, there has been a terrifying assault on democratic values such as freedom of the press. Journalists and human rights defenders in both Ukraine and Russia are facing enormous challenges and independent voices are being stifled.

In Russia, free speech is being systematically extinguished as independent media is closed down and critical reporters are forced to flee the country. In Ukraine, the local media community is fighting a courageous battle for truth-telling in wartime conditions while standing up for press freedom. Everywhere propaganda and censorship have thrown a cloak of secrecy over the most dangerous conflict to break out in Europe since the Second World War.

In this context, the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN), with the support of the Evens Foundation, has commissioned a series of articles about the ethical challenges facing journalists covering this war – in Ukraine, Russia and around the world.

Experts and journalists will write about the ethical challenges of reporting conflict zones; the Ukrainian journalists struggling for impartiality; the courageous resistance of journalists in Russia; and the impact of social media and disinformation on coverage of the conflict.



Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited Bucha, where he talked to local residents and journalists. Photo by President of Ukraine on Flickr (Public Domain CCO 1.0)



Ukrainian refugees at Berlin Central Station. Credit: Matthias Berg on Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

This series will highlight the importance to news media of the five core values of professional journalism as an antidote to propaganda and censorship. These are:

- accuracy and fact-based reporting;
- independence;
- impartiality;
- humanity and respect for others; and
- accountability and responsible reporting.

It can be a struggle to maintain these values at the best of times and is even more difficult during war, when combatants on all sides demonise their opponent and turn to malicious lies and propaganda to win over public opinion.

All journalists reporting the war in Ukraine are facing an ethical struggle to tell the story of the conflict in a fair, unbiased and accurate way.

Several storylines have emerged since the Russian invasion which demonstrate the challenges facing news media. One of the most important concerns is the many allegations of war crimes being committed. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has sent a team of investigators and forensics experts to Ukraine which it describes as a "crime scene".

Telling the truth – even when it hurts

BY JEAN-PAUL MARTHOZ

Though they often claim to be detached observers, journalists enjoy, even unconsciously, being on the right side of history, fighting the “Good War,” defending the “good guys”. The conflict in Ukraine is an example of what Herbert Gans, in his seminal 1980 essay *Deciding What’s News*, calls journalism’s “enduring values”. “Some wars are fiendishly complicated and contain multitudinous shades of grey, but this one is (...) easy to characterize as an old-fashioned morality tale of good versus evil, or David against Goliath,” Ben Coates wrote in *Politico*, 10 days after the Russian invasion.

For most reporters, Ukraine’s resistance to Russia’s aggression has the same moral clarity as other epic struggles, for example against the Somozas in Nicaragua in the 1970s or Myanmar’s military regime today. In Ukraine, many journalists have reacted by rooting for the underdog, lauding the country’s response and resilience. “In the broadest sense, mainstream Western media has been pretty united in denouncing Russia’s invasion,” wrote Jon Allsop in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. The illegality of the war, the indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas, the commission of war crimes and Western governments’ united front against what they see as Putin’s revanchism have inevitably drawn a clear line in the sand.

In early March, Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov pushed back, accusing Western media of being “very emotional”, implying that they were biased and unprofessional in their reporting. But emotions and empathy are part of journalism. “Emotion in journalism is important to convey the lived reality of the situation. It gives voice to victims and survivors, but it also acknowledges how these narratives are shaped. This is all crucial for reporting in Ukraine,” Caitlin Knight argued in the *Press Gazette*.



The President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin at the annual talk with Russian people as seen in a live broadcast on many screens, June 2019. ©Zhenya Voevodina/Shutterstock



Ukrainian journalist sits in a bomb shelter with notebook, waits for the end of the air attack of Russian invaders, works and posts the latest breaking news. Kyiv Ukraine, February 2022. ©Maria Symchych/Shutterstock.

Neutrality is neither a journalistic custom nor a virtue. Journalists are often partisan. Martha Gellhorn, George Orwell, Robert Capa and Andrée Viollis were not neutral during the Spanish civil war and even less so during the Second World War. "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. You can't ask journalists to stop being human in order to be good journalists," Auschwitz survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel famously said. Impartiality doesn't mean inhumanity. As French-Swiss film director Jean-Luc Godard bluntly said, impartiality does not mean giving "five minutes to Hitler and five minutes to the Jews".

During the Balkan wars in the mid-1990s, journalists who stayed in Sarajevo embraced what BBC correspondent Martin Bell called the "journalism of attachment", in solidarity with the besieged population. "Staggered by what they saw, many reporters forged ties to the city. They too had become Sarajevans," remembered RTL and Le Monde reporter Rémy Ourdan in his book *Sarajevo. A Love Story*. They too were asking for a military intervention to crush the snipers and the bombers. "Gone was my wandering impartiality. I was for air strikes, for NATO intervention, for arming and training the Muslims," wrote British war correspondent Anthony Lloyd in his memoir, *My War Gone By, I Miss it So*.

Wars always raise the bar of journalistic responsibility. Ukraine is all the more challenging as it reflects a defining geopolitical shift and is being framed, notes Jason Farago in *The New York Times* as a culture war, as a clash of civilisations between liberal democracy and autocracy. Who in this context would like to be seen as providing comfort to the enemy?

The early August controversy over Amnesty International's statement accusing the Ukrainian military of stationing its troops and artillery near hospitals, schools and residential buildings encapsulated the dilemmas journalists are also facing. It did not really revolve around the facts documented by the organisation, nor on the interpretation of these facts under international humanitarian law, but on its impact in the battle of war narratives.

“Without wanting it, the organisation created material that sounded like support for Russian narratives,” said Oksana Pokalchuk, Amnesty International’s Ukraine director who resigned in protest. Seeking to protect civilians, this research instead became, in her view, a tool of Russian propaganda.

A similar dilemma emerged in early May when the New York Times published a story on the assistance US intelligence services had allegedly provided to the Ukrainian military by helping them to target and kill Russian generals. President Joe Biden was livid, according to news reports. The leaks sparked “an internal freak out at the White House”, Politico wrote. Should the New York Times have abstained from publishing information which might have justified Russia’s upping up the ante?

One of the key challenges for journalists covering war has always been to report on facts which will hurt their own “side”. “No one suggests that Ukrainian forces are always heroic. Few participants emerge unsullied from war and it’s clear that Ukraine has challenges that predate the conflict. But impartiality is simply not about publishing on one side, and then on the other,” wrote Bloomberg opinion columnist Clara Ferreira Marques.

Impartiality requires rejecting false equivalences between the aggressor and the victim or between facts and lies. It excludes the convenient and lazy he said/she said approach. But it does not exempt journalists from covering all sides thoroughly and rigorously. Uncomfortable stories which contradict the pro-Western, anti-Russian discourse on the war must also be told.

A June public opinion survey in Brazil, Germany, Poland, the UK and the US by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that less than half the respondents thought that the media had provided a “range of different perspectives on the conflict”. Russian disinformation is massive but Ukrainians’ “patriotic storytelling at times takes liberties with reality,” wrote Doan Bui in the French (strongly anti-Putin) liberal weekly L’Obs.

Kyiv may also be taking liberties with media freedom. The Committee to Protect Journalists warned on July 28 about a “draft media law that threatens to restrict press freedom in the country and would move it away from European Union standards”.

Of course, the Western media’s war coverage, despite inevitable flaws, cannot be compared with the Russian media which has been put under total state control. But it is a reminder that in liberal democracies, journalists must distinguish themselves by providing all the news (and opinion) “that’s fit to print”. Their core mission is to help citizens understand what is happening and also to keep their own governments accountable and protect them against self-delusion or hubris.

William Howard Russell, who covered the Crimea war for The Times in the mid-1850s, described war correspondents as the “luckless tribe”. The Ukraine war has again reminded us that it sometimes requires more courage to confront one’s own sympathies, one’s own public opinion or government than to face the enemy’s bullets on the frontlines. As the founder of Le Monde Hubert Beuve-Méry said, “We must tell the truth even when it hurts. Especially when it hurts.”

Jean-Paul Marthoz is a columnist at Le Soir in Brussels and the author of En première ligne. Le journalisme au coeur des conflits [In the front line: Journalism at the heart of conflicts]. This article is the second in a series supported by the Evens Foundation about the ethical challenges facing journalists covering the Ukraine war. The series follows the recent publication of media landscape reports – Building Trust in Journalism in Central Eastern Europe – on Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

Ukraine war raises ethical questions for newsrooms

BY JAMES BALL

Russia's full-scale invasion of neighbouring Ukraine has been the biggest story in global affairs since the late days of February 2022. The consequences extend far beyond the borders of Ukraine and Russia, and reporting on the effects of this war is not restricted to experienced conflict and foreign affairs reporters working on the frontlines.

Given the long track record of sophisticated media manipulation by Russia in particular – though Ukraine has had its moments – and the potential that the conflict could escalate even further, the difficulties of reporting the stories raised by this war ethically, accurately and safely are manifold.

The Committee to Protect Journalists says that at least 12 journalists have been killed in Ukraine and many more injured. Journalists should have all appropriate training, support and risk assessments. Commissioning editors should be extremely cautious about their use of freelancers, to make sure they are not indirectly encouraging unnecessary risk-taking.

Journalists need to be aware of their safeguarding duties towards sources and in-country support staff such as fixers, as well as being familiar with relevant international human rights treaties. While the UN charter does not bind news outlets, journalists should be aware that, for example, footage and photography of prisoners of war should not be used, nor should interviews with prisoners supplied under coercion.

Away from the front lines, outlets must be appropriately sceptical: neither the Russian military nor the Ukrainian government should be regarded as accurate sources. The information they provide requires independent verification or careful caveating. This is not to draw a parallel between the two, but many governments during wartime use strategic misinformation, and it is the job of independent journalists to separate fact from fiction and propaganda.

Similarly, user-generated video requires expert verification and careful consideration before being broadcast. It is an all-too-common practice for hoaxers to reuse old footage (or even footage from TV dramas or video games) to fool media outlets, which can affect the broader credibility of the news organisation.

Russia, however, is far more sophisticated than this. The genuine swell of grassroots online support for Ukraine has dampened its usual ability to dominate social media. Ukraine's army of "fellas", comedic pro-Ukraine Shiba Inu avatars, engages in constant online counterpropaganda, for example.

Russia has proven itself able to use well-intentioned reporting or remarks from Western sources to its advantage. There have been multiple independently verified reports of atrocious human rights abuses by Russia during the Ukraine conflict – including mass graves, torture of prisoners and the use of rape and sexual violence as weapons of war. Amnesty International, however, produced a controversial report accusing Ukraine



Photo ©Supamotion/Shutterstock

of breaching human rights law by operating military assets in civilian areas. The NGO was accused by several international law experts of misunderstanding the law of armed conflict, while Russia skilfully seized on the report to draw false equivalences to international audiences.

Jane Lytvenenko, journalist and contributing researcher at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy (and a Canadian-Ukrainian), notes the risk of both Russian fakery and exploitation.

"Russia has been known to manipulate reporters with fake documentation, including photos and videos," she said. "At the same time, it uses reports or commentary from around the world to its advantage — Alex Jones, Tucker Carlson and Elon Musk making an appearance on [Russian] state television is a good reminder of that.

"Journalists need to understand how to track down sources or photos or videos for verification before amplifying or reporting on them. At the same time, they need to be careful and thoughtful in framing their reports to avoid being weaponised by Russia's vast propaganda machine."

Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins flags a particular risk to wire services, which are constrained by extreme time pressure and working practices based on accurately reporting what various actors say — as an information source for other news outlets. But that doesn't always work as intended in the modern online world.

"The Russian government understands how the Western media reports statements from foreign governments, generally outside the context of fact-checking and verifying statements made by their officials," Higgins said in a written interview.

"They use that as an opportunity to spread disinformation, particularly through wire services."

Another example of an ethical dilemma is whether to report information on Ukrainian casualties. In the early days of the invasion, by unspoken consensus (though very much at the request of Ukrainian authorities), Western outlets overwhelmingly chose not to report such details. But as the conflict continued, this consensus broke, with some outlets choosing to report on casualties. There are conflicting duties and responsibilities at play here – different outlets will make different choices, but this should come after appropriate thought, rather than casually.

Similar choices surround the reporting of Ukrainian troop movements, strategy or where missiles or drone strikes land. The Ukrainian government has imposed restrictions on journalists including not revealing the names of units or their location, not filming military installations, waiting several hours before reporting a missile strike or bombardment and coordinating their movements in combat zones with the armed forces, as such information could be used by Russia to target future strikes more accurately. Again, individual journalists and outlets will need to make their own choices – and where individual journalists find themselves at odds with their outlet, they may wish to contact their union.

All conflicts raise serious ethical issues for newsrooms. The big challenge in Ukraine is being savvy about how Russia might exploit accurate (or at least 'reportable') information and deciding how much to adjust our working practices to suit that. This will be a question that only becomes more pressing in the years to come.

James Ball is the global editor of The Bureau of Investigative Journalism where he oversees the not-for-profit's international reporting projects. He also works as a freelance writer and broadcaster and is a weekly columnist for The New European. He was appointed as trustee of the Ethical Journalism Network in December 2020 and chairs its UK committee of advisors.

Photographing Ukraine:

“What right does any of us have to tell other people’s stories?”

BY LISA CLIFFORD

What right does any of us have to tell other people’s stories? That’s a question British-Swedish photojournalist Anastasia Taylor-Lind often asks herself.

Taylor-Lind has been documenting the lives of ordinary Ukrainians since the 2014 Maidan revolution. She has spent this year in Ukraine photographing the devastating consequences of the Russian invasion on civilians, some living only a few hundred metres from the frontline.

Ukraine is a country she loves, but Taylor-Lind questions why she is the one who gets to tell the story of this conflict.

“Given a choice between hiring me and hiring one of my amazing Ukrainian colleagues, why would you hire me?” she said. “You have to fly me from London. I don’t speak the language. Almost everything has to be explained to me because I’m an outsider. It doesn’t make any sense at all why you would choose me, a foreigner.”

Thousands of journalists from around the world have flocked to Ukraine to cover the war for international audiences. Taylor-Lind believes it is Ukrainians, as well as foreign correspondents, who should be telling the story of this war to the world, not simply working as translators or fixers for foreign correspondents.



Donbas, Ukraine, 2019. A bus departing from Kurakhovo, a frontline town, to the entry checkpoint into the non-government-controlled Donetsk. After reaching the checkpoint, passengers will have to queue for many hours, in the middle of a minefield, waiting to cross. Despite harsh conditions, over a million people cross this line every month. One of the major reasons for traveling is to visit family members on the other side. Photo credit: Anastasia Taylor-Lind | Caption: Alisa Sopova | www.anastasiataylorlind.com

"I think the strongest photographic storytelling that is coming out of Ukraine is from Ukrainians," she said. "I believe photography to be valuable and that it makes a contribution ... and the strongest work will be made by people who are from the communities that they are documenting. No one has a problem with Ukrainian journalists doing the legwork, producing stories for foreign journalists in Ukraine right now, but often without getting the byline on the news report."

The photojournalist industry is dominated by "white, middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual men" from Western countries, Taylor-Lind said. She believes they are parachuted into wars because media bosses for international outlets have an unconscious bias against local journalists, doubting their objectivity and reliability as witnesses to what is happening around them.

"There is a colonial idea that only white people from rich countries can be truly objective, can truly tell other people's stories," said Taylor-Lind. "That, for example, non-white people can't be trusted to tell the stories of their own communities because they would be biased. So, let's send the guy from the American newspaper to go and tell it objectively."

"And the thing is that none of us are objective, but there is an idea inside the legacy media that some voices are more objective than others and typically they are old white guys from rich countries."



Tatiana Batskalyova cares for her 90-year-old mother-in-law, Lira. Both women fled their house in the grey zone between Avdiivka and Donetsk, which was destroyed by shelling. Currently, they live in an apartment in Avdiivka that was also heavily damaged by shelling and then renovated by the family. Tatiana has been unsuccessful in receiving compensation for the war damage from the state. Photo credit: Anastasia Taylor-Lind | Caption: Alisa Sopova | www.anastasiataylorlind.com.



Donbas, Ukraine, 2019. Anna Dedova, 75, at the grave of her son who accidentally killed himself with a hand grenade he found near his home in the village of Opytne last year. This visit, organized by a local activist, is a rare occasion for her because the graveyard is situated in the grey zone between Avdiivka and Donetsk and is largely inaccessible due to fighting and landmines. Photo credit: Anastasia Taylor-Lind | Caption: Alisa Sopova | www.anastasiataylorlind.com

This attitude has also affected the types of commissions Taylor-Lind is offered. "It's fine for me to work in war zones as a woman, but I better make sure I get all the stories that are about women in war zones and preferably portraits, not the frontline stuff. Don't step on anyone's toes. Don't take anyone else's work. You stick with the women and war thing."

Most of Taylor-Lind's work over the last eight years has not been made on assignment but is self-initiated and self-funded. As a foreigner reporting on communities that are not her own, Taylor-Lind prefers to work alongside a writer from that community when possible. In Ukraine, that is Alisa Sopova from Donetsk city.

"One of the ethical responsibilities I have is not to hire brilliant photographers or journalists as translators or fixers. If I want to work with a Ukrainian writer or photographer then ... they shouldn't be working as my translator."

Taylor-Lind and Sopova have been working together in Donbas since 2014, writing and photographing as a team, the outsider and the insider, each bringing something unique to the story. Taylor-Lind hopes her pictures speak to people who've never been touched by war, so they can see what it looks like in the faces of ordinary people.

"We have this idea that war takes place in a war zone, perhaps in trenches. We focus our attention on the experiences of combatants. But often there are civilians living in these spaces as well. My main interest isn't so much in the soldiers, but more what it's like to be living with them," she said.

Taylor-Lind and Sopova have forged a successful, and equal, collaboration in Ukraine. But she is acutely aware of the differences in their lives. Taylor-Lind can go home anytime she wants, her Ukrainian colleagues are home. When she fell ill with COVID-19 she returned to the UK to rest and recharge her batteries, both physically and emotionally.

"When I come home, of course I follow the news in Ukraine, and I'm planning my next trip. But Alisa's mum and her whole family are in Donetsk, in the occupied territories, so it's just completely different."

"Foreign photographers always have a choice whether to go to Ukraine. And we also have a choice when to leave or have downtime. We need to be able to sleep properly, we need to have time away from work to be good at what we're doing."

"The foreigners and the Ukrainians inside of reporting teams have very different experiences and have very different opportunities to rest."

On a purely practical level, an important ethical consideration for Taylor-Lind is using the appropriate transliteration of Ukrainian names and places, as the English spelling varies in transliteration from the Russian and Ukrainian languages. For example, Kiev was once the accepted spelling of Ukraine's capital city (transliterated from Russian) but is now written as Kyiv, the Ukrainian transliteration. Donbass (Russian) has become Donbas (Ukrainian). "Words matter, names matter. It's important that we as journalists get it right," said Taylor-Lind.



Donbas, Ukraine, 2019. Nikolay Grinik fishing with his son Kirill and daughter Miroslava during a weekend picnic near Avdiivka. Most recreation zones in the area are contaminated with landmines, and people struggle to find safe spots. But Griniks are experienced in navigating the space of war: they have military positions only 50 meters away from their house. Photo credit: Anastasia Taylor-Lind | Caption: Alisa Sopova | www.anastasiataylorlind.com

As well as basic accuracy, she is also acutely conscious of representing people in a way that they will recognise themselves and their experiences in the images. In Ukraine, she has photographed the same people several times and was able to involve them in her recent exhibition of their images at the Imperial War Museum in Manchester.

"As soon as I saw the exhibition space, I made pictures and sent them on Facebook, Messenger or WhatsApp. I was like, 'look, this is your photo'. Lots of them used them as their profile picture and shared them on social media."

There is value to the foreign journalists who are adding to the growing body of stories and images about the war in Ukraine, says Taylor-Lind. Ukraine is huge and Russian attacks have spread rapidly throughout most of the country. That means great numbers of reporters and photographers are needed to document this war.

"This might sound idealistic, but I see the role of the international journalist as a supporting role for my Ukrainian colleagues because it is too great a task for them alone, not because they are Ukrainian but just because the scale of the violence that's been unleashed and the speed at which it has happened" said Taylor-Lind.

"I've been working there for eight years, and it's a place that I love, and I feel at home in. I've been telling the stories of the same people for a good while, and it doesn't make any sense to me why I would stop now."

The selected photos in this piece are taken from the series "5k from the Frontline" and are used with the kind permission of the photographer, Anastasia Taylor-Lind, www.anastasiataylorlind.com

Journalism is the key to winning Ukraine's war on corruption

BY AIDAN WHITE

The fight for democracy and freedom in Ukraine is being fought on two fronts, one against the deadly weapons of Russian invaders and another against the enemy within – bribery and corruption.

On both of these battlegrounds, Ukraine is locked in a war with powerful forces. Just how powerful was revealed early in May when anti-corruption authorities in Kyiv arrested Vsevolod Kniaziev the head of the country's Supreme Court as part of a \$2.7m bribery investigation, the biggest in Ukraine's history.

Soon after his detention, a no-confidence vote by the Supreme Court of 140-2 paved the way for Kniaziev's formal sacking. This extraordinary development highlights not only the determination of the authorities in Kyiv to crack down on graft at all levels (a prerequisite for membership of the European Union) but how corruption is a fact of life within Ukrainian society.

Almost a quarter of Ukrainians paid a bribe when using public services last year and according to Transparency International's Corruption Index, a leading global barometer of bribery and corruption, Ukraine was ranked 118 out of 180 countries last year, only slightly better than Russia but well below the global average.

A culture of internal secrecy, weak institutions and poor law enforcement allows corruption to flourish and exposing malpractice in centres of power can be a dangerous and difficult task, but it is not a job that should be left to government fraud squads alone. Independent investigative journalism also has a critical role to play.

The dilemma facing some Ukraine journalists is how to report corruption without damaging the country's reputation and putting at risk international support.

Journalist Yuriy Nikolov, for example, was leaked evidence that army food procurement contracts had been inflated in January this year, but conscious of not wanting to harm the war effort, he went to great lengths not to publish them.

But he changed his mind when he approached defence officials with the findings and found their response "was not what it should be". He sensed that the matter was not going to be pursued officially and decided he had to run the story.

Nikolov told The Guardian that he and other investigative journalists paused their activities at the beginning of the war and had gradually resumed work in the autumn. "I will say that during the invasion, I have turned down many stories," he said.

But his story published in the news site ZN, UA was a tipping point, along with the news on the same day that a deputy infrastructure minister had been arrested for siphoning aid money intended to buy generators. Sources in the presidential administration said president, Volodymyr Zelensky, was furious and the incident led to the dismissal of 15 senior government and regional officials, including two senior defence officials.



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Journalist Veronika Melkozerova writing in Politico this year about this incident said: "Getting a scoop that shocks your country, forces your government to start investigations and reform military procurement, and triggers the resignation of top officials is ordinarily something that makes other journalists jealous. But I fully understand about wanting to hold back when your nation is at war."

The challenges facing Ukraine journalists are, therefore, not just in fighting and winning a military struggle, but in creating the space for responsible journalism that will encourage independent scrutiny of political power and will hold to account those in charge of the country's money.

This becomes particularly important now that eye-watering sums of money are suddenly being shifted around to support urgent reconstruction projects.

According to an estimate from the Washington-based Brookings Institution last year, the full cost of rebuilding Ukraine in the aftermath of war will cost anything up to \$750 billion. Unless anti-corruptions are giving priority and put in place there could be "sprawling corruption and, in turn, wasted money, disenfranchised citizens, and fertile ground for continued conflict."

The lessons from previous conflicts – in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq, for example – illustrate how recovery from a devastating war requires not just adequate funding for reconstruction, but also systems that will combat corruption in how money is spent and accounted for.

And it's not just in times of war. Corruption risks are high whenever investments are large and distributed quickly and no nation is immune. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, media revealed how huge sums of public money were wasted in both the United States and Britain alone, for example, for want of official transparency and scrutiny of how money was spent.

With this in mind, Brookings proposes using a small fraction of reconstruction funding to support journalists who can mitigate corruption by reporting on financing, procurement, project execution, and other aspects of the massive programme of international support now being developed for Ukraine.

They suggest that a percentage of the total reconstruction budget should be paid to support investigative journalism and anti-corruption efforts. They suggest that three percent of total reconstruction funds could be directed towards anti-corruption efforts and the expansion of independent investigative journalism in Ukraine.

It could be money well spent given that they estimate, according to relevant reconstruction precedents, that the cost of corruption can be as high as 30 percent of the total investment.

For journalists exposing corruption means working closely with civil society groups and the state anti-corruption investigators and audit agencies. At the best of times, these can be uneasy relations and in the heat of war they are even more fraught.

Ukraine's leaders should have nothing to fear from the investigative instincts of good journalists. Ethical and professional reporters are critical friends who can contribute to an anti-corruption ecosystem that will promote good governance throughout Ukraine's current war and will enhance the country's democratic standing in the reconstruction to follow.

People who care about Ukraine want every penny for reconstruction spent as effectively as possible, so government, the judiciary and public institutions must take the lead by dismantling structures that enable corruption, introducing new rules, creating more transparency, and taking action, even against the most rich and powerful, when they break the rules.

Political leaders and policymakers also need to recognise that quality journalism is a key ally in the fight against corruption.

For that reason, international media support agencies and journalism development groups should make support for in-country investigative journalism a top priority.

They can provide support for media education and training for journalists in forensic accounting, the principles and rules of procurement, and the skills needed to use state-of-the-art technology to analyse financial data or to surf the dark web.

News media, additionally, should also be encouraged to work with civil society and local communities to monitor reconstruction, particularly in the areas most affected by the war.

But working in Ukraine alone is not the only answer to transnational corruption. Any viable anti-corruption strategy also needs to ensure cross-border collaboration and joint investigations supported by regional and international media.



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