

Media coverage of Ukraine's crisis: War for people's minds

It now is evident that Ukraine has been noted on the world's map by a vast majority of Americans. From "somewhere near Russia," it has moved to "between Russia and the European Union" – and this awareness happened thanks to coverage in all renowned national and local media in the United States and beyond. Since December, Ukraine's political crisis has shown how some media play with information and how journalism is dependent on geopolitics.

Journalists' work

Being a Ukrainian native, I was monitoring media from different parts of the world in terms of how they have covered the Ukrainian crisis, paying special attention to those countries involved in resolving the issue: the United States, Europe, Russia and Ukraine itself. Ukraine became a newsmaker ever since unrest grew at Euro-maidan (Kiev's main square) from what started as peaceful protests against delaying the EU-Ukraine- associated membership deal by pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich in November. The unrest converted evolved into a bloody anti-government conflict, with more than 100 killed, thousands injured and pre-war relations between Ukraine and Russia (de facto Russian military aggression) over the Crimean peninsula annexation.

From December to February, Kiev was dangerous place for journalists to work. The first journalist to suffer injuries was Tetiana Chornovol, who worked for the anti-government online publication Ukrainska Pravda. She was beaten by unknown attackers in late December. In January, tension and street violence rose. It seemed that attacks by special police forces

were aimed against the least protected and most vulnerable people because of their work conditions: journalists and paramedic volunteers. Ukrainian Espresso.tv provided videos, where police and snipers' weapons purposely targeted the word "press" and red crosses on protective waistcoats. Forty-six journalists were reported injured, and two dead, after clashes in Kiev.

The journalists' most recent work has become entangled in controversy and obstacles as the Crimean conflict escalates. A Ukrainian journalist from the weekly magazine Ukrainsky Tuzhden and a freelance photographer were kidnapped and tortured in Crimea. A group of journalists from Ukraine's national TV network 1+1 was deported from Russia after shooting video in North Ossetia, a territory annexed by Russia from Georgia in 2008. A similar story happened with journalists of the channel Ukraine in the unacknowledged republic of Abkhazia, which has been controlled by Russia since 1993. Journalists still are doing their jobs, but now very differently.

U.S. coverage and the European angle

Among the first media that started covering Ukrainian events were the U.S. newspapers the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times, and the broadcast network CNN. Attempts to localize news and give pointed opinions prevailed over "pure" informing. As the conflict spread beyond the Euromaidan protests to Ukraine as a whole, with a major hot spot in Crimea, the United States stepped in as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. American media exploded with all kinds of stories, ranging from very supportive and positive toward Ukraine to negative ones as well. The New York Times' leading opinion pieces, as well as CNN's news and commentaries (including Anderson Cooper's first-hand reporting from Ukraine), mostly expressed neutral and supportive positions. For example, the New York Times ran an opinion column from Nicholas Kristof in which he deliberately

explained why the “villains” are the Russian troops in Crimea. The Washington Post published Condoleezza Rice’s opinion story urging a stronger U.S. position in this conflict. Opinion pieces challenging U.S. involvement and support of Ukraine appeared in the Los Angeles Times, including those by Paul Whitefield, who contrasted American internal financial needs with providing monetary support to Ukraine.

European media, not surprisingly, showed more in-depth coverage on Ukraine’s crisis, as geographical closeness is still a crucial factor for world media to involve their foreign reporters into first-hand coverage. The BBC created a special section on its web-site, with live updating on events via Twitter, Facebook, other media, and its own correspondents. The same kind of attitude to covering Ukrainian events was expressed by the Guardian in Britain and Germany’s Douche Welle. In an edition for non-stop Ukrainian coverage Poland’s most influential newspaper, Gazeta Wyborcza, had special issues published in the Ukrainian language, showing its support in that way.

Despite the different angles in coverage, a general message sent by Western media is that Ukraine is divided within the framework of Ukrainian versus Russian languages and ethnic issues. In fact, this generalization was a case in pre-revolutionary Ukraine. Events from recent months have dramatically influenced people’s views and self-identifications. Newscasts and analytical articles on the nation’s uniting during the conflict are missing in Western coverage, while it is widely shown by Ukraine’s media. This notion of national division has been played for centuries by politicians and historians. Now it is being widely exaggerated by the Russian government to justify that country’s intervention into Ukraine’s sovereignty in Crimea.

Russian propaganda

The portrayal of Ukraine in Russian media cannot be called

anything else than propaganda. The majority of Russian television networks (with the only possible exception being Dozhd' [Rain], which is an opposition TV channel) shows an alternative reality to the coverage from the rest of the world.

The recent facts of pro-government propaganda and press freedom persecution in Russia include a series of resignations from well-known media. The first occurred when Russia Today anchor Liz Wahl quit her job on-air because of unfair coverage of the Ukrainian crisis. A week later, 39 staff members including 32 journalists – and all of the photo editing staff – resigned from Lenta.ru, the oldest liberal online newspaper in Russia. The staffers quit in a show of support for chief editor Galina Timchenko, who was fired from the paper's independent position and replaced by a pro-Kremlin editor.

Misleading and unfair reporting prevail throughout Russian media, regardless of whether the platform is print, broadcasting or online. Until recently, Russian media on the Internet stayed the least controlled by the government and the most open to publishing diverse opinions. But now it also is being repressed by the government: oppositional web-sites are banned, as well as blogs and live- journal accounts of prominent oppositional leaders Alexei Navalny and Garry Kasparov, the website of radio station Echo of Moscow and more.

Since March 1, when thousands of unidentified troops (in uniforms that resemble those of Russian troops) appeared in Crimea, Russian TV channel Russia 24 reported that thousands of refugees from Ukraine were on the Russia-Ukraine border. In fact, however, they provided archival video that showed cars lined up at a Polish-Ukrainian custom check-point. Officially, just 89 Ukrainians have asked for asylum in Russia during the first two weeks of March. Later, other television networks, while reporting devastating clashes between pro-Russian forces and Ukrainians in Simferopol, used archival video from Kiev's

February protests instead.

The most recent evidence of Russia's goals to invade and monopolize Ukraine's informational space includes the military capture of Crimean Tatar's TV channel ATR, dumping Ukrainian channels from cable networks and replacing them with Russian ones, and the closing of Ukrainian radio stations in Crimea. All this happened at the same time as preparations were made for the illegal referendum about the annexation of Crimea by Russia. While officials in Moscow refuse to take responsibility for these actions their origin are more or less obvious.

Inside view from Ukraine

Staying fair, objective and transparent has been the hardest task for the Ukrainian media. In this situation, when media conglomerates comprising major television networks and publishing houses are controlled by billionaires that were close to Yanukovich's administration, obeying the duty of objective journalism is hardly achievable. For instance, during the riots in Kiev's, the reality of Yanukovich's official position was presented by the TV channel Inter (which is controlled by pro-Kremlin oligarch Dmytro Firtash, who recently was imprisoned in Austria as a result of Interpol and FBI's investigations). Nevertheless, the majority of national media remained fairly balanced in covering the events. Moreover, the newest positive processes in Ukrainian journalism occurred.

First, almost immediately after the beginning of the clashes at Euro-maidan, the special television online channels Espresso.tv and UkrStream started streaming around the clock from the epicenter of the events. This is a new phenomenon for Ukrainian television, and most of the Ukrainian networks borrowed and retransmitted videos from these channels to cover the events in Kiev.

Second, after 20 years of useless discussions and lost attempts to create public media, self-organized public service broadcasting online channel, Hromadske.tv, was created. Indeed, the boundary conditions of the new revolution forced journalists into this unprecedented step in Ukraine's history. Prominent journalists from mainstream Ukrainian print, broadcast and online media share their free time after their full-time work assignments to contribute to this public service initiative. So far, it works only in a form of online streaming from one self-maintained studio, combining studio interviews and analytics with onsite web-cams streaming by journalists, and Skype interviews/video conferences. Perhaps, the most-viewed streams were those from ousted President Yanukovich's residency Mezhihir'ya, where journalists were picturing the royal-like wealth of its former owner. Besides the ethical nuances of this reporting (along with the fact that the majority of national, and some international, media did stories on the treasures of corrupted officials by invading their outcast private residencies), it generated huge social interest. The special public website YanukovichLeaks was created by journalists and civil activists for investigating the corrupt schemes of the former president and his government.

The booming popularity of this long-awaited initiative led to the recent development where Hromadske.tv started broadcasting as a joint project of the television channel First, which is the oldest national TV network (it has a penetration rate of 95 percent of Ukraine's territory and is the "mouthpiece" of the Ukrainian government). This example of cooperation has been followed by another project of Ukrainian television that aim to unify Ukrainian society.

Social media: So who controls the people's minds?

The Ukrainian revolution happened with great help from (or because of) social media. Social media are widely used as informational sources now, since it already has been accepted

practice for major media players across the globe to disseminate news through them. But person-to-person interaction made Facebook and Twitter, along with Ukrainian and Russian local social media (Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki) key platforms for negotiating the public gatherings at Euro-maidan protests in November. They were used for further coordination of protests.

Dozens of pages that supported and confronted the protests, and that followed the Ukraine-Russia conflict, were created in social media in recent months. Politicians and public figures post comments and tweet about events online. YouTube also is a main platform for the newest streaming videos and the output of public television channels, which shortly after appearing online become widely known in Ukraine. Such use of social media for the needs of mobilizing and influencing people cannot have stayed unnoticed by those interested in information manipulation. The signs of informational war have already been seen in Ukraine, as constant denial-of-service attacks on some of Ukraine's most-viewed news sites (such as Channel 5, Hromadske.tv, and Ukrainska Pravda) and their YouTube channels are reported. Traditional media are not the main players in this war any more. One should be very picky in choosing sources of information to get the sense of the truth. This might be one of the most obvious inferences about role of Ukraine's crisis in today's media world.