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The media at the time of unrest: a report of a Maidan participant

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The media at the time of unrest: a report of a Maidan participant

During the months of the large-scale protests in Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities that became known as Euromaidan and then simply Maidan, I was first and foremost a citizen participating in the popular uprising against the repressive regime. My identity as a scholar analyzing this uprising or its perceptions in Ukraine and abroad was much less important. This means that my use of the media was primarily intended to familiarize myself with the situation on and around the Maidan for the purpose of effective participation rather than to study various representations of the situation. I simply did not have enough time to perform the latter task, however important it is for my scholarship under less-strained conditions. Accordingly, I paid attention only to those texts from foreign media that were reposted on Facebook by my friends or friends of friends whose recommendations promised quality or at least relevance. Actually, this is how I mostly read foreign media, even in more peaceful times (that is, since the advent of Facebook), but in these stressful weeks I only had time for texts dealing with Ukraine or those factors that might affect Ukraine. As for the Ukrainian media, it was important to me not only as a source of information about what was happening on the Maidan and in relation to the Maidan, but also as an indication of how media owners wanted their outlets to represent these events, that is, how ready they were to support the protesters rather than then President Yanukovich. Not only did I regularly consult a few television channels for a balanced account of “facts”, but also I occasionally checked other broadcasters for their changing representations. Moreover, I closely followed several websites providing latest news and/or insightful analyses, and as my anxiety grew, so did the number of the sites I accessed at least several times a day. Therefore, my knowledge of Ukrainian media representations of the Maidan is much more intimate than of foreign ones, which is why I will only discuss the former and not the latter. However, since the main medium I and many other Ukrainians relied on was not any newspaper, television channel or even website but Facebook, my discussion will feature the role of social networks, which was a distinctive feature of Euromaidan. As the above introduction makes clear, this is not a comprehensive study of the discursive landscape, but rather a report on participant observation.

Apart from violence and ensuing loss of lives, a prominent role of the Internet in general and social networks in particular was perhaps the main difference between Euromaidan and the previous surge of mass protests in Ukraine, the Orange Revolution. While only 15% of Ukrainians had access to the Internet back in 2004, the share has since grown to one-half in the country as a whole and two-thirds in big cities. Not surprisingly, the use is most widespread among the younger generations, with fully 77% of people between 18 and 29 years of age connected.¹ To be sure, not everybody goes online for political purposes, but such uses can be expected to increase more or less proportionally to the general spread of the Internet, all the more so because of the dissemination of political statements and news through social networks (see below). Therefore, unlike in 2004, the regime could not effectively block the information on the protest itself and its perceptions in Ukraine and abroad. Even if television had been as censored as on the eve of the Orange Revolution, most participants and sympathizers would have hardly been cut off, as they could find necessary information online. For the users themselves, the Internet has already become the main source of information: according to a survey conducted in January 2014, 84% of citizens found out about the protests on the Internet and 81% on television (a third source turned out to be communication with relatives and friends, which was indicated by 43% of respondents).²

An even more impressive change had to do with social networks. Back in 2004 they simply did not exist in Ukraine, hence interpersonal exchange of information related to protests took place primarily on the phone, often through landlines as cell phones were still relatively rare.

Now virtually everybody owns a cell so it is possible to communicate on the spot, but Facebook enables a much faster dissemination of messages, all the more so because it is widely used on mobile devices. It is such dissemination that played a crucial role in mobilizing Kyiv residents in support of the Maidan in the early hours of the 11th of December, when it became clear that the riot police were going to advance on the protesters. Not only did thousands of people inform their friends about the very need to go urgently to the city center, but many also shared information about best ways to do so, such as who can give a lift from certain parts of the city, where the police are blocking the traffic and so on. During the last three months, Facebook was used for a variety of Maidan-related purposes: groups were created for specific events or ongoing activities; special pages reported on current needs of protesters; individual pages and topical groups spread documents, evidence, analytical and artistic texts, both verbal and audiovisual. When the confrontation on the Maidan gave way in late February to the confrontation in the Crimea, Facebook activities were promptly redirected toward the monitoring of provocations by Russian troops and their local supporters against the Ukrainian military establishments, providing help to the besieged establishments' personnel, disclosing disinformation spread by Russian official and media outlets, and such. Of course, the part of Facebook I observed had a much closer relation to Kyiv than the Crimea as I have many more friends in the former place (where I live) than in the latter. Therefore, with the shift of the "most important" events to the peninsula the main Facebook activity I witnessed became dissemination of information rather than online contribution to largely offline processes. Still, some friends continued helping victims of the Maidan clashes, discussed ways to pressure new authorities for resolute reforms in various domains or otherwise sought to use revolutionary skills in the post-revolutionary situation.

To be sure, it is far from always that activities on Facebook facilitated those on the Maidan; all too often, the former served as an ersatz of the latter. Many people who rarely if ever set foot on the site of protest and hardly helped those who permanently lived and fought there frequently posted, shared and "liked" harsh critiques of various protest activities, disseminated sensational "facts" and gloomy predictions and otherwise contributed to general anxiety. Some users countered such "couch" activities in comments to the respective posts or in texts on their own pages. Many more seemed to ignore those people whose activities were limited to Facebook, while closely following and more or less actively supporting those known for their productive work offline. Some of such "Facebook celebrities" had established their reputation well before the Maidan and thus had an initial communicative capital which facilitated their effective dissemination and coordination during the anti-government protests and the Russian invasion. For example, the investigative journalist Mustafa Nayyem had for years been the most popular personality on the Ukrainian segment of Facebook, so it is hardly surprising that his call for protesting against the government's decision to thwart the Association Agreement with the European Union became highly instrumental in organizing an initial protest on the Maidan in late November whose core consisted of Internet users. Others, in contrast, became known and sought after on Facebook because of their prominence on the Maidan such as Andrii Parubii, the commander of the Maidan self-defense or Dmytro Yarosh, the leading figure of the radical organization called Pravyi Sektor (Rightwing Sector). Depending on one's repertoire of Maidan-related activities: (a) standing on the square at certain hours or ready to go there in the case of a danger; (b) bringing food, medicine and other necessary items; (c) volunteering in one of the kitchens or aid posts and (d) simply following the situation from home or office), one primarily read those Facebook posters known for their focus on the respective topics. But that was not the sole criterion: my personal list of regular reading included not only those people who knew much on what I wanted to find out about but also those who could add a bit of optimism at frequent moments of despair.

In all Facebook activities I observed during these crucial months, the Ukrainian and Russian languages coexisted quite peacefully if not always equally. Notwithstanding the prevalence of Ukrainian on the Maidan itself, most of the Maidan-related Facebook posts seemed to use Russian in accordance with the predominance of the latter language among Ukraine's urban population and, related to this, among Internet users. Moreover, Russian-speaking users contributed to the predominance of their language on the "Ukrainian" Facebook by being less inclined to share texts in Ukrainian than Ukrainian-speakers to disseminate texts in Russian. I do not mean that Russian-speakers refused to share text in Ukrainian; they just were less likely to come across them since their reading repertoire was predominantly in Russian, in contrast to Ukrainian-speakers most of whom read in both languages, either willingly or for want of respective products in their preferred language. (Of course, many members of each group read and shared also texts in other languages, primarily English, all the more so because at the time of ordeal it became particularly important to know what the "world" thinks of the events in Ukraine.) Not only does the asymmetry of media consumption patterns for the two language groups reflect and, at the same time, reproduce better knowledge of Russian than Ukrainian among the country's population as a whole but also the unequal demand for products in the two languages stimulates the predominantly Russian-language supply. While this situation is characteristic of all types of media, the Internet with its inherently transnational communication effectively merges the Ukrainian Russian-language market with the Russian one. This gives the resulting market a great advantage over that which functions in Ukrainian and is virtually limited to Ukraine (Kulyk, 2012, 2013a.) At the same time, the presence of the Ukrainian language goes beyond Ukrainian-speakers' posts and texts they share. On the one hand, many Ukrainian-speakers comment on Russian-language posts in their own language; on the other, Russian-speakers themselves often share texts in Ukrainian or quote them without translation. Therefore, all exchanges are actually or potentially bilingual, meaning that both languages are or can be used by those willing to participate. While some people might have been prevented from contributing to the exchange by its predominant language, I have never observed language policing (overt challenging by one participant of the language used by another) in any Maidan-related Facebook activities, just as I have never witnessed it on the Maidan itself.

In fact, strictly monolingual interactions do exist on Facebook, first and foremost in closed topical groups devoted to the protection of the language in question. I participate in one such group, which is called *I tak poimut* (They will understand anyway) and is preoccupied with the introduction of Ukrainian in various communication practices currently dominated by Russian. The group members focus on pressuring various producers and service providers to use Ukrainian – instead of, or at least in addition to, Russian – on their respective Facebook pages, web sites and offline documents such as consumer instructions. (The name of the group refers to a frequently used explanation of why Ukrainian is an extra, namely that Ukrainian-speakers will fully understand these documents in Russian.) Not surprisingly, all communication in the group is in Ukrainian, although texts members share for others to react to are usually in Russian. At the time of the Maidan, the group seemed to be less active than usual, perhaps due to many members' primary preoccupation with the protests against the government rather than businesses. However, the end of confrontation in Kyiv and the almost simultaneous escalation in the Crimea reinvigorated the group: in addition to the renewal of its main activities, its members became involved in the discussion of a new language law initiated by the post-revolutionary government, seeking to ensure provisions for the use of Ukrainian in society in general and commerce in particular.

At the same time, many of my Ukrainian-speaking friends argued in their posts and comments that a new law either was unnecessary or should grant Russian an official status (nationwide or in certain regions only) in order to reassure its speakers that they were equal citizens of Ukraine. Such a reassurance seemed particularly important in view of widespread fears that the victory of the pro-European and mostly Ukrainophone Maidan would lead to the discrimination

against Russophones.³ On 26 February, a flash mob was organized in Lviv through social networks whose otherwise Ukrainian-speaking participants relied on Russian both offline and online for one day to demonstrate their solidarity with the eastern compatriots and express their belief that a new language law would be harmful for national unity.⁴ This belief became much more widespread during the following week when the Russian government used the alleged discrimination against Russian-speakers as a pretext for its military aggression in the Crimea and instigated violent separatist demonstrations in many other predominantly Russophone regions. In contrast to the Crimea where most people seemed to favor some kind of integration with Russia, Russophone residents of the East and South manifested their support for Ukraine's independence and integrity, which they articulated during mass rallies in both customary Russian and symbolically important Ukrainian. If Facebook is any indication, language matters are rather low on the agenda of the politically active part of society, which is primarily preoccupied with warding off the Russian aggressors and implementing democratic reforms. However, the parliament decided to proceed with its plan to prepare a new language law, so its discussion may lead to a new confrontation in the coming months.

Turning finally to other, more traditional media, I would like to focus on how they adjusted their routine to an extraordinary situation in the country due to the large-scale protests and then the foreign aggression. Once again, I do not claim to examine the media in general or even a particular type thereof, but rather describe my experience of using them in the last months. As mentioned above, due to both increased anxiety about the confrontation and the need to know what kind of involvement on my part would be appropriate at the moment, I checked some media outlets much more frequently than I normally do at peaceful times. During the protests on the Maidan, I needed to know what was going on there first thing in the morning, last thing before going to bed (or, if I spent the night on the Maidan, before taking the last subway train downtown) and at least several times in between. To meet my demand, the web sites would have to post updates very frequently and not make a long break at night, and television stations would have to issue news bulletins every hour and broadcast a live stream from the spot in between. Needless to say, most media did not rise up to my unrealistic expectations, even if they did change their routine more or less significantly. The sites I regularly accessed reported continuously at most disturbing nights but otherwise most of them made a break somewhere after 1 am, while others imitated ongoing activity by posting "stored" reports on what happened hours earlier. Some sites such as Radio Liberty and *Ukrainska Pravda* supplemented their updates by live streams from the Maidan, which disappeared during relatively calm periods, but then emerged again with a new escalation.

Television stations were more reluctant to abandon business as usual, because it might incur loss of advertisement money and the oligarch owners did not want to risk being punished by the regime. In terms of programming, only a few stations increased the number of news bulletins and organized so-called marathons on crucial days of the confrontation, with a non-stop sequence of news, discussions and streams dealing with this one topic. Most Maidan-oriented was Fifth Channel featuring hourly news around the clock and a lot of streaming, which proved extremely important on nights of escalation such as 11 December. (It was from their stream that I found out about the police advance on the protesters and called a taxi to go downtown.) This station's prominent role was similar to its role in 2004, but now it was not the only one accurately and extensively reporting on the confrontation. Some stations did not change the programming, but featured the protests in their news bulletins, sometimes to the exclusion of all other topics. Still others did not bother or dare to do even that, particularly after the reported crackdown by the presidential administration, which resulted in much less extensive and favorable coverage of the Maidan on most channels, but did not quite marginalize sympathetic representations.⁵ In any event, the regime did not manage to impose a full-scale information

blockade so whoever wanted to know what was going on the Maidan could easily find out. This means the prejudice of a large part of the population, particularly in the east and south resulted not from the inability to access alternative sources of information, but from the unwillingness to accept their messages.

It seems that the Russian occupiers of the Crimea did not want to risk that the people they were supposedly protecting would believe not them but those who disclosed the absurdity of their claims. One by one, they removed Ukrainian stations off the air and replaced their signals with those of Russian broadcasters.⁶ Soon thereafter, Ukrainian outlets were excluded from cable networks thus limiting their availability to the Internet. For years, Russia has been waging an information war against Ukraine by disseminating its messages through all kinds of online and offline channels, including those of Ukrainian television which featured Russian-made products implicitly or even explicitly asserting East Slavic unity and challenging Ukrainian independence.⁷ Now the Kremlin is no longer content with conveying its messages, so it proceeded to blocking Ukrainian channels.

Notes

1. Dynamika vykorystannia internet v Ukraïni”, press release of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 28 October 2013. Retrieved March 3, 2014, from <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=199&page=2>.
2. “Maizhe 100% ukraïntsiiv stezhat’ za Evromaidanom – doslidzhennia”, *Ukraïns’ka Pravda. Zhyttia*, 28 January 2014. Retrieved March 3, 2014, from <http://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2014/01/28/150170/>.
3. For a discussion of the (pre-Maidan) wishes and fears of Ukrainophones and Russophones regarding language policy in general and language law in particular, see Kulyk (2013b).
4. “Vo L’vove odin den’ budut govorit’ tol’ko po-russki iz solidarnosti s vostochnymi regionami”, *Dozhd’ TV*, 25 February 2014. Retrieved March 7, 2014, from http://tvrain.ru/articles/vo_lvove_odin_den_budut_govorit_tolko_po_russki_iz_solidarnosti_s_vostochnymi_regionami-363802.
5. “U Krymy zamist’ ‘Intera’ teper pokazuiut’ rosiis’kyi NTV”, *Ukraïns’ka Pravda*, 7 March 2014. Retrieved March 8, 2014, from <http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/03/7/7018037/>.
6. Samchenko, V. “Natalia Lihachova: Vladi vyhidna kontroliovana svoboda slova”, *Ukraïna Moloda*, 16 February 2014. Retrieved March 8, 2014, from <http://umoloda.kiev.ua/number/2415/211/85916/>.
7. For a detailed discussion, see Kulyk (2010).

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