

# IN PURSUIT OF *KAIROS*



# UKRAINIAN JOURNALISTS BETWEEN AGENCY AND STRUCTURE DURING EUROMAIDAN

by Roman Horbyk

If people today have what ancient Greeks called “acme”, a peak in someone’s life, a Kyiv journalist turned politician by the name of Serhiy Leshchenko might well have enjoyed it over a few short weeks in September 2016. A few years before that, he had become his country’s top journalist whose questions would send shivers down the president’s spine, and the mass protest against the corrupt bigwigs he had unmasked led to his election as an MP. His articles were published in newspapers around the world, notably in *The Guardian*<sup>1</sup> through which he made much noise in the US presidential election hitting hard at Donald Trump’s campaign chief Paul Manafort and his connections to Ukrainian corruption. He also became the hero of a large *New Yorker* feature.<sup>2</sup> To crown his achievement, Leshchenko purchased an apartment in a high-class downtown development project in the Ukrainian capital<sup>3</sup> – and thus put his own long-fostered authority under threat.

The social media crowd was outraged with the bad taste of indulging himself in luxury while his country suffered from war and economic downturn. But it also turned out that Serhiy’s expenses did not match his earnings, which was scandalous for someone who made a name lambasting the tastelessness, embezzlement, and vices of the powerful. Defending himself, Leshchenko tried to appeal to his muckraker achievements, but this seems only to have made things worse. Many of his attackers made the argument that he failed to separate his professional and political work properly – that he became a half-politician/half-journalist. Although only an individual case, this story reflects a bigger arc of Ukrainian journalists gaining and spending power during and after Euromaidan, something I would like to take a closer look at here.

Euromaidan itself convened, as is known, thanks to just two Facebook posts by an investigative journalist named Mustafa Nayyem, a close friend and a colleague of Serhiy Leshchenko (he was in the US at the time and could only participate from a

## abstract

In this article, I examine the role of journalists during Euro-maidan in November 2013–February 2014. The conceptualization of a specific case of power, the media power (found in works by Bolin, Couldry, Curran, Hjarvard, Mancini, Zelizer, and others) basically oscillates between two extremes – that of regarding the media as heteronomous of the political field and that of arguing that the media increasingly influence other fields through processes of mediatization. What is the role of journalists in power relations? Under which conditions is the power of journalists – and their agency – likely to grow? This article presents the results of a series of interviews with Ukrainian journalists who covered the events of Euromaidan in different capacities. Validated with other evidence, their narratives suggest a positive power dynamic for the Ukrainian journalists during the protest events.

**KEY WORDS:** Media, power, journalists, mediatization, Euro-maidan, Ukraine.

The journalist Mustafa Nayyem on Euromaidan, November 2013.

PHOTO: ALEXANDR ANDREIKO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

distance), and who is now also an MP – but who seems to be a bit more careful in his expenditures. Both of the posts were shared over 3,000 times.<sup>4</sup> Nayyem was then the most followed Ukrainian on Facebook with more than 30,000 subscribers,<sup>5</sup> and within days he spoke from the stage of what had already assumed the name of Euromaidan, along with Viktoriya Syumar, Director of Institute of Mass Information, the renowned publicist and opinion leader Vitaly Portnykov, and *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*'s observer Serhiy Rakhmanin.<sup>6</sup> All of them were among the protesters' most favorite speakers for the weeks to come as the numbers grew from hundreds (mostly journalists and Nayyem's friends who acted on his call) to many, many thousands.

I argue that the social power of Ukrainian journalists increased because of their involvement in the protest, and at the high point of the crisis of authority the media continued to cement a fragmented society taking over a number of power roles from the emasculated institutions, reaching as far as the surveillance and policing functions. Moreover, because the institutions had been incapacitated in large part through the active intervention of muckraking investigations, one could conclude that the journalists spearheaded civil society's efforts to wrest power from the political leadership. This emphasizes a more complex structure of media power, namely that under extreme circumstances of protest, revolution, war, and – one can hypothesize – any similarly disruptive event, media can fulfill the functions traditionally associated with public authorities when it is facilitated by the type of culture that welcomes the active role of writers/journalists and that has a long tradition of political resistance. Against this background, the professional culture in Ukraine is stretched between the two poles of conformists and activists, corresponding to a media culture where the active involvement of journalists in political life is the norm rather than the exception.

### Media power, agency, and dependency

One problem to ponder is what the actual influence of journalists and media was during Euromaidan. Who influences whom is a question asked countless times in sociology, and media studies is no exception. Is the media an active agent of influence or itself subjected to the authority of more autonomous social actors? In audience studies, it had been traditionally – and crudely – assumed that journalists hold sway over the minds of their audience, but this later relented to the idea of active users and other approaches postulating that meanings are negotiated from both sides in this interaction. Likewise, the relationship between journalists and politicians has been conceptualized in all possible ways.

Another problem in the stories of journalists at Euromaidan is to what extent they were independent actors. This summons

the specter of yet another theoretical conundrum, of agency and structure, pondering the issue of primacy between the individual's own choices and institutions, structures, and resources that either enable or prevent a specific type of action. In its protean elusiveness, the answer to this question seems not entirely unlike the infamous geometrical problem of squaring the circle. The particular focus on public discourses and communication helps to imagine the field as divided between adherents of Jürgen Habermas,<sup>7</sup> who emphasizes the agency of deliberative communication in the public sphere, Michel Foucault,<sup>8</sup> who supposes actors to be enactors of discourses, and Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>9</sup> who tries to reconcile this opposition through the habitus-field dynamic. Likewise, Anthony Giddens<sup>10</sup> dialectically stipulates that agency and structure are both dual, equally enabling each other and enabled by each other.

In dealing with these problematics, one tradition within journalist studies theorizes that journalism is an “interpretive community”<sup>11</sup> in principle based on its self-ascribed authority to interpret events. Quite in contrast, Mancini<sup>12</sup> argued from Bourdieu's field theory position that the media are heteronomous

of the political field. Either structurally built into the system of political clientelism in the countries where traditional authority dominates or serving the political system as an information hub in rational authority societies, media field actors give up their autonomy because they are ultimately dependent on what is going on in other fields, primarily the political field.

The answers to these questions seem to depend on the chosen perspective. Observing media from the grounds of political economy, Curran<sup>13</sup> as well as

Couldry and Curran<sup>14</sup> came to conclusions that are not in favor of expanding media power. The impacts of “big money”, vested interests, and political influences erode the power of media, which both authors see as identical to “empowering people”.<sup>15</sup> Yet a more technology-sensitive perspective would flip this around arguing for the increasing cumulative influence of the media thanks to mediatization, which is the ever-growing adoption of media logic by other fields that have to adjust to the rules of the media, not vice versa.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, in political communication, “the new era of minimal effects”<sup>17</sup> was inferred from the same premise, the omnipresence of media.

Alternatively, in an interesting move beyond Bourdieu, Bolin<sup>18</sup> suggested that, in the convergence of journalism and entertainment on television, it is not journalism that is devoured by entertainment but rather entertainment that is assimilated by expanding journalism. Can something similar be observed in the dynamic between the journalist and the political fields?

Yet another persuasive alternative is presented by Nick Couldry's<sup>19</sup> concept of the “myth of the mediated center”. From this standpoint, media are seen as a ritual – as a set of “media-oriented practices” or a certain way of behaving with and talk-

## “IS THE MEDIA AN ACTIVE AGENT OF INFLUENCE OR ITSELF SUBJECTED TO THE AUTHORITY OF MORE AUTONOMOUS SOCIAL ACTORS?”

ing about media. Its key presupposition is that a society has a center and that media stand in that center or provide access to it. Couldry found this presupposition to be less than persuasive and to be totalizing, obsessed with large outlets, romanticizing, and generally misleading – or, in the end, mythical. Instead, he proposed a focus on how media form the audience’s knowledge of the world, facilitate or obstruct the audience’s agency, and determine what ethical positions this should entail.

Therefore, I focus my own analysis of media power at Euromaidan at the level of journalists’ capability to influence other actors through power of representation and through their own personal agency. But instead of finding the ultimate master influencer, I am interested in “how (under what conditions and with what result) do people exercise their agency in relation to media flows”.<sup>20</sup> The bottom line is that media power is to be seen as relational,<sup>21</sup> and it is revealed in relation to the power of other actors. From this perspective, the accumulation of power by activist journalists paralleled not only the continued erosion of power among conformist journalists, but also the waning power of the ruling elites and the state.

Looking at Euromaidan as one of the recent massive social movements once again marrying Reinhart Koselleck’s “critique and crisis”, one could argue that this was an exceptional time and essentially different from some regular “background” state. Because Euromaidan was a “historical event”, power and agency obviously came to be configured differently. Here, I would like to remind of another old (and fundamental) dichotomy. The Ancient Greek language and philosophy knew two concepts of time<sup>22</sup> – *chronos*, the historical time, and *kairos*, the momentous time (understood as the fortunate and the opportune moment). In archery and rhetoric, *kairos* meant the perfect delivery – the right set of circumstances when the action can be effective.<sup>23</sup> *Kairos* is not only a potential opening, but also the ability to seize the opportunity, and the personified deity of good chance. It is thus little surprise that for Martin Heidegger both human action and the moment of revolution implied an interplay of *chronos* as well as *kairos*.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, I believe that faith in *chronos* without *kairos*, thus in any “ordinary”, “unexceptional” conditions, should be questioned because they all consist of such punctured moments. Secondly, is the exceptional situation not especially interesting because it defines the next equilibrium? And finally, in a slightly ironic parallel to de Tocqueville’s<sup>25</sup> analysis of the French Revolution and the Ancien Régime, I might also suggest that outbursts such as this tend much less to change the old structure, and much more to tear down the old façade covering the structure that might have already changed underneath. It is the accumulation of tension in the structure (critique), the rupture (crisis), and the subsequent re-structuring that represent, in my opinion, a holistic picture of agency.

### **Eastern Europe: from no whence to no whither?**

Some scholars of East European media systems tend to see them as a case of a rather universal trend in media power. In the dia-



Serhiy Leshchenko and his wife in their new apartment.

lectical approach of Karol Jakubowicz,<sup>26</sup> “the media may and do affect political developments, but at the same time their impact is predicated on the existence of favorable political conditions without which they could not perform that function”. Jakubowicz argued for a flexible scheme of establishing the dialectic of media power by examining “the scope of political and administrative control over the media”, the links between political and media systems, and “the behavior and normative attitudes among the political elites”.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, he urged not to overlook other cultural and economic factors. Even though this analytical schema admits the capacity for journalists to wield power over politics, its analytical focus is almost entirely on the political field. Without delving deeper into the media system on its own terms, such a focus is likely to produce uniform images of “subordinate” media.

Since the collapse of communism, Eastern Europe has engaged in a transformation that to most observers now looks like, to quote from the Russian writer Viktor Pelevin, a “transition period out of nowhere and into nowhere”. The media were a key element in this process, subject to what Jakubowicz<sup>28</sup> aptly called “mimetic change” that entailed adoption of Western norms and an orientation to benchmarks. This resulted, in some countries, in an effective reconstruction of the media system according to the neoliberal standard or, in other countries, in imitative façades that sheltered the same old practices.<sup>29</sup> Increased marketization was adjoined by media corruption, European cosmopolitanism by the rise of nationalism, and professionalization by the preservation of old institutions. Although I find speaking of any one “East European model” less productive than speaking of different national models, one of the key features common to all national media systems in the region (except perhaps the Russian one) is a tradition of journalists’ political engagement. As Salovaara-Moring argued,



Spatially, Euromaidan was initially fragmented and organized around multiple and simultaneously active “preaching sectors”. PHOTO: SASHA MAKSYMENKO

**In East Central Europe the role of the journalist has traditionally been regarded more as a political activity than as a content producer or manufacturer of “objective” news for the market. The traditional role of a journalist has been closer to that of an intellectual, artist, or writer – someone who spoke on behalf of the people and to the people.**<sup>30</sup>

Ukraine fits into this pattern rather neatly, yet with an important difference. Historically speaking, ever since Ukraine lost any traces of autonomy and began to acquire a press of its own (in the 1770s-1780s), its journalism developed in a twofold manner. One strain was a top-down project supporting the objectives of imperial authorities (and carried out mostly in imperial or hegemonic languages – Russian, German, Polish, Romanian, and Hungarian). The other was an oppositional, often underground, activity that defined itself via its critical attitude to imperial state-building. This essentially postcolonial dichotomy continued in the Soviet era that saw the party-controlled journalism becoming a de-facto extension of the government, yet at the same time confronted by the dissident *samizdat* underground. Just one example was *Ukrayinskyi visnyk*<sup>31</sup> published by the dissident and Gulag inmate Viacheslav Chornovil, who even as the opposition leader in independent Ukraine never abandoned his publishing activity as the editor of *Chas/Time* before dying in a suspicious car crash in 1999.

Throughout the 1990s, Ukrainian journalism went through a dramatic expansion of pluralism mired by deep economic crisis and sprawling corruption, later subject to attacks by the authorities, censorship, and “clanization”.<sup>32</sup> The media market, in a con-

temporary observation, looked more like that in Macedonia or Bulgaria rather than Poland or the Czech Republic; it was weak, increasingly concentrated, overcrowded by outlets created for the purposes of political spin, and short on Western investment, and the unbridled influx of media product from Russia in 1991-2014 facilitated by unfair competition was eroding it even more.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, this contributed to the uncritical and normalizing character of the mainstream media discourse towards the elites<sup>34</sup> during the 2000s and early 2010s. Ryabinska<sup>35</sup> suggested that this was in essence “media capture” by the state and oligarchs thanks to informal exchange of services overriding formal structures and to the corruption evident in the prevalence of paid-for content and covert advertisement in the media.

At the same time this was paralleled by the rise of independent and alternative media vibrantly connected to the older underground journalist tradition. The efficiency of control over the “captured” media revealed its limits. Technological advancements reduced the cost and created a space beyond the formal control of state regulators. Across the mainstream media, an oligarchical pluralism took shape, whereby the media holdings controlled by competing politico-economic groups prevented any single group, including the relatively weak state itself, from re-monopolizing the media system.

### **Enlarged power for journalists during Euromaidan**

Euromaidan emerged in many respects as an outcome of the setup described above.<sup>36</sup> From the first day of the “journalist” rally called for by Nayyem in his Facebook post, the protest

was driven by critical and oppositional media outlets as well as popular bloggers and publicists who posted on social media. Of course, the presence of independent online media and the availability of social media enlarged this very direct mobilizing power of journalists. The live streams from Maidan by Internet television projects, such as *Hromadske*, *Espresso*, and *UkrStream*, sometimes gathered as many as 2.7 million simultaneous viewers.<sup>37</sup> But there was more to it than simply conveying information and knowledge about the protest nationwide and around the globe. Notably, independent media served as the political opposition hub and coordinating platform, the producer of symbols and content, as well as the watchdog over the opposition; “media were there both the observer, promoter, amplifier and even the organizer”.<sup>38</sup>

The Ukrainian journalist Sonya Koshkina’s<sup>39</sup> extremely detailed account of the events on Euromaidan, on the contrary, leaves little place for her colleagues to act, romanticizing mainstream politics and individualist action.

Yet even in this book, which is somewhat biased against journalists, the rich factual base allows one to draw several conclusions regarding the ways in which the media and journalists facilitated the social movement’s success:

1. Spatially, Euromaidan was initially fragmented and organized around multiple and simultaneously active “preaching sectors” led by each of the many political camps represented. The key role in unifying and directing the protest was played by the central stage and its sound system, social media, oppositional streams, and news websites. This was one of the key functions of media, cementing the diverse and fragmented protest.
2. Journalists sometimes acted as the protest “cannon fodder” such as when Tetyana Chornovil bound herself with metal wires to police cars thus immobilizing them (any movement would have cut her body in half) or when the same Chornovil was kidnapped and severely beaten, which created a media scandal that strengthened the protest.
3. Activist journalists also took part in decision making as members of the Council of Maidan People’s Union, playing an important role as a body of power on February 20–22, 2014 and having an impact on broader decision-making. In particular, the Council had a say in the appointment of the new prime minister on February 27, 2014.

**THE COUNCIL WAS** one of the key institutions of the social movement that linked protesters and the oppositional politicians who represented them and was therefore extremely instrumental in channeling the influence of the crowd onto the negotiating table between the opposition and then-president Viktor Yanukovich (apart from the more immediate and powerful, but not very sophisticated, tools such as shouting, booing, etc.). Out of 46 members of the Council, nine can be identified as primarily jour-

nalists or writers (just under one fifth, which is still positively disproportionate given the percentage of journalists and writers in the general population). However, at least 20 of the members, almost a half of them, maintained an active media presence and blogged for news outlets. Likewise, in their blogs at *Ukrayinska pravda*, the journalists Dmytro Hnap and Serhiy Leshchenko acted as agenda setters for what Maidan was supposed to do. Both of them harshly criticized the deal with Yanukovich in their 21 February blogs<sup>40</sup> recommending the still president to flee the country and the freshly released opposition leader Yuliya Tymoshenko to refrain from taking any official post (advice that both followed – of course, not because they were told to do so by the journalists but because it followed the demands of the protest formulated by the journalists). Hnap was calling for the ousting and arrest of Yanukovich as early as December 4, 2013,<sup>41</sup> setting the Euromaidan agenda rather early on.

These were not unilateral decisions imposed by the journalists on protesters, but rather an articulation of the protesters’ actual demands. And reinforced by a million-strong readership of the blogs, it gave these points back to the protest as its ready and formulated program. When journalists and media figures joined the Council, they also had an influence on the oppositional politicians who dealt directly with the government and the international community.

Among my informants,<sup>42</sup> I have interviewed a widely popular publicist who was a member of the Council.

This is how this man, “Davyd”, construed the limitations and opportunities presented to the journalists during Euromaidan:

**There were two groups of journalists. The first that covered the events and the second that participated in them. [I was] a member of the Council of Maidan... an activist... I would not exaggerate their impact on decision-making. We could influence things conceptually. For example, I proposed the very idea of creating the Maidan People’s Union and the Council of Maidan. It was my own idea taken up by the politicians. [...] All the real decisions were related, first of all, to defensive capacity and, secondly, to the negotiating capacity. So, the core of the decisions remained in the politicians’ hands. In any case, I believe that all journalists and civic activists could play a supportive role in this situation. Because Maidan itself, unsympathetic to the leaders of the opposition, directed them as its own representatives. We could take part only in the warming up of the public opinion. At a crucial moment, Yatseniuk, Klitchko and Tiahnybok had to address the people anyway.**

However, when describing the typical pattern of interaction he had during the protest, “Davyd” offered a unique example of

## “THERE WERE TWO GROUPS OF JOURNALISTS. THE FIRST THAT COVERED THE EVENTS AND THE SECOND THAT PARTICIPATED IN THEM.”

the genuine and far-reaching capability of a popular and well-connected journalist to enter the political field and take the lead in the power relations influencing politicians:

I cannot say that I was spending my day in Maidan because I would spend most of it in the Trade Unions Building. We had a headquarters there, as you know. And we did different work: meetings, consultations with politicians; I did not speak at press conferences because I am a reporter. There were some briefings for diplomats, which we held as members of the Council of Maidan, there were gatherings [zasidannia] of the Council of Maidan. I mean, [this was] an ordinary day. On critical days, we were in the square, spoke from the stage, but not every day obviously. [...] There were a few more places that I may talk about in the future because they were offices of the leading politicians where we had an opportunity to meet not only opposition activists, but also people who were, so to say, neutral and who could walk into the offices of the authorities while simultaneously communicating with the opposition.

It was a circle of people where Petro Poroshenko could show up. People who left the Party of Regions such as Inna Bohoslovka. We had our own meetings there from the first days of Maidan related to our effort towards forming the majority to vote back the parliamentary-presidential republic.

That was, as “Davyd” himself believes, one of the main reasons for why he started receiving threats and had to flee to a neighboring EU country. He was targeted for his attempt to project power through lobbying and trying to influence decision-makers. “I began to be considered one of factors in the creation of this majority. And it was not quite a journalist activity, but it was important because I had firmly established the contacts that helped me [abroad] to influence the sanctions lists, which also changed the situation very dramatically”.

One of the key *Hromadske* founding team members, “Oksana”, is a well-known journalist in her 30s. She remembers how “Sikorski [then Foreign Minister of Poland] told me openly that they were watching *Hromadske*’s streams from the streets when these killings started on the 18<sup>th</sup> [of February]. So they packed up and got off [to Ukraine]. We were really projecting influence then”. This account would have left the responsibility for breaking the backbone of the regime with journalists, had “Davyd” not provided a suspiciously similar claim. In Poland at the time, he explained the three foreign ministers’ surprise visit to Kyiv that played a major role in sealing Yanukovich’s fate as a result of his own intervention:

When they started shooting people in Maidan, nobody in Poland understood what was happening, from journalists to politicians to diplomats. I had to literally persuade my colleagues and people in the higher echelons of the Polish authorities that the destruction of Maidan was underway. Persuade with tantrums. Because the Polish side worked all the time towards ensuring that the events were constructively negotiated. It acted in concert with the Western countries. And I believe that the result of these persuasions was the trip by [foreign ministers] Sikorski, Steinmeier, and Fabius to Kyiv.

Irrespective of whether either account is true (or both simultaneously), it is evident that journalists sensed their impact as significant and strove to seize “the right time” and to influence foreign policy even beyond their own country. Consciously or not, they tried to shape this moment as the Heideggerian revolution – acting upon *chronos* through *kairos*. The difference lies in the means this influence was projected with – either one’s own content (Oksana’s version) or through lobbying agency beyond journalism but thanks to one’s status as a journalist

(Davyd’s version). Notable is that both claim a central role in the events without recourse to “the myth of the mediated center”; their influence is predicated on their own choice and their own agency.

Such interactions and direct interventions into the political field were likely reserved for the top-level journalists. Others could do only so much as simply join the protest as rank-and-file. In the words of “Alina”, a young society editor of a leading news website:

**“IT IS EVIDENT THAT JOURNALISTS SENSED THEIR IMPACT AS SIGNIFICANT AND STROVE TO SEIZE ‘THE RIGHT TIME’ AND TO INFLUENCE FOREIGN POLICY EVEN BEYOND THEIR OWN COUNTRY.”**

We also tried to become engaged in more traditional activism. We spent one weekend [in Maidan] trying to find where we could help, in the kitchen or with the wounded. We quickly realized we were better at something else. But many folks [journalists] did that after work, some hurled Molotov cocktails at the police.

For some, the key moment that marked their acceptance of the protest and its goals was the adoption of the so-called 16 January legislation that virtually outlawed most of the protest activity. The darkest hour thus turned into their fortunate moment. “Aleksandra”, a 40-something foreign desk reporter from *Segodnia*, a newspaper owned by Donetsk oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, confessed that it was then that she formed the opinion that she had to stand for her professional freedom and “right to profession”. Joining the protest, or even simply covering it, journalists would often fall victim to police violence. Most of the injured in the 1 December *Berkut* beating were journalists (about 50 people altogether), and they were also targeted by pro-government

Euromaidan in Kiev,  
January 2014.

PHOTO: TETERIA SONNNA/  
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



thugs. As “Marko”, a photojournalist who works for several national publications, remembered:

**I was taking pictures when I was attacked so I didn’t see them. The strike was professional, my eye got swollen immediately. I was later diagnosed with a suspected retinal detachment, so at that moment I simply lost visual control. In principle, I got away lightly – I only lost my face, literally. The rest was salvaged by my body armor, my cycling helmet. I don’t know at all how it held out. I remember a moment when they put a boulder on my head then raised it and dropped, commenting: ‘Wow, look – the helmet holds out!’ Or the man trying to jump on my head with both his legs.**

Similar experiences brought journalists and protesters even closer; once the lot was cast, they were accepted as part (albeit a special one) of the protesting crowd. “This is how journalists were standing in the same row with the Maidan people because they suffered too. [...] Plus the effect of journalists standing side by side with the people. I am not afraid to say that in Maidan we stood together”, said “Marko”, remembering how protesters would share sandwiches, Internet connections, and warm tents with journalists and photographers and would even shield them from police bullets.

### The journalist as a rock star or a king of chaos

The journalists’ participation in politics (including street politics) made them a vulnerable target for their camp’s opponents, but also, as the strength of the protest grew, put them in an increasingly empowered position. Traditional power roles – surveillance, investigation, and even policing – also began shifting towards the media as the only (apart perhaps from the church) remaining authority in society, while the executive branch of power and law enforcement were increasingly losing legitimacy through their continuing use of force. As early as on 4 December, journalist Dmytro Hnap wrote, “In [this] country, investigative journalists remain the only law enforcement agency”.<sup>43</sup> This was likely a rhetorical device, but the power of surveillance, as a rule associated with state agencies, was also often overtaken by the media. For example, during the blocking of the riot police units by local activists at the town of Vasyl’kiv in the Kyiv suburbs (5 December), an eyewitness reported how the protesters described their needs at the moment of the clash with the authorities: “They didn’t ask for anything, just two things: 1) tell the journalists they are waiting for them; 2) leave your phone numbers and be ready to help in case of need”.<sup>44</sup> When a crime had to be reported, it was reported to journalists rather than to the police who were seen as the enemy.

This boosted the intensity of journalists’ social contacts. As informant “Alina” mentioned to me: “I became really popular in social media. Many people [journalists] became popular in the revolution [na revoliutsiyi] as the demand for information

increased. People [followers] also started addressing me, I received 50 messages a day”.

“Davyd” shared his memories of meeting his audience immediately after a live broadcast from one of the riot police’s attempts at clearing the square.

**After the broadcast, I went to have breakfast here in the downtown and was approached by a colleague from *Espresso* who said there were almost no people and the Maidan [protesters] were likely to be forcefully removed. I was upset; what else could I do. I had my breakfast and went to Maidan, and I suddenly see a sea of people, and every single one I passed said hello and thanked me for the reporting [on the assault]. It was a one-of-a-kind moment in my life.**

“Oksana” was one of the most active and most frequently present journalists on Maidan during the protest, carrying out live streams and reporting on the skirmishes as the situation unfolded. She also found the power dynamic to be positive for journalists:

**We had a very specific situation. We were a little idealized and felt like rock stars. I am telling you the truth! We were always greeted, followed – “this is *Hromadske*, make way for them” – applauded, asked whether we had gotten some sleep, supported. We were highly recognizable because Maidan [the protesters] were watching us. I remember very well the day Yanukovych was toppled and everyone got going; those first days were like paradise. I was extremely sad, but from a journalist’s perspective, we were pursued! People pursued me in the subway to tell some story, like there is some patent bureau plagued by corruption for 15 years and ‘we are ready to tell you everything’. A couple ran after me in the subway telling me they lost a child in a road accident and the corrupt official responsible for it was not imprisoned. They had long hidden their pain and had never said anything until now.**

After the peak in February 2014, some of the increased influence wielded by journalists continued into the war situation. For example, a journalist named Kateryna Venzhyk related a story on her Facebook profile of a chance meeting with a soldier in the metro, which began like a typical exchange about the realities of war and the overall tragic situation. However, the conversation took a different turn when the author’s professional identity was revealed:

**When he learned I am a journalist, he began to ask me fervently [s zharom]: what’s up and how it is going, how is the parliament, what are the people saying, how many people were in Maidan on the 21<sup>st</sup> [the first anniversary of Euromaidan], and ‘what fuck are they [parliament] up to’. He was going to leave, I gave him**

my card and said, ‘Drop me a message if you need anything; I’ll try to help’.”<sup>45</sup>

In this interaction, the journalist clearly acts from a position of empowerment to help and take action.

Another informant expressed this in the following way:

**The attitude to journalists improved. Before, people would always blame journalists for being corrupt, scandal-thirsty, and selling their services for money. When people saw journalists in Maidan, their work, the risks they were taking, they realized they are citizens like themselves. They saw the real enemy and understood it was not the journalists, that the journalists work for them.**

It is all the more interesting to contrast this personal impression with the polling data suggesting there was little change in trust towards media, which was the second most trusted institution in Ukraine both before and after Maidan.<sup>46</sup> “Davyd” confirmed that his perceived sense of the journalist authority was not affected by the popular disillusionment with politics: “There was disappointment with politicians, but there was not disappointment with journalists. In general people regard my texts as independently written”. It can be hypothesized that perhaps the prevalence of trust remained the same (as many people as before trusted or did not trust the media) but that the intensity of trust increased, and people trusted more strongly and more openly and were ready to act upon that trust.

Not all journalists were content with the direction the media sphere had taken. This is the position of “Eduard” who was a journalist with a leading weekly in 2013–2014 and who now works as an independent commentator. His opinion towards Euromaidan, the post-Maidan Ukrainian government, and society has been generally critical. “A moment came when some journalists [...] started to be perceived as agents of either side in the conflict. And if the journalist does not meet this universally accepted model, he is ostracized”, said “Eduard” who claims that he adheres to professional values of neutrality and impartiality. Other journalists who admitted to their activist roles also seem in their responses to negotiate this tension between professional norms. “Aleksandra” said, for example, that she tried to avoid covering those social fields where she is an activist, although later she confessed she does write articles about illegal construction, too. “Eduard” himself is unsure about how realistic these values are.

At the end of the day, however, doubt was not the defining direction in the dynamic. There is a well-known picture of the entrance to the Ukrainian parliament guarded by two self-defense activists armed with shields and clubs. This picture encapsulates what I argue was the tendency of the power dynamic during these few days. The power effectively belonged to Euromaidan

in two key aspects – the monopoly of violence symbolized by the protesters controlling the physical space and the entrance to a key site of power, and the power of surveillance symbolized by the photographer taking their picture and transmitting it to the world in a show of power. The third aspect was that of decision-making, and this was the weakest faculty as also demonstrated by the eventual surrender of power to the traditional institutions, the parliament first of all, even though at the end of the crisis the parliament was in many cases issuing decrees only legitimizing the protester’s actions that had already happened. When MPs voted to seize Yanukovych’s estate outside Kyiv on 24 February 2014, it had already been overtaken by the protesters on 22 February 2014, the previous Saturday. The state followed, the protesters led – and were themselves led by the journalists and media-savvy activists.

At the critical moment of the power collapse following the deadly clashes of 18–20 February 2014, the media were among those institutions that remained stable and that continued functioning without interruption, thus helping mitigate the disruption of public space. They prevented disintegration and ensured the continuity of the social fabric, but cementing it as the political

sphere took time. They worked not just to transform society, but to integrate it – a task that might seem futile in its ambitiousness. In the hours between the escape of Yanukovych and the emergency sessions of the parliament, the capital was essentially controlled by self-defense units and groups of concerned citizens patrolling the streets as well as journalists who followed them and sometimes,

along with other activists and opposition leaders (much less popular and influential than themselves), told them where to go.

It seems tempting to conclude that in a revolutionary situation, when the traditional power collapses and can no longer fulfill its functions, society still cannot be left with a vacuum. In a modern society, such a political vacuum can be filled by media and journalists (provided that levels of trust and the cultural tradition allow it) thanks to the perception of them – and their own self-perception – as a (sub)field adjacent to the political field (in Bourdieu’s language) or as a part of the power apparatus (in Foucault’s terminology). “The myth of the mediated center” is at work – with less than mythical effects.

If in a normal situation the media are an actor in the service of social power (the king), when the king’s head is chopped off, the servant deemed the closest takes over for a while until order is restored and some Fortinbras claims the throne. This media “regency” was evident in Ukraine during the revolutionary period, with a peak around the transition between the old and the new government.

With the journalist invasion of the political field receding, leading authors such as Vitaly Portnykov, Sonya Koshkina, and Serhiy Rakhmanin continued to rally vast audiences with their texts. Other journalists tried to use the kairos and capital-

## **“A MOMENT CAME WHEN SOME JOURNALISTS [...] STARTED TO BE PERCEIVED AS AGENTS OF EITHER SIDE IN THE CONFLICT.”**



ize on their growing popularity, expanding contact base, and increasing ability to project influence like, for example, Serhiy Leshchenko, Mustafa Nayyem, Serhiy Vysotsky, Yehor Soboliev, and Hanna Hopko who all were elected to the parliament in the 2014 snap election. They and more recent journalist-to-politician “turncoats” such as Dmytro Hnup campaigned on their work in the media and their perceived authority to establish truth and to carry out surveillance of politicians on behalf of society. These formed the basis for their credentials for elected office. In the parliament, they continued to act from the position of an observer empowered to take action, for example, in the police reform (Nayyem) or by introducing electronic asset declarations for state officials (Leshchenko). This exacerbated the ambiguity of their standing between the fields because they were no longer journalists but were not yet conventional politicians; they could

control the implementation of the parliamentary decisions they lobbied for thanks to their positions in the respective committees, and at the same time they could leak the content of insider negotiations to the broader public. The political field itself was also changing thanks to the presence of such hybrid “journalist-politicians”. This is not unlike the contrary of Wittgenstein’s ladder that must be thrown away after use. When the king’s head rolled, journalists used their journalist power as a ladder to climb to the throne and occupy it in a more sustainable way than just a few days’ regency, but in so doing they refused to discard the ladder and instead kept it as a practical weapon in the struggle with other elites they shared the throne with.

However, as the kairos passed and began to slip from the journalist-politicians’ hand the authority that helped these figures be elected also worked against them, for example, in the situation

Independence Square in Kiev,  
Ukraine, on December 29, 2013.

PHOTO: SASHA MAKSYMENKO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



with Leshchenko's new apartment discussed at the beginning of this article (one could also cite smaller controversies around Hopko's dissertation or Soboliev's parliamentary work involving fistfights and threats). When the journalist-politicians are accused of non-transparent behavior, the first argument raised by their opponents is the discrepancy between their principles as journalists and their current activity as politicians. The media power that has elevated them to the position of influence thus backfires and topples them from the newly conquered heights.

The ladder to climb to the throne turns into a double-edged sword.

### **Power at a price**

The power itself came at a price paid more dearly by less popular, ordinary journalists. At least 270 media workers were beaten

and 7 were killed during the critical year of 2014.<sup>47</sup> In addition, 63 journalists were kidnapped by the Donetsk rebels (ibid.), and throughout 2014 anti-Maidan forces specifically targeted journalists perceived as enemies responsible for orchestrating Maidan, which was implicitly a way of recognizing the power of the "mediated center". Journalists were (and still are) attacked as the site of social power by those seeking to undermine this power and affirm their own. Severe measures were taken against journalists during the Crimea annexation and the current Eastern unrest (no Ukrainian or local media were admitted to the rebel-held areas, local editorial teams were attacked, and a number of journalists were kidnapped). Also, "Oksana" remains very critical towards the current aftermath of the situation: "Our Facebook-o-crazy... In our country 'likes' became political capital. It has a direct impact on your publicity. And it

is a part of the populism, a dark side of all this fun [vsioho tsioho shchastia]”.

There are also the notable cases of the high-profile murders of the Ukrainian commentator, anti-Maidan activist, and pan-Russian nationalist Oles’ Buzyna (notable for his anti-Europe opinion articles in *Segodnia*) who was shot in broad daylight in Kyiv, allegedly by radical Ukrainian nationalists, and Pavel Sheremet, a Belarus-born journalist with a high-profile career in his home country, Russia, and Ukraine who was blown up with an explosive device in his own car in the capital’s downtown and whose murder remains a mystery to this day (most allegations hint to the Russian secret services). This highlights that journalists remain under attack because of their perceived central position in society, similarly to high-profile politicians in other countries, not least Sweden.

But there was also another kind of price to pay. As “Eduard” recalls:

When I was in Crimea [during the annexation], as soon as I posted on Facebook and other social media, I would meet with a huge interest. But the kind of interest... I mean, I was seen as a certain medium who had to express support for the Ukrainian troops, send them regards, assistance, and so on. But all I did was write that they felt uncertain, abandoned, and betrayed. People took this very literally and started writing, through me, hundreds of messages and so on. I mean, in principle I felt such pressure in that I felt what the audience wanted [from me]. How they want to have this reported. Any controversial things that cause critique or show the Ukrainian side in a critical light were not exactly in high demand.

This informal censorship by the pressure of society or the audience was, in some accounts, completed by a more traditional “information management”:

At the time when the military conflict already entered the hot stage, there were of course many such cases. I faced it personally because I had left the magazine by then and picked up a job on television, so I saw how it worked. There were facts of direct... I mean, we hadn’t had it in the magazine, everything could be solved in a discussion this way or another. There had been no direct pressure when you are told how to do it. On television, it was done openly. I mean, not to me personally but I saw how the management was working with other colleagues. They were given some instructions openly.

Without any specific details, this testimony can of course be challenged, but it is difficult to doubt that Ukrainian mainstream media (mostly television) took a stance of informational protectionism and refrained from criticizing the military or the government, thus practically committing at the very least self-censorship in the wake of the military aggression against the country. The society co-opted the newly discovered media power by channeling some of the influence into the more traditional fields of politics and activism, while reintroducing censorship elements in the realm of conformist journalism. And, again, the fortunate hour – Kairos – has passed for journalism.

### Ukrainian media: between the activist and the conformist poles

It is important to note that not all journalists felt empowered in the same way. As “Alina” said, “There was very little direct influence of journalists in Maidan. But it is fair to say that journalists’ work led up to Maidan because journalists informed the people about what the government was doing. The government gave us a lot of material”.

The interviews point at the existence of two different poles of the spectrum, or even two habitus of journalists in Ukraine, the activist journalist and the conformist journalist. According to “Borys”:

There is a difference between journalists who have strong opinions and those who don’t. In the latter case, they just do whatever they can to satisfy the owner. In the

independent media, all journalists have their opinions and they are present in the texts. It’s stupid to pretend we didn’t hate Yanukovich, for a good reason, I mean.

“There are people”, “Marko” said, “who really want to change something, do something, and there are also many of our colleagues who work from bell to bell. You’re sent somewhere, you go there, do the shoot, come back, copy the pics, and off to rest you go, to have a drink, to relax”.

Media activism has mostly taken place in the online media with limited financial yet notable human resources. For such activist journalists, it was all about taking sides – streaming, documenting, informing, and mobilizing. “Borys” was very outspoken about being an activist journalist:

When I covered illegal construction in Kyiv, I was there not to get a good story, but to actually prevent the destruction of a historical building in the city I love. I think many other journalists saw their work as killing two birds with one stone – you do something useful for society and you work and get paid.

There are certainly some intermediary types between the activist

## “THE BLURRING OF BOUNDARIES BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND ACTIVISM, BETWEEN MEDIA PROFESSIONALS AND CIVIL SOCIETY, IS A STRIKING FEATURE OF EUROMAIDAN.”

and the conformist extremes. One notable example is the Kurchenko holding case where a lot of oppositional and activist journalists worked in the media outlets controlled by Yanukovich's clan, "the Family". Those working in the mainstream media should by no means be discounted as impartial, passive, or even anti-protest; "Aleksandra", whom I interviewed, combines activism and work in the oligarch-owned daily. Szostek<sup>48</sup> found that even the oligarch-owned large TV channels had rather sympathetic coverage of Euromaidan and conveyed the protest agenda to the general population, to the point that Yanukovich's Prime Minister Azarov had to complain that the government's voice was not being heard.

**The blurring of boundaries between journalism and activism, between media professionals and civil society, is a striking feature of Euromaidan. If Yanukovich thought that opposition journalists operating in the 'less influential', lower audience spheres of Internet and print media posed little danger to his regime, their role in the events of late November [2013] may have changed his mind.<sup>49</sup>**

"Aleksandra" thinks that journalism in Ukraine has become a social lift that recruits new and capable people into politics in the situation where the only ones who progress formally through party ranks are the leaders' relatives and associates. Activism is a fairly normal activity for a journalist, "Aleksandra" believes, and it is possible to combine writing (if adhering to the principle of neutrality) and activism as expressed in the very choice of the topic to write about as well as a physical presence and action at the site of protest. Journalist's activism thus becomes mostly a function of the body and acquires a corporeal dimension.

From this standpoint, journalism in Ukraine works like a kairos machine of sorts – one that connects you to the center (not necessarily mediated) at an opportune moment. "Aleksandra's" words are echoed by her significantly younger colleague "Ok-sana" from *Hromadske*:

**In Ukraine, social lifts never really worked. There was no possibility for a human being to earn some public social capital without money. If you look at all the activists who turned into politicians, they all used to be journalists and write somewhere. Although not everyone was a journalist, except Mustafa [Nayyem] and [Serhiy] Leshchenko. Some of them were public people who wrote. But it was easier to call yourself a journalist. We had no normal lawyers or judges. How could Ukraine even have normal lawyers? The human rights activist circle was also a little weird. As well as the business community. In fact, it strangely happened such that the media sphere was for some reason more pluralistic; there was more space to earn some political capital than elsewhere. In practice, if you wanted to become something – I dunno, like an anti-nicotine activist – you [had to become] a journalist. It was a strange sphere where you could be active and become known because you had access to media, to the public. Which eventually worked out.**

This situation is surely not unique, and it does remind of earlier classifications of journalists since the late 1960s and the early 1970s, such as the objectivity-obsessed "gatekeeper" and the justice-seeking "advocate".<sup>50</sup> There was also a tangible national angle to it, and Köcher<sup>51</sup> suggested a difference between British and German journalists not only when it came to, respectively, their stronger objectivist or advocate perspective, but also in the acceptability of unethical methods, which turned them into "bloodhounds" and hunters of news in the UK and into "missionaries" in Germany. Eventually, these binaries fit Hanitzsch's<sup>52</sup> analysis of different dimensions in journalist cultures, in particular the dimensions of journalists' institutional roles. In terms of this classification, the Euromaidan journalist culture can be defined as strongly interventionist and adversarial to the authorities. Its prevalence over other journalist cultures in the country became one of the defining components in the entire social movement's victory.

## **Conclusion: elastic field in a power loop**

If Serhiy Leshchenko had his acme over a few short weeks in September 2016, this came after and was facilitated by his kairos a few years earlier. The journalist surely mastered the effective delivery in his investigative articles, the art of saying the right things at the right times. Just as much as he and his fellow activists managed to seize the politically auspicious moment, the kairos at Maidan's agora, in order to shape the tide of chronos, or historical time.

Regardless of how journalism is defined, a key component of most theories and definitions is its relation to power. In less than 15 years, activist journalists have enjoyed a vertiginous career in Ukraine, from a persecuted and marginal minority to one of the most influential social groups and key actors in the political field. This was certainly facilitated by the technological shift that made media work more cost-efficient and less resource-demanding. But the transformation could also only happen because the culture had a long tradition of journalists taking a stand against authorities, and the idealized figures of an honest publicist, a passionately engaged writer, and a resistance fighter were familiar and readily accepted by the public. In this way, the underlying social structure contributed to their success significantly by its duality that facilitated individual choice and individual agency.

Journalists, as well as much of the society, perceived themselves as part of the "mediated center", and at the same time provided extensive knowledge about the social world to their audience thus fostering their audience's protest agency. They sought to project influence by mobilizing their own agency as well as the structural elements facilitating such agency, including the culture of activism and advocacy journalism, the romanticized revolutionary rhetoric, and the gaps in the control of the media field by the elites. At the peak of this agency, Euromaidan became simultaneously an uprising of the public sphere against the state, a strategic action struggle between the fields, and the manifestation of the politics as the Foucauldian continuation of primeval war by other means.

The journalistic field whose habitus became increasingly di-

vided between activists and conformists of the media work has undergone a major power shift, with the social prestige flowing from flexible television anchors serving the interests of the channel owner to independent critical journalists assuming a confrontational position. It is little wonder that the ambitious student of journalism Serhiy Leshchenko dreamed of becoming a TV host in 2000; leaving this dream behind because of his own modest speaking skills<sup>53</sup> for an even more successful career online, he became the embodiment of this change. This shift was the result of the individual agency of many journalists who decided not to yield to the pressures and who eventually sacrificed their professional ideal of objectivity for a stronger ideal of public service.

Following their success on the streets, the activist group faced a choice and quickly began to disintegrate into those who moved up to the new political elite and those who continued their activist work of romantic opposition. The “new” politicians are trying to use their authority to revitalize and cement the legitimacy of the political class that is withering away in new corruption and power abuse scandals. At times, they are at a loss to even define their status – are they the politicians, the government, or still journalists? Even Kateryna Handziuk, the victim of a recent acid attack, is a telling example because she has been defined somewhat ambiguously as an activist while she was also an elected local politician with executive responsibilities.<sup>54</sup>

There are enough similarities with progressive populists elsewhere in Europe. On the continent’s far end, in Spain, the public intellectual-turned-politician leader of the anti-austerity *Podemos* Pablo Iglesias confronted a familiar challenge when he bought a luxury apartment in ostensible contradiction to the principles he preached.<sup>55</sup> Is this a pan-European trend of the rise, co-optation and, maybe, fall of a counter-establishment? Iglesias seems to have weathered his storm while Leshchenko’s outlook is less clear. By spending their hard-won authority in politics, the activists (populists?) looped the cycle in which journalists used their truth-establishing authority firstly to further dissolve the already weakened political power, which also strengthened their own social position as the authority that holds politicians responsible, and then secondly to reinvigorate the political field with an injection of their legitimacy. Power is thus moving in a cycle between the political field and the journalist field that in particular has demonstrated its extreme flexibility and elasticity and its ability to expand and contract, regroup, and grow again. This story has no ending.

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