

UKRAINE

HROMADSKÉ TV: A NEW KIND OF MEDIA, A NEW FORM OF ACCOUNTABILITY



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Hromadske TV

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Introduction

On 22 November 2013, an internet television station called Hromadske.TV (or “Public.TV”) started operating in Ukraine. It was a joint initiative of 15 young Ukrainian journalists who wanted to provide objective and unbiased information about current affairs and political processes in the country. It is now the most popular non-profit internet television station in Ukraine.

It is important to understand that the station was launched the day after the Ukrainian government suspended preparations for signing the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement.¹ Hromadske.TV soon became the biggest public eyewitness platform of the Maidan movement – the result of a political and social crisis that struck Ukraine in 2014,² and that is still visible today. The conditions of the Minsk Protocol,³ which was supposed to result in a ceasefire in the Donbass region, have not been met; the country’s young male population is still being mobilised; and the annexed Crimea is still under Russian rule.

However, despite the conflict, Ukrainian culture seems to be having its moment of revival,⁴ with Hromadske.TV playing an important role in this process. Hromadske.TV not only grew into a resource of political commentary and information, but also into a broader platform to talk about cultural and social issues – including refugees, gender rights, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues – at a time when the country was still trying to rebuild its cultural and social identity after the painful events of 2014.

This was mostly only possible because Hromadske.TV is available on the internet – most Ukrainian TV stations are owned by the state or by oligarchs. Hromadske.TV “broadcasts” live, has a YouTube channel where its programmes can be watched, has a very busy social media presence, and its website is available in three languages: Ukrainian, Russian and English.⁵ It is a good example of how the internet helps Ukrainian citizens speak out about all sorts of economic, social and cultural issues and encourages them to define their own future.

Political context

Ukraine ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) on 12 November 1973 when still a part of the USSR, the former Soviet Union. However, despite the considerably early date of involvement with ESCR issues, Ukrainian policy regarding ESCRs today is quite weak.

Firstly, torn apart by the civil war and the political crisis, the country simply has no economic resources to take care of ESCRs. Secondly, the new parliament has prioritised political issues over social, cultural and economic ones. As a result, the internet has started playing an increasing role in influencing and educating audiences and preparing them for conscious choices in all aspects of cultural and social life.

1 This document was supposed to start the process of integrating Ukraine into the European Union; however, the process was frozen by President Viktor Yanukovich. This provoked public disapproval, resulting in the civil war. To read the whole document, please go to: mfa.gov.ua/en/about-ukraine/european-integration/ua-eu-association

2 Also known as the Ukrainian Revolution of 2014, the Euromaidan Revolution or Revolution of Dignity, a series of violent events that took place in the main square in Kiev (called Maidan – hence the name). The pro-European part of the population gathered to protest against the freezing of the EU-Ukraine integration process. The events involved riots, fights between protesters and the police, as well as snipers shooting (over a hundred civilians were killed). This resulted in the ousting of Yanukovich, and was followed by a series of changes in Ukraine’s sociopolitical system, including the formation of a new government, the restoration of the previous constitution, and a call to hold impromptu presidential elections within months. The events usually connected to the Ukrainian Revolution are the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, as well as the civil war in the Donbass region.

3 Representatives of Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and the Lugansk People’s Republic (LPR) signed the Minsk Protocol, an agreement to halt the war in the Donbass region of Ukraine, on 5 September 2014.

4 Lepeska, D. (2016, 31 August). Kiev’s New Revolution: Young Ukrainians spur cultural revival amid the conflict. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/aug/31/kyiv-new-revolution-young-ukrainians-cultural-revival-amid-conflict>

5 en.hromadske.ua

Hromadske.TV appears to be the best illustration of this. It was formed by the journalists who stopped believing in the state-funded and state-ruled television, and who wanted to make a difference in society. However, television production and operation is an expensive enterprise, and the founders of the project say it was hard to imagine how they could raise enough money back in 2013 to start a television station.⁶ It is important to understand that the initial stages of the project were funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the United States Embassy, as stated in the station's Annual Financial Report 2013.⁷ However, later that year the project managed to raise UAH 461,000 (USD 44,906) in the first 25 days of one of the most successful crowdfunding campaigns in the history of crowdfunding in Ukraine.⁸ This proved that an enterprise like this – the delivery of independent, unbiased information – was a necessity in Ukrainian society.

But has Hromadske.TV managed to meet people's expectations?

A new kind of media, a new form of accountability

It seems so. Hromadske.TV's YouTube channel had 325,704 subscribers with over 21 million views in 2013,⁹ and in November 2014 it was announced that its YouTube channel recorded its highest number of live-streaming hours.¹⁰ Its Facebook page now has more than half a million people subscribed to it. The founders of Hromadske.TV confess that this surprised them at first – they did not expect the figures to be so high so quickly.¹¹

Partly this success was due to Hromadske.TV's content: fresh independent investigations that offered reportage from the frontline of the war, and socially relevant content such as interviews with political prisoners and the military, as well as content on refugees and gender minorities – something that the state-funded TV could not afford to cover

OBTAINED FUNDING	
Head office and Hromadske.tv newsroom	
MATRA	793 000 UAH
US Embassy Media program	790 000 UAH
Renaissance Foundation	248 000 UAH
Internews	193 000 UAH
Crowd-funding	1 100 000 UAH
Individual donations (such amounts are not expected in future)	2 531 000 UAH
Auction House "Dukat"	207 000 UAH
Internews - for investigations (agreement signing stage)	3 000 000 UAH

Obtained Funds by Hromadske TV

politically. Partly it is to do with the platform it is shared on. Back in 2014, the president of tech company Internet-Invest called Hromadske.TV "a brand new kind of media that has not existed in Ukraine before, and that would influence the media future of the country."¹²

It was indeed a new kind of media – a TV channel funded by viewers, shared via internet, and using social media as complementary platforms, which allowed direct, interactive communication with its audience. Much of this interaction draws on the potential for creative political expression. For example, Hromadske.Culture¹³ launched a project called "Creative Constitution" where artists and viewers depicted different chapters of the Ukrainian constitution using different media (graffiti, dance, music, theatre, etc.).¹⁴ "We use our constitutional rights to express our opinion," says one of the artists who created a graffiti artwork based on the constitution's chapter on freedom of expression. This project aimed to stress the constant violation of basic rights in Ukraine.

Many Hromadske.TV initiatives were designed to incorporate internet users (or the audience) in this way. For example, they put out a call for stories to be collected by their audience in the outlying regions in Ukraine, and to publish these on social media. "There is too much bad news in this country, so we decided to change it and just look for the stories of little victories," one user wrote on the

6 AIN. (2014, 9 February). What Hromadske.TV Is Made of: Figures, Money, People. *AIN.UA*. ain.ua/2014/02/06/511834

7 See the Cash Flow Statement of the Hromadske.TV Annual Financial Report 2013: hromadske.ua/finreports/Annual%20Fin%20report%20-%20ENG.pdf

8 Watcher. (2014, 20 May). Hromadske.TV has raised 461 thousand hryvnas on Internet in 25 days. *Watcher.com.ua*. watcher.com.ua/2014/01/20/hromadske-tb-za-25-dniv-zibralo-v-interneti-461-tys-hrn

9 teleprostir.com/news/companynews/show-21957-gromadske-tb-b-e-rekordi-pereghliadiv

10 ru.telekritika.ua/rinok/2014-11-26/100859

11 AIN. (2014, 9 February). Op. cit.

12 Ibid.

13 A recent cultural addition to the station's programming that is becoming more and more popular, and shows that Hromadske.TV has moved from being mainly concerned with political issues to a true socio-cultural platform that helps to define new Ukrainian culture. See: hromadske.ua/culture (All Hromadske.TV content is available in Ukrainian, Russian and English.)

14 hromadske.ua/posts/vidkryi-konstytutsiiu-iak-osnovnyi-zakon-ukrainy-staie-mystetstvom

station's Facebook page after posting her story of a young girl who created an art gallery in her little village.

However, exposure on the internet and social media comes with responsibility – and even danger to the lives of those whose share stories or whose stories are shared. While the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights often receives reports from civil society about journalists who report on socioeconomic rights facing threats from authorities, a recent letter¹⁵ signed by 301 NGOs and addressed to the Committee highlighted the threats that human rights defenders face in the field. This letter followed the murder of Berta Cáceres, a Honduran indigenous and environmental rights activist. Journalists working at Hromadske.TV find themselves in a similar situation. Many Hromadske.TV journalists have reported threats on their lives in comments posted on their Facebook pages and other online accounts. Ekaterina Sergatskova, who has been a journalist at Hromadske.TV since 2014, shared the following with me in an interview conducted for this report:

I and many of my colleagues regularly get threats to our lives, but they usually come from individuals and rarely go beyond the virtual space. I can give you the latest example: Dmitry Korchinskiy, the famous provocateur and the founder of the “St. Mary Battalion”,¹⁶ wrote a Facebook post about me calling me an agent of the Federal Security Service [FSB, Russia's secret service], which I regard as a potential threat, because many of his soldiers may perceive it as a call to action: FSB agents must be destroyed.¹⁷

Ekaterina – and her colleagues from Hromadske.TV, Natalya Gumenyuk and Nastya Stasyuk, who are also two of the founders of the station – stress that threats often come from government officials, primarily Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, who calls the journalists “liberal separatists”, and

says their lives are less important than the lives of soldiers. These threats by the interior minister make the job of the Hromadske.TV journalists more difficult, and put their lives at risk, Ekaterina says.

Independent researchers seem to confirm what Ekaterina says. The authors of *Attacks on the Press: Journalism on the World's Front Lines*¹⁸ and *Beyond the Cold War of Words: How online media can make a difference in the Post-Soviet Space*,¹⁹ both list Hromadske.TV among the channels that have journalists who work under constant threats to their lives. However, this does not make the channel stop operating. On the contrary, it continues to fundraise, and its content is expanding to include talk shows with controversial figures, interviews with political prisoners, and an increasing number of cultural and social initiatives.

Many interesting cross-media collaborations have emerged. For example, even the state broadcasting channel *Suspilne Movlennya* (Public Speech)²⁰ has collaborated with Hromadske.TV, broadcasting some of its content. Another similar collaboration exists with an online channel in Russia called *Dozd TV* (TV Rain).²¹

Conclusions

Hromadske.TV is a non-profit crowdfunded project with transparent financial reporting. Since its launch, much of its programming has shown an awareness of human rights issues in the Ukraine, and how they impact on Ukrainian society.

The founders of Hromadske.TV – Gumenyuk, Stanko and Andrei Saichuk – say that when Hromadske.TV was founded back in 2013, a focus on ESCRs was an important part of the content. They are constantly aware of the problems of inequality, regularly report on economic issues, and develop the concept of Ukrainian culture as opposed to “global” or “post-Soviet” culture.²² At the same time, Hromadske.TV appeared to be a powerful platform that challenged traditional media.

However, history has shown that any new media innovation can be used for positive or negative ends. “I think that today Ukraine is the perfect place for the study of propaganda in the digital world of new media,” Natalya Gumenyuk says. “Whatever

15 “Situation of defenders of economic, social and cultural rights”, a letter initiated by the International Platform against Impunity, the International Service for Human Rights and the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 24 May 2016. globalinitiative-escr.org/global-civil-society-alerts-un-committee-to-risks-facing-esc-rights-defenders

16 This is a territorial defence battalion established in mid-2014, during the early stages of the war in the Donbass. It consists of volunteer military units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine under the command of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence in 2014-2015.

17 Here Ekaterina refers to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in the Donbass which she reported on many times as an independent journalist. Interview conducted for this GISWatch report on 5 August 2016 via email.

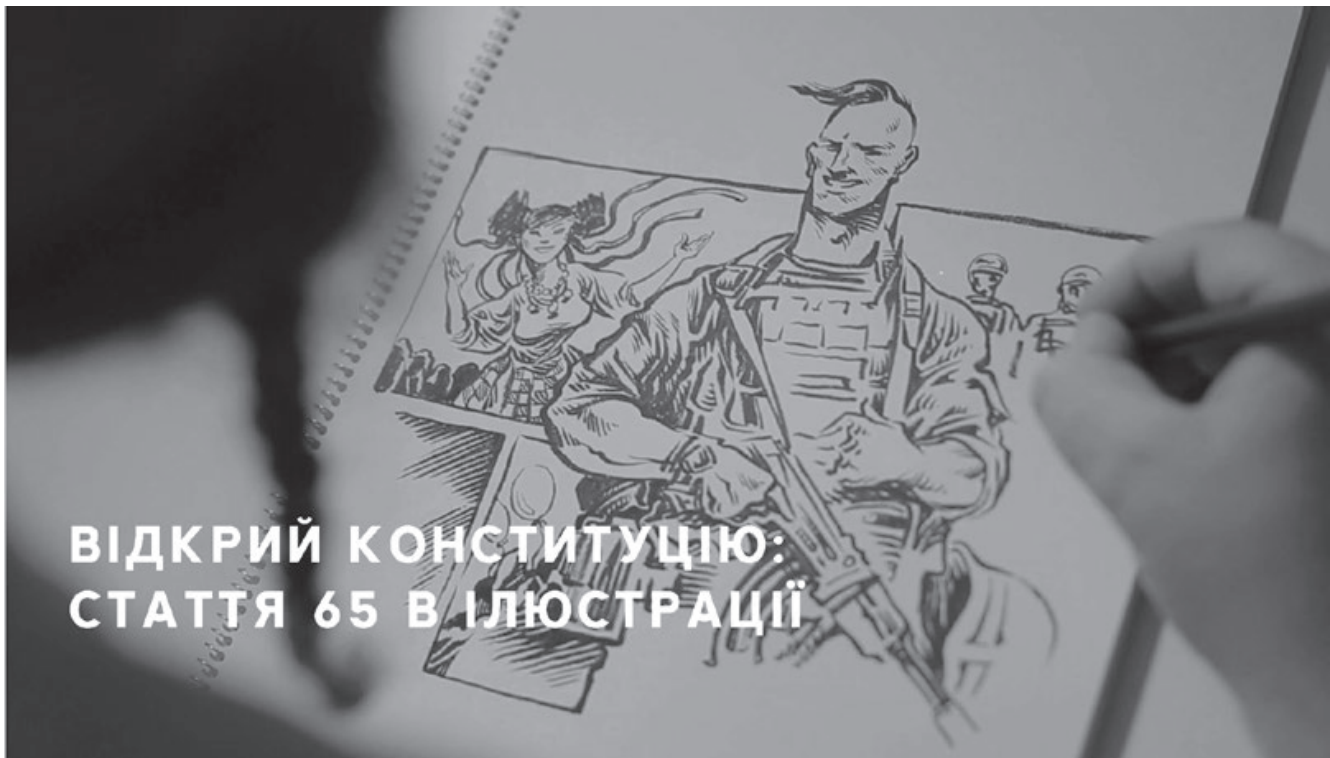
18 Committee to Protect Journalists. (2015). *Attacks on the Press: Journalism on the World's Front Lines*.

19 de Jong, S., et al. (2015). *Beyond the Cold War of Words: How online media can make a difference in the post-Soviet space*. The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies.

20 1tv.com.ua/suspilne

21 <https://tvrain.ru>

22 Interviews conducted for GISWatch 2016.



"Open the Constitution" project by Hromadske.Culture. The caption says (in Ukrainian) "Open the Constitution: Article 65 in Illustration".

they say, the 20th century had never seen information being treated so cruelly by so many different sources: TV, radio, talk shows, tabloids, and on social media..."²³

Natalya is right. As the founder and the editor of Hromadske.TV she knows that this power of the internet has to be used wisely. And hopefully she will be able to lead her team in that direction.

Action steps

Taking the Hromadske.TV example into account, I suggest the following steps for internet activists dealing with ESCRs in Ukraine, and elsewhere in the world:

- *Crowdfunding is good.* No one at first believed that Hromadske.TV could be successful, but it turns out that the initiative is welcomed by the public, even in times of great turbulence, and particularly when the government does not take progressive steps to fulfil social and cultural rights.
- *Use the digital space to its limits.* Hromadske.TV is internet TV – a new type of television. Internet is young, Hromadske.TV journalists are young, their viewers are young. And that is your power. Keep exploring the digital space. Be proud of

Skype interviews and iPhone reportage. That's your world.

- *Let your viewers become more than just viewers.* Let them create the news themselves. Let them say what they believe in. Create no boundaries between you and your audience. Do not create impersonal content. Invite them to collaborate. Teach them. Be proud of them.
- *Let everyone know you believe in human rights, and do everything to show it.* Many people in Ukraine and elsewhere in the developing countries have literally forgotten what human rights represent. Constantly keep reminding them. Treat the constitution as a screenplay. Make it interactive. Sing it, dance it, as Hromadske.Culture did.
- *Protect yourself.* Threats to your life are common if you enter a public domain at a time of conflict. Name the threats when they occur. Talk about them and about the people who make the threats, so the public is aware of them. Take steps to legally protect yourself if necessary. In case of a serious threat to your life, approach the Committee to Protect Journalists²⁴ for help and protection.

²³ Argumentua. (2014, 10 October). Natalya Gumenuk: Donbass has lost fear. *Argumentua.com*. argumentua.com/stati/natalya-gumenyuk-donbass-utrartil-strakh

²⁴ <https://cpj.org>