

'Maidan' and new media: the Kyiv Revolt seen from Ukraine and London (guest blog)

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This article by LSE student and Silverstone Scholar Elena Serdyuk.

At the beginning of December 2013, while I was physically in London, my heart and mind were in the centre of Kyiv with my family, friends and thousands of Ukrainians who took to the streets, appalled by the violence used by the Berkut riot police against the peaceful protesters on Maidan Nezalezhnosti ("Independence Square" in English; "Maidan" for short) on the night of 30 November.



The original protests, which started a week earlier, were caused by the refusal of the current president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych to sign a free trade agreement with the European Union—something he's been promising Ukrainians for years. In the midst of a sudden crisis, in order to stay informed, and remain sane, I turned to watching alternative Ukrainian TV channels online, such as Hromadske.TV, Channel 5 (5.ua/live), Espresso.TV and Spilno.TV, all of which stream in real time.

Over the first two weeks of the protests, the state-controlled TV channels in Ukraine either ignored the developments on Maidan, instead showing soap operas and concerts, or covered them in a biased fashion, depicting the protesters as "right-wing extremists" and stating that they totaled just a few hundred people. In reality, there were hundreds of thousands of protesters—regular peaceful citizens, fed up with the corrupt state apparatus, the puppet government, the incompetent Verhovna Rada (the Parliament) of Ukraine and the current president's failure to fulfill the desire of the Ukrainian people to live in a democratic European society. The blatant violation of human rights on 30 November was the final straw.

Online resources, such as Channel 5, Spilno.TV, Espresso.TV and Hromadske.TV, provided an important lifeline for real, unedited coverage of the protests, allowing uncensored information to reach viewers both inside Ukraine and far abroad.

Channel 5 is a cross between traditional media and new media venture as, apart from streaming online, it used to be available on TV in Ukraine, before its broadcast was turned off on 17 January 2014. Espresso.TV, Hromadske.TV and Spilno.TV are available online only, streaming live coverage of events on their websites as well as on YouTube, and testing a style of delivering the news never before seen in Ukraine. Channel 5 is owned by one of the opposition-supporting billionaires Petro Poroshenko and has a traditional business model, where the revenue comes mostly from advertising. Espresso.TV, in turn, is co-owned and funded by several public and private entities.

In the meantime, Hromadske.TV and Spilno.TV are in a league of their own, as they are funded exclusively by the public donations and grants. These two online channels make for a fascinating case study of networked journalism in the on-going debate about the changing nature of journalism today. Both projects describe themselves as non-commercial citizen Internet television. Just as their names suggest—"Hromadske" stands for "Public" in English and "Spilno" means "Together" or "United"—their connection with the public is essential, as they rely heavily on interaction with the viewers and citizen journalists in covering the stories and latest developments in the protests.

In my next post I am going to look more closely at how Hromadske.TV and its journalists came to be one of the go-to sources covering the protests in Kyiv, what their philosophy is and what criticism and praise they have earned so far.

Stay tuned...

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