

# **Money and Free Speech in Ukrainian Political Journalism: The Case of Hromadske**

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***NB** This is a work in progress and presents only a sketch of an argument that will have to be more fully developed and demonstrated through ethnographic evidence. Please don't circulate or cite without the author's permission.*

## **Introduction**

Speak to Ukrainian journalists about their profession, and you will get a range of views painting an ambivalent vision of journalism. At one end of this range, there will be a figure of journalist the liar, an unscrupulous servicer of the needs of politicians and oligarchs big and small — the figure encapsulated in the undying post-Soviet trope of “journalist as a prostitute” (Roudakova 2009, 2017). At the other, there will be journalist the hero, a person so pure of self-serving intentions and so fully embodying freedom from external influence, that s/he is ready to take considerable risks in the service of truth.

The relationship between these two moral extremes suggests a space of tensions that are generally characteristic of journalism as an occupation which, on the one hand, entails waged labour, and is thus subject to economic and political pressures; and on the other, as a *profession*, seeks to retain its organisational, epistemic and moral autonomy, which it moreover elevates into its chief value. Journalists, in the words of a French sociologist, “are structurally condemned to produce [...] under political and/or economic constraints” (Champagne 2005: 50). The way they do so and the way these pressures are articulated in ethical reflection within and outside the profession, have a great deal of cultural and social specificity.

In this paper, I begin to sketch out one important tension structuring the professional life of political journalists in Kyiv, Ukraine — namely, the apparent conflict between the moral value of autonomy and the economic value of speech, which are inherent in their waged work and its political import. To do so, I build on a year-long ethnographic fieldwork with reporters working for two public broadcasters (Hromadske and Suspilne), as well as their colleagues in the private media. My research aimed to understand how elite journalists debate and seek to realise the value of freedom of speech, and how they square it with the structural contradictions that characterise their profession.

In a context where the news frequently becomes an instrument in the hands of media owners or the highest bidders, journalists can take money and relations of exchange (which they inevitably have to deal with) to threaten their freedom and/or

professionalism. This is especially so, I want to argue, in the case of “independent” media set up (and supported by Western donors) to realise the democratic promise of free journalistic speech. Here I will focus on Hromadske, a small liberal news organisation where I spent much of my time in Kyiv. Established as a charity by a group of prominent journalists just before the Maidan protests in 2013, Hromadske’s *raison d’être* is to service the interests of the Ukrainian “public”, as opposed to the interests of oligarchic owners who have come to dominate the Ukrainian media economy and are frequently blamed for turning current affairs journalism into instruments of political influence and tokens of political exchange.

To the extent that such instrumentalisation is an objective condition of work for many journalists (outside Hromadske), it fuels a particular form of ethical vigilance directed at the self and others and focused on detecting the circuits of exchange that journalists, or products of their labour, might become involved in. In this context, I argue, the realisation of the value of creative professional autonomy for individual reporters, and of the democratic potential of free speech for organisations such as Hromadske, hinges on discursive and material separation — for example, of words from money, internally determined creative self-expression from externally determining conditions of journalistic work, and persons and organisations from larger structures of influence. This can shed light on the “political epistemics” (Glaeser 2010) of Ukrainian journalism, namely, the ways in which members of the journalistic profession develop about themselves in the context of the political-economic system of media production, affect this system.

One way to understand the value and meaning of journalistic freedom of speech in Ukraine is to follow discussions about its opposites: manipulation of information, oligarchic control, and corrupting influences of informal payments for journalistic coverage. While researching Hromadske, I witnessed a number of discussions on these topics — they inevitably brought together questions of ethics (how to live well) and professionalism (how to be a good journalist), articulating these in relation to descriptions of the oligarchic political economy of mainstream media. The problem of professional and personal autonomy thus emerged with particular sharpness through my interlocutors’ accounts of other journalists’ malpractice, corruption, and compromises between money and freedom.

In what follows, I attempt to interpret one such debate in its wider context. This allows me to explore how negotiations of journalistic autonomy vis-a-vis the profession (realised in journalistic discourse, everyday organisation of work, navigation of social hierarchies, and in individual professional trajectories), reveal the particular ways in which professionals who in virtue of what they do (journalism), and where they do it, cannot help but to constantly try and resolve the ethical ambivalences forced on them by the structures of their profession.

### **The Portnov-ZIK controversy**

One evening in late January, huddled in a corner of Hromadske’s newsroom, two journalists were debating an interview aired several days earlier by the all-news TV channel ZIK. The programme featured Andriy Portnov, a former advisor to President

Yanukovych, who like Yanukovych himself fled Ukraine after the February 2014 massacre of the Maidan protesters (see ZIK 2018). The interview quickly became the focus of an intense media controversy (DetectorMedia 2018). Appearing (by Skype) in a Hardtalk-style<sup>1</sup> programme hosted by ZIK's producer general Natalia Vlashchenko, Portnov was questioned about Ukrainian politics. Hours later, a pro-government MP, Ivan Vynnyk, walked out of another ZIK talk show, in protest of Portnov's appearance on ZIK. Following Vynnyk, a number of government politicians, spokespeople and nationalist-leaning journalists and bloggers used Facebook to expressed their dismay with the interview, some of them calling viewers and guests to boycott ZIK. One day later, a group of about 20 people protested in front of ZIK's headquarters in central Kyiv, protesting 'revanchist' politics of the channel apparently revealed by this interview, and demanding Vlashchenko to be fired (Ukraiins'ka Pravda 2018). These reactions, in their own turn, provoked responses from ZIK, Vlashchenko herself, the National Union of Journalists and others in defence of the general right of journalists to work without outside interferences, particularly when they give floor to government critics.

One of the main reasons for which Portnov's appearance on ZIK proved so offensive was the insensitive timing of the programme. The interview was aired on 22 January, the fourth anniversary of the first deaths in the Maidan protests (allegedly shot by the police). Portnov, who was not implicated in the criminal investigations into these deaths,<sup>2</sup> was nevertheless marred by his association with Yanukovych. The very act of giving air time to a former ally of the disgraced president added to the offence in a context of a war-time ideological polarisation of the public sphere: Portnov was seen as associated to the political actors widely held responsible for violence in the Maidan and the ensuing crisis in Ukraine, so Vlashchenko and ZIK became guilty by extension. Finally, a smaller number of commentators, mostly media professionals, took exception with the conduct of the interviewer. They allowed that Portnov could not be denied an on-air appearance if the principle of free speech was to be guaranteed, but stressed that the interview was not critical enough: Portnov's right to free speech had to be counter-weighted with the journalist's duty to critical, balanced reporting, lest the interview turn into propaganda. As it happened, the interviewer's questions appeared weak and complimentary to the guest and failed to challenge Portnov's (allegedly self-interested) criticisms of the post-Maidan administration. Because of the seemingly non-critical position taken by the interviewer, the implication of partisanship and thereby political sympathies and associations, extended to her as well.

These rather different concerns were all propelled by the same question: how to explain Portnov's appearance on ZIK and Vlashchenko's weak interview questions? Some commentators speculated that ZIK must have been paid off to run the interview; others implied that there was an (unidentified) connection to Russia<sup>3</sup> and the Kremlin's propaganda agenda in Ukraine. The spokesperson for the Ministry of the Interior, a former journalist himself, pushed this logic even further, speculating

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<sup>1</sup> Hard Talk is a radio and television programme broadcast by the BBC since 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Although there were several criminal cases opened against him, all apparently without much result (Radio Svoboda 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Citing, as evidence, an unconfirmed attempt to give air time to Viktor Medvedchuk.

that the *owner* of ZIK (a minor Lviv oligarch who fled justice after his motorcade had killed a woman in a car accident in 2017) somehow personally invited Portnov, a government critic, in a “calculated tactics ... to avoid criminal responsibility”<sup>4</sup> for the accident (Shevchenko 2018). Such speculations about the real-but-hidden reasons for Portnov’s appearance on ZIK operationalised a suspicious hermeneutic (Shevchenko 2008) which tended to imply that the interviewer’s and interviewee’s behaviour fit hidden agendas in a larger political game opaque to an outside observer.

The logic of such speculations was most succinctly summarised to me by Oksana Sheremetieva,<sup>5</sup> a former high-ranking government official (in a post-Maidan government) and a telecom lobbyist: “Usually you know who owns which TV channel, and how the owner is tied into politics... So you can see when they [the channel] start whacking (*mochyty*) their political competitor — you understand that it’s a character assassination (*chornukha*).” I asked Oksana to elaborate; she continued:

They [the owners] are using it... Our television industry has been loss-making since 2008.<sup>6</sup> And of course they’ve got to make money somehow, right? What happens is actually called “white corruption”: they promote their own [*svoii*] politicians through the TV, then these politicians get into the Parliament, and from there into the Cabinet, yeah, and get to control state companies, which are then handed over as a payment to the oligarchs. This is how they make profits, it’s just that the cycle isn’t direct — it isn’t ratings-ads-money. The cycle is more complex, it has a visible part and an invisible one. All these under-the-table agreements...just like the character assassination of rivals, requires collaboration of journalists, presenters, editors and producers — almost invisible figures in Sheremetieva’s scheme depicting the flows of agency, representations and profit in an oligarchic media economy. Accounts of political instrumentalisation of journalism are the stock of “spontaneous media sociology” in Ukraine and the broader region, whether among lay consumers of news or media professionals themselves (see e.g. Koltsova 2006; Roudakova 2008). Oksana’s description is consistent with those I collected throughout my fieldwork, many of them more explicit (and often less nuanced) in their rendering of journalists as unfree, dependent vessels of TV owners’ political agency. The reactions to the Portnov-ZIN controversy are a case in point. Such accounts get right the basic fact about a large section of Ukrainian media: journalism is frequently used as an instrument in political and economic struggles and more often than not powerful actors acquire media assets with exactly that purpose, while those who do not own such assets, are forced to either play clean or negotiate or purchase news coverage.<sup>7</sup> One policy paper, compiled by a group of Ukrainian media experts for Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in 2010,

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<sup>5</sup> Names of all interviewees anonymised.

<sup>6</sup> This claim is broadly speaking correct.

<sup>7</sup> This problem has been described at length for the case of Russia (Koltsova 2006 and Roudakova 2009), and theorised more generally as media-political clientelism (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

elaborates on this logic of economic dependency and political instrumentality:

Many owners use mass media as means of influence on society and authorities, but not for making profit. This way, when investing into media business, most investors treat this activity as an auxiliary asset in relation to their main business. [...] Moreover, the unprofitability of media, though it may sound paradoxical, is beneficial to their owners. Journalists are easier to control when they know that their salary depends directly not on the audience and advertisement but on contributions of the owner. In the end, the economic crisis of media organisations results in a phenomenon of hidden advertisement. Under such conditions, a large amount of critical materials in the media is not the indicator of the freedom of speech, but a realisation of the media owners' or sponsors' orders aimed at destroying their business or political rivals. (Ivanov et al. 2011: 1)<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, according to one post-2014 estimate, the “TV audience (77,9%) is highly exposed to channels controlled by politically affiliated individuals” (MOMU: n.d.), with 76.25% of the audience captured by TV channels controlled by four major oligarchic groups (Pinchuk, Kolomoiskyi, Akhmetov, Firtash and Liovochkin). Much of the sensitive coverage of politics and current affairs by the major broadcasting and press outlets persistently show signs of political bias<sup>9</sup>. Several TV editors who joined Hromadske in 2016-17, for example, told me that they had left their previous (much better paid and more prestigious) jobs at a TV channels belonging to Rinat Akhmetov because they had been routinely expected to broadcast politically motivated reporting that favoured the owner.

The political instrumentalisation of journalists is not lost on audiences themselves (although the available research on this issue tends to focus on Russia, the Ukrainian situation is analogous). Helen Miczkiewicz, a media scholar, reports that by the late 1990s, Russian television viewers followed a strategy in which knowledge of a TV station's owner could be “vital in deciphering what [was] meant to be a persuading agenda” of the news (2008: 41). Participants of Mickiewicz's focus group in major Russian cities thought they could predict what spin each network would offer on a particular story. This reveals a corrective heuristic which, regardless of how precise it is (and of how consistently it is applied by a particularly positioned person), implies a certain suspicion towards news as framed for persuasive effects, and perhaps more generally, public discourses as intentionally manipulated (see also Shevchenko 2008). This heuristic, as both Mickiewicz's material and Olga Shevchenko's ethnography suggest, seeks to infer particularistic interests that are benefitted by such framings and manipulations.

It is against this structural background, that we should understand the reductive “dietrological” (Knight 2009) interpretations of Vlashchenko's interview with Portnov. While they do not encompass the whole range of positions in the controversy, they

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<sup>8</sup> Original English modified for readability.

<sup>9</sup> Pick any recent (or not so recent) news monitoring report by Detector Media or IMI as a proof.

nevertheless demonstrate that the political instrumentalisation of journalism has effectively bred a pervasive attempt, among both journalists and their audiences, to identify bias and take a stance on it. Such suspicious hermeneutics and descriptions, I want to suggest, are a form of journalists' ethical reflection on the conditions of their work, and as such reveal a valued image of a good journalist. When reporters deconstruct products of one another's work to look for signs of political intent, instrumentality and unfreedom (as happened with the Portnov interview), or when they pass judgements on this work (and thus, on its authors), which reduce it to its conditions of production and circulation and dispense with the autonomy of the author, they are evaluating this work in light of the values of autonomy from political and economic pressures, that characterise and are realised in 'good' journalism.

But how does one manage to stay free, to remain a good journalist, given the pervasive pressures of the oligarchic political economy of media in Kyiv? To address this question, I return to Hromadske and specifically to a discussion that took place in the newsroom after the Portnov-ZIK affair, which further elucidates the ways in which the same value of professional freedom is differentially operationalised.

### **Two views on professionalism**

Let me now return to Hromadske's newsroom, where I began. "One thing that distinguishes Hromadske," — a friend at the organisation once told me, "is that no-one leaves work at 6. Those who come to work here from the big telly [the private oligarchically owned channels do] not always understand that." Journalists at Hromadske, my friend implied, did not work to the clock because the kind of journalism the organisation sought to produce, required a vocational commitment going beyond a mere contractual relation.<sup>10</sup> Now it was well past 6pm, and the newsroom was full. After the evening planning meeting with the chief editor, the senior reporters Anton and Maria huddled with several others in the corner of the room, discussing a proposal for an editorial article on freedom of speech. Hromadske had missed the chance to run a long story on the reception of the Portnov interview, even if individual reporters had debated it at length on Facebook and in person. Now, Maria and Anton, both in their early 30s<sup>11</sup>, both revered current affairs correspondents, were taking about whether Hromadske should run an article taking stock of that discussion and its implications for the journalistic profession.

It had been a year and a half since the murder of *Ukraiins'ka Pravda* deputy editor Pavel Sheremet — a dear friend and teacher of many Hromadske journalists, who had worked four floors below in the the same office building; the murder was still unresolved and credible suspicions abounded that it had been government's job. Throughout 2017 and early 2018, far right groups had attacked the offices of Inter, one of the main TV channels, which they accused of being "anti-Ukrainian". In the same period, the military prosecutors' office raided *Radio Vesti* — a broadcaster that allegedly belongs to a run-away Yanukovych official; although officially the raid

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<sup>10</sup> What my friend did not say, however, was that working for Hromadske also often implied working without, or with reduced, pay, when grants were depleted or delayed.

<sup>11</sup> Which in the Kyiv labour market gives people 10-12 years of experience in journalism on average.

had little to do with *Vesti*'s journalism, it effectively prevented them from reporting for some time, and the fallout from the raid forced them to relocate to another office, with minimum equipment and technical capacity. For most outside observers, these events did not form a trend: Sheremet's murder was widely seen as political; but, surprisingly, many journalists had little solidarity with their colleagues at *Vesti* and *Inter*,<sup>12</sup> both seen as "broadcasting the key points of Russian propaganda" and thus not worthy of protection on the grounds of press freedom.

Maria, aware that a tighter regulation of the space of permitted opinions eventually benefitted the powers-that-be, thought that all these events augured a trend towards narrow journalistic freedoms. The government officials' responses to ZIK's interview with Portnov fit the pattern. "When is it right to tell a journalist that she shouldn't invite someone for an interview?" she mused. Where does one draw a limit? Can Hromadske ever be questioned and attacked in a similar way?

In fact, journalists from Hromadske had been singled out as "unpatriotic" and "working for the enemy" more than once, particularly for their coverage of the failures and alleged crimes of the Ukrainian army and security apparatus. Maria, a television journalist, had done some of this reporting; she also attracted public notoriety for calling on fellow journalists to resist "hate speech" in their war reporting (such as calling the rebel fighters and people in the rebel republics "terrorists"). She had received threats, and in one instance became the target of a public disinformation and bullying campaign, seemingly initiated by the Ministry of Defence. All this likely made her—a person who in virtue of her background would be rather more predisposed to take a clear-cut, "patriotic", position—more sensitive to similar accusations against other journalists.

Now Maria was trying to persuade Anton, who disagreed with her, that it would be right for Hromadske to run an editorial, clearly separating concerns about the quality of Vlashchenko's interviewing (which was at best substandard, they concurred), from those about the principle of freedom of speech, which in this case meant the right to invite any guests and interviewees without having the public or politicians intervene into journalistic work. Hromadske, Maria implied, should show solidarity with ZIK—not because of any shared ideas on politics or quality of reporting that might unite the two outlets, but precisely because journalistic profession was impossible without its insulation from outside interventions whatever the internal divisions. It was this insulation, for Maria, that created the very possibility of freedom of expression for all in the profession: "Do you understand," she said to Anton in exasperation, "that this story is not about ZIK, nor about Vlashchenko, nor Portnov? It's about all of us as a *tsekh*!" *Tsekh*—a word harking back to the mediaeval self-governing professional corporations, and coming with strong communitarian connotations—here designated the journalistic profession as an autonomous community of professional practice where all members, bound by reflexive self-understanding and a common professional ethos, shared the same corporate interests. "I agree that no-one should tell the journalist what to do",

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<sup>12</sup> Or, for that matter, 1+1, NewsOne, [Strana.ua](http://Strana.ua) and ZIK — other organisations affected by what the National Union of Journalism have denounced as "political pressure" in 2017-18.

replied Anton. “But I do not belong to the same *tsekh* as Vlashchenko or anyone from ZIK. There is no *one* *tsekh*, but many small ones. We simply do different things!” For Anton, there could be no professional unity with journalists like Vlashchenko because of the quality of their work. It wasn’t new to me that he counted among his colleagues two dozen or so journalists spread across a number of small “independent” media organisations in Kyiv, and none of them at oligarchically owned channels. In our earlier interview, Anton had insisted: one simply cannot be a good journalist at an oligarchic publication, since sooner or later one would have to make unpalatable compromises between one’s freedom, and employer’s demands. The place of work, in his view, clearly marked the different kinds of journalism, and the kinds of ethical “choices” compromises, one was prepared to engage in.

Anton’s comment turned the conversation to the question of who can claim the title of a “real” journalist, and with it, the membership in a *tsekh*. Maria insisted that a “real” journalist was “a person spreading information in public interest” — effectively, anyone without regard to where they worked. Extremely broadly defined, this role came with responsibilities (such as a commitment to the common standards of reporting), but also, importantly, with a particular *right* to speak without outside compulsion or intervention. Freedom, Maria implied, was a professional *entitlement* of the journalist, and had to be defended as such.

Anton disagreed again: “A real journalist is the one who doesn’t do *dzhyntsa*!” Derived from the English “jeans” (its etymology unclear), in Ukrainian and Russian journalism, *dzhyntsa* generally originally refers to questionable practices of hidden advertisements and planted news stories (Koltsova 2006: 90). The practice emerged in the 1990s, when coverage of politicians, businesses and commercial products began to be sold, although not declared, as advertisement (Roudakova 2017).<sup>13</sup> In Anton’s usage, however, it implies a much broader condition of politically or commercially dependent journalism, corrupted or corruptible by money. The role of the journalist, Anton explained, was not to “make money”—it was to tell truth and do it in a way that followed professional standards. Vlashchenko’s interview with Portnov was not “real journalism” in this sense, because Anton perceived it as politically biased (and thus not free from influence or desire to influence) in ways that seemed to go beyond mere unprofessionalism, although he could only speculate about the exact reasons for that (there was no indications whatsoever in the Portnov-ZIK controversy about money changing hands). It was clear, however, that in his reaction, “money” and the lack of autonomy went hand in hand and could even be said to substitute one another. Saying that a real journalist is not a person who makes money, Anton abdicates the determinant logic of the media economy in which journalistic work is instrumentalised in pursuit of profit directly (as in *dzhyntsa*) or indirectly (as in the larger circuits of political exchange described to me by Sheremetieva).

At stake, in Anton’s minimalist characterisation of a “real journalist”, is a careful separation of the different social worlds inhabited by those (not-quite real in his

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<sup>13</sup> In today’s Ukraine, there are several non-governmental organisations monitoring publications and broadcasting of the key media for signs of *dzhyntsa*.



opinion) journalists who work “for money” and those who, like him, are detached from the logic of profit. The difference, however, wasn’t simply between those who worked to earn the living, and those who made sacrifices out of a sense of vocation. Anton had no qualms with receiving a salary — indeed, Hromadske’s wage arrears throughout the late 2017 repeatedly tested his budget and ability to withstand financial scrutiny in the name of creative freedom. Rather, “making money”, as it became clear in our interview on a separate occasion, referred to “dirty” (*brudna*) journalism where the hack received remuneration, whether as a wage or extra payments, for work that required carrying out someone else’s commercial orders (*zamovlennya*) or hierarchical commands (*nakazy*).<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the problem for him was not money per se, but the corrupting and controlling influence that money came to stand for — influence that goes against individual creative autonomy of the journalist (which is why, I think, he could so easily apply the label of *dzhyntsa* to the ZIK interview). If for Maria journalists’ autonomy was to be defended by separating the profession as a whole from such corrupting influences, for Anton, this autonomy had to be realised through individual choices and personal resistance to influence: “In all the publications where I’ve worked as a political correspondent, I had freedom. Even in cases where other journalists did not have it. I just negotiated my own conditions [*vybyvav sobi umovy*].”

What is important about Anton’s comments for our purposes is his insistence that one can only be a “real journalist” if one *already* speaks freely of influence, and Vlashchenko’s interview with Portnov clearly failed to satisfy this criterium. Note the difference: if Maria is suggesting that professional freedom is a formal collective right that comes with professional practice; Anton is insisting that freedom has to be individually claimed in such practice, and as such is itself a determinant of a good journalist. As a value, freedom characterises and organises the profession, but differently so for Anton and Maria. Moreover, where for her this freedom is a kind of a formal precondition of journalism that marks it off from other professional fields, for him it is something substantively achieved and thereby internally differentiating the profession.

The two views are not irreconcilable — they emphasise and idealise different aspects of the messy social practice of journalism and have different practical implications for navigating the profession. Maria’s view of the *tsekh*, informed by her own experience of on-line bullying, led her to solidarise with ZIK despite the fact that she considered Vlashchenko’s interview substandard and potentially politically motivated. Anton, however, takes a view that prevents him from solidarity with those whom he doesn’t consider his colleagues, for they fail to live up to his vision of a good journalist. Idiosyncratic and contextual as these two views might be, they nevertheless illuminate some of the ways in which journalists in Kyiv engage with the value of the autonomy that organises their profession and how they evaluate each other’s work in the light of it, and, most importantly, how they seek to realise this value through their work within a political economy of their profession, which cannot but pose multiple challenges to their ability to do so.

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<sup>14</sup> Such work is commonly referred to, in Ukrainian and Russian, as *zakazukha*.

### **Conclusion: the work of separation**

Whatever the differences between Anton's and Maria's stances on professionalism and autonomy in the Portnov-ZIK controversy, they should not conceal one important similarity: namely, that one's autonomy as a journalist (whether personal or collective) is something that is practically realised through the limitation of other people's claims on one's actions and relationships. This negative idea of limitation is, of course, part of the classical notion of freedom of speech. What makes it interesting for our purposes, however, is that Anton and Maria's discussion, and Hromadske's case more generally, point to the fact that limitation is not merely a formality in the sense of a legal norm—it is a valued aim, a condition that is actively pursued by journalists who, taking an ethical stance on the oligarchic media economy (and calling it an economy is one way to take a stance), seek to insulate themselves from it, and from the forms of professional judgment (particularly, suspicion of bias) that it has bred. By way of conclusion, let me briefly elaborate on this thought by pointing to some of the ways in which (liberal) journalists in Kyiv attempt to separate themselves, individually or collectively, from the oligarchic media economy and genres of reporting produced by such media and how this is partly realised through, and partly leads to, a pursuit of ethical and professional difference.

In Hromadske's original version of public broadcasting, the public was a literal and metaphorical protagonist of its journalism: recordings of early broadcasts feature Skype calls with lay viewers alongside studio discussions with guests and live streams from the Maidan. This was a kind of an experiment that sought to restore trust to journalists both through the reporting being done, and by demonstrating the internal organisation of news production.<sup>15</sup> Journalists and videographers who worked at the channel<sup>16</sup> in the early months, have fond memories of the radical creative freedom they enjoyed, in the absence of the position of chief editor, with little editorial guidelines, and a coop-like work atmosphere where the division of labour was collectively negotiated to correspond to individual skills and preferences. Indeed, although by now Hromadske has grown to more than a hundred employees, with its organisational structure developing hierarchically related managerial and editorial positions to accommodate the needs of the growing organisation, discussions in the newsroom still remain relatively egalitarian, the distribution of reporting tasks being negotiated at length and frequently challenged. With this in mind, Hromadske could be said to embody an ethos of equality, openness, and collective effort which corresponded to the unusual times of social upheaval that the organisation was launched in. But there is more to this than just a reflection of the Maidan, protests: I want to suggest that this ethos stemmed directly from the fact that the founding members of the organisation, “who disagreed with the controlled subordination [*pidkontrolnist*] of most Ukrainian media,” (Hromadske 2013) were deliberately looking for an alternative to the dominant model of news broadcasting in Ukraine. Breaking with established

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<sup>15</sup> I'm grateful to Serhiy Solod'ko (sociologist, KMA) for this observation.

<sup>16</sup> Back then, Hromadske mostly did on-line television, breaching out into news feeds and longer-form journalism only later.

formats, modes of organisation, and funding,<sup>17</sup> Hromadske's founders effectively sought to set it apart from other media organisations in the field of journalism, which in their majority remained quite dependent either on funding from their owners, or for illicit advertisements (Ivanov et al. 2011).

As such, Hromadske is in a line with a range of organised responses to the oligarchic system of media, which include a new school of journalism (at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv) where students are reportedly taught that it is unethical to work for an oligarchic media; initiatives to teach professional standards of reporting (on the BBC model); name-and-shame campaigns of monitoring and documenting cases of politically biased and unprofessional news reporting in the mainstream media; and two bodies of professional standards (self-)regulation, with all of which key managing members of Hromadske staff are allied. The instrumentalisation of news, perceived as a personal ethical problem by many journalists, is also recognised as a professional problem, and organisations that seek to address it, such as IMI and DetektorMedia (among others) have been successful recipients of foreign democracy promotion grants. So too has Hromadske, although not without some intermittent difficulties. But unlike the initiatives that seek to act upon the elements of the media system — e.g. by training journalists — Hromadske appears to represent a different stance towards the system: separation. As an institution, it embodies and performs a break with the dominant hierarchically organised organisations, where direct top-down lines of editorial and managerial control facilitate censorship and private funding provides a leverage of control.<sup>18</sup>

Hromadske's institutional separation is individually replicated by some of its journalists — for example, Anton. Throughout the late 2017, when Hromadske ran into financial trouble, Anton repeatedly brought up the topic of leaving Hromadske for a higher paying job, only to conclude that it wasn't worth it (he is still working at the organisation). In an interview, he said:

I have been offered to join a publication which has *dzhyntsa*, and an owner in politics. I was offered good money, a good position. I said no, and when they

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<sup>17</sup> The original intent to create a media organisation that would be proofed from economic and political pressures,(,) **delete comma** meant that the founders of Hromadske sourced the initial capital through a combination of Western governmental grants and crowdfunding. In the 100 days of its crowdfunding campaign in 2013-14, the organisation received donations totalling ca. 1,25 million UAH, or \$156 thousand (Hromadske 2013). Today, the organisation's rules prohibit accepting donations and grants from politically exposed persons. Of the ca. USD 2.6 million that make Hromadske's 2018 budget, the greatest part comes from its institutional donors in the EU (according to Hromadske's internal documents).

<sup>18</sup> However, it cannot but be part of the same professional field as the media (it seeks to provide an alternative to) **to which it seeks to provide an alternative**. This interconnectedness and Hromadske's structural relation to other positions within the journalistic field (and the consequences of this position, such as the need to compete for audience with far better funded broadcasters) (,) **delete comma** is a source of constant reflection among the organisation's staff. Inevitably, there is a great deal of variation in the moral positions taken by individual journalists with regards to the broader profession and the ideal of it that Hromadske encapsulates, and this is particularly visible at moments when issues of collective action arise in the face of looming threats to the professional privilege of freedom of speech.

asked why, I said: ‘Well, I won’t work well with you. I will be getting this good salary for some three month, and on the fourth, I’ll leave with the scandal. You will lose out, I will lose out, why do you need this?’

The (ideological) norm of sincerity that organises the modern liberal ways of speaking, and more specifically, journalistic truth-telling, requires that one’s utterances be expressions of inner thoughts and feelings. Such expression is to be governed by immaterial meanings and values, rather than material transactions or interests. If the expression is to be sincere, it has to be unaffected by money and external influences of power. Sincere speech in this liberal framework, is speech governed by immaterial meanings rather than material transactions — or indeed by power relations (Keane 2007, 2009; Roudakova 2017). Sincere expression, in other words, requires an autonomous subject: a self disentangled from the material world of transactions, social ties and structural constraints. This disentangling is a hard work that has to be visible to those the subject interacts with, if he or she is to be recognised as really autonomous and sincere. As it has become clear to me from interviews with Anton, his commitment to immaterial values of journalism, requires on the one hand extricating oneself from the political economy of news-making influenced by oligarchs and *dzhyntsa*. (And that is partly the *raison d’être* of Hromadske). But on the other hand, it necessitates the denial of material values. In one instance, when Hromadske was struggling with paying salaries to its employees, Anton and others discussed the situation in the newsroom, but felt it necessary to qualify that they did not really value money in itself, and that they didn’t actually want money, but recognition and dignity that came with a salary paid on time.<sup>19</sup>

Another staffer at Hromadske, Stas, similarly refused an offer of a senior position at a newly launched TV channel Priamyi (owned, as rumours had it, by President Poroshenko) that would have trebled his salary. A promising young reporter also refused an offer from Priamyi which would see his salary rise from 16,000 UAH to 30,000 UAH, instead opting for Hromadske’s weak editorial hierarchies that came

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<sup>19</sup> On average Hromadske pay a market rate of salaries to its journalists, technically the majority of its staff are self-employed, which comes with a host of administrative complications and potentially lower pensions in the future, not to mention the fact that the organisation cannot offer additional benefits that attract staff to the major broadcasters: this appears to be one of the outcomes of actually separating the organisation from the dominant mode of political-economic exchange. *eftab720*At the level of senior editorial and managerial positions, these salaries are significantly lower than at the major privately owned broadcasters. This nonetheless, my interlocutors often insisted that lower salaries and administrative hassle were compensated by the freedom from outside interference, matched by an egalitarian and “anarchic spirit” (to quote one of my interlocutors) within the organisation. Social prestige and foreign travel are an additional matter of pride: despite its small size and audience, Hromadske has been chosen as the main local partner of a recent new BBC TV programme in Ukrainian; senior Hromadske journalists are well integrated with the civil society and foreign diplomatic circles in Kyiv. Many employees emphasise (that they have) **they would have had** “nowhere to go”, had they left Hromadske.

The current chief editor mentioned in our interview that when she started reporting for Hromadske (sometime after the Maidan), she did not ask about pay, as if money did not matter. Such stories were offered to me as demonstrations of the journalists’ commitment to the ideals of freedom and public service embodied by Hromadske, the negation of the monetary value of work implying that the non-monetary, ethical returns were more important.

with significant creative autonomy. While these decisions can be also interpreted as pragmatic choices weighing up money and freedom, the fact that such moral-economic calculation takes place at all and that, through it, journalists establish the relative value of a working for an Hromadske versus an oligarchic media, does contribute to my point.

Another dimension where separation is operationalised is in the discourse of reporting itself. In a cultural context where suspicious reading for signs of influence and control (see above) is a prevalent way of engaging with journalistic discourse, one way of realising one's autonomy, is avoiding the common signs of influence. For instance, on several occasions I witnessed Anton (who as a political journalist was more preoccupied about this than others) express concern that particular passages in his articles could be read as sympathetic to a politician. He sought to change these in such a way as to avoid implying that the particular political strategies he was describing, ought to be seen as "good" or worthy of readers' support. On another occasion, he criticised a new economics reporter at Hromadske, who had written a short news article about an oligarch's steel plant "as if it had been given by Akhmetov's [the oligarch's] press office" — that is, too complimentary to the plant and thus falling into the "genre" of hidden advertisement. A much more mundane occurrence was the chief editors' instructions about how best to achieve balance of opinions (and discussions) in a particular piece of reporting, sometimes with comments that balance, accuracy, and factual reporting was what professionally distinguished Hromadske from most media in Kyiv.<sup>20</sup>

Summing it up, to speak freely for many of my informants among elite journalists in Kyiv, means to abstract oneself from the social and material entanglements that they are embedded in, because they participate in a political economy of news production and live in a material and social world, which cannot but pose multiple limits to individual self-expression. These limits are postulated as having to do with external influence of power and money on journalistic speech. The ideal of free speech is counterposed to these influences and requires the journalists to disentangle from them, through active avoidance of (expected) constraints on their work, creation of institutions separate from the oligarchic media economy, and even preference for particular writing styles that communicate a balance of opinions and freedom from political bias. The positive and negative aspects of journalistic freedom of speech are imbricated together in the practical attempts to assert the freedom by disentangling the individual or collective self, discursively, socially and materially, from signs and relations of influence.

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<sup>20</sup> Katya, a particularly passionate editor of a programme, frequently complained to me that a lot of what was being done by the news bulletin team "looked the same" as news bulletins on any major television channel. Another reporter and videographer said: "The [day news] editor told me to do this story — but it's not a Hromadske story! It's something you'd see on TRK Ukraina [Akhmetov's channel]. We should be different!" While this pursuit of difference could be interpreted as a particular realisation of the economic logic of differentiation of media products in a market by which Hromadske had to be different to appeal to its audiences, I would suggest that the logic driving the differentiation is one of ethical and professional distinction, feeding into ideas about Hromadske as separate from the dominant oligarchic economy, which I have discussed above.

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