

3

Failure and moral distinction in a Ukrainian marketplace of ideas

TARAS FEDIRKO *University of Glasgow*

This essay examines the generative effects of claiming moral failure within a Ukrainian liberal movement for media reform in post-Maidan, pre-invasion Ukraine. The reformers wished to reorganize news reporting around the ideals of autonomy, balanced objectivity, impartiality, and corrigibility, which they believed underpinned Western media. They decried most Ukrainian media as failing such standards, highlighting the individual moral failure of journalists bankrolled by oligarchs in return for favourable media representation. In turn, those from whom the reformers tried to distinguish themselves morally mocked them as ‘grant-eaters’ for their dependence on Western democracy promotion grants. This tussle pitted material success against yearnings for moral and professional probity. Developing Selka’s idea of moral distinction, I argue that while the reformers’ pursuit of virtuous difference was sincere, their structural vulnerability vis-à-vis the mainstream media also made morality more salient as the basis for agonistic differentiation.

On the evening of 2 February 2021, three of the most popular all-news TV channels in Ukraine – ZIK, 112, and NewsOne – were abruptly shut down by presidential decree. The decree froze all assets of the channels’ de facto owner, the opposition Member of Parliament Taras Kozak. Acting as a ‘front’ for his close ally Viktor Medvedchuk, Kozak had purchased the channels in 2019, prompting an exodus of journalistic staff who rightly anticipated that their news programmes would be used to promote Medvedchuk. Medvedchuk maintained close ties with the Kremlin and was one of the leaders of the Opposition Platform – For Life (OPFL), a parliamentary party uniting many former allies of President Yanukovich ousted in the 2013–14 (Euro)Maidan revolution. OPFL vehemently opposed Ukraine’s post-revolution Euro-Atlantic turn. The channels proved crucial for the party in the 2019 parliamentary elections, and by early 2021 helped them become the main challenger of President Zelensky’s parliamentary majority. In the context of the war in Donbas, OPFL was also perceived as promoting Russia’s strategic interests in Ukraine.

In retrospect, the sanctions can be seen as part of the geopolitical escalation that ended with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. At the time, however, they

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) 29, 62–78

© 2023 The Authors. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Royal Anthropological Institute.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

took many within Kyiv's journalistic corps by surprise. On the morning after the channels were shut down, my Facebook feed filled with media professionals' celebratory posts about the sanctions. The most vocal support came from a small minority of Kyiv's journalistic community: a group of reporters, editors, and staff of watchdog NGOs that make up what I have called the liberal movement for the reform of the journalistic profession in Ukraine (Fedirko 2021). Members of this activist minority have dedicated their careers to promoting independent journalism¹ (*nezalezhna zhurnalistyka*) and, through it, a Western-orientated liberal democracy in Ukraine. Comments on the sanctions by several former employees of Hromadske TV,² an online public broadcaster and a key organization in the movement where I conducted most of my field research in 2017-18, were particularly revealing. One post, by a former senior producer, read: 'Such good news that I'm afraid to celebrate :) I hope these harmful media will be shut down forever, although in Ukraine anything can happen.' Another former staffer posted a photo of himself: solemn, hand on heart, as if for a performance of the national anthem, standing in front of a TV screen that showed a test card in place of a sanctioned channel's broadcast. These reactions were echoed in statements of professional organizations forming the backbone of the reform movement, such as the Independent Media Council and Detector Media, and by the movement's main funders, the G7 embassies in Kyiv. All concurred: the sanctions were not an attack on journalistic freedom because those working for 112, NewsOne, and ZIK were 'propagandists' and 'sell-outs' rather than real journalists who deserved to have their speech protected. In a country at war, considerations of national security delineate the limits of journalistic freedom.

The liberal reformers' hostility to the three channels was the result of an ideological and social polarization within Ukraine's media profession that closely tracked political upheavals in the country after 2014. Early 2014 was a turning point in recent Ukrainian history because of the Maidan revolution, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the start of a separatist war in Donbas. These events brought to power and consolidated a coalition of nationalists and neoliberals in Kyiv, who put the country on a path to Euro-Atlantic integration, while their once powerful, relatively more pro-Russian opponents were marginalized. This turn towards Europe symbolized liberalization and modernization for many middle-class supporters of the revolution, tying their prosperity and professional status to the fortunes of the post-Maidan political regime. Most people in Kyiv's media community supported the Maidan, but with four oligarchic groups controlling three-quarters of the country's media, few journalists could credibly claim they were not perpetuating the neo-patrimonial regime that the revolution had opposed. Emboldened by the revolution's agenda and increased Western donors' funding for independent reporting, the media reformists came to oppose an otherwise unconsolidated majority of the profession. The reformers claimed that in their passive subordination to or active collusion with oligarchs and other political capitalists, mainstream media and journalists had failed to live up to the high standards of journalism as the 'Fourth Estate'. Since the early 2000s, most large privately owned Ukrainian media became dependent on subsidies from their politically engaged owners who were competing for power and corrupt rents in Ukraine's 'oligarchic democracy' (Matuszak 2012). Many others relied on revenues from the corrupt selling of news, editorial voice, and political opinion to paying clients among political and economic elites. The reformers posited that such financial dependence undermined journalists' capacity to produce 'honest' (*chesni*) news free from owners' or patrons' influence, and stripped them of control over, and dignity in, their work. In contrast to alleged personal

loyalties to oligarchs or other patrons, the reformers argued that good journalism had to be led by the ideals of professional autonomy, balanced objectivity, and impartiality. For the reformers, the mainstream media's subordination to patrons, and reporting practices they led to, signalled profound *moral* failure to uphold these professional ideals and the Europeanizing project that they stood for in Ukraine.

Media scholars associate these globally circulating norms with the professional ideology of a 'liberal' or 'Anglo-American' model of journalism, and specifically of public broadcasting and news agencies' journalism of fact (Bishara 2013; Hallin & Mancini 2004). In Ukraine, they are typically referred to as 'BBC standards', indicating their foreign origins and prestige. As I have argued elsewhere (Fedirko 2021), these values were shared across Ukraine's media profession, but mainstream journalists rejected reformers' uncompromising interpretation of autonomy in favour of a more pragmatic stance that allowed them to reconcile censorship with public service. Lacking influence on mainstream journalists, those working for *nezalezhni media* tended to address their discourse of failure to each other, to their (prospective) audiences, for which they competed against the mainstream media, and to their funders, whose support they sought to elicit. They knew that they, much as the Western media on which they styled themselves, were fallible. But openly acknowledging and correcting their professional failures – something that the mainstream Ukrainian media rarely did – was key to averting the kinds of failure they associated with corrupt journalism, and to credibly cultivating virtuous difference from it.

Taking up this special issue's call to study failure and its generative effects in their ethnographic particularity (Alexander, introduction to this volume), this essay investigates why moral failure became the focal point of *nezalezhni media's* competitive differentiation from the rest of the profession. I explore how the reformers' ascriptions of moral failure affected their ethical aspirations, their careers, and their project of liberal media reform. My analysis places such ascriptions at the root of the polarizing dynamic within Kyiv's journalistic profession that led to reformers' hostility to some other journalists suggested by the opening vignette. Anthropologists and philosophers have used the concept of ethical (or moral) failure to describe what happens when people's attempts to live a good life come up against various intrinsic (Robbins 2004; Tessman 2015) or extrinsic (Lambek 2015; Rajković 2017) limits. I also examine failure's relation to internal contradictions and structural limits of ethical projects, exploring how claims about other people's moral failure became mobilized in dynamics of conflict and competition within a profession shaken by (geo)political turmoil. The Kyiv media reformers are interesting in this respect because of their agonistic, and sometimes antagonistic, pursuit of virtuous opposition to perceived failures of other journalists. I analyse this oppositional dynamic, and its role in how media reformers organized their relations with the rest of Ukraine's journalistic profession, as a process of *moral distinction*: explicit signalling of one (act, relationship, person, group) as different from, because deemed morally superior to, the other (Selka 2010).

In line with established usage, I understand ethics as having to do with the question of 'how one should live and what kind of person one should be' (Keane 2016: 20). I reserve the word 'moral' for ethical concerns and practices that are connected with explicit normative codes – in this case, liberal understandings of good journalism – and ethical evaluations that build on such codes. Two broadly (although not universally) accepted tenets of the anthropological literature on ethics are that ethical life is inherently evaluative, and that ethics is implicit to reflection and action

(Laidlaw 2018; Lambek 2015). The evaluative character of ethics is a necessary but not sufficient condition for competitive claims to moral distinction. Likewise, ethics' putative immanence to interaction cannot explain how and why, in some contexts and for some social groups, ethics becomes a matter of public concern, provides the building blocks of powerful social boundaries, or becomes the idiom of political projects (Kelly 2018; Lempert 2013). To account for this (*pace* Laidlaw 2014: 1-23; cf. Laidlaw 2018: 190), we need a kind of social explanation of ethics that looks beyond ethics itself, without reducing it to power or material interest. A quick glance across contemporary mass-mediated publics, liberal and otherwise, religious and secular, in which social conflicts increasingly unfold through claims to individual virtue and moral purity is the hallmark of struggles against dominant groups, should suffice to see that social explanation of ethics is not of purely theoretical importance.

I borrow the term 'moral distinction' from Stephen Selka (2010: 292), who uses it to describe how proponents of Candomblé and evangelical Christianity in northeastern Brazil, where the two religions draw followers from the same social strata, imagine each other's moral dispositions. Arguably, the role of morality in these religions easily leads to the moralization of religious differences. In contrast, for Kyiv's media reformers described here, morality was one of many possible sources of worth that underpinned secular status hierarchies in Ukrainian media: for example, commercial success, public renown, or superior technical skill. This makes it necessary to explain why *moral* distinction gains salience over these other kinds of valorized difference.

I address these problems through an ethnography of Hromadske TV and its employees, and their agonistic claims to virtue – claims made against their opponents. My focus in this essay is on how the reformers engage with ideas of moral and professional failure, rather than discussing and comparing ideas of moral failure from 'both sides', as it were, although inevitably I deal with how reformers respond to implicit accusations of being in thrall to foreign power. While not necessarily an ethnographic failure, it is a limitation. In what follows, I first contextualize the reformers' judgement of failure in relation to the political economy of media in Ukraine, and then trace its consequences through the way that Hromadske TV journalists narrate their own careers and discuss their channel's future. This ethnography prompts me to formulate a more general explanation of how ethical evaluation turns into moral distinction, which I present in the conclusion.

The liberal minority in a post-Soviet marketplace of ideas

In the USSR of the late 1980s, *perestroika* and *glasnost* kickstarted a comprehensive transformation of the journalistic profession, affecting the system of media genres, redefining what counted as newsworthy truth, and changing editors' relations with the communist elites. From being the Party's 'critical friends' (Fainberg 2020: 16; for an extensive analysis, see Roudakova 2017; Wolfe 2005), journalists became its critics, carving out a new professional jurisdiction (Abbott 1988) outside the state. With the USSR's collapse, editorial independence from administrative commands and interventions 'from above' became a core ideal of the transforming media profession.

Across the former Soviet republics, the first steps of mass media in the fledgling capitalist market coincided with a long period of economic and political crisis. The economic downturn shrank consumer demand, undermined advertisement revenues, and forced media workers to look for alternative sources of revenue. One such source was 'private donations from businessmen who [made] significant amounts

of money and who were now intent on moving into positions of political power' (Roudakova 2009: 418).³ For these emerging patrons in a moment of primitive accumulation, media influence was an instrument in running for public office or building political alliances, which in turn helped to secure their property rights for appropriated public assets, protect their businesses from law enforcement, and expand their commercial opportunities. 'Rather reluctantly', Roudakova writes, 'journalists began to enter political-economic alliances with their private sponsors' (2009: 419). This 'privatization' of editorial agendas undermined editorial independence, while the fact that journalists were paid to wage so-called 'information wars' on behalf of competing political-economic factions (Koltsova 2006: 98-117) fragmented corporate loyalties and solidarity within the profession (Roudakova 2017).

Various emerging forms of 'media-political clientelism' (Roudakova 2008) transformed the media economy in Ukraine, as in other post-Soviet republics, into a literal marketplace of ideas. *Dzhynsa* (Ukr., *dzhynsa* in Rus. [Daucé 2018]) became the iconic practice of this marketplace. Etymologically, the term is related to *dzhynsy*: jeans, the quintessential object of late Soviet black-market trade and consumer desire, which were increasingly available as cheap counterfeits of Western denim brands flooded post-Soviet market stalls. As with 'knock-off' clothes, *dzhynsa* presents something as what it is not: manipulative advertisement as impartial, truthful news. It is related to other kinds of informal influence, such as the use of news for character assassination ('black PR'), publication of compromising material (*komprobat*), and 'commissioned stories' (*zakazukha*) (Ledeneva 2006). Yet, *dzhynsa* is distinguished by being a mostly voluntary, commercial arrangement between a buyer of publicity (e.g. a politician or a company) and its seller (once individual journalists or editors, now increasingly commercial departments of media organizations). Having emerged as an informal adaptation strategy, at the time of my fieldwork, *dzhynsa* was a significant revenue source for many Ukrainian media. It remains widespread despite being regarded as immoral by most Ukrainian journalists, including those who benefit from it by working for media funded through it. The stereotypical figure of an unscrupulous hack who trades the ownership of their words and opinions for money marks the ideal moral limit of the journalistic community: whether reformist or mainstream, few Ukrainian journalists would disagree that acceptance of *dzhynsa* commissions is bad form. In practice, however, just where to draw the boundary, how much *dzhynsa* can be tolerated, and for what reason, is a matter of professional struggles.⁴ What is at stake here is the power to define journalistic professionalism itself.

One of the groups in Ukraine that consistently took up the late Soviet value of editorial independence in their struggle against media-political clientelism comprised the elite print and broadcasting journalists and media NGO professionals who formed a loose movement for the reform of Ukrainian media. The movement, which I have researched since 2017, came together in a series of journalists' mobilizations against government and owners' censorship in 2001-4. Since then, under the growing influence of democracy promotion projects sponsored by Western states, such as Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and philanthropists, such as George Soros and Pierre Omidyar (Fedirko 2021: 473-7), the reformers have merged the familiar ideal of editorial independence with a globally circulating norm of journalists' autonomy as a *professional corps*: a self-regulating community of producers bound by common codes

of professional standards and ethics, and committed to public service through impartial and balanced, objective reporting.

In their institutionalized opposition to the dynamics of the Ukrainian marketplace of ideas, liberal reformers have remained a small, albeit prestigious – because internationally connected and recognized – minority. They have had limited success in realizing their vision of proper journalism. Having initially sought to reform the mainstream media from within – for instance, through skills and ethics trainings and ‘awareness-building’ campaigns among media professionals – since 2013 they have increasingly turned into a separate fraction of the profession openly hostile to ‘dependent’ media.

My interlocutors within the movement never used the Ukrainian (or Russian) words for ‘failure’: *nevдача*, *proval*, *neuspikh*. These have a connotation of a one-off failed attempt at achieving something. Nevertheless, in identifying what was wrong with the Ukrainian media and their profession, they routinely talked about what can be described as a chronic, systemic failure of both the mainstream media organizations and the people working for them. This perceived failure’s moral stakes were marked by terms such as ‘compromise’, ‘lack of impartiality’, or ‘violation of standards’. As I explain below, the idea that journalists’ dependence on owners or *dzhyntsa* clients is not only unprofessional but also immoral best captures the substance of the reformers’ judgement of failure.

Dimensions of moral failure

For my interlocutors in the reform movement, *dzhyntsa* – ‘the worst enemy of journalism’, in the words of one Hromadske TV staffer – counterpointed their visions of professional, virtuous reporting. But what exactly, to echo Catherine Alexander (introduction to this volume), was the object of failure here? At one level, the reformers recognized that journalists’ dependence on various patrons represented a systemic economic failure: less a market failure than a failure of the media economy to *become* a (free) market in the first instance, shedding dependence on corrupt payments for influence in favour of ‘honest’ advertisement and subscription revenues. Underpinning this recognition was an ideal of the market as an institution of freedom. At another level, the stakes of the reformers’ opinions of failure were quite personal, and were grounded in the pernicious sense of individual complicity, dependence, and immorality that accompanied the sale of one’s authorial voice.

My interlocutors’ disapproving talk about the place of money in their work captured this well. Anton, a senior political correspondent at Hromadske TV, once told me that the role of a journalist was not to ‘make money’: ‘A real journalist is the one who doesn’t do *dzhyntsa*!’ Like others, however, Anton recognized the structural vulnerability of journalistic work: a practice that should be motivated by pure ideals of public service and creative autonomy, yet inevitably takes the form of dependent wage labour that can only partly realize these ideals (cf. Lebovic 2016). His former colleague, a reporter and editor, Yuliana Skibits’ka,⁵ who hosts a Telegram channel (blog) on media criticism, wrote:

I think that journalism [in Ukraine] is by default an unprofitable profession, in which in order to earn big/normal money (at least 1,000 USD/month and up), one needs to either jump out of their pants, or sell out ... Of course, one can earn [working] in journalism. One can write *dzhyntsa*, promote interests of politicians or other interested parties. [Many journalists] did rather well for themselves in this way (Skibits’ka 2020).

How, Skibits'ka asked, should 'an honest journalist who takes care of their reputation and does not co-operate with bad publications' live a decent life (*dostoine zhyttia*) in a marketplace of ideas that makes one choose between one's vocation and material security? In Skibits'ka's complaint, we hear an echo of what has, elsewhere, been understood as a moral failure resulting from an irresolvable conflict of values (Robbins 2004: 208-9). Key contributors to anthropology's 'ethical turn' understand moral failure as stemming from the inevitable need to qualify absolute values and commitments 'in and through lived practice' (Lambek 2015: 220), or from the practical impossibility of achieving ethical clarity, cohesion, and self-consistency demanded by moral doctrines yet undercut by people's 'inability to escape the demands of social existence' (Keane 2016: 261-2; see also Laidlaw 2014: 173; Schielke 2009: 178). Thus, Skibits'ka's complaint can be interpreted as a recognition that 'decent life' (material security) and 'honesty' (impartial pursuit of public truth) are both important, yet cannot jointly be realized in a journalistic career.

But a closer look at the 'demands of social existence' in Kyiv's media economy shifts attention away from the intrinsic contradictions of journalists' ethical striving to extrinsic limits to ethical agency, and from moral failure as a matter of clashing ideas to failure as a matter of social conflict. I find a helpful parallel to Skibits'ka's dilemma in Ivan Rajković's analysis of chronic moral failure among workers at a Serbian spare car parts company, which centres on state-subsidized, unprofitable work which he terms 'mock-labour'. At once existentially meaningless and the means for material security, such work demoralizes the car mechanics as they realize 'the structural limits to [their] ethical striving' (Rajković 2017: 56) to exercise creative autonomy at work. What is at stake here, as with the Ukrainian journalists, is the irreconcilable tension between different orders of freedom: economic and ethical. As tightly as these are intertwined in practice, they are often represented – by anthropologists and our interlocutors alike – as opposed to each other in the way that the material is opposed to the ideal. Rajković challenges this binary.

Fabio Mattioli's analysis of the Global Financial Crisis's reverberations in North Macedonia (this volume) similarly points to the way some kinds of moral failure are deeply embedded in political-economic relations that either compromise people's capacity to realize their ethical aspirations, or mean they face impossible, often equally bad, moral options. I observed a similar situation at Hromadske TV. When a hiccup in grant funding resulted in protracted wage arrears in autumn 2017, many less affluent journalists felt they were compelled to choose between continuing to work at Hromadske temporarily unpaid, but without censorship; or leaving for an organization where they would get a secure, even superior, salary, but would be likely to encounter *dzhyntsa* and (self-)censorship. In this double bind, they were set up to fail either as autonomous individuals able to provide for themselves and their families, or as 'honest' journalists. Even though they focused on the failure of others – those who, as it were, made the wrong choice between money and freedom – these reformers understood that moral failure was always a possibility for them, too. In our interviews, they often emphasized the effort it took them to avoid such failure: their resistance to censorial instructions at mainstream TV channels where some had worked; their career-changing decisions to take up a job in an independent media; and the economic sacrifices that such choices entailed.

Rajković (2017) and Mattioli (this volume) describe postsocialist contexts in which the experience of dependency is at the heart of moral failure. So it is in the case of

dzhyntsa. One evening, over beers and smoked anchovies in Hromadske TV's small kitchen, a senior correspondent called Andrii told me about his job at a large news agency in Kyiv in the late 2000s. At one point, he had to cover for a colleague responsible for transportation industry news, who had just left for another job. Andrii realized that the bulk of the transportation beat consisted in servicing his agency's *dzhyntsa* contract with the Ukrainian state railway company. The company, he said, 'was sending up to fifteen press releases a day, and I had to make fifteen news articles out of them'. He found the task of turning corporate press releases into complimentary news articles about the company not only pointless but also ethically uncomfortable. Andrii continued:

My editor probably understood that doing this really irked me, and started to apologize, saying: 'You understand, buddy, this is how it works, it's like a bone in my throat too'. He would walk around swearing, saying that he had *journalists* working for him, not *service boys* (*zdies' zhurnalisty rabotaiut, a ne mal'chiki na pobiegushkah*).

Journalists – not service boys, but also not retail traders. In 2005, Volodymyr Hranovs'kyi,⁶ a political adviser freshly appointed to manage Inter TV, one of Ukraine's largest channels, penned an article meant to defend his channel from accusations of *dzhyntsa* in the news department. He wrote: 'If one comes across an offer to buy [news at Inter], they should know: in front of them is not a journalist, but an illicit travelling salesman. [*Dzhyntsa*] ultimately transform[s] the news into a bazaar stall and journalists into retail traders of low-quality goods' (Granovsky 2005).

Hranovs'kyi's words gain an ironic quality in light of later allegations that in 2012 he received US\$2 million in cash from President Yanukovich's political party for its PR on Inter TV. Irony aside, comments like his reveal what Ukrainian media professionals find most reprehensible about *dzhyntsa*. Offering or being forced or paid to follow someone else's bidding as a journalist demeans and belittles journalistic work. In a context where selfless vocation to journalism is the most valued and prestigious form of media career and 'honest' speech and writing are both a good journalist's public obligation and, more generally, a signal of one's control over one's expression, an engagement in *dzhyntsa* seems to signal something essential about one's moral character.

In her ethnography of print media in the Russian city of Novgorod at the turn of the millennium, Roudakova (2008; 2009; 2017) paints a vivid picture of the alienation and humiliation of writing news at someone's command. As I interpret it, for Roudakova's interlocutors, the moral problem at stake was not commodification of their labour in the 'market for electoral persuasion' (2009: 419) per se, but the way it made their work, and by implication them, into a vessel or instrument of their patrons' agency. My informants in Kyiv, whether or not they engaged in *dzhyntsa*, felt a keen sense of vocational attachment, belonging, and personal responsibility for the product of their work, and were always aware that, as named authors of this work, their careers – and often their sense of self-worth – were staked on its quality. Different criteria of quality were in use in the profession: 'honesty' (i.e. objectivity and truthfulness), creativity, reporting skill, writing, or filming quality. Regardless of which one was emphasized in individual practice, and of disagreements about which one was more important, journalists working for radically different outlets would still understand each other's claims to good work. For the reformists, independence from external control, above all indexed by 'honesty', mattered the most. Of course, good professionalism required giving up some of the control over one's work to

editors, professional standards, or ethical codes (Bishara 2013). But by taking orders on what to write and how from paying patrons, practitioners of *dzhyynsa* seemingly gave up control over the very ideas and words that ought to constitute the site of a journalist's authorial creative freedom. Regardless of whether engagement in *dzhyynsa* was a matter of free choice, as critics often argued, or a result of trying to make ends meet, for outside observers it appeared as an immoral transaction: an exchange of something intimate, pure, and incommensurable – one's creative work, one's principles – for the universal, impersonal leveller of money; of something publicly important – factual objectivity and impartiality in news – for personal gain. Occasionally, 'cross-subsidy' occurred whereby *dzhyynsa* in business news was used to sponsor quality political reporting. However, the reformers would still see this transaction as qualified failure.

Moral distinction

Such failure, and what it allegedly revealed about the character of those who fail, was an important moral co-ordinate for many of my interlocutors in the media reform movement. One of those opposing *dzhyynsa* with particular zeal was Natalka. She had a Master's degree from the prestigious School of Journalism at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, and began her career in 'big journalism' at Hromadske TV, where I first met her. By the time of our interview, she had accepted an offer to join the reformed Ukrainian Public Broadcasting Company. With her degree and experience, she could have easily gone for a job at one of the oligarchically owned private broadcasters in Kyiv, which offered superior salaries, technical support, and incomparably larger audiences. But from what she said, I understood she did not regard this a legitimate option; nor did she consider going freelance – the most precarious, badly paid form of reporting career in Ukraine. At university, Natalka joked,

We've been brainwashed all right in this respect. [One of the first lectures] was about which channel belongs to whom. And ... our teachers and the School's management [said] that they are educating us so that we create an absolutely new Ukrainian media space, [a media space] of new quality. Either so that we do something of our own (*shchos' svoie*), or go into independent projects, strengthening them.

She said she finished her studies with a firm conviction that working 'for a media organization owned by an oligarch is *wrong*', adding that Ukraine's media profession was divided between 'those who are ready to create real journalism, and those who work for oligarchic channels'. Echoing Anton's characterization of 'real journalism' in opposition to *dzhyynsa*, Natalka's understanding of who counts as a proper professional comes into relief against the foil of professional malpractice and failure. There was a 'fundamental difference', she explained, between media organizations like Hromadske TV, funded by foreign donors, and mainstream commercial media, used by their oligarch owners 'as a personal instrument for increasing [their] social support'. This 'obvious' difference was, above all else, a moral one:

There exist no compromises for me when speaking about working for commercial television or some such. Because I think that people with honest names who go to work there – their honest names legitimate criminals [i.e. oligarchic media owners] ... To me this seems even worse than if some outright bastards went to work there, you know. [The kind of people] who will carry out whatever news tasks you give them, regardless of any values.

Stark and unrealistic, the distinction she made was familiar to me from conversations with other Hromadske journalists. One way that they stated their opposition to moral failure (and implicitly explained their own avoidance of it) was by emphasizing the importance of pure commitment to values rather than material reward in their careers. One of Natalka's colleagues told me he worked at Hromadske 'for the idea'. Another, a young videographer called Dasha, recalled her decision to look for a job at Hromadske:

From the outset, I understood I couldn't work for 1+1 or STB [major oligarch-owned channels] because ... Damn it, at university we analysed their news, and when one channel is disparaging one politician, and another shows some dodgy *dzhynsa* every X minutes, it was disgusting to even think about it ... None of this was close to my heart. I wanted to work according to my conscience and so I went to Hromadske.

Claims about conscience, as Tobias Kelly remarks, often convey a 'particular sense of liberal moral personhood' (2018: 115) that resonates with an understanding of ethics as 'reflective freedom' (Laidlaw 2014): 'a self-conscious taking of a step back to evaluate the implications and possibilities of particular practices' (Kelly 2018: 116). I have argued elsewhere (Fedirko 2021) that the ideals of professional journalism espoused by Kyiv's media reformers encode certain traits of liberal individualism. Natalka's and Dasha's accounts above fit the same pattern. Instead, here I am interested in the way that their reflexive 'step back' also implies a step away; their ethical claim about themselves is also a claim to ethical difference from, indeed superiority to, others.

On one occasion in early 2018, I witnessed an argument at Hromadske's newsroom between Anton and Maria, a senior reporter and co-founder of the channel. The argument is too complex to reproduce here, but its crux was whether or not Hromadske's competitor, ZIK (which at the time had not yet belonged to Kozak and Medvechuk), was right to air a complimentary interview with a Yanukovich-era politician. Many other journalists went as far as to say that it was counter-revolutionary and incorrect to invite such speakers; right-wing protesters picketed ZIK's office for a similar reason. Maria, however, argued that, although the interview broke standards of good journalism, Hromadske should publicly support ZIK and condemn those who thought it permissible to tell the programme host whom to invite. Anton objected: for him, the interview had nothing to do with 'real journalism', and the interviewer was not worthy of solidarity or protection. Exasperated, Maria said: 'Do you understand, this story is neither about ZIK, nor about [the journalist or her guest]. It's about all of us as a *tsekh*!' *Tsekh*, which roughly means 'guild' and comes with strong communitarian connotations in Ukrainian, here designated the journalistic profession as an autonomous community of practice bound by specific rules (which ZIK had apparently broken), on the one hand, and sustained by corporate solidarity, on the other. 'I agree that no one should tell the journalist what to do,' Anton replied. 'But I do not belong to the same *tsekh* as anyone from ZIK. There is no *one tsekh*, but many small ones. We simply do different things!'

The accounts above reveal the relational character of ascriptions of failure and reflections on virtue (Alexander, introduction to this volume). Understanding ethics as inherently evaluative, Michael Lambek places ethical judgement at the core of subjects' attempts to live virtuously. People's attention to virtue, he argues, necessarily includes attention to vice: '[T]o assess the ethical value of particular acts is not necessarily to judge them positively' (Lambek 2015: 232). Moreover, routine ethical judgements

contain a seed of ethical comparison, which can grow into competitive, distinctive claims to superior virtue: '[I]nsofar as values are relative, they enable and may even entail competition or a sense of mutual evaluation among people who embrace them' (Lambek 2015: 234). Thus, Dasha's claim to living virtuously as a journalist does not only imply avoiding a life of vice, the objective correlative of virtue. Rather, it also implies that others – socially proximate and involved in uncannily similar work – fail to work in a virtuous way similar to hers; this implication is the very basis of her claim's moral force.

The ethnography also demonstrates how Ukrainian media reformers used such claims to ethical difference to organize relations with others, whether by narrating their careers as out of principle opposed to the mainstream, or by drawing symbolic boundaries by denying professional solidarity. I use the term 'moral distinction' to designate how such claims to moral superiority become indexed to boundaries between groups. The notion of distinction evokes the eponymous work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984 [1979]), and specifically his insight that aesthetic taste, political opinion, signs of wealth, and moral judgement can all mark potent symbolic boundaries. If ethical life is inherently evaluative, and sometimes agonistic or antagonistic, it is so in a particular way in a social context where doing good journalistic work means being constantly aware of what other practitioners are doing. Professions, such as Kyiv's journalistic community, create social conditions under which competitive distinction becomes the main form of orientation to, and evaluation of, fellow professionals. Members of a profession share their claim to competence over specific areas of social life, and are orientated to shared norms and stakes, or at least are united in their contestation of what these should be (Abbott 1988; Martin 2003). In such contexts, members typically struggle over belonging and prestige, as, for instance, does Anton, who insists on not belonging to the same *tsekh* as the employees of ZIK, drawing a moral boundary between a small minority of 'real journalists' and the majority – those who fail morally to act upon their professional failures (cf. Lamont 1992). Because professional norms are often organized as morality systems (Keane 2016), professional failure can become the focal point of 'moralized' struggles for distinction.

At the outset of their movement, the media reformers coalesced around several NGOs specializing in journalism training and media criticism. These organizations were central to establishing Ukraine's first independent media trade union and broadcasters' association, as well as a professional ethics commission. They and their leadership took active part in both the 2004 and 2013-14 revolutions. However, despite training thousands of journalists, and gradually gathering supporters from among prominent journalists working for mainstream media, the movement failed to revolutionize the profession by making its vision of proper journalism the dominant one. The tide turned for the movement after the 2013-14 revolution, when a combination of their alliance with the post-revolution government, support of G7 and EU diplomats, and rapidly increasing Western funding for liberalization and democratization in Ukraine enabled the reformers to establish several new media organizations. This made it possible for reformers and young entrants to the profession, such as Dasha and Nataalka, to build careers relatively disentangled from the country's immoral marketplace of ideas.

Many reformers recognized that their moral purity and autonomy from the profession's mainstream were precariously staked on their subordination to the

impersonal structures of geopolitical power manifested in democracy promotion grants to Ukraine. Those whom they criticized as failing in turn mocked the reformers for their ‘grant eating’, suggesting that their claims to moral superiority were dubious, even hypocritical, given their reliance on foreign funders. Yet, because media grants rarely if ever dictated the content of reporting in the way that oligarchic censorship and *dzhynsa* did, reformers remained relatively impervious to such criticism. Other kinds of critique of *nezalezhni media* – as less professional, less conventionally successful, less capable of taking good care of their staff – cut deeper.

Moral difference and the media economy

The beginning of my fieldwork at Hromadske TV coincided with preparations for the new broadcasting season. One of the new programmes would be a nightly live current affairs programme, a mix between a news programme and a panel talk show. The programme, called *NyniVzhe* (roughly, ‘Here and Now’), deliberately echoed in its format the style of Hromadske’s early programmes during the 2013–14 revolution: recordings of early broadcasts feature Skype calls with lay viewers alongside studio discussions with guests and lengthy live streams from the site of protests in Kyiv’s Maidan Square. The deliberate immediacy and informality of Hromadske’s broadcasts helped establish audience trust by signalling their authenticity and freedom from censorship, and by laying bare the typically invisible organization of news production. The spontaneity of Hromadske’s early programmes made for a refreshing contrast with the scripted, sleekly produced quality of evening current affairs programmes on mainstream TV channels.

Hromadske’s new programme aspired to a similar kind of authentic immediacy, this time produced to a higher technical and aesthetic standard that could allow it to compete with commercial rivals. But the launch of *NyniVzhe* was less smooth than expected. The production team opted to run the programme in a test mode for a month, cutting all experimental features such as direct communication with audiences, and bringing the programme closer to what their mainstream competitors were doing. After one of the first broadcasts, Ivan, a prominent co-founder of the channel, complained to the show’s producers in an all-staff Telegram chat: ‘Why on earth are you branding the programme “LIVE”? Live differs from a recording only in its interactive set-up – the possibility for the audience to intervene into the broadcast’. A counter on YouTube, where the show was aired, displayed the size of the live audience on the platform. Ivan was indignant: ‘Twenty viewers! Why are you saying it’s Live? This is erasing us, all our efforts. If this [type of programming] is not effective, why repeat it week after week? Classic television is not our path!’ Maria replied: ‘Ivan, I have similar worries – it hurts me, I panic, to think about [us doing] classic TV’. Maria reassured Ivan that ‘experiments and freedom will return once we’ve practised a little’.

This exchange reveals that claims to distinction, present in individual journalists’ stories of their careers, were also manifest in their attempts to shape Hromadske TV’s organization and products. As I mentioned earlier, the channels’ founders explicitly saw Hromadske as a response to the failures of the mainstream media to serve the public interest. The channel’s founding documents prohibited political advertising and financial support from ‘politically exposed’ people to avoid the kinds of direct exchange considered the root of mainstream journalists’ moral failure. This emphasis on independence bled into newsroom dynamics, too. Journalists and videographers who worked at the channel in its early months have fond memories of the radical,

creative freedom they enjoyed in the absence of the position of chief editor, with few editorial guidelines, and a co-op-like work atmosphere. Although by 2017 Hromadske had grown to more than 100 employees and developed a hierarchical structure with a corresponding division of labour, newsroom discussions remained relatively egalitarian and often led staff to openly challenge channel managers about their decisions.

Hromadske staff understood that their claims to superior quality of reporting, which underpinned their claims to moral distinction in the profession, could be easily turned back on them. To channel such critique, an editorial council consisting of journalists and mid-level editors regularly deliberated on items reported as lacking by readers or fellow staffers. Unlike most commercial outlets, the channel issued corrections and public apologies; reporters were ordered to rectify mistakes or suspended if they breached rules repeatedly. Presenting reporting failures as isolated professional accidents, staff sometimes said that Hromadske's ability to reflect on and correct professional failures positively distinguished them from mainstream channels that paid no heed to corrections even when accused of deliberately publishing slanderous reports.

At the time of my fieldwork in 2017-18, Hromadske TV's management ran the channel on a yearly budget of about £1.65 million – significantly lower than that of their immediate competitors, ZIK, NewsOne, and 112. A combination of core and project grants from a dozen foreign donors, the channel's budget was spread thinly, forcing Hromadske employees to work overtime, for lower pay and without the contractual benefits offered by commercial media, sometimes spending their own money to do the kind of reporting they wanted. Most staff accepted such relative privations as the price of journalistic freedom, but there were others to whom Hromadske's low-key, low-tech, improvisational approach to broadcasting suggested a lack of professionalism. One day, I struck up a conversation with a technician who had joined the channel after his previous employer, a company producing one of Ukraine's most-watched political talk shows, closed under government pressure. Accustomed to the resources of commercial TV, he had little else but scorn for Hromadske. 'What you see here', he said about the channel, 'is amateur student activity (*studencheskaia samodeiatel'nost'*) not real television'. Others, including some BBC staffers on skills training missions to Hromadske, remarked that many of its programmes would have been more suitable for radio than television: they had strong reporting content, but were badly done from the point of view of the moving image. This impression of a lack of professionalism was often strengthened by the channel's poor 'material base': from a chronic lack of chairs in the newsroom (leaving for a smoking break, one was never sure one would have something to sit on after coming back); to a frequent lack of dedicated transport for reporting crews, which set them back in the fast-paced competition for news; to the fact that camera operators used digital photo rather than professional video cameras; and, finally, to the fact that many stages of programme production relied on a Google Documents suite rather than specialized TV workflow management software.

Similarly to reflexive performances of corrigibility to their audiences, donors, and other journalists, the informal, improvisational way in which Hromadske TV worked suggested an ongoing experiment: a modern liberal exercise in constant improvement (Alexander, introduction to this volume). As Catherine Alexander (this volume) and Charlotte Bruckermann (this volume) argue for their ethnographic contexts, the

designation of projects as ‘experimental’ can stave off the verdict of failure, which becomes transformed into improvement and learning, or pushes it indefinitely into the future. Likewise, for the most loyal staffers, the technical glitches at Hromadske spoke not of failure but of an unfolding project whose potential had not yet been fully realized.

Despite their reflexive self-critique of professional failures, or their re-framing as open-ended experimentation, few among Hromadske’s staff could ignore the fact that in the world of Ukrainian television, their channel was the poor relation. In 2017-18, Hromadske’s TV broadcast ratings were on average far below 1 per cent – significantly lower than the 2-4 per cent claimed by 112, ZIK, and NewsOne. Most of Hromadske’s competitors were awash with owners’ subsidies that allowed them to produce programmes to much higher aesthetic – although often not journalistic – standards, which directly translated into higher audience ratings. Reliant on foreign grants, which were sufficient for maintaining the channel’s operation but not much more, Hromadske lagged behind unless they could turn their distinctive qualities, such as authenticity and objectivity in political reporting, to their advantage. But the attraction of being interviewed by an ‘honest’ news channel was limited to public figures already sympathetic to the liberal reformist project.

These material constraints limited exactly how Hromadske journalists could challenge their competitors, elevating the significance of products such as documentary films and reportage that were Hromadske’s strength, on the one hand, and claims to moral distinction, on the other. Unable to significantly increase the size of their TV audience or provide better equipment and infrastructure for reporters, Hromadske staff were often left reiterating to their audiences and each other that their journalism was more truthful, impartial, and independent – ‘fundamentally different’, as Natalka put it, in its *ethical* qualities. As one senior editor told me, in job interviews with potential new recruits she always told them that even if Hromadske could not pay them a higher salary than many competitors, it ‘offered freedom’. Thus, the harsh realities of competition for audiences and staff gave a further competitive edge to liberal reformers’ pursuit of moral distinction.

Explaining moral agonism

Beginning with liberal journalists’ judgement of moral failure, and tracing its generative effects, I have suggested that political conflict, tensions of economic domination, and symbolic violence are central to Kyiv media reformers’ ethical life (Wright 2018: 145-9) and can help us explain the particular forms it took in post-Maidan, pre-invasion Ukraine. My goal has not been to advance a cynical argument that the journalists’ pursuit of virtue in opposition to failure is ‘really’ about gaining power or status. To do so would have been to fail my interlocutors and deny them the proper care of ethnography (see Alexander, introduction to this volume). Such claims to superior virtue are sincere and meaningful in themselves. Keyed to journalists’ strongly held visions of good professionalism and self-worth, they are ‘enmeshed with but ultimately not reducible to pragmatic concerns or identity politics’ (Selka 2010: 292). At the same time, these claims remind us that people often pursue what they see as a good life not only in relation to but also in opposition to or in conflict with others (Kelly 2018; Wright 2018).

In social orders, such as religions or modern professions, that have collective standards of worth, practitioners are often orientated to each other through competitive differentiation. Anthropologists suggest that cohabitation of two religious communities

(Singh 2011) or competition of two religions for followers from the same group (Selka 2010) produce agonistic dynamics in which difference can be expressed in moral terms. But if morality's salience as a dimension of distinction is not surprising in religious contexts, its prevalence over competence, commercial success, or prestige in professions is less obvious. In Ukrainian journalism, several factors combined to elevate morality and ethical purity over other kinds of valorized difference that reformers could claim. First, *nezalezhni media* operated in a highly agonistic media market with conflicting standards of success. Independent journalists' news might have been more objective, but their adversaries' access to superior resources secured them much greater audiences. Insisting on their difference from the mainstream was one way for these journalists not to be judged by the yardstick that favoured their competitors. This explains the tenacity of their claims to distinction. Second, the system of ideas about good journalism that underpinned media reformers' project had a clear moral valence thanks to its origin in journalists' opposition to Ukraine's corrupt marketplace of ideas, and its association with the project of Europeanization. Ukrainian media liberalism's tangled history explains why distinction could be moral in character, rather than, say, purely ideological. But this is not yet enough: similarly to other journalists with whom they competed for audiences and prestige, the reformists could build their claims to distinction on various sources of professional worth. We have to explain why moral distinction gained such prominence over other idioms of difference. Finally, then, careers within which the reformers could credibly claim the moral high ground and ethical purity from corruption had been made increasingly possible by expanding Western funding after the 2013-14 revolution. Foreign grants enabled the realization of the reformers' moral ideal of independence but could not support the spending necessary to successfully compete for mass audience, talent, or ad revenues against major broadcasters. In Ukraine's oligarch-dominated media market, the reformers were relatively disempowered, even if congruent with their moral vision of professionalism and symbolically validated through their international recognition. Their conflicted position made moral distinction through virtuous opposition to mainstream failures a relatively more accessible, meaningful, and credible form of professional differentiation compared to other sources of professional worth.

It seems that the main outcome of these claims was group solidarity among the reformers themselves. The 'dark' side of this solidarity is moral separatism manifested, for instance, in the reformers' near-unanimous support of state sanctions against 112, NewsOne, and ZIK. In the eight years between the start of the war in Donbas and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, moral rifts that emerged among journalists I studied became mobilized in new conflicts and realigned with other divisions, such as the pro-Ukrainian/pro-Russian divide that became iconic of the wartime securitization and polarization of Ukraine's public sphere after 2014. Eventually, moral tensions germinated into open conflict over who was a 'real' journalist, whose speech and rights should be protected, and to whom professional solidarity should be denied or extended.

Acknowledgements

I thank Catherine Alexander, Charlotte Bruckermann, Matei Candea, Paolo Heywood, Matthew Porges, Madeleine Reeves, Farhan Samanani, Leyla Sayfutdinova, Serhii Solod'ko, Hans Steinmüller, Diana Vonnak, and Fiona Wright, as well as the *JRAI* reviewers and assessor Simon Coleman, and audiences at Durham and St Andrews,

for their feedback on this essay. The research and writing up were made possible by generous funding of the British Academy (grant no. PF20\100094) and Matei Candea's Risking Speech project (European Research Council grant no. 683033).



NOTES

¹ I use my interlocutors' term 'independent journalism' for news journalism not directly controlled by the state, owners, or *dzhyntsa* clients.

² I have retained names of all organizations but changed those of individuals unless noted otherwise. Calling this essay's main protagonists 'Hromadske' rather than 'Hromads'ke' as required by the convention, I follow their preferred title in English.

³ Natalia Roudakova writes about Russia, but in Ukraine the dynamic was similar.

⁴ Cf. Abbott (1988: 225-6) and Lebovic (2016: 88-93) on struggles over news journalism's distinction from commercial advertising in the interwar United States.

⁵ Her real name.

⁶ His real name. Note that the Ukrainian surname Hranovs'kyi is transliterated as 'Granovsky' in Russian. The article cited below came out in Russian, hence the variation in the reference.

REFERENCES

- ABBOTT, A. 1988. *The system of professions: an essay on the division of expert labour*. Chicago: University Press.
- BISHARA, A. 2013. *Back stories: US news production and Palestinian politics*. Stanford: University Press.
- BOURDIEU, P. 1984 [1979]. *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste* (trans. R. Nice). London: Routledge.
- DAUCÉ, F. 2018. Dzhinsa. In *The global encyclopedia of informality*, vol. 2 (ed.) A. Ledeneva, 284-7. London: UCL Press.
- FAINBERG, D. 2020. *Cold War correspondents: Soviet and American reporters on the ideological frontlines*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- FEDIRKO, T. 2021. Liberalism in fragments: oligarchy and the liberal subject in Ukrainian news journalism. *Social Anthropology* 29, 471-89.
- GRANOVSKY, V. 2005. Nikto na kanale 'Inter' ne daval ukazanyi po prodazhe novostey. *Detector Media*, 25 November (available online: <https://detector.media/community/article/877/2005-11-25-vladymyr-granovskyy-nykto-na-kanale-ynter-ne-daval-ukazany-po-prodazhe-novostey/>, accessed 13 January 2023).
- HALLIN, D. & P. MANCINI 2004. *Comparing media systems: three models of media and politics*. Cambridge: University Press.
- KEANE, W. 2016. *Ethical life: its natural and social histories*. Princeton: University Press.
- KELLY, T. 2018. Beyond ethics: conscience, pacifism, and the political in wartime Britain. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 8, 114-28.
- KOLTSOVA, O. 2006. *News media and power in Russia*. London: Routledge.
- LAIDLAW, J. 2014. *The subject of virtue: an anthropology of ethics and freedom*. Cambridge: University Press.
- 2018. Fault lines in the anthropology of ethics. In *Moral engines: exploring the ethical drives in human life* (eds) C. Mattingly, R. Dyring, M. Louw & T. Schwarz Wentzer, 174-93. New York: Berghahn Books.
- LAMBEK, M. 2015. Value and virtue. In *The ethical condition: essays on action, person and value*, 214-41. Chicago: University Press.
- LAMONT, M. 1992. *Money, morals, and manners: the culture of the French and the American upper-middle class*. Chicago: University Press.
- LEBOVIC, S. 2016. *Free speech and unfree news: the paradox of press freedom in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- LEDENEVA, A. 2006. *How Russia really works: the informal practices that shaped post-Soviet politics and business*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

- LEMPERT, M. 2013. No ordinary ethics. *Anthropological Theory* 13, 370-93.
- MARTIN, J.L. 2003. What is field theory? *American Journal of Sociology* 109, 1-49.
- MATUSZAK, S. 2012. *The oligarchic democracy: the influence of business groups on Ukrainian politics*. Warsaw: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia.
- RAJKOVIĆ, I. 2017. For an anthropology of the demoralized: state pay, mock-labour, and unfreedom in a Serbian firm. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 24, 47-70.
- ROBBINS, J. 2004. *Becoming sinners: Christianity and moral torment in a Papua New Guinea society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- ROUDAKOVA, N. 2008. Media-political clientelism: lessons from anthropology. *Media, Culture & Society* 30, 41-59.
- 2009. Journalism as 'prostitution': understanding Russia's reactions to Anna Politkovskaya's murder. *Political Communication* 26, 412-29.
- 2017. *Losing Pravda: ethics and the press in post-truth Russia*. Cambridge: University Press.
- SCHIELKE, S. 2009. Ambivalent commitments: troubles of morality, religiosity and aspiration among young Egyptians. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 39, 158-85.
- SELKA, S. 2010. Morality in the religious marketplace: evangelical Christianity, Candomblé, and the struggle for moral distinction in Brazil. *American Ethnologist* 37, 291-307.
- SINGH, B. 2011. Agonistic intimacy and moral aspiration in popular Hinduism: a study in the political theology of the neighbor. *American Ethnologist* 38, 430-50.
- SKIBITS'KA, Y. 2020. Podvodnia itogi spora. *Vsrataya zhurnalistika* (Telegram channel), 25 December (available online: https://t.me/vsrataya_zhurnalistika/535, accessed 13 January 2023).
- TESSMAN, L. 2015. *Moral failure: on the impossible demands of morality*. Oxford: University Press.
- WOLFE, T. 2005. *Governing socialist journalism: the press and the socialist person after Stalin*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- WRIGHT, F. 2018. *The Israeli radical left: an ethics of complicity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Échec et distinction morale dans un lieu d'échange d'idées ukrainien

Résumé

Le présent essai examine les effets normatifs de l'invocation de la faillite morale dans un mouvement libéral ukrainien pour la réforme des médias, dans la période post-Maïdan et jusqu'à l'invasion de l'Ukraine. Les réformateurs voulaient réorganiser le journalisme d'information autour des idéaux d'autonomie, d'objectivité équilibrée, d'impartialité et de corrigibilité, sur lesquels ils pensaient que les médias occidentaux étaient fondés. Ils décriaient l'absence de ces principes dans les médias ukrainiens, mettant en lumière la faillite morale de journalistes financés par des oligarques en échange d'une représentation flatteuse. En retour, ceux dont ces réformateurs essayaient de se démarquer se gaussaient de leur « appétit de subventions » et de leur dépendance des fonds occidentaux pour la promotion de la démocratie. Cet affrontement mettait face à face la réussite matérielle, d'un côté, et de l'autre l'aspiration à la probité morale et professionnelle. Développant l'idée de distinction morale proposée par Selka, l'auteur avance que, bien que les réformateurs aient été sincères dans leur recherche d'une différence vertueuse, leur vulnérabilité structurelle vis-à-vis des grands médias a aussi contribué à mettre en lumière le rôle de la moralité comme base d'une différenciation agonique.