

Intermediaries of change: How media-focused non-governmental organizations shape meta-journalistic discourse in Ukraine

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Abstract

Ukrainian media is currently undergoing its most challenging period in history. Still transitioning from political and economic instrumentalization, it has been significantly affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, impacting both safety and the economy. The loss of advertisement revenue has made them dependent on the support of media-focused NGOs and foreign donors. Established by journalists and funded by foreign donors, these organizations find themselves in an ambiguous position – not at the core of the journalistic field, as they do not compete with legacy media in content production and revenues; and not at its periphery, as they actively shape journalism culture in Ukraine by legitimizing and delegitimizing actors, norms, and practices based on their definition of ‘good journalism.’ Due to their autonomy from state and market influence, they manage to combine regulatory and activist functions, monitoring journalists’ adherence to journalistic standards and criticizing violations while supporting the interventionist role of the media in collecting evidence of war crimes and promoting political missions like gender equality. Simultaneously, the ongoing war means that in frontline areas, the transition is held back, as the quality of the media becomes less important than mere access to information. Drawing on nine semi-structured interviews with key actors from prominent NGOs such as Lviv Media Forum, The Reckoning Project, Women in Media, the Institute of Mass Information, and a professional association (National Union of Journalists of Ukraine), conducted online in 2023–2024, this research utilizes discourse

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analysis to investigate how media-focused NGOs shape the meta-journalistic discourse in Ukraine.

Keywords

meta-journalistic discourse, media, peripheral actors, Ukraine, war, ngo, collaboration, journalism culture

The media in Ukraine have undergone many changes due to the political, economic, and social challenges the country has faced since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, Ukrainian media have faced their most challenging period in history. Due to bombardment, Russian occupation, and the targeting and persecution of Ukrainian journalists, along with the capture of media infrastructure, media outlets in several regions of Ukraine were forced to shut down, leaving an information vacuum behind (Trojan, 2023; Vyhovska, 2023; Yatsyna, 2023).

Civil society organizations have played a crucial role in the democratic transition (Stewart and Dollbaum, 2017) and the development of independent media in Ukraine. Foreign funding allows these organizations to function independently from political and economic influences, enabling them to perform a regulatory function (Korbut, 2021), in addition to supporting journalists and media organizations materially, through channeling foreign donor funding, as well as, the findings show that these organizations also provide professional training and advice, contributing to the professionalization of the journalistic community in Ukraine. Conceptual literature on journalism argues that its boundaries are constantly negotiated both by the journalists themselves (Zelizer, 1993) and by other social actors (Carlson, 2016). Studying journalism as a social practice, in addition to it being a profession, allows for accounting for external influences and how they shape journalism (Carlson, 2019; Reese, 2019).

Contributing to the literature on journalism culture, peripheral actors and boundary work in journalism, this study conducts a discourse analysis of nine semi-structured interviews with the founders, managers, and employees of four Ukraine-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused on supporting and developing media in Ukraine, as well as reporting on the war crimes (Lviv Media Forum - LMF, The Reckoning Project - TRP, Women in Media - WiM, the Institute of Mass Information - IMI) and one professional association (National Union of Journalists of Ukraine - NUJU). The analysis aims to find out how media-focused NGOs contribute to shaping meta-journalistic discourse in Ukraine. To achieve that first this research estimates the extent to which these NGOs relate to or challenge journalistic ideology, perform journalistic practices and correspond to structures based on the peripherality components (Hanusch and Löhmann, 2023). Next, it analyzes the discursive strategies these NGOs use to legitimize and delegitimize actors, norms and practices in Ukrainian journalism, simultaneously shaping the meta-journalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016).

Power and authority in journalism: Constructing community and legitimacy

Power and authority in journalism are constructed by the community, as “journalists create shared interpretations that make their professional lives meaningful,” including establishing standards of “good journalism” (Zelizer, 1993: 82). They engage in boundary work demarcating journalistic norms, practices and participants by either extending the “borders of what may be considered journalism into new domains” or erecting new “boundaries within journalistic practice to reposition something or someone as being outside of acceptable journalism” (Carlson, 2015: 10–11).

However, for these statements about journalism to be acceptable by the professional community, they need to rely on shared values that comprise journalistic identity, in turn giving professional legitimacy and serving as means of control (Carlson, 2015: 34–36). These ideals closely relate to democratic values (Eide, 2017: 91). Seminal work in journalism studies argues that the Anglo-American tradition of journalism is the dominant model of professional journalism worldwide, serving as a reference in terms of ethics and professional routines (Mancini 2002 cited in Mancini 2005). Based on the social responsibility theory, it prescribes that press has a responsibility, among others, to inform and enlighten the public, protect individual rights by serving as a watchdog against the government, and maintain financial self-sufficiency to avoid external influence (Peterson, 1984: 74). The emerging ideal-typical values such as public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics shape journalism occupational ideology (Deuze, 2005).

While Western journalistic norms are indeed exported to the Global South, it is up to the recipient countries to “accept, adapt, or reject these norms,” a process often influenced by the societal context (Hanitzsch et al., 2019a: 2). The concept of ‘journalism culture’ is used to evaluate divergence of the local models of journalism from the hegemonic journalism ideology, and is defined as a set of ideas, practices, and artifacts “by which journalists, consciously and unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others” often resulting in conflict as “diverse professional ideologies struggle over the dominant interpretation of journalism’s social function and identity” (Hanitzsch, 2007: 369–370). Journalism culture is further deconstructed into three dimensions: institutional roles in society (interventionism, power distance, market orientation), epistemologies (objectivism, empiricism) and ethical ideologies (relativism, idealism) (Hanitzsch, 2007: 371).

Similarly, non-journalistic actors also partake in shaping the meaning of journalism through the construction of meta-journalistic discourse using strategies like definition-making, boundary-setting or contestation, and legitimization of actors, norms and practices in journalism (Carlson, 2016: 350–355). To understand what values these external actors rely upon when constructing discourses about journalism, it is useful to consider what place these actors occupy in the journalistic field.

The influence of non-journalistic actors on the journalistic field

Alliances with non-journalistic actors have sparked debates in journalism scholarship on how these actors are changing the journalistic field (Benson and Neveu, 2005). Some of these “journalistic strangers” claim authority within the field and compete with traditional news actors in content production, while others do not challenge journalists’ position but instead contribute to the improvement and innovation of the field, often bringing expertise from outside (Holton and Belair-Gagnon, 2018: 73–75). This includes pooling in material resources and expertise from other professional fields through collaboration (Mesquita and de-Lima-Santos, 2023).

Concerns about new actors entering the field translate into worries over their influence on journalistic norms and practices, as these actors possess distinct professional identities and pursue their own goals (Lowrey et al., 2023: 2034). For instance, foreign donor funding of the media has been found to influence journalistic practices through agenda setting, and introducing non-editorial activities into journalists’ work (Scott et al., 2019). In some post-conflict and developing countries, foreign donor funding failed to achieve a lasting progress in media development (Myers, 2018; Nyarko et al., 2020), as heavy reliance on this type of funding has led to closure of local media when funding ceased making them vulnerable to other forms of media capture (Relly and Zanger, 2017).

To understand how non-journalistic actors entering the field influence professional norms and practices, it is necessary to move beyond the insider/outsider dichotomy. Building on the concept of the journalism culture (Hanitzsch, 2007), Hanusch and Löhmann (2023) suggest measuring the extent of peripherality of actors in the journalistic field in relation to the core by evaluating how they identify with journalistic identity, perform journalistic practice, and correspond to journalistic structures (p. 1299).

Media transformation in Ukraine: Challenges, reforms, and the role of civil society

The literature on media systems in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region categorizes the media system in Ukraine as being in transition (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019: 262–263). Since gaining independence, the transformation of media in Ukraine has been non-linear, marked by periods of regression and upheaval, influenced by the ruling elite. The most significant transformation was brought about by the Euromaidan, which spearheaded media reform and liberalization, including the development of new independent online media and civic organizations focused on improving Ukrainian journalism and establishing fact-checking organizations (Ryabinska, 2019: 333; Nikitina, 2019: 195), however, many ‘old’ problems persist. Politicization and concentration of media ownership have had a negative effect on the media content, promoting the economic and political interests of the captors, particularly through ‘dzhynsa’ – hidden advertisement, manipulative tactics to discredit political opponents, and omission of content critical of the government (Ryabinska, 2017: 25). Independent media struggle to compete for advertising revenues in this media market structure, and receive little external funding otherwise (Ryabinska, 2019: 349).

The Russian war in Ukraine has introduced safety threats and professional challenges for Ukrainian journalists (Nikitina, 2019: 172–177, 182–197). The political crisis has also affected journalism culture, blurring the boundaries between activism and journalism. Ukrainian journalists' participation in the Euromaidan demonstrations, in response to censorship and media capture during the presidency of Yanukovich, led to the politicization and deeper engagement of journalists in civic activism (Szostek, 2014: 5–6). Some journalists joined NGOs supporting media freedom and created new independent media to inform protesters and “set the protest agenda” (Pleines and Somfalvy, 2022: 111). This gave rise to interventionist journalism, which in turn influenced journalists' role perception, leading to contradicting role conceptions that combine the roles of populist disseminators, detached watchdogs and agents of social change (Budivska and Orlova, 2017; Yaroshchuk, 2020: 110–113).

Civil society in Ukraine has played a crucial role “substituting for the state to a significant extent in some areas” (Stewart and Dollbaum, 2017: 217), including the media sector. NGOs and professional associations have been fulfilling regulatory functions such as informing relevant policy, introducing reform, monitoring violations of journalists' rights, and ensuring media adherence to professional standards and norms (Korbut, 2021: 16). To understand what place these organizations undertake in the journalistic field and how they contribute to its transformation, this research answers the following questions:

To what extent are the media focused NGOs peripheral to journalistic field in Ukraine?

How do the media focused NGOs legitimize or delegitimize actors, norms, and practices in Ukrainian journalism?

Method

Purposeful sampling of four NGOs (IMI, LMF, WiM, TRP) and one professional association (NUJU) was conducted based on the following criteria:

- (1) Conversations with Ukrainian journalists who were asked to name organizations supporting journalists and media in Ukraine.
- (2) Researcher's knowledge of the prominent actors in the Ukrainian journalism and media community based on own experience living and working in Ukraine.
- (3) Diverse profiles of the organizations that allow for comparing the different ways they shape the journalism culture in Ukraine.
- (5) The organizations were founded by journalists or people with a journalistic background and focus on the media development and support of journalists in Ukraine.
- (6) The organizations are funded by foreign donors and/or via the membership donations.

At the same time, such a research design, has its limitations, specifically, the small sample size and non-randomized sampling strategy may result in over- or under-representing certain aspects of data.

Following the informed consent procedure, and upon receiving the approval of the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, nine semi-structured

interviews were conducted with the founders, managers, and employees of sampled organizations: Alla – founder (IMI), Iryna – Media Expert (IMI), Oksana – Director (IMI), Lina – Deputy Head (NUJU), Ostap – founder (LMF), Olga – CEO (LMF), Olivia – Director of Outreach (TRP), Svitlana – Ukrainian journalist (TRP), and Liza – Director (WiM). The interviews were conducted online via WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Zoom (following the preference of the interviewees), and on the phone between October 2023 and June 2024. They were approached on Facebook and via personal mutual contacts. The interviewees were informed about the aims of the research, their rights and data management procedures via the information letter. They both verbally and in writing consented to identifying information such as names of their organizations and their own names and positions appearing in this research uncensored. Some interviewees were approached several times with follow-up questions and clarifications.

Discourse analysis (DA) was employed to go beyond looking for patterns in the data and instead takes a more critical approach, revealing its complexity, including implicit aspects of the data like pre-existing structures (Geertz, 1973). DA is particularly applicable for this research as it allows viewing discourse as a social action, a co-construction of meaning (Wetherell, 2001). Milliken (1999) distinguishes two theoretical commitments of DA: that discourse is a “structures which construct social realities” by means of sign systems, and that discourses are productive, as they operationalize “regime of truth” that includes certain modes of identity and action and excludes others. In this process, “subjects authorized to speak and to act” and “the relations within which they see and are seen by each other and in terms of which they conduct the ... business with respect to that issue-area” (Milliken, 1999: 229). Hence, via the discursive practice, these subjects organize and control social spaces and groups – objects (Milliken, 1999: 229).

The analysis of the data was performed in two phases, first the theory driven coding framework based on ten components of peripherality (values, experience, belongingness, professionalism, competencies, formats, transformability, autonomy, audience-centricity, and organization) was applied to the data to identify actors’ position in relation to the field (Hanusch and Löhmann, 2023: 1299). In this stage of analysis in addition to the DA of interviews, the analysis of the articles and reports that interviewees referred to during the interviews, as well as the webpages featuring the organizations’ mission have been analyzed.

On the next stage, the theory-driven codes were extracted from the Carlson’s (2016) conceptualization of discursive components involved in construction of meta-journalistic discourse, such as “definition-making” about “who or what they include and exclude as journalism”; “boundary work” that includes setting and contesting the boundaries of journalistic actors, norm and practices; and their legitimization (Carlson, 2016: 359–360).

Findings and discussion

Situating NGOs’ peripherality in the Ukrainian journalistic field

The analysis identified that the position of the sampled actors in relation to the core of the journalistic field is ambiguous. While all five sampled organizations identified to a certain

extent with a journalistic identity based on traditional journalistic values, some divergence is observed in their practices and structures.

Identities

In terms of adherence to traditional journalistic values, most of the studied NGOs refer to the Code of Ethics of Ukrainian Journalists as guiding their work and advocate for Ukrainian journalists to adhere to. The Code is based on international human rights and press freedom principles, the global charter of ethics ([International Federation of Journalists, 2019](#)), and Ukrainian constitution and legislation. It enshrines traditional journalistic values such as autonomy, factuality, objectivity, public service, and balance, in addition to non-discrimination and respect for private life, among others. It also condemns violations of journalistic norms and ethics, including corruption ([Commission of Journalistic Ethics, 2014](#)). Based on these standards, IMI conducts regular monitoring of Ukrainian media, highlighting media with the best scores (96% adherence to standards) in the “white list” ([Institute of Mass Information, 2024](#)) and publicizes and condemns violations (Oksana). At the same time, the organization “reserves the right to debate its content and application” ([Institute of Mass Information, n.d.](#)).

While LMF places journalism standards on the forefront of its activities, it mostly relies on the monitoring reports of watchdogs like IMI (Olga). According to its charter, to become a member of NUJU, journalists must recognize the Code of Ethics ([NUJU, 2020](#)). Due to its niche focus, WiM, in addition to the journalistic Code of Ethics, advocates to adhere to human rights commitments and international law concerning gender equality and non-discrimination. For instance, in a manual featuring recommendations for Ukrainian journalists that the organization co-authored, it recommends journalists reporting on sexual violence during the war to consult the Murad Code ([CJE, 2023: 45](#)), a global, voluntary code of conduct for those collecting information from survivors of systematic and conflict-related sexual violence” that promotes a victim centered approach to reporting ([Murad Code Project, n.d.](#)).

TRP is a cross-border collaborative project that includes both legal professionals and journalists, united by the goals of justice and accountability for crimes resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The objectives, namely, documenting crimes and informing the public, closely align with traditional journalistic values of public service. At the same time, the organization does not aim to compete with the traditional media, instead attempts to avoid ‘media contamination’ through communicating and collaborating with other actors on the ground. In terms of ethics, the organization’s methodology is based on the ‘do no harm’ principle, and it regularly organizes training for journalists who work in the field on how to avoid re-traumatization (Olivia). The professional background of the interviewed members of the studies NGOs varies, with most having background working in mainstream journalism (IMI, WiM, NUJU, TRP, LMF) and a few in legal studies (TRP) and political science (LMF). However, according to the websites of each organization, they include members with journalism education and/or experience in their teams.

Practices

Members of TRP in Ukraine engage in traditional journalistic practices, such as data collection through field interviews and production of reportages for traditional media. However, half of their work involves non-journalistic practices and methodologies. For instance, many collected testimonies are not published but stored in a digital archive for lawyers to review and present as evidence in tribunal after the war, resembling human rights work more than journalism (Svitlana). Ukrainian journalists in the project are trained to follow legal methodology to ensure the data's admissibility in court, which differs from traditional journalistic methods (Olivia, Svitlana). The mission statement explains this approach is needed "due to discrepancies between legal and journalistic modes of investigation" resulting in evidence presented by journalists being dismissed in courts ([The Reckoning Project, n.d.](#)). Additionally, the NGO uses innovative formats, such as multimedia projects with interactive maps and an archive of testimonies, to distribute their content.

IMI engages in wide array of activities combining the role of a watchdog and informing the public. Even though IMI's activities have a media component, it positions itself first and foremost as an NGO. While they reserve a right to publish news of social significance beyond the media sphere, most of their publications have an activist component, collaborating with law enforcement actors to investigate and follow up on cases (Oksana). IMI supports media organizations by providing legal services for attacked journalists, offering safety training, conducting media monitoring, and supporting media materially. While producing traditional journalistic content is not the organization's main goal, IMI does publish monitoring reports on its website, and informs the public about violations of journalists' rights on social media.

Similarly, WiM combines the role of a watchdog conducting public advocacy of issues connected to gender equality and non-discrimination, both against women journalists and in the content of Ukrainian media, condemning violations. In addition to reports and recommendations, the organization also conducts interviews and published stories on their website ([Women in Media, n.d.-a](#)) to improve the visibility of challenges that women journalists face, such as gender-based violence, sexism, pay gap (Liza). Besides the website, where NUJU publishes articles and video interviews with and about Ukrainian journalists and media ([NUJU, n.d.](#)), the organization also has a presence on social media, where it shares media-related news and its promotional materials. At the same time, LMF produces mainly communication material about its activities, recommendations and information pieces for media professionals both on its website and social media.

Structures

In terms of transformativity, some organizations clearly state their goal to transform Ukrainian media, others do so unconsciously. For instance, IMI sees itself as "an important tool of change both in the consciousness of our professional community and in the improvement of quality of the press" (Alla). WiM plans to introduce gender equality policies into each Ukrainian media's editorial policies (Liza). In contrast, TRP does not

explicitly state an intent to transform Ukrainian journalism but may be unconsciously doing so by extending its boundaries by adopting methodologies from the legal field and merging them with journalistic practice.

When it comes to autonomy from political and economic influences, these organizations share a common feature: foreign donor funding that allows them to be independent from state and market influence. IMI is funded “from non-governmental foundations and contributions from citizens on the basis of transparency, voluntary involvement, and integrity” (Institute of Mass Information, n.d). Similarly, NUJU receives membership fees from its members. Since the full-scale invasion, the organization has also received support from other European unions of journalists and the International Journalists’ Union, which collaborated to create an emergency fund to support Ukrainian journalists through NUJU (Lina). LMF receives support from the Global Forum for Media Development, a network where the organization receives targeted support from foreign donors (Olga).

Both WiM and TRP have rather diversified donor funding. WiM’s projects are supported by various donors, including international NGOs and foundations such as International Media Support and the International Press Institute (WiM, n.d.-b). TRP is funded both from private foundations as well as grants from the foreign ministries and governments of European countries (Olivia).

Shaping meta-journalistic discourse

The analysis identified that informants employed both definition-making and boundary setting/contesting discursive strategies to legitimize and delegitimize certain actors, norms, and practices in Ukrainian journalism.

Legitimizing and delegitimizing actors

Some informants used definition-making and boundary-setting/contesting strategies to legitimize appropriate actors in Ukrainian journalism based on their view of “good journalism,” which aligns with ideal-typical journalistic values (Deuze, 2005) specifically ethics and autonomy. Conversely, they delegitimized those that don’t fit this definition.

Describing the largest professional forum for journalists in Ukraine, organized annually by LMF, one of its founders, sets a clear boundary between independent journalism and those working in media owned by oligarchs, viewing the latter as a violation of ethical norms:

The Media Forum is not for everything that is called journalism, and not everyone who calls themselves journalists. I mean that there are certain ethical norms that are important to us. We are working to develop independent journalism. We are not a platform for all media [...] we support those who work for independent journalism. [...] It doesn’t mean that we have never invited journalists from the traditional oligarchic media; we did but, we took it as an opportunity to look at this phenomenon from a critical point of view (Ostap).

Following the full-scale Russian invasion, LMF also began providing financial assistance to media and journalists affected by the hostilities or forced to shut down. The CEO of the organization explained that while the criteria for emergency assistance to individual journalists are flexible due to concerns for physical safety, long-term development assistance prioritizes those adhering to journalistic standards:

We can't count on all media we have on the market surviving the crisis. That's why our task is to identify the most capable and support them in searching for long-term solutions [...]. We have enough monitoring organizations in Ukraine that publish "white lists," [that we consult] as for us, it is important that the media [we support] have a tradition of producing quality content based on the journalistic standards (Olga).

One such watchdog organization is IMI, which publishes a "white list" monitoring financial transparency, presence of fakes, manipulations, 'dzhynsa' [hidden advertisement] among others in the media content. One of its experts explains the purpose:

During the full-scale invasion, the advertising market disappeared, making it very difficult for media to survive, especially regional media. We continue to make a 'white list' because, firstly, the war will be over one day, and the advertisers will return. Secondly, it is important for donor organizations. There are many donors now in Ukraine, and they need to know which media are trustworthy to invest in their development. There is no media market in Ukraine in the same way it exists in other developed countries. All the media are owned by someone, often rich people, oligarchs, businessmen, politicians. Media financed by donors are independent because no one influences their politics, but they cannot be financed eternally. [...] In this way, we are working to develop a healthy media market for the future (Iryna).

While LMF and IMI prioritize journalistic standards, the study found that NUJU prioritizes other criteria like trust, community needs and location of the media to legitimize the preservation of small community print newspapers that had to discontinue their work due to the war. NUJU supported 31 local newspapers located on the de-occupied and frontline territories of Ukraine, channeling the international donors' investments to restart printing for local communities in four regions, totaling 350,000 copies. The Deputy Head of the organization argues that, besides the practical considerations like the lack of electricity and internet on the frontline, making print newspapers the only accessible source of information, the social significance of these newspapers for local communities is another important criterion:

Locals should know and trust these media; people know the name, they know the journalists, etc. Big nationwide newspapers in Ukraine are a sad story as they almost all shut down. They also wouldn't provide local news like transport schedules, water delivery times, financial aid distribution schedules - local news about local people [like the local newspapers do] (Lina).

At the same time, she acknowledged that NUJU has to support these newspapers regardless of the quality of their content, as there are no other alternatives in these areas: “These newspapers have no competitors for us to choose from who would be producing better quality content. There is only one newspaper for several communities” (Lina).

Legitimizing norms

IMI has a long history of assisting in professionalization of Ukrainian journalism, including through the advocacy of journalistic standards. Shortly after the independence of Ukraine, there was a need to adopt Western standards to substitute the party press mentality left behind after the Soviet Union, which IMI as first media focused NGO in Ukraine attempted to do:

In the beginning, everything was focused on the quality of journalistic practice and the new democratic standards that needed to be introduced to the work of Ukrainian media. (...) First, our goal as IMI was the adaptation of the Western standards to the Ukrainian realities. (...) We needed to learn from how our [Western] colleagues work but not just copy them, adapt these programs instead. (...) [We have] our own realities, our own history, our own path, which is different from that of France, Germany, Netherlands, the US and others (Alla).

Today IMI is condemning the misinterpretation of the traditional journalistic standards by the Western colleagues reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine: “Some Western media reduce the standard of balance of opinions to technical execution giving voice to Putin’s side. We on the other hand advocate for its correct interpretation” (Oksana). In the article published on IMI’s website, Oksana further elaborates on the dangers of ‘fake balance’:

“Today, when events are reported very quickly, the professional standard of journalism is mistakenly reduced to technical representation of ‘sides of the conflict’. It does not give the audience understanding of what is true and what is false. [...] The mistake is in that journalists and editors who lack professional skills often think that the opinions of the opposite sides are equal regardless of who they represent. If one of the sides lacks evidence, and the other has it, or if one side commits a crime and the other is a victim [...] it is a huge mistake to interpret such opinions as equal ([Institute of Mass Information, 2021](#))”.

The war has also brought challenges for execution of certain ethical norms for journalists in Ukraine, who face a challenge of preserving dignity and privacy of deceased people when reporting on mass graves left behind by the Russian soldiers in the liberated areas of Ukraine, as it is “impossible not to show” the bodies because of the social significance of informing the world about the crimes (Iryna). In this case, IMI advocates for journalists to find ways to adhere to ethical standards regardless of circumstance by using artistic ways of representation: “For instance, in Bucha, Stas Kozlyuk took a picture of a hand [of a deceased woman] with her nails still painted, this photo was picked up by the world media and made quite an impression. Or a photo of a [deceased] child’s shoe

next to a puddle of blood. [...] There are media that publish the photos of dead bodies, but we criticize such practice” (Oksana).

While IMI addresses a broader range of issues in journalism, WiM prioritizes gender equality and combats discrimination, including through public condemnation of violations of gender equality standards and discrimination in the media content: “Recently, in 2023, Russian Radio Freedom after the public statement from WiM has removed an article that has been romanticizing rape [of Ukrainian women] by the soldiers of the aggressor country – Russia” (Liza).

WiM also works to improve the adherence to gender equality in journalistic practice sponsoring reportages related to gender sensitivity and non-discrimination:

We had several projects. One was about strengthening the capacity of the media and independent journalists to report on gender-based violence during the war, and another focused on [fostering] understanding between the internally displaced people and the receiving communities. We also supported an anti-homophobic campaign in Poland and provided mini-grants to report on the experiences of the LGBTQ community during the war (Liza).

In cooperation with other media focused NGOs, the NGO organizes symbolic professional events to spotlight the best practices and condemn violations in Ukrainian media:

We established a special nomination for the best material about women’s rights and adherence to gender equality. It is a special category in the professional journalistic competition *Tschest Profesii* (Eng. Honor of the Profession), through which we celebrate the contribution of journalists, including women journalists, in combating gender inequality in our society. (...) We also had another anti-award, *Tse Yaiitse* (Eng. It is an Egg) [...] we awarded a chicken egg as a symbol to raise attention to the stereotypical representation of women in Ukrainian media and politics (Liza).

Legitimizing practices

Cross border practices emerge from collaboration of professionals from journalistic and legal fields across geographical and professional boundaries, who are united by the goal to bring the perpetrators of the war crimes committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine to justice (Olivia). While Ukrainian journalists collect the testimonies of the victims in the field, their collaborative partners, the lawyers from Syria, develop the legal methodology and train journalists to use it in the field to collect evidence. Talking about the training of journalists in Ukraine, Olivia, the Director of Outreach of TRP, says:

The goal is not to train them as if they were lawyers, but it’s rather to train journalists to be journalists who are able to gather information that preserves the integrity of, the witness, which in turn, increases the chance of admissibility in court. (...) What our journalists produce is more akin to advocacy, in trying to promote accountability in both the court of law but also the court of public opinion (Olivia).

As the testimonies are used both for legal purposes and to produce journalistic pieces for traditional media to attract attention to the issues and inform the international audience, journalists have to engage in a hybrid practice, combining journalistic and legal methodologies in their interviews with the victims. Svitlana, a Ukrainian journalist working with the project, shares her experience combining these two roles when working in the field:

Now I have to ask about things I would have been shy or uncomfortable to ask in some other journalistic work. (...) When I say that these interviews are more detailed than regular journalistic interviews, it means that when a person says ‘they put a bag on my head and tied my hands,’ you must not take it for granted and ask if it was a cotton or plastic bag, and the person must explain that. (...) Sometimes it feels like too much, but evidently, the lawyers need these details to understand some general mechanisms which Russians use in different regions. That’s why we have to ask but it is not always easy (...). There is a very thin line here not to turn into an interrogator. (...) And we can’t treat people as a checklist (Svitlana).

At the same time, such combination of practices from different professions also results in combining several roles. The journalist clearly delineates her practice in documenting the war crimes for the legal archive from the media publications which are made on the basis of some of these testimonies, and argues that they become journalism in its traditional understanding when get published. Svitlana argues that while the practices are changing, the self-perception of her professional role remains the same:

There is no such thing for me to leave the journalistic role and undertake a different role. There is no feeling that I have changed spheres. You just change focus, change your practices, but one way or another, you are working with documentary texts, interviews. You just interpret them differently, record them differently, and it result in different things. Whether I am writing a book of reportages or making a project about village architecture or documenting war crimes or writing reportages, in the end it, it is all the same. It is documentary work, interviewing people, recording these interviews, and then I interpret them accordingly to the format I am working on (Svitlana).

Svitlana explains such freedom to undertake multiple professional roles and combine different practices by the changing realities in Ukraine and Ukrainian journalism – the lack of stability, and absence of a strong journalistic tradition.

Conclusion

This research found that through the construction of meta-journalistic discourse, NGOs shape journalism culture in Ukraine. They legitimize actors, norms, and practices that align with their understanding of good journalism and its role in society, while delegitimizing those that do not.

At the ideological level, WiM, LMF, and IMI seek to transform journalism culture in Ukraine by shaping discourses about appropriate actors. They emphasize adherence to

traditional norms and condemn violations of journalistic standards and ethics. The organizations advocate for ethical idealism (Hanitzsch, 2007), insisting that journalists must uphold standards regardless of the circumstances, by finding alternative and respectful ways of reporting on mass graves while preserving the dignity of the deceased. Previous research noted that ethical absolutism correlates with higher levels of press freedom and democracy (Ramaprasad et al., 2019: 221–225) which have indeed been on the rise in Ukraine since the Maidan revolution, including due to the contribution of the civil society organizations particularly in the media development sector (Korbut, 2021; Stewart and Dollbaum, 2017).

At the level of institutional roles, particularly LMF and IMI advocate for maintaining distance from power and economic influence. They condemn media outlets that lack ownership transparency and publish unmarked political and economic advertisement (dzynsa) by excluding them from participation in professional forums (LMF) and “white lists” (IMI). This exclusion of ‘inappropriate’ actors suggests that the NGOs are attempting to build a journalism culture and media system alternative to the existing instrumentalized one (Ryabinska, 2017, 2019). Previous research in other countries in the CEE region shows that two media systems and journalism cultures can coexist in the same country, leading to competing narratives about good journalism (Bajomi-Lázár and Horváth, 2023) and internal conflict within the journalistic community (Trifonova-Price, 2019: 316).

In their work, these NGOs combine traditional institutional roles, serving as watchdogs through monitoring and public advocacy, and informing and educating the public by publishing information in traditional and non-traditional journalistic formats. Simultaneously, they themselves adopt and support journalists and media to perform an interventionist role in society. For instance, WiM advocates for the women journalists’ rights and gender equality in media and content, and funds reporting projects that highlight these issues. TRP advocates for justice for victims of Russian war crimes in Ukraine, and provide journalists with methodological tools to collect evidence that will not only inform the public through the traditional media reporting but also that will ensure that the evidence is preserved for trial. The NUJU advocates for frontline communities’ rights to stay informed, and to avoid news deserts funds the local community newspapers, despite their low circulation as compared to the national level newspapers, and poor content quality (Institute of Mass Information, 2020).

This tendency towards an interventionist role of Ukrainian journalists and media-focused NGOs in the times of war align with previous research showing that journalists in countries undergoing transition adopt interventionist roles to pursue certain political missions and promote specific values (Hanitzsch et al., 2019b: 162, 169–170). At the same time, the considerations like the mandate and influence of donors on the agenda of the organization could also potentially be the reasons, while not investigated in this research.

Previous research indicates that ‘journalistic strangers’ like ‘implicit interlopers’ can bring innovation to the field contributing to its improvement without questioning its authority (Holton and Belair-Gagnon, 2018: 73–75). TRP has challenged the boundaries of journalism by introducing non-journalistic methodologies into journalistic practices through collaboration with legal professionals and experimenting with formats to enhance

the visibility and impact of war crimes reporting. Tools from outside journalism may help journalists perform their interventionist role, serving as ‘intermediaries of change’ in the society, not only as individuals (Heft and Baack, 2022) but also collectively across professional and geographic boundaries. Since the full-scale invasion, initiatives similar to TRP began to emerge among others UWA (Ukrainian War Archive, n.d), a war crimes investigation department opened by The Kyiv Independent (Reporters Without Borders, n.d).

The changes that IMI, LMF, and WiM attempt to introduce into Ukrainian journalism culture may indicate the process of transition of the Ukrainian media system (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019) characterized by adherence to professional values and autonomy is ongoing despite the war, and that media-focused NGOs have the potential to facilitate this transition, particularly due to their ambiguous position in the field. By founding NGOs, journalists who share the same ideologies gain more freedom in organizational structure and practice than legacy media. This allows the NGOs to criticize the legacy media without competing with them, as well as to support the media by pooling and distributing foreign funding, providing Ukrainian media an opportunity to be independent of national political and economic influences. At the same time, the ongoing war creates a need for journalists to perform the interventionist role, which may lead to innovation (TRP), while also holding back the transition in the areas where the local context does not allow for the implementation of reforms such as on the frontline where the mere presence of Ukrainian media regardless of their quality is precious for the local communities (NUJU).

The study also found that the studied NGOs facilitate collaboration across organizational and geographical boundaries. A cross-organizational collaboration between the studied NGOs and legacy media organizations has the potential to shape a media community based on shared values. At the same time, a collaboration between foreign donors and Ukrainian media-focused NGOs that mainly involves the channeling of funding toward supporting independent Ukrainian media may indicate a global attempt to liberalize the Ukrainian media system. Future research, however, should address the influence of foreign donors on the agenda setting in the national NGOs in the media sector, including through epistemological methodologies and observation.

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