

# Facebook as an alternative public space: The use of Facebook by Ukrainian journalists during the 2012 parliamentary election



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**ABSTRACT:** As the social media increasingly proliferate and shape media consumption in the present-day world, journalists growingly turn to them in search of direct access to their audiences. Under conditions of restricted media freedom, such access suggests a great asset both to journalists who can engage into an open discussion with a wider public and to the very public. In Ukraine, both trends had been vivid in recent years preceding the Euromaidan: on the one hand, media freedom had been deteriorating, but on the other hand, journalists had been utilizing social media more actively. The article examines how Ukrainian journalists communicated with their audiences via Facebook. In particular, it analyzes patterns of interaction during the 2012 parliamentary election campaign. The results of the study show a substantial level of confusion among Ukrainian journalists regarding the role of public debate on Facebook in 2012–2013. While journalists tended to dismiss users' comments as mostly irrelevant, they did consider themselves to be providers of important information or viewpoints for the formation of public opinion. Although such interaction between journalists and other users does not satisfy the normative criteria of the public sphere, analysis of content and interviews with journalists showed that Facebook did suggest an evolving alternative public space in Ukraine, in contrast to the ever more controlled space of mainstream media during the presidency of Yanukovich.

**KEYWORDS:** Ukraine, journalism, Facebook, social media, public sphere, media freedom.



## INTRODUCTION

The social media have seen a sharp rise in popularity across the world, causing crucial changes in media consumption and communication between political elites, media and citizens. In response to these changes, many journalists increasingly turn to social networks sites (SNS) in search of direct access to their audiences. The interaction between journalists and the wider public on SNSs becomes

of particular significance in countries with restricted media freedom. In such challenging political environments, social media suggest an alternative public space for political discussions with journalists often being key figures driving the debate.

In this regard, the situation in Ukraine before the Euromaidan presents an interesting case for exploration of journalists' engagement with the public online under the conditions of deteriorating freedom of speech. Following the victory of Viktor Yanukovych in the Ukrainian presidential elections in 2010, Ukrainian journalists and media had been increasingly facing various kinds of pressure and restrictions from the authorities. While the majority of mainstream media had been under direct or indirect control of the then ruling elite, online media, including SNS, stood out as "islands of free speech", along with a few traditional media outlets (Szostek, 2014). It was at that time that many independent Ukrainian journalists started actively using social media, and Facebook in particular, in order to communicate both information and opinion regarding political developments in the country. The significance of journalists' voices in social media later surfaced during the Euromaidan protests, with the very first rally instigated by a single Facebook post of the Ukrainian journalist Mustafa Nayyem (Savanev'skyy, 2013). During the Euromaidan, a number of Ukrainian journalists were engaged in protests and mobilized the Ukrainian public through SNS. The weight of journalists' online activities remained substantial in the post-Maidan period, too. Quite a few journalists have been topping the lists of the opinion leaders in the social media, which allows them advocating for some causes and influencing political developments in the country (Butchenko, 2015).

The leverage of Ukrainian journalists that materialized during the Maidan and afterwards had been, however, an outcome of their increasing presence in social media throughout the first years of Yanukovych's presidency. The dissent among independent journalists over backsliding democracy and their persistent criticism of Yanukovych's regime voiced on their account pages contributed to the establishment of an alternative public space in Ukraine.

The article explores how Ukrainian journalists communicated with their audiences via Facebook during the parliamentary election campaign of 2012. Based on the analysis of Facebook pages' content of selected opinion-leading journalists, as well as interviews with the journalists, the study examines patterns of interaction between journalists and commentators. Informed by the concept of public sphere, the article discusses how such interaction could contribute to the establishment of an alternative public space and how the latter is related to the normative concept of the public sphere.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DEMOCRATIZING POTENTIAL OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION**

With the rapid development of the Internet, online communication emerged as one of the central focuses of media and communication studies. In particular, the dem-

ocratizing potential of online communication has become a prominent though disputable subject matter within media studies (Papacharissi, 2002; Dahlgren, 2002). Enthusiasm regarding the capacity of digital technologies to advance democratic communication stemmed from a widely accepted theoretical framework, which views democracy indispensably linked to the practices of public communication (Garnham, 1990; Dahlgren, 1995; Norris, 2000; Barnett, 2003; Dahlgren, 2002; Carpini et al., 2004).

Within such a theoretical framework, the notion of the public sphere has come to the fore of media scholars' discussion of the democratizing power of digital communication (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). Most of the discussions relied on the concept of a public sphere introduced by Habermas (1989) to explain the historically essential role of a public sphere for the emergence of democracy. In his groundbreaking work, Habermas argued that activity in the cultural public sphere in Western Europe of the 17th century, which involved good mannered conversations about many kinds of small things among equals, in due course spilled over into the political sphere (Lunt & Stenner, 2005, p. 60). Consequently, a forum for political discussion emerged, laying the ground for informed and critical public opinion formation. Reasoned and critical discourse is thus a cornerstone of Habermas's concept of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 1995).

Habermas's initial conception brought about numerous interpretations of what can be considered a modern form of public sphere. As public communication has been increasingly relocated into the domain of mass media, perception of the mass media as the major embodiment of the public sphere became mainstream (Carpignano et al., 1990, p. 33). Television, due to its popularity and capacity to reach huge audiences, has long been regarded the prime institution of the public sphere in modern society (Dahlgren, 1995), although it has also attracted a lot of criticism, including that of Habermas (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994).

Whereas television has been commonly denounced for trivialization of discourse, emergence of the internet as a new form of communication technology received quite an enthusiastic response from many activists and scholars. The new opportunities brought by digital technologies were praised and expected to provide a two-way and low-cost platform for sharing of information and rational debate — leading to public opinion formation (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Dahlberg, 2011).

Numerous studies have been exploring various forms of online discussion activities and their role in fostering political debate and deliberative democracy. A large body of research focused on the online fora and discussion boards, one of the first web-based platforms for political debate (Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Janssen & Kies, 2005; Freelon, 2010). The focus later shifted towards comments sections in online news media, regarded as the most common forms of citizen engagement online (e.g. Domingo et al., 2008; Reich, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011; Weber, 2014). Unequaled popularity of SNSs among users also prompted researchers to analyze communication in the social media through the lens of public sphere theory (e.g. Van Dijck, 2011).

While the significance of online political discussion (in a broad sense of “political”) as a form of public sphere has been largely acknowledged, analytical framework for the study of instances of online public debate remains a matter of scholarly debates (Dahlberg, 2004). One of the complexities theorists face pertains to dynamic and multiple communication spaces online, which appear, develop, transform or even vanish quite fast. Another fundamental complexity concerns adequate operationalization of the public sphere concept that could guide empirical research. The problem of operationalization of the “public sphere” concept has been key to different interpretations of the framework. Criteria that scholars define for analysis of public debate in terms of public sphere concept heavily depend on theoretical approaches to democracy (Ferree et al., 2002; Freelon, 2010), each bringing their limitations.

One of the mainstream approaches has been grounded in theories of deliberative democracy, with direct references to Habermas’s conception (Dahlberg, 2004; Dahlberg 2011; Freelon, 2010; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). Freelon identifies the following three characteristics essential for Habermas’s public sphere:

- (1) the establishment of rational-critical argument (as opposed to social status) as the sole criterion by which public contributions should be judged; (2) circumscription of discussion topics to the domain of “common concern”; and (3) openness to all members of the public. (Freelon, 2010, pp. 1173–1174)

According to Freelon (2010), operationalization of Habermas’s concept for empirical research of online political communication has thus foregrounded such criteria as: rational-critical argument, public issue focus, discussion topic focus, reciprocal listening and equality. These criteria are also guiding the proposed study. Accordingly, analysis of journalists’ Facebook pages and interaction on their pages will focus on the content of postings and commentaries (do they represent a matter of public interest?); quality of presented arguments (are they rational and critical?); level of civility of discussion; accessibility of discussion for all eager parties.

The discussed approach, though dominant in the studies of online discourse from the perspective of its democratizing potential, has substantial limitations, namely its lack of flexibility when it comes to analyzing all possible modes of political expression, various civic and political environments, as well as its preponderance with deliberation that leaves other communication norms out of sight (Paparharissi, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005; Freelon, 2010; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015).

Despite a recent profusion of studies that focus on analysis of online communication within the framework of public sphere theory, the lion’s share of research has concentrated on the cases from established democracies, overlooking developments in non-democratic or semi-democratic environments where online platforms like SNS often suggest an alternative public space for political debate.

In a similar vein, the growing body of research in journalism studies that has been exploring changing modes of relationship between journalists and audiences in the context networked digital media has also seen a prevalence of cases from

established democracies. Media scholars have scrutinized media and journalists' response to the advent of user-generated comments (e.g., Nielsen, 2014), the emergence of "participatory journalism" and its impact on traditional journalism practices (Domingo et al., 2008; Singer et al., 2011), the changing perceptions of professional role (O'Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008) and the role of the audience (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012), acceptance and normalization of new practices like blogging and microblogging by journalists (Singer, 2005; Hermida, 2010; Lasorsa et al., 2012) and other changes within journalism cultures. There is, however, a lack of studies that would combine analysis of journalists' response to the challenges and opportunities brought by the advent of social media and new modes of interaction with the public on the one hand, and non-democratic political environment, on the other. This article is expected to contribute to the field by examining communication of Ukrainian journalists with the public on their Facebook pages under conditions of restricted freedom of speech in mainstream media discourse.

## **2012 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AND DEFICIT OF MEDIA FREEDOM IN UKRAINE**

The 2012 parliamentary elections were the first parliamentary elections held during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich who had won the 2010 presidential poll and were regarded as a test for him and his ruling Party of Regions. His presidency in Ukraine had been widely associated with stepping back in democracy, violations of human rights and clamping down on media freedom. In 2012, President Yanukovich redirected foreign and trade policy of Ukraine towards Russia, whereas relations with the EU worsened, particularly over the imprisonment of former Prime Minister Tymoshenko, jailed in trials seen by many in the West as politically-motivated. In that context, a quite critical conclusion of the Mission on International Election Observation (OSCE, PACE, European Parliament and NATO Assembly) had been predictable. According to the Statement of the Mission (OSCE, 2012a), the 28 October parliamentary elections were characterized by the lack of a level playing field, caused primarily by the abuse of administrative resources, lack of transparency of campaign and party funding, and lack of balanced media coverage.

International media watchdog Freedom House reported worsening conditions for the Ukrainian media since Yanukovich became president in 2010 (Freedom House, 2013). In particular, Freedom House pointed out that businessmen with political interests owned and influenced many media outlets, while the state had been a major player in national and regional TV broadcasting. On top of that, journalists had been facing the threat of violence.

Ahead of parliamentary elections in 2012, a watchdog NGO, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) stated that independent media had been facing "harassment, including constant intimidation, raids and prosecutions" in Ukraine (RWB, 2012). RSF particularly mentioned the case of pro-opposition channel TVi, which lost its terrestrial frequencies in 2010 and faced pressure from tax officials.

Television has been dominating the media landscape in Ukraine for many years; and while the majority of TV channels have been privately-owned, a lot of owners have been imposing limits on the editorial policy of their media (Szostek, 2014). The Mission on International Election Observation also concluded that the media environment in Ukraine was characterized by a virtual absence of editorial autonomy on the television prior to the 2012 elections (OSCE, 2012a). The instrumentalization of TV by oligarchs and dependence of state-owned broadcasters on the state budget had been significantly restricting political pluralism, in favor of the ruling party.

Along with distortion in coverage, International Observation also noted an insufficient amount of media coverage of the electoral campaign as such.

OSCE/ODIHR EOM media monitoring results (OSCE, 2012b) showed that the amount of campaign coverage in news and current affairs programs, in particular on the most watched TV stations, was limited, which might have had a negative impact on voters' access to different political views. Moreover, TV stations did not increase the amount of discussion programs during the campaign period. However, monitoring results showed a slight increase of campaign coverage on these broadcasters during the last ten days of the campaign.

In their conclusions, International Election Observation (OSCE, 2012a) said that the key role of the media in framing electoral issues and informing the electorate in a critical way on the policy positions of the various contestants could have been undermined in Ukraine.

In such circumstances, the Internet emerged as a crucial platform for independent journalism and alternative public space in Ukraine, despite limited penetration.

There were 15.3 million web users with unrestricted access to the internet in Ukraine (out of 45.5 million people), as of December 2011 (Internet World Stats, 2011). By the time of 2012 elections, online media had already emerged as a popular news source for many Ukrainians, with more than a dozen leading news websites representing different stands of opinion. Social network sites have been increasingly gaining huge popularity in Ukraine, with the number of users rapidly growing. In 2012, the two most popular SNSs were Russian VKontakte [Staying in Touch] and Odnoklassniki [Classmates], with 26 million registered Ukrainian users respectively (*Dzerkalo Tyzhnia*, 2012). Facebook was less popular in Ukraine with just about 2 million registered users, as of August 2012 (Shevchenko, 2012). At the same time, the number of Ukrainians on Facebook has been increasing and reached 4.5 million registered users in September 2015 (Dmytrenko, 2015).

While there are still many more Ukrainian users on Vkontakte than Facebook, the latter is believed to be the most important social network site in Ukraine in terms of its impact on public agenda. Vkontakte is mostly used by very young Ukrainians for predominantly entertainment purposes, whereas Facebook is widely used for public communication and political debate by activists, journalists and politicians. The significance of Facebook as a platform for news dissemination and mobilization, which was manifested during the Euromaidan (Barberá & Metzger,

2013), had also been a result of an active presence of opinion-leaders there for several years before the protests erupted in 2013. A number of Ukrainian journalists were among the opinion-leading personalities on Facebook during the 2012 elections. After the Euromaidan, this trend has further strengthened: journalists' posts are widely shared and commented. According to the list of the most popular Facebook personalities in Ukraine, three out of the first top-10 pages belonged to journalists, as of November 2015 (Watcher, 2015).

Discussion of political issues has been a distinctive feature of Facebook in Ukraine. It is, therefore, plausible to suggest that there has been a kind of digital divide among Ukrainian users of social networks. While teenagers and youngsters tended to prefer VKontakte, which also functions as a storage of a huge amount of audio and video content; middle-aged Ukrainians tended to use Odnoklassniki, mostly for communication on private matters. Facebook, instead, has been preferred by young urban professionals and people from the third sector (NGOs), who are generally eager to get engaged into discussion of public interest issues. Thus, Facebook has gradually emerged as a popular platform for political discussion online in Ukraine, with a lot of journalists and opinion leaders posting elaborated posts that generate discussions and attract many users. In the situation when mainstream media could not provide sufficient pluralism and depended either on the state budget or their owners' interests, Facebook turned out to be free, popular and easily accessible new media. The openness of many journalists with regard to expressing their political viewpoints has also been possible due to the lack of policies regulating journalists' activities online among the majority of Ukrainian media outlets. As a result, a lot of journalists' posts contained criticism of the government, which could not appear in many media loyal to the ruling elite.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study examined communication of Ukrainian journalists on Facebook through the analysis of their pages' content, including their posts, comments and interaction with other users in the comments. In addition, interviews with some of the selected journalists were conducted.

The time frame of the study included three weeks, two weeks preceding the parliamentary elections that took place on October 28 (October 15–28, 2012) and one week following the elections (October 29–November 4, 2012). The choice of the time frame is explained by the assumption that the election campaign in the conditions of deteriorated media freedom would be extensively debated online in social media, given the political significance of the elections. Accordingly, journalists would be expected to provide substantial coverage of the election campaigns on their pages in SNSs.

In total, account pages of 14 journalists were selected for the research. Despite a quite limited scope of the study, the sample of journalists was designed to repre-

sent different media, both in terms of types of the media and their political orientation. Popularity of journalists' accounts in social media was also taken into consideration. A preliminary sample consisted of 14 journalists, but following a pilot study several journalists were excluded from the sample because of the very low activity during the analyzed period.

One of the journalists, Olexander Chalenko, was initially listed among the journalists whose Facebook pages were to be analyzed in the proposed study, due to his high activity on Facebook. Yet, subsequent analysis of his account page showed that its content did not basically satisfy criterion of civility, one of the crucial pillars of the public sphere concept. His postings frequently contained offensive and unconventional language.

The list of journalists initially selected for the study and excluded during the pilot research thus included:

1. Olexander Chalenko, a journalist, columnist and blogger. In 2012 he was a contributing editor and a correspondent working at several Ukrainian websites (Revizor.ua and Obozrevatel). He is considered to be a pro-Russian journalist with a very critical position towards pro-European parties and politicians.

2. Vakhtang Kipiani, editor-in-chief of the two Ukrainian web projects (Vladometr and Istorychna Pravda [Historical truth]). He is a famous Ukrainian journalist of Georgian origin, media manager and columnist. In different periods of time he was a member of several Ukrainian pro-Western parties and participated in students' democratic demonstrations in the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s he ran for parliament, but lost in the elections.

3. Sonya Koshkina, editor-in-chief and co-owner of a popular Ukrainian news website Livyy bereg [Left bank]. She has extensive experience of political reporting and was an active participant of the journalists' movement against censorship and in support of media freedom.

4. Yanina Sokolovskaya, editor-in-chief of *Izvestiya v Ukraine* [News in Ukraine], a Ukrainian edition of the Moscow-based daily *Izvestiya*. The newspaper was closed in February 2013 because of economic problems, but the website continued operation. The newspaper was known for its pro-Russian position.

After the pilot study, 10 journalists remained in the sample. Below is the list of the selected journalists with brief background information. Information about the number of friends and/or followers was collected in September-October 2013 at the time of the initial study and updated in November 2015.

1. Kristina Berdysnykykh, worked as a journalist at the leading Ukrainian weekly news magazine *Korrespondent* in 2012. Berdysnykykh is the author of numerous investigations and reports and a popular Ukrainian blogger. She had 686 friends and 1217 followers on her Facebook page, as of October 2013. The number of her followers increased almost nine times during the last two years. She had around 10,500 followers in November 2015.



2. Tetyana Danylenko, a news-presenter of 5 TV channel owned by Ukrainian oligarch and current president Petro Poroshenko. During the analyzed period she was an editor and news-presenter of the weekly analytical program *Pidsumky* [Conclusions]. Danylenko is also a popular columnist covering predominantly political issues. She had about 4900 friends in October 2013. The number of her followers increased to over 58,000 users by November 2015.

3. Valerii Kalnysh, in 2012 worked as editor-in-chief of the *Kommersant-Ukraine* business daily, one of the leading publications on business and politics. This newspaper was a Ukrainian edition of the Russian daily *Kommersant*, owned by the Russian business mogul Alisher Usmanov. *Kommersant-Ukraine* was closed in March 2014. Kalnysh had 760 friends and 460 followers, as of October 2013. The number of his friends increased to 2000 users and followers reached 4670 in November 2015.

4. Yevheni Kuzmenko, worked as a political observer at the satirical Ukrainian website Obkom in 2012. He is also a popular political columnist and writes for several Ukrainian news websites. He had around 1500 friends in September 2013. The number of his friends and followers significantly increased over the last two years, reaching 2740 and over 17,500 users respectively in November 2015.

5. Serhiy Leshchenko, one of the most famous Ukrainian journalists known for his investigations revealing corruption of Ukrainian political elites, published by the popular Ukrainian news website *Ukrayins'ka Pravda* [Ukrainian Truth]. In 2014 he became an MP and a member of pro-presidential faction in the parliament. He is a popular persona on Ukrainian Facebook, which is illustrated by the large number of his followers. He had over 4000 friends and 10,000 followers in September 2013. The number of his followers substantially increased over the last two years, reaching more than 82,000 followers in November 2015.

6. Oleksandr Mykhelson, in 2012 worked as a journalist at the weekly news magazine *Ukrayins'ky Tyzhden* [Ukrainian Week], a publication known for its quite critical editorial policy towards the then ruling elite in Ukraine. Mykhelson is also a popular Ukrainian columnist. He had 2130 friends and 1206 followers, as of October 2013). By November 2015, the number of his friends and followers increased to 3,500 and 12,500 users respectively.

7. Mustafa Nayyem, in 2012 worked as a political reporter at the leading Ukrainian news website *Ukrayins'ka Pravda*. In 2014 he was elected as an MP, a member of the pro-presidential faction in the parliament. He has been one of the most popular Facebook personas and an influential opinion leader. Information about the number of his friends and followers was not accessible in October 2013. The number of his followers reached over 186,000 in November 2015. He is the most followed Ukrainian journalist on Facebook (Watcher, 2015).

8. Vitaliy Portnikov, a famous Ukrainian journalist and publicist. In 2012 he was editor-in-chief of the TVi channel, known for its criticism of the then ruling political elite. Portnikov has also been hosting a program on Radio Free Europe/

Radio Liberty and writing columns for several printed and online outlets (including Russian ones). Information about the number of his friends and followers was not accessible in October 2013. As of November 2015, the number of his followers reached 109,000 users.

9. Olha Snitsarchuk, a political reporter at 5 TV channel. She is an experienced TV-journalist and popular blogger. She was followed by more than 2300 users on Facebook in October 2013. The number of her followers increased to over 7000 users, as of November 2015.

10. Vitaliy Sych, in 2012 worked as editor-in-chief of the *Korrespondent* news weekly magazine with a reputation of an independent outlet. He soon left the outlet after its sale to the close ally of then-president Yanukovych in June 2013. Sych became editor-in-chief of a newly-created weekly magazine *Novoye Vremya* [New Time] in May 2014. He had almost 5000 friends and almost 3000 followers on Facebook in October 2013. The number of his followers increased almost ten times and reached 27,500 users in November 2015.

Analytical framework for the study of journalists' content was designed to cover the following aspects and questions: 1. General overview of activities on Facebook (frequency of postings; the number of postings; the number of friends/followers; what kind of postings prevail — journalism-related or personal; is there a link between postings? Some theme? Cohesion?). 2. Type of content: photo, video, link to one's own material, link to others' stories. Do posted links, materials contain extra commentary? How many postings represent opinion, without additional content? 3. Number of postings promoting content: one's own and one's media in general. 4. Percentage of comments that received responses. What kinds of comments were they? From personal friends? Colleagues? Most provocative comments? Most reasonable comments? etc. 5. Did provocative comments receive any reaction? What was a journalist's "policy" with regard to trolling? How did a journalist react to offensive language, accusations etc.? Did a journalist block/report users he/she considered inadequate? Did a journalist delete any comments? What was the rationale behind the "policy"? (was it elaborated or rather an occasional reaction to particular cases?)

The second stage of research included interviews with journalists, whose accounts were analyzed. In total, seven interviews were recorded. The three other journalists from the sample could not be reached for the interview at the time of the study. The main obstacle for conducting interviews with all the journalists has been lack of access to them. All interviews were conducted in October 2013.

The interview guide included the following questions: Which type of content do you usually post on Facebook? How do you use your account in your professional activity? Do you prefer to post commentaries or merely information? Why? Are there changes in your usage of Facebook compared to the time of the parliamentary elections in 2012? Do you always read comments to your posts? When do you decide to respond? Which comments do you ignore? Have you ever deleted some

comments or banned users? Why? Could you please describe comments to your posts in one word: discussion, irrelevant statements, etc.? In your opinion, do users' comments under your postings produce added value to the discussion? Which reaction to your posts do you expect? Do you always receive it?

As seen from the guide, a large percentage of the questions concerned interaction of journalists with other users in comments and journalists' perceptions regarding the value of discussions under their posts. Responses to these questions can presumably explain whether Facebook discussions can be regarded as an embodiment of a public sphere.

## FINDINGS: JOURNALISTS' ACTIVITIES ON FACEBOOK

The preliminary assumption that Ukrainian journalists would be more active on Facebook during the election period compared to non-election period proved to be wrong. The majority of journalists whose accounts were analyzed did not show higher than average activity. Some of them were even less active than on average. Table 1 shows general information about the number of posts made by journalists during the analyzed period, the number of comments under posts and the number of journalists' responses to the comments.

Table 1. Journalists' activity on Facebook

Name of the journalist	Posts	Comments under the posts	Journalist's replies to comments	
	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	%
Kristina Berdinskykh	25	246	31	13
Tetiana Danylenko	39	1104	77	7
Valerii Kalnysh	6	5	3	60
Yevheni Kuzmenko	7	54	4	8
Serhiy Leshchenko	11	157	4	3
Oleksandr Mykhelson	46	695	110	16
Mustafa Nayyem	10	1532	29	2
Vitaliy Portnikov	23	598	7	1
Olha Snitsarchuk	14	144	18	13
Vitaliy Sych	10	454	26	6

Source: authors.

Analysis of content on journalists' Facebook pages showed that they generally preferred to make postings about politics and various aspects of their profession (like field notes from interviews, events etc.) rather than their personal life. Thus, journalism-related posts prevailed over personal posts on all examined account pages. Moreover, some journalists decided not to post personal information at all.

As the interviews revealed, many journalists tended to regard their Facebook pages as part of their professional journalistic activity. Facebook was regarded as a continuation of their professional sphere, which is why most of the interviewed journalists tried to avoid sharing insights into their personal life, especially for the public. As Valerii Kalnysh put it:

I see Facebook as a source of news, and I try to transmit my news through Facebook. (Kalnysh, October 2013)

Some interviewees even criticized those colleagues who posted their personal photos and reflections on Facebook.

That journalists largely considered their presence on Facebook to be an important part of their professional activities is indicative of Facebook's perceived significance in terms of a discussion space. Predominance of journalism-related posts also illustrates primary relevance of Facebook as a domain for sharing opinion, observations and information with the broader public.

Another significant pattern identified through the analysis of journalists' Facebook pages pertains to the quite expressive manner of postings about political issues and politicians. None of the selected journalists seemed to conceal their political standpoint by claiming political neutrality. Whereas some journalists even openly stated which party they were going to vote for, most journalists were less explicit, yet the content of their posts and manner of writing were quite suggestive. Such posts usually revealed a skeptical attitude to politicians in general and the then ruling elite in particular. This pattern was identified in many analyzed cases and did not relate to journalists' specialization: both news presenters and political observers of TV-news channel declared their political views. Their position was also obvious from the way they commented on the results of the election and political situation Ukraine.

Irony and skepticism are the two distinctive frames journalists were employing in a number of posts on political issues and the election campaign in particular. While researched journalists did not resort to direct offences, many posts suggested a skeptical attitude to politicians and political processes in Ukraine. Lines of commentaries under posts also suggested a rather critical discussion. Irony and humor could be also tracked, among Ukrainian journalists photoshopped images were popular, including so-called *photozhaby* (photoshopped images conveying various internet memes).

Ironic framework was thus widely employed to discuss political issues by journalists. This finding has important implications in terms of the public sphere concept. It is worth noting that Ukrainian journalists extensively posted about politics but found it relevant to frame their interest in political issues through irony and humor. On the one hand, they raised issues of public importance; on the other hand, they generally preferred to mask their interest and concern with ironic re-

marks. This typical feature of the analyzed discursive practice suggests a challenge for the operationalization of the public sphere concept in terms of a deliberative model. Instead, one should keep in mind acknowledgment of multiple modes of political expression, as discussed earlier in the overview of the theoretical framework.

### **Types of content and promotion of the media**

All researched account pages featured a variety of content types. There were links to journalists' columns/programs, various observations of politics and life in general, photos, check-ins with additional comments or pictures, links to YouTube video pieces etc. During the analyzed period posts with some extra content (pictures, video, links) prevailed over posts that contained only textual commentaries/observations. Thus, journalists demonstrated awareness of technical options offered by Facebook.

It is worth noting that the journalists very seldom promoted other people's content on their page. Furthermore, they didn't promote all of their own content produced for the media. As Mustafa Nayyem explained it:

I think it is senseless to publish information which Ukrainian readers can find by themselves. I am trying to publish less accessible materials. (Nayyem, October 2013)

Despite the fact that many of them used the word "news" to describe their posts on Facebook, it looks more like opinion-based journalism rather than just news. This again illustrates the perception of Facebook as a relevant platform for expressing opinion and, presumably, stimulating discussion.

The journalists expressed mixed views regarding the use of Facebook as a tool for receiving information. Some journalists, such as Valerii Kalnysh, reported receiving a lot of useful information from Facebook. By contrast, a few other journalists noted that there was too much information noise, which prompted them not to rely on information from Facebook. For example, Vitaliy Sych mentioned that the number of Facebook users in Ukraine increased dramatically, but their quality decreased.

There was no unanimity among the journalists concerning promotion of their own content on Facebook. Some journalists, like Olga Snitsarchuk, did not do it all. Some others, for instance, Vitaliy Sych, used Facebook pages for announcement of to-be-published stories and issues of his magazine. Vitaliy Portnikov posted links to all content produced by him for various media. During the interviews, journalists confirmed different approaches to the use of Facebook.

Most of the analyzed journalists were posting relatively short messages on their Facebook pages, although there were exceptions. For example, posts of Vitaliy Sych, then editor-in-chief of a leading Ukrainian magazine, were quite long and pre-

sented a well-elaborated opinion on miscellaneous issues. In most cases, those posts concerned a major topic of his magazine's issue that had been announced on his page as well. Sych said in the interview that he was using his Facebook page to promote his magazine. He used to post a picture of the upcoming issue's cover, which was usually a bright and colorful image that attracted people and encouraged them to share it. He also posted some thoughts or observations from the articles before publishing them in order to attract attention. His page was predominantly peculiar for column-styled postings.

The majority of the examined posts were commentary, not just information. However, there were journalists who used Facebook for presenting information about their pieces. Journalists from the analyzed group may be divided into two subgroups: members of one group were trying to distance themselves from the media they were working for and not to overload their readers with their own content; whereas members of the other group used Facebook as a platform for promoting and sharing their own content. Journalists from the first group tended to use Facebook for publishing those opinion articles or notes that could not be included in their pieces of journalism. Serhiy Leshchenko called it non-format materials and described them as photos and commentaries that could not be published by his employer. Journalists from the second group sometimes tended to present more elaborated commentaries while promoting materials, but it did not result in more active public Facebook communication. Members of the second group promoted their stories-to-be-published or their outlets on Facebook, and mostly they were from online-media and magazines. Only one journalist from the sample, Serhiy Leshchenko, mentioned that he was using Facebook to check people's reaction to his soon to-be-published or possible materials. He also used his page to receive professional comments to his ideas for possible stories. However, such usage of Facebook as a tool for communication with the audience was the exception among the interviewed journalists.

### **Comments and interaction with other users**

Journalists revealed certain differences in their approaches to interaction with commentators on their pages. Some of the journalists very seldom replied to the comments left by their readers (like, for example, Vitaliy Portnikov whose replies made up just 1% of the total number of comments). Others were more eagerly engaged in conversations, for instance, Oleksandr Mykhelson whose responses amounted to 16% of the total number of comments.

Usually journalists replied to comments requesting clarification, additional details concerning the post or suggested follow-up remarks. The majority of a journalist's comments contained an explanation to some aspects of the discussed matter.

Analysis suggests that some journalists responded to presumable acquaintances (in some cases it is clear, in others — it can be inferred from the comments), al-

though occasional comments to common users were identified too. Some interviewees admitted that they responded to the comments of their acquaintances and to frequent commentators. At the same time, many journalists were quite selective about their responses: many direct questions did not find a response. Similarly, the journalists very seldom responded to offensive comments. Those comments that were visible at the time of analysis suggested evidence that often journalists ignored allegations of bias, lack of professionalism and direct questions by commentators. Sometimes they preferred ironic remarks instead. Interestingly, some journalists, as for example Vitaliy Sych, responded more willingly to comments under non-political posts. As the interviews revealed, journalists preferred to block offenders rather than start public discussions. Some of them, for instance, Serhiy Leshchenko, said that he used to block offenders without warning. Another journalist Valerii Kalnysh explained:

This is my page and this is my reality, and I want to feel comfortable at least here. (Kalnysh, October 2013)

Usually conversations on Facebook in the analyzed period were quite friendly in terms of the manner of discussion. A friendly character of discussions might be explained by that commentators largely seemed to be acquainted with the journalists and, presumably, with each other in some cases. However, there were also cases when such conversations turned into heated debates with up to 900 comments, including personal appeals and very critical statements. Even in such cases, apart from occasional replies, journalists seemed not to try influencing discussions caused by their posts at all. Usually their role was that of a passive observer rather than a participant of discussion. Whereas some of the analyzed posts stirred up active discussion among users, journalists tended to position themselves as being out or above heated discussions. Neither did they act as moderators.

For example, given Vitaliy Portnikov's popularity, conversations under his postings (particularly those expressing opinion on political matters) were very hot. Identified posts attracted 598 comments in total. The response rate was very low, though — only 7 comments by Portnikov, which reached nearly 1%. Furthermore, only one comment out of 7 addressed the very political issue raised by commentators — Portnikov's attitude to the political party Svoboda. In all other cases, his comments contained either technical information regarding TV broadcast of his programs or a mere polite "thank you". He also did not intrude into heated discussion between users:

I am publishing materials not to make people comment, but to stimulate (them) drawing conclusions on the basis of my analysis. (Portnikov, October 2013).

Cases when journalists replied to offence or provocation were also very rare. There was only one case identified during the analyzed period, when a journalist

was publicly criticized by the user who negatively commented on her professionalism as a news presenter.

Analysis of the posted content also showed that the journalists were not encouraging feedback from the “readers” to their posts and did not stimulate discussion, despite a provocative manner of quite many posts.

At the same time, it should be noted that there was little coherent discussion under the analyzed postings. Most comments represented rather separate expressions of quick reaction/short commentary to journalists’ observations. Thus, the quality of the discussion under many posts was quite low: emotional perceptions and attitudes outweighed reasoned debate. Analysis also showed that the level of civility of discussion depended on the popularity of journalists’ pages. Pages of journalists who had mostly acquaintances in their friend lists contained mostly friendly discussions, exchange of remarks etc. Instead, pages of public journalists attracted many users beyond journalistic circles. As a result, discussion threads contained allegations, sarcastic hints etc.

Both analysis of posted content and interviews suggest that analyzed journalists tended to perceive Facebook primarily as a platform for one-way communication, namely, for distribution of some extra information and opinion that could not be published in the traditional media outlets for various reasons. Journalists seemed to position themselves above internet discussions, with some journalists noting that it is users who benefit from comments in the first place. One of the journalists said:

People are talking to each other... Do they really need answers? (Kalnysh, October 2013)

At the same time, journalists tended to see their role in provision of “food for thought”. All of them said that comments should exist. Mustafa Nayyem explained:

It is like a reflection of the general atmosphere. You can understand how people evaluate some post or some event. (Nayyem, October 2013)

Paradoxically, even those journalists who confessed they did not read comments under their posts said that comments produced added value.

Several journalists also noted that they preferred to reply to private messages rather than comment for the wider public. Such an attitude undermines to some extent a concept of “public sphere” on Facebook. It seems that private communication is still considered as more important and personalized.

Almost all journalists from the sample said that they regarded many comments as just an attempt for some people to self-express themselves without trying to discuss something seriously or as a mix of reasonable discussions and spam with sarcasm, irony or even mockery. Many of them also mentioned a type of comment that provoked endless, unreasonable or stereotypical discussions; in that case they also tended to ignore such comments.



A reluctance to respond to common users' questions or comments illustrates a lack of reciprocity, which is an essential principle of the public sphere. If many questions or remarks remain unanswered — what is the outcome of the discussion? It is also noteworthy that journalists, particularly those who had many friends and followers among common users, tended to consider discussions under their postings senseless (as one of the journalists said). Although a great deal of users' commentaries may be regarded as those that do not require a response, there are also comments that could potentially evoke serious discussion. Yet, they frequently remained unnoticed in an avalanche of brief remarks/repetitive claims/etc. Lack of reciprocity is not the outcome of journalists' attitude; it is a "byproduct" of the overall interaction.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study of selected Ukrainian journalists' activities on Facebook with a special focus on the interaction with commentators showed a substantial level of confusion among journalists regarding the role of public discussion on Facebook.

On the one hand, most of the journalists admitted they did not read all the comments, because they found the majority of them irrelevant. As one of the journalists said in the interview:

I am not interested in everyone's opinion. I am interested in professional opinions. (Sych, October 2013)

Neither did the journalists respond to many questions or remarks posted by the other users in the analyzed period of time. On the other hand, the journalists referred to the added value of comments in general terms.

While they tended to avoid heated debate online, they did seem to consider themselves as providers of important information or viewpoints for the formation of public opinion. The interviewed journalists also admitted that they carefully controlled the list of their friends on Facebook and practiced banning of offenders. Practices of banning users suggest that accessibility of discussion on Facebook is questionable. At the same time, the principle of civility of dialog is of equal importance, which could justify restrictive measures against some users as long as users were banned for uncivil behavior rather than for their critical stance and alternative viewpoints.

Identified patterns of interaction with commentators, as well as journalists' views regarding public discussions on Facebook showed that interviewed journalists did not consider users' discussions under their posts as a substantial contribution to the public debate. The lack of engagement into discussions is another indicator that public debate on Facebook was not satisfying the criteria of the public sphere in Ukraine in 2012–2013, from the perspective of the deliberative democracy

approach. While these findings are limited to a small group of leading Ukrainian journalists and cannot be generalized to the broader public, their importance is explained by the crucial role of journalists in the conditions of democratic deficit and deteriorating freedom of speech in Ukraine under then president Yanukovich.

At the same time, analysis of pages' content and interviews with journalists showed that Facebook did suggest an alternative public space in Ukraine, in contrast to the ever more controlled space of mainstream media under president Yanukovich.

Crucial changes, however, started in Ukraine in late 2013 with the beginning of the Euromaidan protests. Activism of Ukrainian journalists (Szostek, 2014), the critical role of Facebook and other social media during the protests, as well as subsequent democratization processes in Ukraine could significantly transform both public debate online and relations between journalists as key Facebook personas with the wider public. Comprehensive research is thus needed to explore development of Facebook as an alternative public space in Ukraine after the Euromaidan. Such research should also be informed by the alternative theoretical approaches to the study of public sphere, due to the insufficiency of the deliberative democracy approach for the comprehensive exploration of public debate online.

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