

Detector Media NGO ■ Kyiv ■ 2016 ■

**SPECIAL REPORT**

**THE COVERAGE OF THE CONFLICT  
IN THE EAST BY THE UKRAINIAN  
MEDIA: INVESTIGATING THE  
VALUES, GUIDELINES, AND  
PRACTICES OF THE JOURNALISTS**



## The Coverage of the Conflict in the East by the Ukrainian Media.

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The Special Report is prepared by Detector Media NGO (a successor of Telekritika NGO) within the project implemented in partnership with OSCE Project Coordinator in Ukraine under financial support of Embassy of Great Britain in Ukraine.

In February-March 2016, Detector Media NGO has conducted a research of journalistic practices, journalists' views on their role in the process of reporting the conflict, and their values that determine their practice. Within the research, 30 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups were held (17 participants). Journalists and editors with an experience of covering conflict-related topics, were among the respondents. 8 national and 13 regional TV-channels (including the future public broadcasters), 6 national online media, 6 national and 9 regional printed and online media outlets were involved into the research.

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# HOW UKRAINIAN JOURNALISTS UNDERSTAND THEIR ROLE IN CONFLICT COVERAGE

## RESEARCH COVERED:



## TRENDS:



PLURALITY IN APPROACHES TO CONFLICT COVERAGE



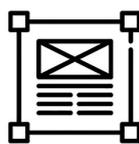
NO UNIVERSAL RULES OF CONFLICT COVERAGE

## EDITORIAL PRACTICES:



- ⊕ no editorial rules;
- ⊕ professional standards are an object of journalists' interpretation rather than an editorial policy;
- ⊕ uncertainty about the standards observance with no potential harm to the country;
- ⊕ journalists rely on personal experience and knowledge not the editorial instructions;
- ⊕ journalists cannot be absolutely 'above the situation' because of the feeling of involvement.

## APPROACHES:



- ⊠ Ukrainian servicemen enjoy the most of journalist's attention and empathy;
- ⊠ avoiding the topics that may jeopardize the image of Ukrainian servicemen and play into the Russian propaganda's hands;
- ⊠ displaced persons, residents of liberated and occupied territories have a bit lesser coverage due to the weaker interest of the viewers, access problems and mixed feelings about these social groups; but the journalists do not tend to over-generalizing and are aware of the media stereotyping problem;
- ⊠ the majority avoids representing of the other party of the conflict in their materials.

## JOURNALISTS' FEELINGS ABOUT THE DIALOGUE WITH THE OCCUPIED TERRITORY LOCALS:



- the majority believes the dialogue is necessary;
- not ready to take responsibility for the idea of dialogue promotion.
- no understanding of whom to talk to within the dialogue;

In February-March 2016, Detector Media NGO had a research of editorial practices, journalists' opinions about their role in the conflict coverage as well as of the landmarks defining the journalists' practices. There were 30 interviews and 2 focus-groups with 17 journalists held. The research covered 8 national TV-channels, 13 regional TV and radio companies (including the oblast branches of the National TV Company of Ukraine), 6 national on-line media, 6 national print media, 9 regional print media and on-line platforms. These are the media from: Poltava, Lutsk, Vinnytsia, Lviv, Mykolaiv, Kirovohrad, Dnipropetrovsk, Ivano-Frankivsk, Chernivtsi, Kramatorsk, Odessa, Uzhgorod, Kharkiv, Sumy, Zaporizhia, Severodonetsk and Kyiv (the journalists of national media).

The project was implemented in partnership with the Office of OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine and with the financial support of the British Embassy in Ukraine



British Embassy  
Kyiv



# 1

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The coverage of the issues associated with the conflict in the east of the country by the Ukrainian media has become a subject of multiple studies, expert reviews and comments. Such an interest to the problem is explained by its topicality and wide public resonance.

Most of the studies, however, are based on the analysis of media content. Meanwhile, the very practices of the journalists and their understanding of the standards of working under conflict are predominantly understudied.

The following study is intended to fill this gap **focusing** the research interest on the journalists themselves, **their approaches and system of values** regarding the conflict interpretation and relevant issues as well as **editorial practices** of the Ukrainian media.

### The research objective is the following:

- to find out how the journalists understand their role in reporting the conflict and relevant issues;
- to reveal their views and guidelines they follow while working under conflict;
- to find out what editorial practices and standards of reporting the issues associated with the conflict are spread among the Ukrainian media.

The following study resumes the previous project, “Monitoring the conflict-sensitive coverage of the groups relevant to the conflict by central and regional TV channels” conducted by NGO Telekritika. The results of the monitoring have become a starting point for a deeper research of the practices spread among the editorial offices; the journalists’ understanding of their role in reporting the conflict; and the guidelines determining the journalists’ practices. ■

# 2

## RESEARCH TOOLS

According to the research objective and tasks, the **study combines the methods of semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussion**.

Both methods are the key tools for the studies analyzing the experience of certain social groups’ representatives as well as their ideas and views concerning certain issues. These are the methods that help to understand the **experience of the respondents, their attitudes and motives** more deeply.

On the one hand, combining the methods of interview and focus groups helps to understand the individual experience of the journalists, their ideas of the problem and editorial practices. On the other hand, it helps to monitor group dynamics, spontaneous interaction between the colleagues, and their responses to the statements of other participants of the discussion concerning rather controversial and sensitive issues.

The discussion participants were guaranteed anonymity in view of the provocative character of the issues under discussion. ■

# 3

## RESEARCH SAMPLE

During the discussion, there were thirty interviews with journalists and two focus groups engaging seventeen journalists. The research involved the journalists and editors who directly covered various issues associated with the conflict. Their level of involvement in these issues was different, however.

Although the study is not representative, the sample of journalists was selected with an aim to represent different media types and regions as widely as possible. In this way, 47 journalists and editors who took part in the study represented 16 oblasts and the city of Kyiv and 42 media outlets.

The study has embraced eight national TV channels, thirteen regional TV and radio companies (including the oblast subsidiaries of the NTVRCU), six national online media, six national printed media, nine regional printed periodicals and online media. The following cities were represented: Poltava, Lutsk, Vinnytsia, Lviv, Chernivtsi, Mykolaiv, Kirovohrad, Dnipropetrovsk, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kramatorsk, Odesa, Uzhhorod, Kharkiv, Sumy, Zaporizhzhia, Severodontesk, and Kyiv (the journalists of national periodicals). ■



# 4

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### General overview

The interviews with the journalists and focus group discussions have shown the absence of a common approach to reporting the conflict and relevant issues that would be prevailing among the journalists. Instead, essential pluralism of approaches and professional guidelines as well as a high level of ambivalence regarding a “correct” way to report the issues associated with the conflict is noted among the journalists. On the one hand, such pluralism and ambivalence testify to a rather high level of the journalists’ reflexion on what a proper and professional coverage of the conflict should be like. On the other hand, it means that the Ukrainian journalist community has not worked out universal rules and instructions yet; the journalist community is still in search of professional guidelines. Apart from that, such editorial pluralism shows that there is no state coordinated censorship of media under war. None of the interviewed journalists mentioned any attempts of state authorities to influence their media content concerning the conflict and relevant issues.

The variety of approaches in different Ukrainian media can be divided into three groups: deliberately activist / patriotic approach; expressly professional / neutral approach; and mixed one.

The patriotic, or activist, approach includes intentional focusing on representing the Ukrainian (“our”) side and ignoring “another” side as illegal; a compromise with traditional professional standards of “peaceful times” is admissible to fight against Russian propaganda. Such an approach was the least represented in the interviews and focus groups with the journalists, which, however, contrasts with the previous studies of media content. It may mean that there are certain differences between the views of particular journalists and more stable practices and approaches of media editorial boards.

The second type, expressly professional, or neutral, includes unconditional adherence to professional journalist standards and is mostly typical for media claiming to work by Western standards (for example, Ukrainian editorial offices of international media; some of the independent Ukrainian media).

The most widely spread approach was the third one. The mixed approach includes understanding of how standards are important and adherence to some of them; still, there is much ambivalence and dilemmas. Such an approach also has some varieties, different proportions of “adherence to standards” vs. “trying to help / not to hurt the Ukrainian side.”

The prevalence of the mixed approach and a high level of ambivalence among the journalists concerning different aspects of reporting the issues associated with the conflict demonstrate **the lack of institutionalization of editorial practices** regarding these issues. The interviewed journalists often mentioned that there are no written rules or fixed standards of working under conflict in their editorial offices. Oral articulation of approaches, standards, and debatable issues is also rare and significantly depends on the journalists’, not the editors’, initiative.

In this way, understanding of professional standards in most of the Ukrainian media (except the media distinctly declaring the adherence to Western standards of journalism) is left to the judgment of the journalists. It is especially true for regional media. **Therefore, the journalists are**

## The problem of the conflict in the agenda structure



likely to follow their own views or experiences than conventional editorial practices and standards.

The research has also revealed a great importance of a personal factor and individual initiatives shown by the journalists. Most of the journalists who took part in the study spoke the word themselves to deal with the issues associated with the conflict. A great deal of the respondents are from Donetsk and Luhansk regions; having left these regions in different moments, they are well aware of the context; they have accumulated a database of contacts in the region; they are personally interested in reporting these problems and often initiate the reports relying upon their own experience and awareness of the situation. In this way, it seems rational to **conclude that the role of a personal factor is essential for shaping the agenda concerning the issues associated with the conflict in the Ukrainian media.** Only some of the media selected for the research sample have a purposeful editorial policy “to keep abreast” of the situation in Donbas both in the liberated and occupied territories. ■

## Reporting the issues associated with the conflict: the journalists' experience and editorial practices

One of the key tasks of the study was to find out how the journalists assess the importance and topicality of the issues associated with the conflict.

The absolute majority of the interviewed journalists consider the issues associated with the conflict to be among the most priority for the Ukrainian media and society. In the meantime, relying upon their own observations, most of the interviewed journalists have noted the decrease of interest to these issues among the audience, while political events have advanced to the forefront. Relatively calm situation in the conflict area as well as the tiredness of continuous tension, in the opinion of the journalists, have led to the decrease of the interest among the audience and, consequently, to the decrease of the coverage of these issues by mass media. Most of the journalists' assessments derived from their own impressions, although some of the interviewed referred to the data from the studies of the audience (online statistics and viewing ratings).

*“Here we should note that people are already tired of war. They are tired of all these things. Therefore, mass media response to people's interest and little by little begin to forget about these issues” (a journalist of a national channel).*

*“We see such a tendency: about a year ago everything – I mean from “Yandex. Metrics” and “Google Analytics” – associated with the ATO was read excellently, but now the interest to the ATO and to the IDPs is falling. The volunteer organizations also note that there are less donations and it is harder for people to survive...” (a journalist of a regional online periodical).*

*“Unfortunately, we have to fight for ratings. That's why we've been not touching the issues of war or IDPs for a long time. A certain period of time has shown that people are just switch to another channel when this subject is voiced. Unfortunately, those are the circumstances. Previously, I often went to the ATO zone to shoot videos. We brought reportages from there, when it was a subject number one and it was at the top. I can't say people were interested, this subject is hard to call interesting, but people did watch. Now, however, there is no such an editorial task even. Until something extraordinary happens there to stir the public, sorry... There is no prohibition, no, nothing of that kind. It is just not the most important subject” (a journalist of a national TV channel).*



## Subjects and characters

The interviews and focus group discussions conducted under the study testify that the journalists, especially those representing TV channels, prefer the materials about the **military men**. This conclusion comes in support of the results of the “Monitoring the conflict-sensitive coverage of the groups relevant to the conflict by central and regional TV channels.”

Particular attention to military men is explained by several factors.

First of all, the stories about military men, according to the majority of the interviewed journalists, make up the most interesting and significant category for the all-Ukrainian audience, because the military men are directly exposed to great danger and the situation in the country as well as the security of other citizens depends on their actions. Secondly, mobilization has affected most of the families in this or that way, which is also a factor provoking the audience’s interest to the issues associated with the military men.

Additionally, the members of television crews have underlined the audience’s need for a bright picture and subject, which are easier to receive when you shoot a story about military men.

Besides, it seems important to add that the overwhelming majority of the journalists writing on the conflict tend to keep in touch with the military men, which makes the latter represented more often in the media discourse.

Regional journalists have also noted that they pay much attention to the materials about the military men who represent their regions. What is more, an economic factor should be also taken into account: most of the regional journalists have an opportunity to get to the ATO zone only together with the military men and volunteers. So, their materials tend to be dedicated to these groups as well.

Another factor is that of empathy: while the journalists communicate much with the military men, feel distressed for their lot and grateful for their service, it is inevitably reflected in their materials, in the amount of their attention to the military men and positive representation of the latter.

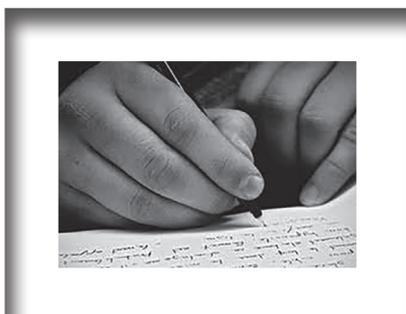
*“Military men, military men – I think, it is the most important now. In fact, they bear the heaviest burden now, and they are responsible for that. If they won’t be there, we can all become refugees and families of the lost etc. That is why, everything depends on them now. [...] As long as they are there, I can be here. If they leave, I will probably have to leave, too. So as for me, I am grateful to them, I support them, I always pay certain attention to them. I respect them, I am ready to forgive them much and hope that a conscious Ukrainian army will appear in this way. That is what I write about” (a journalist of a national printed periodical).*

Such logic and sense of gratitude determines the attention of media to volunteers. Some of the journalists have explained the interest to volunteers’ actions by their wish to tell about positive stories of the victory and faithfulness of common people to common goal. Still, the volunteers were much more seldom mentioned by the journalists in the interviews than the military men. It can be probably explained by general decrease of intensity of reporting the volunteers’ activities in comparison with the critical phase of the conflict.

*“We were so sympathetic... That is why when people (volunteers) began to do something good, we were in action. We also tried to help our soldiers, but it was not as globally as volunteers did. So we began to report it all. And the more we reported, the more people began to join” (a journalist of a regional TV channel).*

The issues associated with the **IDPs, the citizens of the liberated and the occupied territories**, according to the journalists, are less reported in comparison with the military men in view of several reasons.

Firstly, the problems of the IDPs are still the same as half a year ago, while there are almost no solutions of these problems. Therefore, many editorial



offices keep to the point that such materials would be of no interest for the public at large.

*“There are many problems. And there are no solutions. What to talk about? I mean, to tell again that they live in destroyed hostels or have to live a vagabond life? And we have helped them, while the state has provided nothing for them except 400 hryvnias of relief payments?” (a journalist of a regional online periodical).*

Some of the journalists have even listed the ratings data, according to which the interest of the audience to the IDPs is rather low.

*“Not always all the topics are welcomed. The most interesting thing is– if to speak about the audience (yes, we receive rating information) – that the subject of IDPs was not very welcomed...” (a journalist of a regional TV channel).*

Secondly, many journalists, especially those representing regional media, explain that there are fewer materials about these social groups because the journalists **lack resources and access and are restricted by security issues**. The overwhelming majority of regional media have no opportunity to send their correspondents to the frontline zone, since essential funds are needed and the editorial board has to bear responsibility for their security. The absolute majority of the interviewed regional journalists went to the conflict zone **either with the volunteers or at their own expense**; and it also affected the focus of their materials prepared there. What is more, regional editorial offices often discourage the journalists from going to the east of Ukraine justifying it with the issues of security.

It is also significant to note that many journalists have a vaguer attitude to the IDPs and the citizens of the liberated and the occupied territories than to the military men. It is often explained by different experience of communicating with the representatives of these social groups and by journalists' views. Some of the journalists note that the IDPs are less disposed to communication. There is a widely spread idea that the citizens of Donbas are the people “brainwashed with propaganda.” Besides, there are suppositions that all the citizens of Donbas loyal to Ukraine have already left the occupied territories. Nevertheless, the interviews conducted under research suggest that the interviewed journalists are **not likely to generalize their observations and to extrapolate their own experience of communicating with these social groups**.

*“We are stuck in clichés, again, we reduce everything to the topic “we are sorry, sorry, sorry...” You know, it is like... This group is just used to create such an image – so to speak, let us cry together with them. Their tragedy is not studied as it is. Because it is hard to implement. It is hard to go there [...]. Sometimes we run to extremes. At times we want to hear them, at others we want to concrete them. The options are so simple. But there can be no simple options in this situation. Only evolutionary options are left, and it will take much time. I think, here is the inadequacy. It is hard to reach them, it is hard to discover them, because they don't want to be discovered. Because they are like a person who feels pain and puts on a mask. And they want to use these masks to defend themselves against the problem” (a journalist of a national TV channel).*

*“The IDPs are different. Some of them are optimistic and tell about how they were attacked, how they used to hide without worrying. Others prefer to behave as if it was a done deal: “we have moved and that is all”; they don't tell anything. It is especially true for the women whose husbands are still there. I.e. when you ask where her husband is and she just says: he is in Donetsk. And so on. It seems strange. Why is he in Donetsk? These are controversies between the role of a journalist and an individual. Why is the person in the “levy”? His wife is here and receives payments from the state, demands something from Ukraine. But I try to subdue the inner voice, to work professionally, not to take any side of the conflict. Still, it is always painful to communicate with them; you see that a person has lost everything and is trying to make both ends meet from the very beginning, and not all of them succeed to do it” (a journalist of a national TV channel).*



It is also representative that many interviewed journalists have not mentioned the citizens of the occupied territories while listing the sufferers. Still, there is a group of journalists who notice such imbalances in the media content and would love to see more materials on the living of the citizens of the liberated and the occupied territories.

*“It seems to me that there we lack people’s stories. Because politics is nothing but politics. There is no understanding that war is people. And there is a widespread myth in the Ukrainian information space as if “we have marked the line of the frontier, we have established this stone, and there is no life behind that stone.” As if there was no life on the other side. But it is wrong. There is life. There are certain conditions of life. There are certain processes. And they seem interesting to me. But it is a subjective opinion of mine. Establishing the borders, people think that they have also fenced themselves off from the information; they think that the problems are over there. And the main misbelief is that the problems taking place behind the border do not affect the entire Ukraine. Although this border is still conditional, I see that many people from this side of the frontier tend to fence themselves off” (a journalist of a national media outlet).*

Moreover, the journalists representing the media having access to the content from the occupied territories speak about high popularity of such materials under the deficit of information.

*“Our journalists have repeatedly gone to the Crimea, and the ratings were always high; people are always interested in it. Then, if to monitor the page views in the Internet, there will be many reposts and views. And, of course, Donbas. We have several streamers who do not show their faces but shoot by mobile phones and send the reportages to us; the same with Donbas, I mean the occupied territories. [...]. They are always read; the materials from the occupied territories are always of high popularity” (a journalist of a national online media outlet).*

In other words, it seems worthwhile to conclude that the overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian mass media prioritize reporting the issues associated with the Ukrainian **military men**; the citizens of the occupied territories are less reported and the citizens of the liberated territories are left **beyond the focus of their attention** because of several reasons (lack of access, personal attitude, lack of articulation of this problem at state level etc.). As long as there is no distinct editorial demand for the materials on the citizens of the liberated and the occupied territories, a great role is played by a **personal factor**, i.e. the activities of the journalists who have substantial understanding of the context and the problems and initiate their coverage. Apart from that, there is a small group of media **the editorial policy of which includes a stable interest to covering the issues associated with the situation in Donbas.**



## Emotional tension and identification with «our side»

All the journalists who took part in the study (but several exceptions) mention that the coverage of the conflict and relevant issues is followed by extraordinary high tension for them. Many of the interviewed journalists spoke of their experience in terms of “making it their own,” that is how significant the problems of their characters have become for them and how painful the subject on the whole has become.

Emotional tension and the sense of involvement on the one hand and the sense of insecurity of their own country on the other hand have influenced the journalists’ understanding of their professional role under conflict. The overwhelming majority of the interviewed journalists admit that they cannot be entirely “beyond the situation.” Still, different journalists demonstrate different level of such an approach: some of them are steadfast while identifying themselves with the “Ukrainian side,” whereas others claim to understand the weaknesses and restrictions of such a position. Nevertheless, all of the journalists find it difficult to abstract away from the situation and to have an absolutely neutral perspective.

*“If you want to be beyond the situation, you need to be far from the situation. For example, if to speak about the conflict in Syria, the Ukrainian journalists can be beyond the situation. But this conflict is taking place just in our country; our people are dying; our state and our people are suffering. Herein, a journalist is not able to be beyond the situation. In any case. I have just recollected: anytime I hear a phrase “independent media” I want to ask, independent from what? From money, from people? The same with this... beyond what can the journalists be? If they live in this environment and report these problems? And you need to take them personally. It is impossible to be beyond the situation” (a journalist of a national TV channel).*

*“I think that maybe we would love to be beyond the situation in Ukraine, but it is impossible. Why? Because... well, you can be beyond the situation in Syria. Cannot you? It does not matter who will win there, who is fighting... But when you are personally persecuted by the PRD, and you have already been announced as a criminal there just for your materials, it is hard to be beyond the situation. When your acquaintances have been killed or imprisoned, it is hard to be beyond the situation. When there is a military aggression against your country, it is also hard to be beyond the situation. After all, what does it mean to be beyond the situation? We can end up with an absurd, some neutral statements. Without admitting the obvious thing. But here I even don’t know. Even neutrality is unachievable here. How can you, for instance, describe the annexation of the Crimea neutrally? We can write “the incorporation of the Crimea” and “referendum” without quotation marks, but then it will be the position of Russia” (a journalist of a national printed periodical). ■*

## Professional standards under the conflict: editorial practices and journalists’ views

The interviews and focus groups with the journalists have demonstrated that the problems of professional standards in the work of a journalist while reporting the issues associated with the conflict **are not properly articulated and thrashed over in most of the editorial offices.**

Although all the interviewed journalists agree that professional standards are important even under the armed conflict, a considerable part of journalists could not formulate these standards distinctly. Many journalists speak of the standards in their editorial offices as if they were “the matter of course,” but they often failed to describe these “conventional” standards in detail.

*“No, you see, the people working here are experienced enough to understand such things, they are professionals, that is why they were taken here. You don’t need to explain anything to them. Only if certain problems arise, they are discussed” (a journalist of a national printed periodical).*



*“Of course, such things (standards) are usual not to be discussed. It is by default. Default rules. Of course, we keep to the journalism standards. Of course, we look for the sources. In fact, sometimes we speak about particular facts without asking the opposite side. The opposite side is often hiding from us. Sometimes we just speak about obvious things. And we say that it is an obvious fact” (a journalist of a national TV channel).*

*“So, we have certain discussion, but that is a professional discussion. Nobody keeps us away from using the word “a terrorist.” It is OK. Or “you should picture all the people from the PRD and PRL as the bad.” If there are good people, you may picture them as the good. Here we have democracy. I don’t know, maybe, it is a problem within Ukraine that there is no common position, no information policy as it is. But we are a free society and that is one of the advantages. That is why we lose the information war, of course” (a journalist of a national TV channel).*

Only the journalists of several national media have distinctly formulated the standards they should adhere to. It suggests that either these editorial offices have written rules or unwritten rules are carefully discussed there. The overwhelming majority of the journalists, however, focused on a few standards only (first of all, the standard of verifying the information).

In this way, the absolute majority of the editorial offices, especially those of the regional media, lack **institutionalization of professional standards**. The interviews have shown that in many cases, the standards are **interpreted by the journalists themselves**, not produced by the editorial offices. There are no universal ethic rules: a journalist each time takes a decision according to the circumstances and his or her own intuition.

Among different aspects of professional standards, the most developed is that of **terminology**, inasmuch as a considerable part of editorial offices (mainly national) managed to work out particular approaches to naming the parties of the conflict, events and phenomena, although such approaches are usually a kind of “a verbal agreement.” Still, there is no unanimity and complete determinacy among the Ukrainian mass media even concerning the terms. Sometimes there is no unanimity even within the same media outlet. Most of the journalists admit trying to use neutral vocabulary, but a considerable part of the media has decided to adopt the official terminology of the ATO staff.

*“Frankly speaking, everyone decides on his or her own how to call this or that phenomenon. There are no strict limitations on how to write or not to write, on to use these words or not to use those. [...]. The editor does not put any restrictions when we work with a subject. The editor can suggest in what direction to move, where to dig or whom to ask. But there are no rules. The main thing is to keep balance, to work substantially and without misrepresentation” (a journalist of a national periodical).*

*“We treat our party as “the Ukrainian military men” or “the Ukrainian army.” The opposite side is called “the separatists,” “the so-called,” and “the self-proclaimed republics.” We avoid calling them “the terrorists.” At least, I do avoid, because I don’t think it is terrorism” (a journalist of a national periodical).*

*“I decide it to myself that we don’t use the word “rebel.” This word has already taken root as a positive characteristic of these combatants, that’s why we don’t call them in that way. We don’t use any slang like “the Colorados” or “vata.” We utilize classic terms from the ATO vocabulary. If they are the locals who have taken to arms, they are “the separatists.” It does not mean direct using of the weapon. It can be a mayor who calls to act against the state in some way using the weapon. If it is a local person who is armed and who shoots, it is already “a terrorist,” because he takes part in an aggressive, violent fighting. Finally, when it is a Russian person, we just say as it is: “Russian troops” (a journalist of a national TV channel).*

Considering the professional standards, most of the journalists emphasize that the journalists should not lie, should verify the information, be decent and keep away from provoking the audience.

The study has also shown that although there is a general **understanding of regulatory importance of the standards of objectivity and balance** within the Ukrainian journalist environment, the journalists still feel **unconfident that these standards are practicable under the conflict without doing harm to the country**. Apart from that, some of the journalists note that they cannot be impartial and balanced because of the emotional tension and their civic position.

*“Objectivity... Well, I should say, there is a very important thing under the “information war.” When you need to give ear to each point of view in order to adhere to objectivity. If to use it while reporting the politics of the war between Russia and Ukraine, it will become a game to the good of the enemy. Because you listen to their position, but it is a patent untruth. [...] I need to say, I know that my answer will be appreciated as a negative one by you. I consider that we should purposely change the rules, as we are the participants of an information war. We are under the information war, a hybrid war, while information is a weapon, so we can’t... Actually, all those rules can become a weapon against our country. Thus, if it does harm to the country and its future, we need to revise the rules. Although I understand that there should be certain objectivity. But sometimes, under the hybrid war, it can become harmful” (a journalist of a regional periodical).*

*“When you are at a foreign war, it is very easy to work according to the standards of the BBC. It is very easy to be beyond the combat, it is very easy to be objective. When you are indifferent to both sides of the conflict, you don’t matter how the war will develop, what will happen. Of course, strong feelings are caused by pain, deaths, children who have nowhere to live, such human things... But they don’t shape your civic position on who is right and who is wrong in the conflict. And you don’t spend so much time or effort thinking about it. But when a war takes place in your own country, it is impossible to be beyond the “combat,” I think. Like it is impossible to report the aggression of the Nazi Germany against Russia there, it is impossible to report the war now. Because I feel that if Ukraine is a party of the conflict of Russian aggression, then it is a victim of this aggression. As a citizen of this country, I am a victim, too” (a journalist of a national TV channel).*

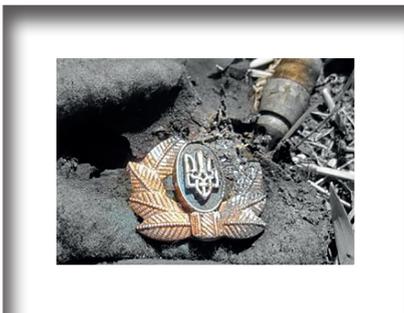
**The problem of balance** and representation of several points of view has become one of the **most controversial** for the journalists, especially when that entails the coverage of the opposite side position. Some of the media (mainly those which are or used to be state-owned and several commercial media) have a distinctly articulated position not to quote “the terrorists,” because it contributes to their legitimization.

Most of the interviewed journalists, however, explain that they often fail to represent the opposite party because of objective restrictions and lack of opportunity to get access to another side. In the meantime, almost no one has turned to the opposite party for information and made attempts to get accredited there. The editorial policy of only a few media includes obligatory citing of the representatives of the so-called PRD and PRL.

Some of the media regularly post the materials that contain the position of “another party,” but it is usually the initiative of the journalists themselves (when they are well-informed of the context and specialize in these issues), not a fixed editorial policy.

*“The editorial policy lies in objectivity. I mean, we do not try to give a word to another party, it is rather hard to do it because they rarely say anything. I mean, they spread certain clichés. But what we do try: for example, when I write an investigation, let it be Donetsk oblast, I always cite the locals. Or Oleksandr Zhuchkovskiy, or Hubarev... But not as a comment, because they won’t give it to me. As their comments in social networks. In other words, I find what they write in Facebook or V Kontakte, for instance. And cite this post” (a journalist of a national periodical).*

Particular attention should be paid to the fact that the journalists of several commercial TV channels have such an editorial policy which allows and even encourages certain **level of a journalist’s subjectivity** in order to provide the stories with additional poignancy and attractiveness.





Such an editorial approach is obviously incompatible with the standard of balance.

So, the overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian media tend to **more or less deliberately exclude representation of the opposite party** in their materials on the issues associated with the conflict in the east of Ukraine.

At the same time, there are the journalists, in particular among those who work for the media with the editorial policy of “not quoting the terrorists,” who reveal the problem of not citing the opposite side in the media discourse.

*“There is such a standard not to represent the opinion of the terrorists. Of course, the balance of thoughts is widely violated now, as we represent only one side of the conflict. We represent the opinion only of those who share the opinion of the current Ukrainian power. These are the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the people who support the current Ukrainian power. We do not represent another opinion at all, the opinion of the so-called separatists, as if they didn’t exist, and we can’t even provide them with enough access to speak on our air. I don’t know why it is so, but there is such a ban... It is not at the level of an editorial office, I think it is a kind of inner censorship. How would it be if I cite the opinion of a terrorist, Hirkin or anyone else? There is some inner censorship as if it were impossible. If I do it, the editor may say that I am out of my mind, because it will be for the first time in history. That is it. But it is very bad that we don’t represent all the parties of the conflict” (a journalist of a national TV channel).*

Addressing the journalists’ work with the sources, it seems important to underline that a considerable part of the interviewed journalists complain of working with the official representatives of the military institutions and cast doubt on the trustworthiness of the “official information.”

*“The main problem from the very beginning is that the official position of the state – the General Staff, the State Border Office, and other institutions – is inconsistent with the reality. And it is rather hard to understand what is really going on. In other words, if we pictured the events according to the quotes taken from the statements of Andriy Lysenko, it would be an absolutely distorted picture, in which everything is either absolutely calm and nothing is going on (while in reality there are shootings and military actions) or everything is very bad and Russia is attacking, we all need to leave (while everything is absolutely calm there). Therefore, we have to check and countercheck everything” (a journalist of a national online media outlet).*

In this way, the most general tendencies are simultaneously **the escape from representing the opposite party and mistrust to the official discourse of the Ukrainian party** (the statements of the officials and military leaders). The key **sources** of information for the journalists are **the military men and volunteers**, and civil population in a less degree. ■





## Self-censorship. Editorial and public tension

Although the overwhelming majority of the interviewed journalists admit feeling free in reporting the issues associated with the conflict, a profounder research has provided the opportunity to reveal the restrictions faced by the journalists to this or that extent.

First of all, there is a self-restriction, a **self-censorship**. Some of the journalists note that they experienced some self-restrictions when the coverage of certain issues could harm the Ukrainian military men, for example. In most of the cases, the journalists explained the occurrence of self-censorship by the threat of Russian propaganda.

*“Then you may, for example, face the information on some crimes and violations committed by the Ukrainian military men. And you don’t want to write about that, because we understand how Russian propaganda will catch it up. [...]. If we were in a vacuum and we didn’t have any eastern or western neighbours, then we could write that all. But we have Russian propaganda, which monitors all the news and selects all the negative to boom it further. Sometimes I personally took a decision not to write about such things” (a journalist of a national printed periodical).*

Still, some of the interviewed journalists have voiced a categorical position that it is wrong to withhold unpleasant information.

*“And this supposition that you can lie if it is for the benefit of the state is nothing but nonsense, because nothing good is generated by lies... A journalist is to inform. Stop saving humanity with your truths, stop pretending you have a mission. If the information is true, you need to share it whatever it is like” (a journalist of a regional online media).*

All in all, there is a group of journalists who are absolutely against self-censorship for the sake of a generous goal, but the overwhelming majority of the journalists reveals ambivalence and tends to look for compromises with the standards depending on the situation.

Furthermore, the journalists experience certain **tension from their editorial offices**, admitting, however, that they have **much more freedom** if to compare the subject with the coverage of political processes and issues. The tension they experience arises both from the “adherence to standards” and in the context of finding a compromise with the standards.

As a rule, this is in reference not to direct tension / editors’ demands, but rather to journalists’ understanding what is proper or improper within this or that editorial office, to the so-called “editorial policy.” In particular, some of the journalists tell that their position is more radical than the editors’ one, but they accept the standards of balance. Others refer to the “taboo” on reporting certain groups. Still others experience “tension” regarding the necessity to report the actions of the Ukrainian army in the most positive perspective.

*“The moral dilemma is that you are restricted by very tough limits of the standards... You cannot call them the terrorists... You say: “the leader of the grouping of the PRD, the so-called minister.” Well, my moral problem is that I saw how it all takes place. I’m from there myself and sometimes I want to use swear words to call them in my items, to explain “who is who”, but I need to be objective and neutral. We should give equal time to each of the parties to speak, to voice every party of the conflict. And sometimes I feel a strong unwillingness to give a word to the PRD, but I have to, because otherwise, if it won’t be represented, the people who live there won’t have any opportunity to hear anything at all. That’s why we have to” (a journalist of a national online media outlet).*

*“We don’t know the real state of things. Even if, for example, a participant*

## The influence of personal experience and views on reporting the issues associated with the conflict

of the ATO will tell us where the firings of the peaceful territories from the Ukrainian army took place, we can't broadcast it: "How, it will humble our army, it will humble our leaders!" So we just withhold it and do not pass it to the air. Many times, the participants of the ATO told me how their commander would mount the armoured personal carrier and leave the battle field just upon the firing. But the informer told it himself: "I feel ashamed to tell that, let's do it without cameras." And there are a lot of such things without cameras. They seem to have a wish to share it with us, with the journalists that there are a lot of problems there, that there is an awful mess there. But they also have an inner censorship, just as we do not to show it. Even if we broadcast an item on how a commander is running from the battle field leaving the battalion under the firings, it will look rather strange. We don't show that. [...]. There are certain details we withhold. There is a trend, yet, to show the heroic character of our army, to wind an aureole round it. I don't like that" (a journalist of a national TV channel).

Self-censorship is closely related to **public tension** as well. Some of the interviewed journalists note that they feel certain fear of the response to a critical material. The journalists recollect the causes when the journalists producing some accusing materials were accused of "betrayal," "anti-Ukrainian position." It is especially true for the materials on the Ukrainian military men.

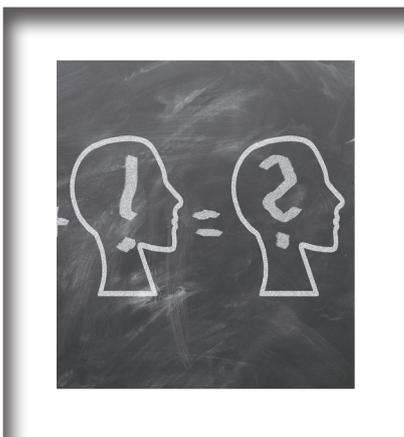
*"Here is the dilemma: sometimes you are afraid that they will say your film is anti-Ukrainian. For example, the journalists of one of the channels were preparing an item on how the Ukrainian military men were plundered. Is that a subject? It is. Is that truth? It is. Is the duty of the Ukrainian journalists to report it? It is. But on the other hand, they immediately faced the accusation that they were anti-Ukrainian, that they were feeding Russian propaganda and so on. Here the patriotic and professional principles go into combat inside of you. Of course, it is rather hard. In each case you decide how to behave. There is no strict rule to behave in this or that way, I mean" (a journalist of a regional TV channel).*

**W**hile the level of institutionalization of editorial practices in the Ukrainian media is rather low, a great role is played by personal factors: individual and professional experience of a journalist and his or her own views.

As for experience, the interviewed journalists can be divided into several groups. The groups are distinguished not by their age or professional experience, but rather by the formation of professional identity and disposition to reflection. The first group is made up by the journalists who have worked in media for a long time, especially in regional outlets, and have shaped their understanding of the profession and duties. The second group are the experts with well-formed views, but disposed to reflection, problematizing the role of a journalist and conflict reporting. The third group is made up by relatively young journalists (from both national and regional media) who are in search of their professional guidelines and are more disposed to adopting Western principles.

The first group is more passive in their approaches and practices (there are less reflections on the terms); the journalists usually work more in the office and seldom go to the field. The journalists of the second group are much more active and initiative, prepare many materials from the mission, and actually play a role of agenda-setters regarding the issues associated with the conflict. The journalists of the third group demonstrate a high level of reflection and openness to new guidelines; many of them refer to the standards of the BBC and the experience received at different professional trainings.

Further, the journalists are extremely influenced by such factors as **the experience of working in the field and awareness of the context**. The journalists who have an opportunity to go to the conflict zone more often



demonstrate deeper understanding of the details; they are less disposed to making generalizations and believing the stereotypes concerning the different social groups; they know the problems of the region, the military men and other nuances better. Meanwhile, if the journalists had *more contact with the region* before the conflict and live closer to the conflict zone, they tend to have a complex view on the situation, while the journalists from the farther regions who have less opportunities to go on a mission to the east have simplified understanding of the situation. It is significant to stress on a group of active journalists originating from Donbas and the Crimea who raise many important subjects and influence media agenda on the whole.

The interviews have testified the existence of a wide range of **views** on the conflict and situation among the journalists, which helps to make a conclusion on a social profile. Most of the interviewees treat the conflict as a result of Russia's aggression, but a considerable part of the journalists pay attention to other levels of the conflict: historical and economic factors, the role of identity etc.

In general, most of the interviewed journalists have complex understanding of the reasons of the conflict. The more the interest for the subject and better the awareness of the context, the more complex the approach of a journalist. It is interesting to note that the overwhelming majority of the journalists express **critical attitude** to the Ukrainian power on the whole and their actions regarding the conflict in particular (for example, they criticize the lack of state policy regarding the IDPs; insufficient attempts to supply the army etc.). ■

## The attitude to a dialogue

**O**ne of the essential points of the study was to find out the views of the journalists on a potential dialogue and how they see their role in such a dialogue.

In most of the terms, the overwhelming majority considers the **dialogue to be important and necessary**, but almost all the journalists immediately ask: “**a dialogue with whom?**” Many journalists note that knowing the situation from near, they see no opportunities for a real dialogue with the representatives of the occupation power. Some of the journalists (the few) state that it is impossible to hold a dialogue with terrorists as a matter of principle.

*“I think that the dialogue with that side is needed. But question is, with whom exactly? I mean, there are terrorists who have just seized the power and stand up for their own interest, claiming to represent the public. I think they are the people with whom no dialogue is possible. But on the other hand, there are no representatives of all the people involved in the conflict to represent their interests. On the one hand, it is necessary to hold negotiations; but on the other hand, there is no one to hold them” (a journalist of a national TV channel).*

*“With whom to talk from the opposite side? I like this rhetoric, it is humanly. In fact, it is needed to talk. But tell me please, with whom to talk? List the people with whom to talk. In my humble opinion, there is no one to talk with in the occupied territories. And the occupied territory does not see anyone to talk with here. How to solve it is another question. Unfortunately, I don't know people from the occupation power ready to the dialogue” (a journalist of a national media outlet).*

Trying to answer with whom to hold a dialogue, many journalists offer to hold a dialogue with common people living in the occupied territories. The same journalists note that they feel more and more dissociation of the Ukrainian society and the state from the citizens of the occupied territories. Herein, they see a challenge to potential reintegration.



*“Of course, the dialogue with the locals is needed. We forget them; they become alien. And this process is on, unfortunately. And we become more and more alienated from each other. Here, I think, we need to do something urgently. A couple of years will pass, and it will be the same as in Moldova. Prydnistrovia is already a cut-off piece” (a journalist of a national TV channel).*

*“The problem is that our state has ceased to treat them as our citizens” (a journalist of a national online media outlet).*

Most of the journalists have expressed the demand for **an articulated state policy regarding both the citizens of the occupied territories and the scenarios of their potential reintegration**. Until there is an articulated state policy, most of the journalists are not ready to take responsibility for promoting the idea of the dialogue.

*“As it seems to me, the task of a journalist is to go on doing what they always did, with more intensity, if possible. We lack information policy in Ukraine. I won’t call it propaganda, but people need to understand that Ukraine is interested to save these territories; they need to be called for a dialogue and so on. It is very important, and I don’t know how to call it... there should be a state order for certain programs, films to explain what is going on to the people. People are already lost in this information tinsel. As one internally displaced woman has said to me, if you turn off television on that side, they will mix up for what they are in three days. You see? They don’t know what they are for. And here they also don’t know what to expect; they don’t understand what is going on. They just live. One day is gone; we’re still alive, okay, thanks God. But what is going next?” (a journalist of a regional TV channel).*

In the meantime, there is a part of the journalists (the active minority) who believe that the journalists can stimulate political leadership to working out a state policy by means of their materials, systematic coverage of the problems and everyday life of the liberated and the occupied territories. ■



## CONCLUSIONS

The interviews with the journalists and focus group discussions have helped to reveal a number of tendencies associated with the coverage of the conflict and relevant issues among the journalists.

- The Ukrainian media are rather plural in approaches and editorial policies concerning the coverage of the conflict. The journalists are often ambivalent in professional standards; it means that the Ukrainian journalist community has not worked out universal rules yet, while the journalists are still looking for professional guidelines.
- The Ukrainian media lack institutionalization of editorial practices regarding the coverage of the issues associated with the conflict. Therefore, the journalists often tend to follow their own experiences and views instead of the fixed editorial practices and standards.
- One of the significant factors affecting the agenda of the Ukrainian media regarding the issues associated with the conflict is a personal factor. Notably these are the activities of the journalists many of whom originate from Donbas and the Crimea, understand the context of the problems well and often visit the conflict zone and raise important questions.
- The journalists tend to have unanimous understanding of the importance of the conflict issues, but most of them note that the interest of the audience to these issues is falling because of the tiredness and relatively calm situation in the ATO zone, which is also a reason to reduce the amount of relevant items in the media.
- The Ukrainian military men make up the most reported group in the media, if to compare them with the other social groups suffering from the conflict. It is so because, according to the journalists, the stories about the military men are the most interesting for the audience, important for the society and bright. There is also a factor of journalists' empathy, as they keep in touch with the military men and are anxious for them.
- According to the journalists, the issues associated with the IDPs, the citizens of the liberated and the occupied territories are less reported in the media because of lower interest of the public to these subjects, lack of resources, and problems with access. Besides, the journalists' attitude to these social groups is more ambivalent than to the military men. Yet, the journalists on the whole are not disposed to making excessive generalizations and are often aware of stereotyping problem in media.
- Emotional tension that follows the coverage of the conflict and the sense of involvement provoked the journalists to reinterpret their professional role under conflict. Most of the journalists consider themselves not to be able to stay entirely "beyond the situation," although many of them realize the challenges of this position.
- The matter of professional standards in the work of a journalist while reporting the issues associated with the conflict are predominantly under-articulated in most of the editorial offices. The standards are very often interpreted by the journalists themselves, not determined by editorial policies.
- In general, the Ukrainian journalist environment tends to understand the regulatory importance of the standards of objectivity and balance, but under conflict, the journalists are not sure they have enough opportunities to adhere to these standards without potential harm to the state. Therefore, most of the Ukrainian media more or less deliberately exclude representation of the opposite party in their materials on the conflict. In the meantime, there is a group of journalists who reveal the problem of not citing the opposite side in the media discourse.
- In fact, the journalists feel rather free in reporting the issues associated with the conflict (especially in contrast with political issues), but some of the journalist experience the tension of editorial offices, public tension and are aware of possible self-censorship. In particular, it entails the issues the coverage of which could challenge the image of the Ukrainian military men and contribute to Russian propaganda.
- Significant factors influencing the coverage of the conflict are the experience of working in the conflict zone and awareness of the context. The journalists who have an opportunity to visit the conflict zone actively, who have a contact database and who had more contacts with the region before the conflict demonstrate a more complex idea of the situation and deeper understanding of the details. In turn, the journalists who seldom leave the editorial offices and work far from the conflict zone tend to have a simplified understanding of the situation.
- Most of the journalists support the idea of a dialogue, but they do not understand with whom the dialogue is possible. According to the journalists, there is no sufficient dialogue in the media because there is no distinctly articulated state policy on the future of the occupied territories and the citizens of these territories. Thereafter, most of the journalists are not ready to take responsibility for promoting the idea of a dialogue, while they are still ready to report such a dialogue. ■