CASE STUDY

Public Service-Spirited Media Takes on the Memory Wars

In a bitterly polarized society, where citizens live in separate information realities and politicians manipulate the historical narrative for electoral advantage, can media create content that bridges divides and creates a common democratic discourse?

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SNF Agora Case Studies

The SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University offers a series of case studies that show how civic and political actors navigated real-life challenges related to democracy. Practitioners, teachers, organizational leaders, and trainers working with civic and political leaders, students, and trainees can use our case studies to deepen their skills, to develop insights about how to approach strategic choices and dilemmas, and to get to know each other better and work more effectively.

How to Use the Case

Unlike many case studies, ours do not focus on individual leaders or other decision-makers. Instead, the SNF Agora case studies are about choices that groups make collectively. Therefore, these cases work well as prompts for group discussions. The basic question in each case is: "What would we do?"

After reading a case, some groups role-play the people who were actually involved in the situation, treating the discussion as a simulation. In other groups, the participants speak as themselves, discussing the strategies that they would advocate for the group described in the case. The person who assigns or organizes your discussion may want you to use the case in one of those ways.

When studying and discussing the choices made by real-life decision-makers (often under intense pressure), it is appropriate to exhibit some humility. You do not know as much about their communities and circumstances as they did, and you do not face the same risks. If you had the opportunity to meet these individuals, it might not be your place to give them advice. We are not asking you to second-guess their actual decisions as if you were wiser than they were.

However, you can exhibit appropriate respect for these decision-makers while also thinking hard about the possible choices that they could have made, weighing the pros and cons of each option, and seriously considering whether they made the best choices or should have acted differently. That is a powerful way of learning from their experience. Often the people described in our cases had reflected on previous examples, just as you can do by thinking about their situation.

This case study is appropriate for:

- College and graduate students
- Civic organizations
- Journalists and other members of the media

Keywords: Disinformation, media, memory wars, partisanship, polarization, propaganda

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About the Author

Peter Pomerantsev is a senior fellow at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, where he co-directs Arena, a research project dedicated to overcoming the challenges of digital era disinformation and polarization. He is author of two books—*Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* (PublicAffairs, 2014) and *This is Not Propaganda* (PublicAffairs, 2019)—as well as a frequent contributor to publications including *American Interest*, *The New York Times*, *Granta*, and *The Atlantic*.

Introduction

THIS IS A CASE STUDY ABOUT HOW YOU CAN CHALLENGE BITTER, cross-partisan divides in a society where disputes over history are weaponized by political forces. A society where politicians manipulate nostalgia for electoral advantage, and where foreign powers prey on these divides. Where opposing groups live in separate media realities, and where many people have begun to question whether such differing visions of history foreclose the possibility of surviving as one nation.

The country at the center of one of the fiercest memory wars is Ukraine. In this case study, we follow a group of journalists and scholars who pioneered a methodology and set of principles for creating media content that offers a way to move beyond these memory wars. Their aim was not to avoid the tough truths of history, but to find ways to communicate them to audiences who vote for different parties; stand on different sides of protests, wars, and revolutions; speak different languages; and view their nation's history in contrasting ways. And they sought to do so in an environment where the Kremlin was aggressively using historical propaganda as a weapon in order to subvert Ukraine, and even as a reason to invade the country.

Hromadske is a nonprofit collective of journalists who left mainstream media, appalled at the oligarchic control of the industry and increasing censorship.

The journalists, led by the editor Natalia Gumenyuk, are part of Hromadske, a civic broadcaster that, though small, has played a huge role in Ukraine's recent history. Hromadske is a nonprofit collective of journalists who left mainstream media in 2013, appalled at the oligarchic control of the industry and the increasing censorship under then President Yanukovych. Just a few months after Hromadske was founded, the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity broke out, protesting corruption, police brutality, attacks on rights and freedoms, and Yanukovych's alliance with the Kremlin. While mainstream channels often followed the lines of their oligarchic owners in their coverage of events, Hromadske covered the revolution in an intense and honest way, giving live and uninterrupted streams from the protests and street battles. Many of these were around historical symbols, with Soviet era statues of Lenin pulled down by protesters.

In order to subvert the democratic promise of the revolution, Russia subsequently invaded Ukraine and spent huge efforts to further divide the country through cyberattacks and, especially, information operations that used traditional and online media controlled by the Russian state or by Russian and Ukrainian proxies. The aim of these efforts—which continue still—has been to make

Ukraine so polarized it cannot consolidate around democratic reforms and common decision-making. An important rationale given for the invasion, and a major theme in the continued information operations, is to allegedly protect the historical identity of pro-Russian Ukrainians and defend the country's Soviet legacy.

Public service–spirited media in this context has two options: to carry on just providing quality content to the progressive audience that already agrees with it, which risks simply reinforcing the polarization the Kremlin is pursuing, or to try and reach across divides and create a common democratic discourse on different sides of the barricades. Since the revolution, Gumenyuk had helped establish Hromadske as a genuinely independent voice, challenging Russian narratives and the post-revolutionary government's corruption and military failures. Hromadske had become one of the few media in Ukraine with a strong human rights position, trying to reach out to the civilian population in conflict zones at time of open war. As a result, Hromadske came under strong criticism from the government after 2016, and was regularly rated one of the country's most objective voices by international media monitors. Though its core audience was in the progressive part of society, Hromadske was in a unique position to try a more innovative approach to historical topics and reach out to audiences vulnerable to Russian state campaigns.

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In 2018, Hromadske partnered with Arena, a research program then at the London School of Economics and now at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, that is dedicated to overcoming the challenges of disinformation and polarization. (The author is a co-director of Arena.)

Learning Objectives

By the end of this case study you should be able to:

1. Understand how competing historical narratives and disinformation campaigns are used to sow societal division.
2. Understand how to identify meaningful commonalities among polarized groups.
3. Create public service–spirited media and other forms of mass communication that can overcome seemingly intractable divides.
4. Measure and scale impact of public service–spirited media interventions.

Case Narrative

Background on Ukraine and the Media Landscape

Audiences in Ukraine live in a deeply distorted media environment, saturated with well-funded disinformation and propaganda pushed by the Kremlin as well as domestic business interests, political parties, and other groups. In the 2000s, political spin doctors, both Ukrainian and Russian, divided the country along a supposedly essential east-west divide, with a Ukrainian-speaking, "pro-Europe," pro-Ukrainian "west" forming one voting block, set against a supposedly Russian-speaking, Moscow-leaning, Soviet-nostalgic "east."[i] The Kremlin and its proxies played on such narratives in their invasion of Ukraine in the wake of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014, which toppled pro-Kremlin President Viktor Yanukovych and committed Ukraine to a more pro-Western path. As a result of the invasion, Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula and now arms, funds, and instructs separatist republics in the far east of Ukraine.

Russian foreign policy strategists make no secret of their aim to use historical narrative as a weapon to stir discontent in neighboring countries.[1] In September 2019, the European Parliament passed a resolution stating that it was "deeply concerned about the efforts of the current Russian leadership to distort historical facts and whitewash crimes committed by the Soviet totalitarian regime and considers them a dangerous component of the information war waged against democratic Europe that aims to divide Europe, and therefore calls on the Commission to decisively counteract these efforts."

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The protestors who took part in Ukraine's revolution of 2013–2014 were branded by Kremlin-backed media as "Banderovsti," Nazi collaborators from World War II. The annexation of Crimea was couched in Soviet and Russian Imperial nostalgia, and the war in Ukraine's east has repeatedly been framed as a fight against Ukrainian fascists.

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i For example, in 2003, a document was leaked to *Ukraiynska Pravda* that outlined a strategy developed by Russian "political technologists" to facilitate the victory of Russia's favored presidential candidate, Leonid Kuchma. The document highlighted that, as part of this strategy, the media should be tasked to emphasise east-west divides: "Yushchenko should be presented as the enemy of ethnic Russians in Crimea. . . . The pro-Russian political forces . . . begin to declare that if Ukraine cannot protect the interests of the Slavs in Crimea, then there is always Russia ready to support. . . . The task of the media is to interpret this as an ontological conflict between East and West." *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, "Tretiy termin Kuchmy. Yak tse povynno bulo buty" ["Kuchma's Third Term. As It Should Have Been"], June 25, 2004, http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2004/06/25/3000773.

Such messages are then vigorously pushed out on traditional media such as television, and on social media. The *Re-Vision of History* research project, led by Internews and Ukraine World, analyzed 850,000 posts on the Russian social media platform Vkontakte and 16,000 posts on Facebook over the period of January 2016–April 2019 made by pro-Kremlin groups and pages. They found that key narratives included:

- the portrayal of Ukrainians as neo-Nazis, and the framing of the war in the Donbas as a continuation of the Second World War, with separatists fighting to protect themselves against Ukrainian fascists;
- the positioning of Crimea as an ancient Russian land and the cradle of Russian orthodoxy, and southern and east Ukraine as historically Russian; and
- the narrative of the USSR as a great power, focussing on Soviet nostalgia as a source of pride, and claiming that Ukraine was created thanks to the Bolsheviks.

The authors of the study conclude that the Kremlin's annexation of Ukrainian territory was preceded by the "annexation of history."[2]

Such divisive tactics are layered onto the deep partisan cleavages in the domestic Ukrainian media and political environment. As media often belong to oligarchic business interests looking to boost their vote, their aim is often to stir up one perceived electorate over the other. Depending on which media outlets residents encounter, this can leave audiences stuck inside different ideological bubbles, with dangerous consequences for Ukraine's democratic development and ultimately its security.

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While many Ukrainian TV and media outlets attempt to debunk Kremlin falsehoods, they rarely check whether their stories are penetrating the audiences targeted by the Kremlin and its proxies. As elsewhere in the world, there is a risk that fact-checking efforts preach to the converted. The focus on debunking Russian falsifications of history also means that the historical agenda is still set by the Kremlin, and the conversation revolves around the historical topics and framings of their choosing. This risks reinforcing their tactic even as one pushes back against it.

Hromadske and the Project to Overcome the Memory Wars

Hromadske is a nonprofit organization, independent of any business interests and with high editorial standards. They describe themselves as a "civic" media organization, with a mission to strengthen Ukrainian democratic discourse and resilience. Seeing the ills of Kremlin-led disinformation campaigns, the editor-in-chief, Natalia Gumenyuk, wanted to understand whether there was a way for

them to engage audiences not just in their own, progressive bubble, but also those vulnerable to Kremlin messaging.

What topics could bring audiences together? Were there concerns people have that Ukrainian media is missing as it focuses on debunking Russian state narratives? What sort of storytelling would work better: top-down voiceover that explains "right" history, for example, or bottom-up human interest stories?

In 2018, Hromadske teamed up with Arena to see if there was a way to overcome the memory wars.

What Would You Do?

Given this context:

- How would you define which audiences you would try to engage in different sides of the memory wars?
- How would you choose which topics to cover?
- What types of storytelling would you choose? For example, would you try debunking approaches? Lectures? Human interest stories?
- How would you measure the success of such engagement?

What They Did

Gumenyuk and Arena started by questioning the very premise of a "divided" nation. Are the stereotypes pushed by political spin doctors accurate?

They conducted a nationally representative poll that combined questions about historical topics and nostalgia, together with social values, voting preferences, and visions for the future.

Instead of a country easily split into two halves, a much more nuanced picture emerged. Some groups polarized by memory wars and identity politics shared aspirations about Ukraine's future and underlying values. For example, more educated, urban groups in the east and west of the country were divided by nostalgia for the Soviet Union and levels of patriotism vis-a-vis Ukraine, but they had similar attitudes on other issues. They were tolerant and accepting of minorities, wanted Ukraine to move in a pro-European direction, placed a high value on human rights, and had liberal rather than authoritarian values.

Moreover, attitudes about the Soviet Union were nuanced. The polling showed that people could be critical of its lack of human rights, yet generally agreed that it had "values of fairness and justice." Most of the people who thought this about the USSR also thought their lives had gotten worse in the decades since independence. One of the experts on the project, a leading expert in nostalgia Sophia Gaston, explains that "nostalgia" often has less to do with actual knowledge or regard for the past, and more to do with discomfort in the present.

Hromadske and Arena investigated these contradictions in more depth through focus groups. To get a sense of overall national sentiment, these were held with groups that had differing historical attitudes, but also nationally representative groups split according to demographics, with one all-women group, a group of older participants, a group of younger participants, and a group of participants from east Ukraine.

Comments from people across the political spectrum who participated in the focus groups

"My uncle was killed in Afghanistan. I have heard stories from him that were completely different to the 'real history' that you hear on television."

"My family hasn't talked about it [the Soviet period] at all."

"We never discussed problems with the Soviet Union with my grandmother."

"There is no separation (between east and west Ukraine). We are united—we are just separated by an informational war."

While partisan politics around contested election results and polarizing politicians sparked strong disagreement between segments, discussion of late Soviet legacy brought people together around a set of common traumas rarely explored in media. Participants were at first hesitant, and then increasingly emotional and candid as they recalled their childhoods in the late USSR; their sense of disillusionment with Communist propaganda; the suppressed memories around the Chernobyl nuclear disaster; the sense of hope, confusion, shame, and resilience about surviving in the 1990s. They organically brought up the Soviet-Afghan War and shared stories about the negative experience of family members who fought there. There was clearly a whole reservoir of unexplored, unarticulated emotions and experiences. Moreover, people clearly recognized that the "east-west" division in the country was pushed by political interests and often artificial.

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Overall the focus groups showed that there were historical topics where polarized groups share common experiences and traumas, such as the Afghan War, Chernobyl, and the 1990s. It also showed Ukrainians as highly socialized and prepared to hear each other out. Even contentious topics did not lead to any particularly aggressive conversations (as they often do in focus groups between, for example, Remainers and Brexiteers in the UK).

Arena and Hromadske worked with prominent historians and cultural experts such as Serhii Plokhy of Harvard University; Anne Applebaum, a co-director of Arena; and Rory Finnin from Cambridge University to develop ideas for new ways of engaging with historical themes that could help to overcome polarization in Ukraine, and to foster common values for the future.

These discussions produced the following aims for the project's content strategy:

- Explore shared experiences and traumas in recent history.
- Foreground common values for the future.
- Break down binary thinking about history: Could Ukrainian patriots recognize the legitimacy of some Soviet achievements? Could Soviet nostalgists accept criticism of the Soviet Union?
- Explore national and ethnic identity through the prism of multiculturalism and human rights: The group's original survey showed that both segments share a civic understanding of Ukrainian identity, are tolerant of ethnic minorities, and believe that protecting human rights is a key priority for Ukraine.

Under Gumenyuk's leadership, the editorial team at Hromadske created 16 five-minute Facebook videos covering topics such as the common trauma of the hardship of the 1990s; experiences of Chernobyl and the Afghan War; achievements in Soviet Ukrainian art and computer science; na-

tional identity, including civic identity, multiculturalism, and the fight for Ukrainian national rights; and Ukrainian protest movements like the peasant rebellion against Stalinist collectivisation, miners' strikes in 1989, and protests against the police in the USSR.

They also made one video that deliberately took the contested topic of the Volyn tragedy (mass killings of Polish civilians in 1943 by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army after a long period during which Poles had suppressed Ukrainians' rights) in order to test the segments' openness to a more divisive historical topic, when explored through bottom-up storytelling.

Hromadske and Arena then evaluated what people on different sides of the memory wars thought of the videos through polls and online engagement metrics, with the ultimate aim of creating content that was equally trusted and engaged with by both sides.

Testing the level of trust was a priority for the project, which sought to create videos that received both high levels of trust *and* high alignment in trust levels between the segments, showing both sides trust the content equally. A problem in Ukraine, and throughout the world, is that trust has become politicized, with groups only trusting media that belongs to their in-group. In Ukraine, the lack of trust in local and national media opens up the space for hostile state narratives to permeate. As Kremlin narratives are frequently aimed at sowing cynicism, the trust factor is of particular relevance in Ukraine.

The key metric for engagement was "retention rate," to show which videos people actually watched.

The results showed that:

- **Universal values unite:** Stories about labor rights, such as miners' strikes in the USSR or the mistreatment of internally displaced people during the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, were equally trusted by different groups.
- **We are united by our traumas:** Videos featuring the actual victims of traumatic experiences, such as relatives of soldiers killed in the Afghan war, had higher levels of trust. These videos simply related people's experiences, without trying to make top-down judgments about what was the "right" version of history. The least successful video, about censorship in the USSR during Chernobyl, had less powerful personal experiences, and drifted more into making abstract judgements about Soviet history.
- **Make history for the future:** While audiences who were nostalgic for the USSR did not change their nostalgic attitudes on seeing the videos, they did agree that specific abuses in the USSR were negative. Nostalgia is often wrapped up in complex issues of personal identity and discomfort in the present, which can be hard to change. However it is possible to reframe the conversation so it focuses on the future. Even those "nostalgic" for the Soviet empire can agree that they do not want to see its abuses of human rights in Ukraine's future.

Conclusion

To summarize, the essence of this methodology to overcome memory wars is:

1. Undermine the clichés of a "divided" country. We are not divided into easily categorized "pro-Russians" versus "pro-Ukrainians," "liberals" versus "conservatives." Avoid reinforcing these propaganda categories and instead study the contradictory, nuanced perspectives people actually have.
2. Search for shared underlying values in seemingly divisive events. People might be on different sides of a partisan debate about, say, the tactics of a protest movement. But most might agree that the protest movement's demand for equal voting rights or labor rights is sound.
3. Use history as a springboard to discuss the future. People can be defensive about their historical "identity," even as they recognize the historical injustices and oppressions that identity entails. Identity isn't necessarily about these issues. It can be connected to personal belonging, or not be about history at all. Focus on the specific injustices and oppressions, and ask whether people want to see them instituted in the present or the future. While a small number of Ukrainians might truly desire the return of Stalinism, for example, they are a tiny minority.

The methodology of this and other projects inspired Gumenyuk and a group of Hromadske editors to create the Public Interest Journalism Lab, an NGO/production company dedicated to uniting social research with content production. The findings of the initial research were scaled into 10 30-minute films for the Ukrainian Public Broadcaster and a multimedia project to catalog Ukrainians' experiences of recent history, which are currently being shown in Ukraine.

The research and follow-up films show that there is a simple, tested methodology and path to overcoming memory wars. And it's one that can be employed in any country where disinformation around history and nostalgia is being weaponized by political forces.

According to the project's directors: "Skilled propagandists play on society's vulnerabilities, giving people who feel left behind or lost in the dizzying flux of rapid change someone to hate and someone to adore. If we want to compete with the propagandists, democratic media also has to explore the same vulnerabilities and unspoken traumas—but our job is to then bring them into public speech, so that gnawing, ignored grievances and pain can be discussed publicly, made sense of in society, and so that ultimately we can move on from them."

Notes

[1] See the following studies: J. Barbieri, "Winning Hearts, Minds . . . and Territory: The Use of History in Russian Foreign Policy Towards Ukraine," unpublished manuscript, University of Birmingham (2019); P. N. Chatterje-Doody, "Harnessing History: Narratives, Identity and Perceptions of Russia's Post-Soviet Role," *Politics*, 34:2 (2014): 126–137, https://bit.ly/38KWmD9; Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, "Winning the Information War: Techniques and Counter-Strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe," Center for European Policy Analysis (August 2016), https://bit.ly/3iLFOzm (see pp. 21–29 for sections on Russian disinformation in the Baltics); Oleksii Polegkyi, "Soviet Mythology and Memory of World War II as Instruments of Russian Propaganda," *Warsaw East European Review*, VI (2016): 77–89; Justyna Prus, "Russia's Use of History as a Political Weapon," Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Policy Paper, 12:114 (May 2015), https://bit.ly/3gFxeAC . https://euvsdisinfo.eu/in-the-shadow-of-revised-history/?highlight=History. https://euvsdisinfo.eu/kremlin-historians-fighting-the-war-on-remembrance/?highlight=History.

[2] Yermolenko, Volodymyr (ed.), "Re-Vision of History: Russian Historical Propaganda and Ukraine," Internews, Ukraine (2019), respectively p. 10, 24, 21; https://bit.ly/2ZNpTIs.