Hope, Lies and the Internet: Social Media in Ukraine's Maidan movement

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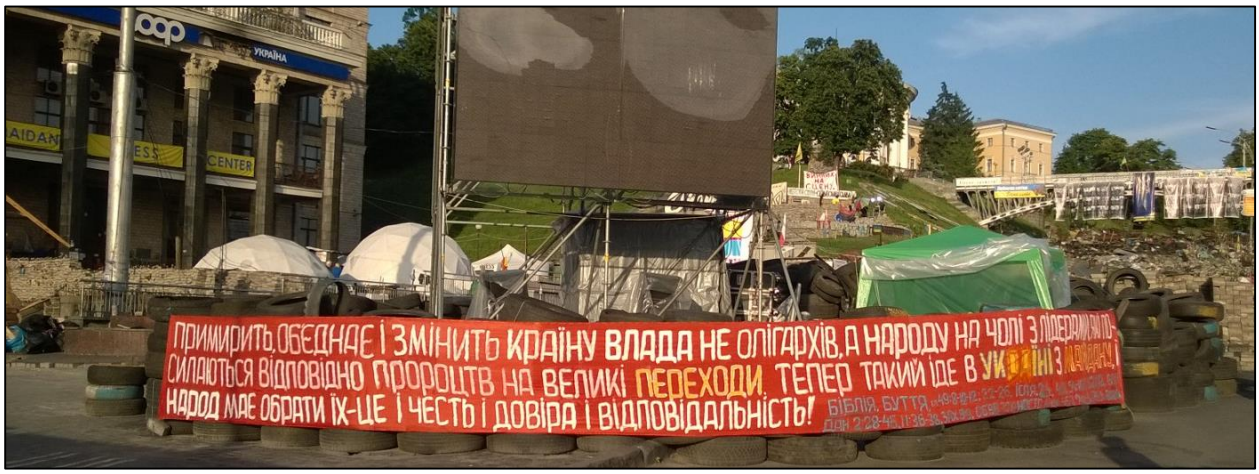
I. Social Media in Ukraine's Maidan Movement

In November 2013, a revolution began in Ukraine. Victor Yanukovych, the Ukrainian President, had backed out of a trade deal with the European Union. A peaceful protest formed in Maidan Nezalezhnosti, Kyiv's Independence Square. The government acted immediately and brutally to suppress it. This action, in turn, provoked another clash on December 1, 2013. For several months, protesters camped in the center of Kyiv. It was a time of increasing violence, but February 18–20, 2014 were the most turbulent days, with almost one hundred protestors – "the heavenly hundred" – dying as the result of gunfire from the Berkut or Ukrainian special forces. Ultimately, the protests drove Yanukovych from power, and early elections were scheduled for May 25th, 2014 – events that led to the Russian annexation of the Crimea in March, and then the rise of Russian-sponsored separatist fighters in the east of the country. The Maidan movement, which the protests came to be called, has an enormous presence on social networking platforms – Facebook, for example – both in Ukraine and abroad. Protestors used these sites to organize rallies, and the public used them to make sense of the flood of often-contradictory breaking news. The Internet was a key tool for many Ukrainians in navigating the "information war" between Ukrainian broadcasters and the Russian media, which is controlled by the Kremlin and adopted a pro-Russian slant.



This large screen, installed on the Maidan, showed videos of relevant events, taken by citizens or journalists and spread virally; news; and, on the many quieter evenings, feature films. The dissemination of videos as means for information gathering and truth-policing is the most apparent role of social media in this movement. Behind the screen is the bridge beneath which is the iconic memorial to the Heavenly Hundred. The banner, put up a few days prior to the election, is a call for democracy, in Ukrainian.

1. Research

During the summer 2014, I spent 6 weeks in Kyiv conducting interviews, observing the participants of the *Kyivan Maidan*, and studying the movement's social media. During casual interactions with and participant-observation of the protestors, the revolution was explained to me as follows:

> What is important about the Maidan is that people came out not for Poroshenko or against Yanukovych or about language or politics, but for their freedom and human worth. That is what's so important about the Maidan.

Over the course of conducting this research, both in Kyiv and in Budapest as a pre-doctoral fellow at CEU's CMDS, I was asked the question: What is the role of social media in political movements? Was

social media decisive? My answer is both hopeful about the potential of technology, and cautious about giving technology too much credit for influencing events.

Volodymyr* lives in Kyiv and managed an active group on the popular Russian social media platform *VKontakte* (VK), where he posts information in Russian from a pro-Maidan perspective. He told me that individuals living in Russia have contacted him via private messages. They asked him to clarify what is going on in Ukraine, because the Russian media's coverage was weak, vague, and at times confusing. Volodymyr regularly posts videos and reports from the Russian media accompanied by individual accounts from personal contacts in the Ukrainian National Guard. He offers his own analysis and commentary along with either neutral or pro-Maidan coverage of the fighting in eastern Ukraine. His coverage appears to be more timely and in-depth than all other reports originating in the region:

> As a result, in my group, some of the news appear in a more timely manner in the sense that the actual events are not always covered very quickly by the Ukrainian segment of the internet, because the situation is such that on the territories occupied by the terrorists there are now very few Ukrainian journalists or pro-Ukrainian journalists, there are mostly pro-Russian journalist and pro-Russian SMI, like LifeNews, like Russia Today, they have journalists on the front lines along with the terrorists, distorting the information. …. [In the videos created by pro-Russian journalists] If you ignore the commentary, you can see rather interesting things. They had these video reports of the capture [of a Ukrainian soldier], in the context that 'our brave warriors were able to capture and torture bandits from the Ukrainian junta.' The Ukrainian media, meanwhile, found out about this information at two days later, via LifeNews. In Ukrainian media, they were showing these images from LifeNews, but with their own audio commentary and their own explanation.

He is not a professional journalist, and he manages this social-media group as a private individual. However, he is professionally interested in military matters. Politically, he opposes expressions of aggressive nationalism, and is reluctant to align himself too closely with Maidan without explaining his position and background. After participating in one of the protests in the fall, he was wounded in a clash with security forces, and spent months under house arrest recovering from his injuries. When speaking about social media, he stresses how important online social networks were when his friends rallied for his support during his house arrest and convalescence.

Social media technologies are pervasive in everyday life, which makes them important in getting the word out in a political crisis. However, a good chunk of how they were used could have been achieved by other means. Phones and *samizdat* (self-published opposition publications) were the communication conduits of recent pre-Internet revolutions; an ethnically Polish participant who had participated both in this Maidan movement and in the 1980s Polish Solidarity movement (a historic protest that arguably sparked the eventual demise of the Soviet Union) commented on the power of the Internet now compared to the *samizdat* then. In his view, social networking provides invaluable, unprecedented, and powerful tools for organizing.

2. Social Media Use

Social media and social networking sites (SM/SNS) are used for two different advocacy campaigns that involve Volodymyr. Firstly, they are used to help individuals who have come under legal pressure as a

result of involvement in the protests, and, secondly, they are platforms for topic-specific (military, conflict in the east) information-dissemination and truth-finding campaigns aimed at a Ukraine and Russia audience. Videos, images and other evidence artifacts are for information dissemination. Videos, images and other evidence artifacts are used by the information dissemination; an evidence artifact may be produced by a different – even opposing organization – but appropriated and re-purposed by this campaign. Part of the campaign is not just the publishing of information but having private conversations with interested individuals.

Social technologies are, most of the time, an alternative tool for practices that existed before; but what is new about social media is that it dramatically lowers the barrier for taking the next step, and messaging individuals on different sides of geographic and political boundaries, and asking: "Hey, what's going on?"

"No one goes to the barricades to die because of a tweet," quipped a fellow panelist at a recent conference in a discussion of the role of social media in political movements. For a time, the phrase "Twitter revolution" was in vogue – used mostly by Western journalists to characterize technology's role in the Arab Spring. When this term is used, it is more often than not applied by an outsider to the actions of people who would not apply it to themselves. Malcolm Gladwell made a well-known argument in a 2010 article in the *New Yorker* that social media forges ties and connections between people that are weaker than a revolution requires. Although Gladwell claimed that a revolution could not be tweeted, it is undeniable that social media has been used with some effect during recent political uprisings.

So in what ways are social networking sites and social media platforms used in revolutions, and by whom exactly? A layperson is capable of making connections across different sources of information, including a variety of social media, engaging critically with the content if a variety of possibilities are available. Politically engaged individuals and groups may use online means to disseminate breaking news or photos or videos taken by eyewitnesses of events in order to help its users and followers assess what is really going on. Additionally, these technologies can be used as a starting point for an ongoing dialogue, thus erecting bridges between groups that had not been connected before. But social media can impact events in even beyond the computer screen. For example, a person may see a *Facebook* article, print it out on paper, and then distribute this article at a protest or demonstration. Someone in that crowd may read this article and call a friend about organizing an action. SNS/SM can be used in a variety ways to achieve political action. However, some of these ways are easier to measure than others.

Gladwell chiefly criticizes SNS/SM technologies for its inability to build "strong" ties, as opposed to the "weak" ties SNS/SM is relatively good as facilitating. In the case of the Maidan movement and Ukraine's unique cultural landscape, the weak ties facilitated by *Facebook* could well have been foundation for the forging of stronger ties, as interview participant Vira suggests:

> [On Facebook,] we had discussions, we saw there were many of us. Facebook gave you the sense that not only do you have like-minded people, but that you have many of them. Before, everyone sat in their respective flats, some in their 30s, some in their 40s – not just the young people – all unhappy about the state of affairs, that the country is being robbed by its government, that no one listens to us. That's what

> Facebook gave us: a brotherhood and a sisterhood. We didn't know that there would be a revolution, that there would be Maidan, but when Yanukovych was being indecisive with the agreement, it was one of many events that contributed to this feeling that this is the end, now or never. Even before Yanukovych headed out, Kharkiv organized a rally about the EU over social networks. This was November 19 to 20, no one knew that he wouldn't sign the agreement. Yet, there was still hope. And you could sense that there would be many people there. But when I came out there – Wow! it was as if all of Kharkiv had come out. This was when everyone woke up.

I first started this project because I was surprised by an abundance of Ukrainian-language tweets, rather than Russian-language, during and after the late February riots. In this kind of exploratory study, the researcher refines the initial research question through systematic synthesis of qualitative data, such as interviews. My initial question concerned identifying events that trigger a different rate of language use in the *Twitter* stream. After the first few interviews, I realized *Twitter* is a small corner of the relevant social media landscape: more prominent were *Facebook* and *VKontakte* (VK), the "Russian *Facebook*." In addition to VK there is another popular non-English service, *Odnoklassnyky*, which was not used by most of study participants, but described as being populated by a different, older demographic than VK. This section describes how VK, *Facebook*, and *Twitter* relate to one another in the social media ecosystem of the *Maidan* movement.

Large numbers of people using small numbers of services creates the connectivity for rapid information spread. It is not important that everyone be on *Facebook* (or VK). But if everyone knows someone who is a Facebook (or VK) subscriber, then these platforms can become a near-instant mass-communication machine. During the *Maidan* movement, the constituency and role of these sites seemed to diverge. For example, there was a self-reported influx of users to *Facebook* during the year leading to the protests. Social media can be studied from interactional and sociotechnical perspectives: as a combination of technical affordance and social practice. An affordance is the software capability that affects the social practice of using the technology. Considering this kind of technology from both perspectives simultaneously is a common approach taken in my field. Consider the following examples of sociotechnical differences between different platforms.

- Photo/video prominence
    - *Facebook*: photos associated with shared content are made prominent to encourage engagement (Likes, Comments, and Shares); once a link is pasted into a post, an image from that URL is loaded by default. The subscriber posting would have to take action to prevent shared content from being accompanied by a visual image in this case.
    - *Twitter*: users must click through to an article to see the associated image, if any.
    - These characteristics seemed to impact how participants who used both divided the content they posted: photos ended up on *Facebook*, and short, timely (and/or humorous) commentaries ended up on *Twitter.*
- Firsthand accounts
    - A key role of social media was connecting people to firsthand accounts. As mentioned in the previous section, this was enabled by video livestreams, as well as sharing video and

photographic media, which – as mentioned above – are more prominent on *Facebook* rather than Twitter.

- Personal connections were the first thing mentioned by almost every participant when I asked about how they determine the truthfulness of information: *Skype*, *Google Plus*, phone calls, and SMS messages provided the trust signal that was lacking from the rapid information flow through social networks.

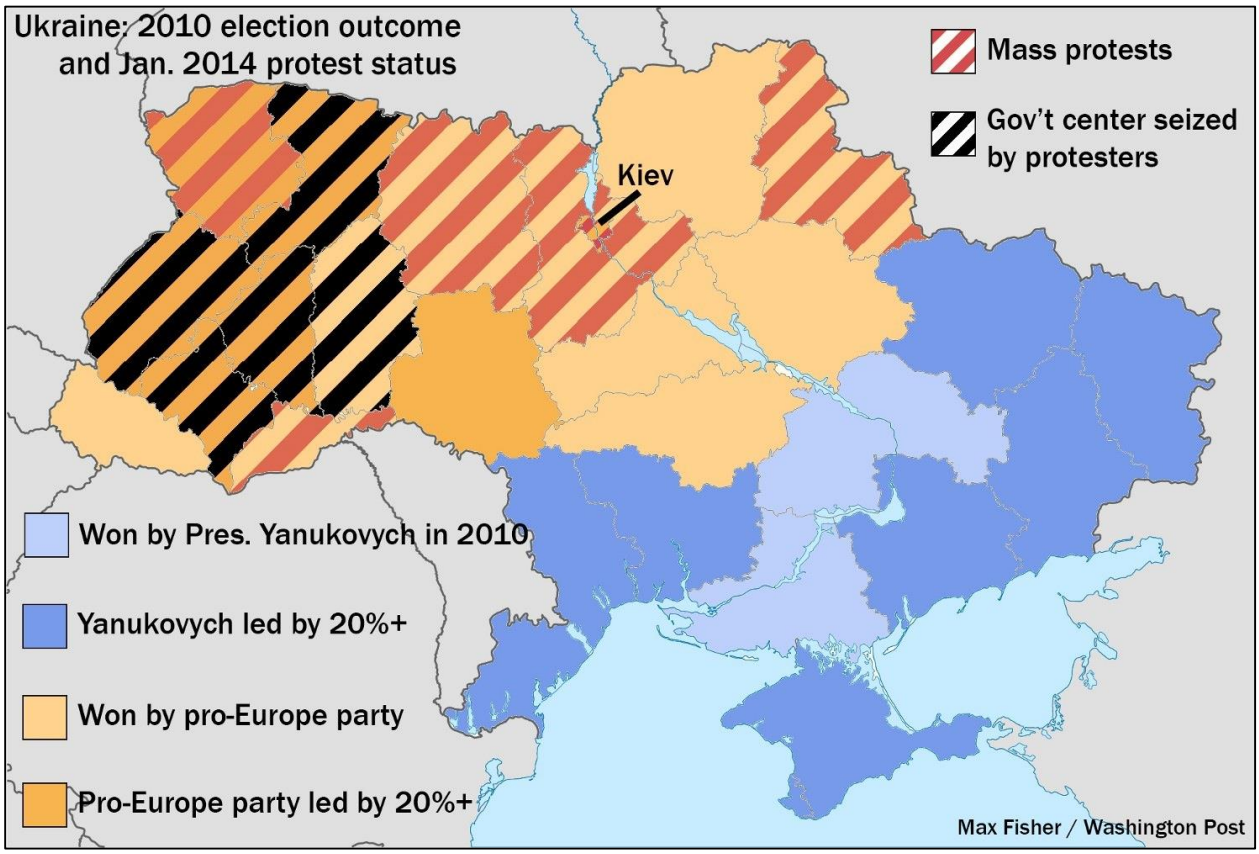
- Post sorting / filtering
  - *Facebook* uses oblique and changing algorithms to determine what people see; and algorithms are personalized.
  - *Twitter* has a "top posts" and a "Recency" sorting; the similarly oblique algorithms governing "top posts" are not personalized.
  - This changes the extent to which people posting content know why they are or are not getting Likes, Comments, or Shares. Participants are able to comment on their *Facebook* news feed content.
- Content sharing
  - On VK, people share television shows and music, which is not done on *Facebook*. This social practice arises from the different legal frameworks affecting the two services, and the characteristics of the services. Since VK is more established, its users have only recently registered on *Facebook*.
  - Social practices of *end-users* of the technology impact what people do. Writing longer and more analytical posts on *Facebook* is common among *Maidan* supporters because of its perception as a more serious space than VK.

In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer prepares a protocol of a few questions, but is prepared to adapt to the topics offered by the participant. This helps to keep the work open and exploratory, allowing new topics to come up. The structuring questions, in this case, had to do with: (1) social media in Ukrainian political discourse, and, (2) uses of different languages, specifically Russian and Ukrainian, but also other languages spoken by the participant (e.g., English or Polish). My aim was to allow participants to remain ambiguous, if possible, about their political leanings, while providing me with a narrative of what social media meant and how language difference played out in the discourse surrounding *Maidan*. Volodymyr, the manager of a Maidan-aligned VK group about military matters and the conflict in eastern Ukraine, told me the following about the difference between "Ukrainian-speaking segments" and "Russian-speaking segments" of the Internet:

> The difference is colossal. The Ukrainian-speaking segment supports Ukraine. The Russian-speaking segment has a great deal of support for Russian propaganda. If you take some random page or profile or post in Ukrainian, 80 or 90%, that's just my impression, of the time we will get pro-Ukrainian information, supporting Ukrainian people and supporting the maintenance of a unified, sovereign Ukraine. If you go to a random Russian site or group or account, there's a more than 50% chance of finding information supporting the Russian position, that Russians must be saved, that Ukrainians are crazy, that they went insane, and why has Putin still not led the army into Ukraine.

In the aftermath of February clashes, Western media began to example the Ukrainian conflict to itself, trying to grapple with images of Kyiv on fire, which were shocking and incomprehensible, even with the

context of the mounting Maidan tension. These "divided Ukraine" maps were not *wrong* so much as they were overly simplistic; the differences in language and ethnic makeup certainly exist in Ukraine, but this is a historical and cultural reality that is only contextually related to the catalysis of the 2013-2014 conflict, and is not helpful for understanding anything about language dynamics in political discourse.



One example of a "divided Ukraine map," reproduced from Washington Post for illustration – see more examples in my essay on Medium.

Language dynamics were an interesting phenomenon. Language policy has been used by various Ukrainian administrations for various purposes, and my initial reaction about language in *Twitter* was not unfounded. Through interviews I discovered that switching from Ukrainian to Russian – or vice versa – is done to be more inclusive and accepting of various groups, and is not done to be aggressive. For a more in-depth framework of different modes and contexts for language choice, see the following upcoming chapter in the ebook, *Digital Eastern Europe*, "Multilingualism on Social Media in the Maidan Movement."

3. Conclusion

Having spent six weeks in Ukraine, I found that the speed with which social media spread messages enabled the dissemination of both first-hand information and misinformation. Claims such as Gladwell's indict social media as being too superficial and ephemeral to help people forge strong social ties during nascent political movements. However, the interviews I collected contained many stories of

connections being forged across geographic and political boundaries. I do agree that there is no such thing as a "*Twitter* revolution," for two reasons.

Firstly, attributing any one social networking platform with success ignores the importance of the diversity of the sociotechnical ecosystem. Different people (casual users, activists, journalists) exist in different social circles and on different online platforms, and the availability of multiple technologies allows some degree of choice based on the needs on the ground. The needs are complex: to spread information, to cull misinformation, to organize rides to a demonstration.

Secondly, and much more importantly, a political movement is a physical phenomenon, not just an online one. Real-world action and discussion is the critical outcome, not the virtual interaction that helps organize or inform. Measuring online activity, the numbers of Likes and Shares, is a truly tiny fragment of the picture. A video shared on social networks, created by journalists, re-appropriated by individuals engaged in truth-finding campaigns has an impact not because of how much it is Liked and Shared, but because of it gained critical mass and became a catalyst for discussion beyond the technology.

In discussing the role of technology in political movements, it is difficult to avoid both overestimating the effectiveness of a viral online campaign, and underestimating the power of a sociotechnical infrastructure that can instantly spread a message to a vast number of people.

II. Notes

This work would not be possible without the individuals who participated voluntarily in this project. During this research, I was a doctoral student supported by the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program, and by Central European University (CEU) Center for Data, Media and Society pre-doctoral fellowship program. In refining my intellectual arguments in this work, I benefitted a great deal from the CEU summer workshop on Internet Policy and Advocacy, discussions with other panelists and attendees at Gawker media's Ping! Collaborate Conference, and conversations with Professors Phil Howard and Kate Starbird.

This research is approved by the University of Washington Human Subject Division #47351. Names have been changed for anonymity. No identifying information was associated with individual interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed into English by the PI. Casual conversations were part of establishing rapport, but only recorded interview data are quoted in this research. Because a signed consent form would be the only identifying piece of information for the participants, written consent was waived in favor of verbal consent.

The project is ongoing! You can participate as an interviewee or offer professional collaboration by contacting me over phone, video-chat, or in-person, through my professional site or on Twitter.

III. About the Project

1. Correspondence

Please direct correspondence to Katie Kusenok, Computer Science & Engineering, University of Washington, Box 352350, Seattle, WA 98195-2350, or by email to kuksenok [at] cs.uw.edu.

2. About the Author

Katie Kuksenok is a PhD student in Computer Science and Engineering at the University of Washington. She was a visiting pre-doctoral candidate at CMDS in the summer of 2014.

IV. Institutions and Funding

1. The Center for Media, Data and Society

The Center for Media, Data and Society is the leading center of research on media, communication, and information policy in Central and Eastern Europe. Based in the School of Public Policy at Central European University, CMDS produces scholarly and practice-oriented research addressing academic, policy and civil society needs. CMDS research and activities address media and communication policy, social media and free expression, civil society and participation, fundamental communication and informational rights, and the complexities of media and communication in transition.

2. The School of Public Policy

The School of Public Policy (SPP) at Central European University, in the words of its founder, George Soros, is a "new kind of global institution dealing with global problems" through multi-disciplinary study of public policy, innovative teaching and research, as well as meaningful engagement with policy practice.

3. Central European University

Central European University (CEU) is a graduate-level, English-language university accredited in the U.S. and Hungary and located in Budapest. The university offers degrees in the social sciences, humanities, law, public policy, business management, environmental science, and mathematics. CEU has more than 1,500 students from 100 countries and 300 faculty members from more than 30 countries.