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# Liberalism in fragments: oligarchy and the liberal subject in Ukrainian news journalism

This article explores the place of liberal subjectivity in the professional culture of Ukrainian journalists to analyse how ideas originating in contexts of hegemonic liberalism at the core of the global capitalist system, are taken up on its postsocialist margins. I outline how certain Anglo-American notions of good journalistic practice, which encode traits of liberal subjectivity, are borrowed and elaborated by a Western-funded movement for an anti-oligarchic liberal media reform in Ukraine. These ideals are then taken up within oligarch-controlled media, a context that the reformers see as inimical to liberalism. Through an ethnographic portrait of an editor-censor at a major oligarch-owned TV channel in Ukraine, I analyse how these professional ideals simultaneously uphold oligarchic patronage and extend the reach of liberal politics in Ukraine. This reveals how in the force field of global capitalism both the reformers and those whom they seek to reform are part of the same, contradictory and fractured, liberal formation. I propose that to better understand cases like this, we need to learn to see liberalism in fragments: as always partial and incomplete and as constituted by multiple elements.

**Key words** journalism, oligarchy, liberalism, liberal subject, Ukraine

## Introduction

Liberalism is everywhere in contemporary anthropology, yet almost everywhere it seems out of focus: a blurred background of ‘Western culture’ against which ethnographers examine the world of ethnographic difference (cf. Candea 2021; Fedirko et al. 2021; Mazzarella 2018; Schiller 2015). Only relatively recently have anthropologists turned the ethnographic lens onto liberalism itself, exploring both contexts in which hegemonic liberalism constitutes common political sense and those where liberal projects can be more clearly seen as narrow mobilisations coalescing around specific group interests (Dzenovska 2018; Englund 2011; Hadley 2010; Mazzarella 2018; Schiller 2013). To contribute to this growing literature and our special collection’s efforts to systematise it for purposes of anthropological comparison, this article analyses a non-hegemonic, minoritarian form of ‘media liberalism’ at the postsocialist semi-periphery of the global capitalist system. I explore how ideals of good professional practice in Ukrainian news reporting encode certain elements of liberal subjectivity; how they are ‘imported’ and elaborated in the context of a transnationally connected movement for an anti-oligarchic liberal reform of Ukrainian journalism; and how they are taken up, reworked and reproduced within oligarch-controlled media – a context that avowed liberal reformers in Ukraine see as inimical to liberal governance, individual freedom

and vocational public service. In so doing, I investigate the tensions between liberalism as ideology and liberalism as a set of institutions in a context where a combination of Western-supported projects of building liberal democracy to secure the margins of the 'empire of capital' (Yurchenko 2017) come into conflict with political-economic arrangements of oligarchic patronage through which the emergent postsocialist bourgeoisie has become integrated into this 'empire'.

Anthropologists of European postsocialisms have argued that the 'unmaking' of state socialism was a complex, path-dependent and open-ended transformation, rather than a linear transition to liberal democracy and capitalism (for an overview, see Rogers and Verdery 2013). Yet, in Ukraine and across the broader postsocialist region (e.g. in Serbia, Greenberg 2014), local intelligentsia, university students and middle-class professionals embraced the possibility of transitioning to liberalism as a comprehensive, deliberate project of individual and collective change. They relied on Western financial and political backing, and allied with local national-democratic parties originally formed by late-Soviet dissidents and reformers, to bring Ukraine into the fold of liberal modernity exemplified by the Euro-Atlantic order. They sought to transform Ukraine's political system and culture, including by reforming the journalistic profession, so as to guarantee rule of law, protect human rights and promote capitalist markets free from state interference and oligarchic privilege. These efforts have grounded liberal ideology – part-developed locally, part-imported thanks to Western 'technical advisers' and project funding – in a set of activist organisations that have regularly supplied new recruits for Western-oriented political parties, but had only intermittent success in realising their programme, and enjoy rather limited public legitimacy. At the same time, however, elaborated within this milieu, elements of this liberalism have had a more diffuse, fragmentary influence beyond their main 'organisational base' in the civil society.

Ukrainian journalism is exemplary in this regard. Over the past two decades in Ukraine, in response to what many journalists perceive as a deepening crisis of professional legitimacy (cf. Roudakova 2017), there has emerged a movement for a moral-professional reform of the journalistic profession. This movement has opposed censorship and political instrumentalisation of news by media owners and politicians, as well as various forms of unprofessional or unethical behaviour among journalists themselves. It has borrowed from Anglo-American occupational ideals of newswork as defined by 'balanced objectivity', impartiality and collective self-regulation (Bishara 2013; Lebovic 2016; Schudson 1981) to formulate standards of professional conduct that extoll journalistic autonomy and mandate vigilance to possible signs of outside influence or interference. These standards encapsulate visions of individuality, freedom, authentic creativity and individual rationality as a means of achieving a broader public good, which have long been recognised as centrepieces of the broad liberal tradition in the West. In Ukraine, this genealogical tradition has been refracted through the humanism and commitment to public service of the late-Soviet intelligentsia (Roudakova 2017; Tromly 2014), and later influences from the West, for instance through British and American-backed skills development projects that sought to develop 'independent media' as a way of democratising Ukraine (cf. Wedel 1998). According to media watchdogs leading the movement, the mainstream oligarch-owned media use news as instruments for securing the political and economic power of their owners. Many of my interlocutors among liberal media workers in Kyiv find that journalists who work for such media are complicit in upholding the oligarchic system that

undermines the project of liberal modernisation. They dismiss fellow reporters and editors at the mainstream media as unfree, unprofessional and unworthy of protection under freedom of speech law. Nevertheless, as my ethnography demonstrates, liberal ideals of journalistic professionalism live on within such oligarchic media in surprising ways, prompting us to ask what form media liberalism takes beyond the boundaries of the organised reform movement.

This article builds on 15 months of fieldwork in Kyiv (in 2017–18, and then in 2019 and 2020), and more than 24 months of supplementary digital ethnography, during which I researched some of the key organisations in the media reform movement and those whom they oppose. My aim here is to explore how a vision of professional subject central to this project of liberal reform reproduces certain traits of liberal subjectivity, and how it is taken up and transformed in a context relatively removed from what the reformers themselves would consider a good example of professional journalism. I focus on a case of an editor (whom I call Svitlana) at an oligarch-owned television channel who oversees the production of news that she herself admits services the interests of her channel's owner. She is an editor whom liberal journalists in Kyiv would be quick to dismiss as an unfree subject, marred by compromise and lacking the ability to govern herself in accordance with the norms of her profession. Exploring in turn Svitlana's narrative of herself as a professional, her interactions with young trainees at a private journalism school, and her explanations for practices that liberals would identify as un-free speech, I demonstrate how the liberal subject – or rather, *a* liberal subject – 'lives' through Svitlana's teaching, her editorial work, as well as her justification of routine censorship that she oversaw at her TV channel.

This case of journalistic subjectivity in Ukraine illustrates a more general process of re-contextualisation of liberal idea(l)s transferred from hegemonic liberal formations at the core of the global capitalist system to its postsocialist margins where liberalism is a minoritarian affair. It illuminates how such ideas are elaborated in response to local political-economic conditions, and embedded within radically different institutional contexts: in this case, a movement for a modernising, anti-oligarchic liberal media reform and an oligarchic media organisation opposed by this movement. Both contexts, constituted by an ongoing struggle between groups with distinct interests and positions in Ukraine's political economy, are connected as part of the same unevenly institutionalised, heterogeneous and fragmented liberal formation. In it, organised, densely institutionalised projects of liberation coexist in a functional relation with radically different elaborations of the same liberal ideas that result in distinct forms of life that 'professional' liberals do not recognise as their own. Ultimately, I argue that moving liberalism from the background of the anthropological imagination into its focus, so that we can examine and critique it in all its meaningful differences, means recognising that although liberalism is everywhere, it is everywhere in fragments.

## Peripheral liberalism in Ukraine

Liberalism and neoliberalism have never been hegemonic in Ukraine in the ways they have in Western Europe (Gorbach n.d.). On the one hand, the newly independent Ukrainian state quickly put in place the constitutional trappings of a liberal democracy. On the other, throughout the country's first post-Soviet decade, 'civil liberties were frequently violated and incumbents routinely abused or manipulated democratic

procedures' (Levitsky and Way 2002: 52), leaving political scientists to argue about the character of the country's political regime. With the important exceptions of the late Kuchma (1999–2004) and Yanukovich (2010–2014) presidencies, governments balanced between shielding their electoral bases from the consequences of marketisation, and adopting selective policies of political and economic liberalisation under pressure from the IMF, US government and other donors. Either way, policies were often designed to favour various patronage pyramids competing over the control of state property and contracts, and to insulate domestic oligarchic capital from foreign competition (Kudelia 2012; Ishchenko and Yurchenko 2019; Matuszak 2012; Yurchenko 2017). Mikhailo Minakov and Matthew Rojanski have argued that the contradictions between the liberal-democratic institutions and 'oligarch-controlled distribution of power and resources' have

yielded two revolutionary cycles, spanning roughly 1992–2004 and 2005–2014. During each of these cycles, a period of popularly supported democratic reforms was soon displaced by simulated democracy, driven essentially by oligarchic competition and then, later, by authoritarian consolidation, resulting in civic protests and eventual regime change, resetting the cycle. (2018: np)

This analysis helps to place Ukrainian liberals in their structural context. Throughout the two revolutionary cycles described by Minakov and Rojanski, and especially since 2004, there has developed a loose bloc of liberal civil society organisations (constituted predominantly by Western-funded policy-oriented think-tanks, watchdog and activist organisations), with sections of middle-class professionals, intelligentsia and entrepreneurs (cf. Ishchenko 2019). They took active part in organising both Maidan revolutions and reaped some of the immediate benefits from Ukraine's post-revolutionary transformations: closer ties the EU and the USA; opening of government positions to revolutionary elites and official promotion of an anti-Soviet, and more recently anti-Russian Ukrainian identity; and memory politics which increased the cultural influence of Ukrainian-speaking intelligentsia (cf. Zhuravlev and Ishchenko 2020; Yurchuk 2020). This bloc has historically allied in a 'national-democratic' coalition with Western-oriented nationalists and the democratic parties that had emerged from the late-Soviet Rukh movement. Through the country's 30 years of independence, this coalition had significant influence on the country's cultural and minorities policy, but was in power only intermittently (Gorbach n.d.) as a result of the 2004 and 2013–14 revolutions. After the 2013–14 'Euromaidan' revolution, this coalition has extended to include emerging far-right groups that played a crucial role the revolutionary escalation and the early period of anti-separatist mobilisation in eastern Ukraine (Ishchenko 2020).

Oligarchic competition has profoundly shaped both post-2014 presidential administrations. Nevertheless, the liberal have navigated their way into Kyiv's corridors of power as elected parliamentarians, political appointees, grant-paid advisers to the executive and policy lobbyists. They promote campaigns and policies for free market, government accountability and curbing of the political power of Ukrainian oligarchic capital, which Western governments and lenders demanded of Ukraine as a condition of their support in the context of Ukraine's double economic and military crisis after 2014. At the same time, the exclusionary character of post-revolutionary nationalism among both liberals and their 'national-democratic' allies, and the disproportionate

adverse effect of liberal economic policies on poorer Ukrainians, have ensured that the liberals' agenda lacks broad popular legitimacy (see Zhuravlev and Ishchenko 2020: 231–2; also Fedirko and Aryal 2020).

## Oligarchy and the media

The Ukrainian journalistic profession has played a particular role in the complicated story of this part-imported, part-vernacular minoritarian liberalism. While the demise of the USSR initiated a short period of growth for news media in Ukraine, the ensuing economic crisis undermined their advertising revenues and editorial autonomy (Ryabinska 2017; cf. Roudakova 2009; Koltsova 2006). Some outlets, especially in radio and print media, turned to illicitly selling their news coverage to politicians and the emerging private businesses to make up for the shortfall left by meagre advertising revenues (Roudakova 2009, 2017). State-owned media soon became part of the 'administrative resource' of national and local authorities (cf. Ledeneva 2006). Others, predominantly in the more capital-intensive commercial TV, came under the control of, or were established by, oligarchic patrons who used them to 'defend' and expand their industrial assets (Yurchenko 2017), as a result of which commercial broadcasters became a ground for anti-oligarchic mobilisations from which a number of liberal politicians emerged.

Today the Ukrainian media landscape is extremely dynamic: new online and broadcast media emerge every year. Yet, most of the media professionals I interviewed in Kyiv insisted that there is 'no media market' to speak of, for the size of advertising demand is insufficient to support the numerous broadcasters, most of which are cross-subsidised by their owners' industrial ventures. According to official statistics, most TV broadcasters have been deeply loss-making since the 2008 financial crisis and until at least until 2016;<sup>1</sup> public announcements by senior media executives and my interviews confirm this. According to one estimate, in 2016, total owners' subsidies to their TV channels were between 600 and 700 million USD (Kalnysh 2017: 166; it is unclear whether this refers to the main four oligarchic media holdings or all TV channels). This radical dependence of media businesses on owners in Ukraine, and the kinds of occupational control and (self-)censorship that result from it (Fedirko 2020), give a particular form to the tension between journalists' dependent wage labour, and their idealisation of independent creative work, that media scholars have argued generally characterises news production under capitalism (e.g. Champagne 2005; Lebovic 2014).

The media reform movement traces its origins to the mid-1990s when western donors and numerous philanthropic foundations<sup>2</sup> began to support liberalising initiatives in the media sector. Organisationally, the movement has coalesced from groups with distinct positional interests (primarily elite broadcast reporters, national broadcast journalists and editors, and staff of foreign grant-supported watchdog and media

<sup>1</sup> State Statistics Service of Ukraine: 'Profitability of operating and all activities of enterprises by type of economic activity with a breakdown on large, medium, small and microenterprises in 2010–2019'. ([https://ukrstat.gov.uk/operativ/menu/menu\\_u/size\\_20.htm](https://ukrstat.gov.uk/operativ/menu/menu_u/size_20.htm)) Accessed 7 April 2021.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. American, British, German, Danish, EU, French, Japanese and Swedish development agencies and foreign ministries, and George Soros' Open Society Foundation and Renaissance Foundation, the Omidyar Network, etc.

training organisations<sup>3</sup>) through a series of coordinated mobilisations in 2002–4 and 2010–13. These were initially directed against government censorship, and eventually came to focus on the ‘corrupt national media sphere dominated by oligarchs with political interests’ (Internews 2019: 5). Each of these mobilisations sought to establish coordinating institutions and expand its organisational basis: from lobbying to regulate hidden political advertising, to establishing trade unions, employers’ associations, professional ethics bodies<sup>4</sup> and, more recently, a number of *nezalezhni media* (‘independent’, i.e. non-oligarchic-controlled, media).<sup>5</sup> But as these efforts failed to change the political economy of media in which wealthy patrons exercised instrumental influence on editorial agendas, the movement has increasingly sought to change journalists themselves. It has emphasised a vision of journalism as a self-regulating profession, at the core of which was the figure of an uncompromising professional subject bound by common standards and personal vocation to serve public interest.

Media monitoring and training organisations have focused on promoting what media scholars call the ‘liberal’ or ‘Anglo-American’ model of journalism (Hallin and Mancini 2004) within the profession, which emphasises nonpartisanship, empiricism and balance in reporting, and journalists’ ‘detachment from direct involvement in news events’, among other traits (Bishara 2013: 38; see also Chalaby 1998; Schudson 1981). These procedural ideals express a markedly liberal commitment to public rationality to be achieved through science-like mechanical objectivity of reporting (cf. Daston and Galison 2007; Schudson 1981: 77–87), and a vision of both journalists and their audience as rational autonomous individuals navigating public life on the basis of facts. In Ukraine, these ideals have crystallised as a set of professional norms often referred to as the ‘BBC standards’: balance of opinions and points of view, speed, truthfulness, separation of facts from value-judgements, accuracy and ‘comprehensiveness’ (*vycherpnist*) of news reports.<sup>6</sup> These standards became the cornerstone of the media reform movements’ training programmes; new, prestigious graduate schools of journalism<sup>7</sup> incorporated them in their curricula. In their turn, *nezalezhni media* have provided organisational infrastructure within which to pursue the vision of journalism subordinated to nothing else but impersonal standards of profession.

Hromadske TV, one of the media funded almost exclusively by European and American institutional donors, was ‘launched [in 2013] by a group of journalists who were disillusioned with journalism in Ukraine and tired of political interference in their work’<sup>8</sup> and who ‘disagreed with the controlled subordination [*pidkontrolnist*] of most Ukrainian media’. The organisation played an important role in covering and promoting the Euromaidan protests, and has since paid much attention to post-revolutionary liberal reforms and human rights issues. But their liberal orientation is also well captured by their foundational opposition to ‘oligarchic’ media:

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Detector Media, Institute for Mass Information, Regional Press Development Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Such as the Commission on Journalism Ethics and the Independent Media Council.

<sup>5</sup> Hromadske TV and Hromadske Radio, the Ukrainian Public Broadcasting Corporation and Zaborona, among others.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://imi.org.ua/articles/standarti-jurnalistiki-osnovi-profesiynosti-chi-zastarili-ramki-i178> (accessed 2 October 2020).

<sup>7</sup> One at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, the other at the Kyiv Mohyla Academy National University.

<sup>8</sup> <https://bigggidea.com/project/392/blog/185/> (accessed 2 October 2020).

The Ukrainian media landscape is practically monopolised by commercial channels which belong to oligarchs. Hromadske is an attempt to change the media market. We believe that in this way we can influence the political milieu, which has been formed by organisations with values that are far removed from serving the interests of the public.<sup>9</sup>

In a similar tone, a recent subscription advertisement from *Novoe Vremia (NV)*, a staunchly liberal weekly owned by a Czech financier, said: ‘Oligarchs pay for the dissemination of information beneficial to them. *NV* subscribers pay for the truth.’ In this ‘classification struggle’ (Bourdieu 2018) for the meaning of ‘proper’, ‘truthful’ journalism (Hromadske TV’s slogan: ‘What *really* happens’), *nezalezhni media* position their brands and frame their reporting in direct opposition to mainstream commercial media. Privately, many reporters from *nezalezhni media* do not consider those working for mainstream media as their colleagues. Indeed, in February 2021, when President Zelenskyi issued a decree that effectively shut down three all-news TV channels connected to Viktor Medvedchuk, a minor oligarch and prominent opposition politician, on the grounds of Medvedchuk’s alleged ties with the Kremlin, many of my interlocutors supported Zelenskyi’s move because in their opinion those TV channels did not produce ‘real journalism’ anyway.

The stark, one-sided way in which these avowed liberals formulate what they stand for, in opposition to the allegedly illiberal other, is perhaps unsurprising given the long tradition of defining liberty in negative terms, in Ukraine and elsewhere (Humphrey 2007). It evokes a familiar critique: namely, that the exclusion of illiberal others is constitutive of liberal projects and formations (Dzenovska 2018; Povinelli 2006; Losurdo 2014). Such critique pierces the veil of liberal ideals by demonstrating how liberal exclusion betrays the practical incoherence of liberal ideals (Canda 2021). But we might also question whether such exclusion necessarily delineates the ‘borders’ of liberalism. I propose that when thinking about the shape and constitution of actually-existing liberal formations in Ukraine and other contexts where liberalism is not hegemonic, we should not reproduce liberal activists’ exclusion of those who do not conform to their visions of the ‘grammar’ of liberal practice (Fedirko et al. 2021). We should be able to account for the fact that liberal ideas gain purchase not just among groups directly involved in projects of liberal reform and rule, which establish specific institutions for realising their ideals, but also among people who are excluded or opposed by such institutions, and who might nevertheless rework and reproduce elements thereof in ways that suggest a more fragmented liberalism than activist liberals would like to acknowledge. This is why I now turn to the case of an editor-censor at a TV channel owned by one Ukraine’s richest people.

### ‘An information sports champion’

‘This was a beautiful Cinderella tale’, Svitlana<sup>10</sup> said, explaining that her path in journalism began when a friend bet her a bottle of sparkling that ‘anyone could land a

<sup>9</sup> <https://bigggidea.com/project/392/> (accessed 2 October 2020).

<sup>10</sup> All names and other identifying details have been changed to protect anonymity. I have also changed the name of the channel Svitlana worked for, and identifying details of the channel’s owner.

job at a local radio'. It was 2000, and Ukraine was entering a period of economic growth after the first post-Soviet decade saw the country's GDP shrink by more than 40% (Yurchenko 2017). Svitlana was in her late teens and had recently enrolled at a university in her hometown in Western Ukraine. Winning the bet, Svitlana 'by pure chance' inaugurated what became a successful career in broadcasting, a career that tied her fortunes to those of Ukraine's rising oligarchs during a decade when they rapidly expanded their media assets while profiting from privatisation of Ukraine's industry and infrastructure.

At the time of our conversation, Svitlana was in her mid-30s. With 17 years of broadcasting experience, she was a veteran in Kyiv's youthful media profession, which most join before they turn 20 and leave by their early 30s. We met in late October 2017 when on Svitlana's invitation I came to a private journalism school where she taught on weekends. The school was a subsidiary of one of the large oligarch-owned media holding companies. We spoke between Svitlana's classes, while her students worked in a studio next door on their first news bulletin. Our conversation meandering, Svitlana switched between different points of view and voices, high and low registers of Ukrainian and Russian, as if to demonstrate in front of me was an experienced reporter in full control of the polyphonic possibilities of language, even when reporting the facts of her own life. Having moved to the capital shortly before the 2013–14 Maidan protests, she quit reporting to become an Output Editor of Evening News at Channel 3, quickly progressing to Head of Day and Evening News, 'number two' (as she put it) in the news department. By now, she quipped, she was 'an information sports champion despite being too short and not very old'. The 'story' of her career, she said, was about more than just favourable opportunities: 'I could have stayed in my home town, kicking trolleybus doors open, knowing that I am a star and that everyone recognises me. [...] All of us have equal opportunities. All of us. [But] It's a question of the effort that you put in.' She said that by now it was 'difficult to impress' her 'with anything in the news genre'. She thought herself a skilled organiser and a team player who looked out for those working with her. Loyalty from her staff, Svitlana said, was for her an important 'achievement'.

The story she told me juxtaposed the arbitrariness of 'pure chance' that brought her into journalism with the hard work that propelled her career. Against the backdrop of matters of chance and nature outside of her control, Svitlana's meritocratic achievement came forth all the more clearly. Competent, impartial, pragmatic and individualistic, in control of herself and her destiny, and committed to her profession and skilled in her work, Svitlana cut a figure familiar from ethnographic depictions of journalists (e.g. Hasty 2005) and other middle-class professionals across the world (Bledstein 1976; Lamont 1992; McClay 1994; Yarrow 2019).

After the interview, Svitlana offered me to observe her class. It was the last session that day; students had to present their first news programme. Supposed to 'go on air' at 4 pm, they were late, and after giving them an extra 10 minutes (which did not save the programme), Svitlana gathered everyone in the classroom. With the unfinished news bulletin on pause on a large screen behind her, she urged everyone to analyse their mistakes: 'Why wasn't the programme ready on time? [...] Now, turn off your justifications, let's look at this situation in a detached way [*podniavshys' so storony*, lit., having risen above it and stepped aside].' She wrote students' replies on a flipchart: 'bad division of responsibilities', 'technical failure', 'irresponsibility', 'lack of knowledge', 'inability to listen to others', 'disorganisation'. Admonishing the students to be 'adult',

Svitlana was asking them to hold back their pride and shame, and to separate what they had done from who they are: this lesson in journalism began with a lesson about work as an alienable possession. 'You had the confidence that you are great and will produce the programme on time. Self-confidence lets us down.' They failed at teamwork, she insisted, not only because they had failed to 'listen' to each other with respect, but also because they did not take individual responsibility for their tasks and failures. Svitlana's lesson created an occasion for self-reflection and 'work on the self'<sup>11</sup> through which the students would learn the attributes of good professionalism: individual responsibility, rationality, humility, transparency and detachment. While such professionalism demanded transcending the uniqueness of one's personality, this was to be achieved through a quintessentially liberal exercise in 'self-possession' which was framed as ultimately amplifying one's capacity to realise their unique self (Boyer 2013: 132–6; MacPherson 1962; Povinelli 2006).

In the figure of the good professional sketched by Svitlana's story of her career and her directions to her students, we can see an outline of a generic liberal subject. In what follows, I will dwell on this in more detail. First, however, a brief note on the notion of the subject that I use. The anthropological literature on subjectivity and personhood has long been attuned to the tension between the singularity of the biographical individual and the multiplicity, complexity and fluidity of the social personae and images of self that the individual can inhabit and form durable attachments to (Ortner 2005; Humphrey 2008). The different cultural ways of being a person might be reified and institutionalised (e.g. the rights-bearing individual of the human rights discourse); assumed by forms of relatedness (Povinelli 2006), constructed in interaction or through practices of production and consumption, or formulated by technologies and discourses with which we interact. They might circulate as more or less detailed, more or less prescriptive, typified images of the self. Finally, they might be mixed and combined with one another (Ong 1999; Dunn 2004; Boyer 2013).

The 'liberal subject' spans all of these possibilities: what makes it liberal is a set of attributes commonly associated with the polyphonic liberal tradition, but the configurations of these attributes remain particular to the peculiar 'distributions' of personhood. There is, in other words, no *one* liberal subjectivity, no *one* way to be a liberal subject. On the one hand, historical liberalisms centred on distinct configurations of personhood. As Asif Agha (2011) notes, classic liberal political theory of the 17th to mid-19th centuries had at its core the possessive individual (MacPherson 1962) which historically gathered 'to itself more and more naturalised figures of autonomy, including, with Kant, transcendent criteria of rationality and free will' (Agha 2011: 178). This 'figure of personhood', as Agha calls it, was de-emphasised in varieties of liberalism that founded their political and economic visions not in individual autonomy, but in other values, for instance, solidarity (Freeden 2009). On the other, as 'persons may be distributed in more ways than one' (Graber 2015: 357), the liberal subject 'lives' through other figures of personhood, such as the professional self, which refract and encode particular liberal values in relation to relevant traits of the subject (cf. Lempert 2012). These figures of personhood exist in semiotic interaction and interpretation: they might but do not have to be recognised explicitly as such; the liberal subject *can* be internalised (to varying degrees;

<sup>11</sup> See Matza (2012, 2018) on the specificity of middle-class 'self-work' in postsocialist Russia.

Agha 2007b: 334; 2007a: 233–54), but can also be performed, integrated with other personae or *merely ascribed*, as when they become reference points in ethical judgments about oneself or others. In this sense, liberal subject, and liberal culture more broadly, are akin to a repertoire (or a set of repertoires) on which actors draw, perhaps not even consciously, as they fashion and narrate various aspects of their life, and as they comment on other people's behaviour, as Svitlana did (Swidler 2001). Understanding this is crucial for grasping how liberal culture pervades contexts that avowed media liberals consider inimical to liberal governance.

### **'This is not a role-play'**

Having discussed the mistakes in the production process, Svitlana moved on to the news programme itself. She paused the news bulletin every 20 or 30 seconds to comment on the reporter's demeanour, the use of language, video editing, script, etc. One of the news stories was an explainer about strokes prepared by a student called Vera. At a shot of Vera's standup,<sup>12</sup> Svitlana paused and turned to Vera, who was sitting right in front of her: 'Oh, who's this doctor? Weren't you a journalist just now?' The shot showed Vera in a white medical coat, standing in a hospital corridor. 'But hospital staff asked me to wear one!' protested Vera. 'Listen,' Svitlana said, 'this is not a role-play. We don't cross-dress as firefighters, we don't dress as policemen. We are not participants in events.' Svitlana resumed the video. '... in most cases the illness can be avoided. So, let's take care of one another and watch our health', said the reporter on the screen.

*Svitlana:* 'The standup is badly edited. [There is] A call to the viewer. We must not issue calls to the viewer.'

*Vera:* So why does TSN [a popular news programme] say, 'Let's take care of ourselves' or some such?

*Svitlana:* The news anchor says that, my dear, not the reporter!

Svitlana drew attention to the link between a way of speaking or presentation and a social persona indicated by it. Criticising redundant language, the reporter's lack of detachment from the situation around her as well as her co-involvement with the audience as a member of the same public, Svitlana was working through the perspectives and positions implied by the report. The liberal norm of journalistic neutrality required the reporter to demonstrate her objective detachment, both by not wearing the lab coat and by not exhorting the viewers. If, in criticising the production process earlier, Svitlana articulated a generic vision of a professional person, now she was developing that vision in relation to specifically liberal values of news journalism, around which the Ukrainian media reformers also built their movement. Similarly to Svitlana's own narrative of professional growth, the different aspects of professionalism that Svitlana taught during the class were underpinned by a composite figure of the liberal subject

<sup>12</sup> Standup, or *stendap* in Ukrainian, is a shot in which a reporter standing in front of the camera narrates the story.

as the professional journalist, or perhaps of the journalistic professional as a particular configuration of the liberal subject.

Genealogically related to early modern understandings of scientific objectivity and individual autonomy of the gentleman-scientist (Bishara 2013; Shapin 1999), the liberal ‘occupational ideology’ (Deuze 2005) of journalism has evolved in Britain and the USA around the twin epistemic virtues of objectivity and distance (Anderson 2001, 2016; Daston and Galison 2007; Schudson 1981), which in turn guaranteed the political virtue of the journalist’s public service. For my interlocutors across the Kyiv journalistic scene, something as trivial as donning a medical coat could indicate a dangerous contraction of the epistemic distance between the reporter and the reported. Not addressing the viewers, eschewing emotions, evaluations and direct appeals, as Svitlana compelled Vera to do, also created space for viewers to make autonomous judgement based on facts. BBC correspondents on training missions in Ukraine who I spoke to were taken aback by the strictness of their Ukrainian colleagues’ interpretations of what they took to be globally common standards of professionalism. But such ethical and epistemic rigidity should perhaps not be surprising in a context where news is frequently instrumentalised for political purposes, and reporters and audiences remain vigilant for signs of potential bias.

### ‘You have only one viewer’

Liberal ideals of journalistic professionalism have a reach in Ukraine that goes beyond the few independent media organisations: Svitlana’s students were learning the same profession as that practised at Hromadske TV or other *nezalezhni media*. Moreover, they did so at a private journalism school owned by one of the oligarchic media holdings. But what the students probably did not know was how routinely these very ideals of objectivity, impartiality and truthfulness were breached in news programmes edited by Svitlana.

Svitlana’s career unfolded within media organisations owned by politicians and businessmen with political interests, most recently at Channel 3, a major TV channel belonging to one of Ukraine’s richest people, billionaire ‘Ivan Antonov’. At Channel 3, Svitlana oversaw news bulletins full of censored stories, character assassinations and praise for Antonov’s businesses. She joined the channel just when the management were seeking to reform the news team as part of an attempt to increase their audience share. Svitlana embraced the challenge. Svitlana’s one-time colleague, an output editor I will call Olga, praised Svitlana for the care she took of her team: ‘Svitlana was always very self-directed, always said that journalistic staff had to be changed, developed, taught, that they had to be paid good money etc.’ For Svitlana, the goal was to attract good professionals, to build a team where ‘80% of people working with me sincerely profess those ideas [*posytsii*, lit. positions] that we broadcast to the masses. While of course understanding that there is a side wind that has to be taken into account.’

Svitlana was quickly promoted to Head of Day and Evening News, which, Olga said, came with new responsibilities:

Head of Day News sends reporters on assignments, talks through their stories, edits them. But in fact, all these people [in the editorial positions] are there to channel down the necessary information [*spuskaty neobkhidnu informatsiiu*] to

the programme staff they manage, so that a wrong person is not shown on air, so that the right one [*potribna*] is [...]. This is, in essence, an extra function; we used to call it the 'entry point' [*tochka vkhodu*].

As an 'entry point', Olga said, Svitlana turned directives 'from above' – the 'side wind' – into tasks for reporters, programme and video editors. Just as the poststructuralist 'new censorship' theorists have argued (e.g. Bunn 2015; Schimpfössl et al. 2020), here the editorial and censorial work were difficult to separate. Olga continued: 'The chief editor would come up to Svitlana and whisper something into her ear, or ping her an email, and then she'd come to us saying: "Take that out; put this in".' Olga and her colleagues eventually learned to leave 'five or ten minutes' in the news programmes unslotted to accommodate any last-minute additions, such as stories featuring particular politicians that 'had to be inserted' into the news bulletin.

As Olga put it, Channel 3 news 'serviced the companies' of Ivan Antonov. Whenever a journalist on her shift produced a story that featured issues pertinent to one of Antonov's companies, Olga said, the report would be checked with the company's press office. Sometimes, the companies had a side production crews make reports to be placed into the channels' news programme. Kostia, another former editor who had worked under Svitlana's management, found this preferable: 'at least they wouldn't distract my journalists' into reporting on Antonov's businesses.

Stories that 'serviced' Antonov's interests were only a proportion of the news covered by Olga and Kostia's programme; and even with 'ordered' reports [*zamovni novyny*] there was room for manoeuvre. Still, Olga said she was 'very ashamed' of her work: 'When people asked me where I worked ... I felt for some reason that everyone knew [...] what shit I produced.' Having worked for less than a year at the channel, Kostia left for a job at Hromadske TV that was more demanding, paid less, came with no extra welfare benefits, but where there was 'freedom' (*svoboda*; see Humphrey 2007) from censorial, and indeed editorial, interventions. Soon after, Olga was fired after she unwittingly ran a report featuring a politician who had broken away from a faction that represented Antonov's interests in the Parliament. According to Olga, Svitlana, who was supposed to vet the programme, was on leave that day, and Olga did not know that the politician had been 'blacklisted' at the channel. Olga said Antonov, who personally watched the programme, ordered to fire the entire production team, and when Svetlana protested to higher management saying 'What about the viewers?', she was told: 'You have only one viewer.'

Svitlana, who fell out of grace after this incident, remained vague about her employment status in our interview, telling me she'd left her editorial post for a 'project' within the same media company. Still, she made little effort to conceal the aspects of her work that many others would have preferred not to disclose. She spoke at length about how she sought to deflect and mitigate Antonov's influence, which often reached her through 'suggestions' from the chief editor. For her, these were practical hurdles to be approached pragmatically:

We are all adults and twice a month get a salary notification from the bank. And we all understand that as long as a TV channel has an owner, he [sic] will call the tune. Particularly if the owner has business interests. That's been the case wherever I worked. [...] The question is, first of all, how disgusted you are by what

you are offered to do. And second, to what extent you can package this into an adequate form.

During our interview, Svitlana demonstrated how she ‘packaged’ requests into ‘adequate form’. She reached for her laptop, and after a minute of searching through her files, put on a news report for us to watch. It began by telling of the damages caused by mass-scale theft of cast iron manhole covers by scrap collectors in Kyiv, and led up to a brief interview with a Member of Parliament promoting the idea of regulating scrap exports. ‘The MP says’, the story ended, ‘that a bill setting quotas for the export of scrap metal is already in the Parliament. [It proposes] To sell abroad only 20% of the volume [of scrap] used by Ukrainian smelters. This will help improve supply and lower the price of metal. Which ultimately means that fewer manhole covers will be stolen.’ I would later learn that when the bill was originally proposed, there had been a severe shortage of scrap, a valuable raw material for iron smelters, because much of the scrap harvested in Ukraine was exported to Transnistria and Turkey. This harmed the interests of Antonov’s and other oligarchs’ iron smelters, major players in the metallurgical industry which, according to industry estimates, accounts for about 12% of the country’s GDP and around one-fourth of total exports.<sup>13</sup> The bill was eventually passed in an altered form in 2016, leading to a 24% increase in scrap supply to Ukrainian smelters in 2016–18, and a 37% growth of production volume in the Ukrainian electrometallurgical industry that is heavily reliant on scrap inputs.<sup>14</sup> Svitlana thus did not need to explicate the obvious: not only did the story concern Antonov’s businesses, but the only person chosen for commentary belonged to a political party who lobbied for Antonov’s interests in the parliament and received favourable news coverage from Channel 3, and allegedly also hidden payments from Antonov, in return. Based on average world steel prices in 2016–17, one can estimate that if the extra steel produced in the first year following the levy was exported, as it probably was, Antonov’s and others’ electrometallurgical plants received ca. 200 million USD in extra revenues – a very imprecise figure, which nevertheless gives an idea of that stakes of lobbying oligarchs’ interests in the Ukrainian parliament and media.

‘You see, we’ve crossed a grass snake with a hedgehog here’, Svitlana said when the video ended, borrowing a line from an old joke. ‘We’ve satisfied politicians, and we’ve satisfied the demand of metallurgists for regulating scrap exports. And the story, after all, is good too.’ I agreed, the report was indeed done well: it took an issue of public concern, discussed it from several perspectives and led the viewer to a possible resolution. ‘This is about communication’, she explained. ‘We sit down with the journalists ... And I’ve always been and will be honest with them. Guys, we *have* to do this. So please, do this in such a way that you won’t be ashamed to put your name to it at the end. So when you give them this freedom without imposing on them how to do it, [...] you can get a decent result.’ At another moment in the interview, she explained:

<sup>13</sup> <https://gmk.center/en/infographic/mining-metals-companies-generate-every-eighth-hryvnia-of-ukraine-s-gdp/> (accessed 12 June 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Data according to Ukrmetprom, an industry association (<http://www.ukrmetprom.org/podvodim-togi-dvukh-let-raboty-poshlin/>) Accessed 2 October 2020.

You have two options: either [...] to say, 'Ok!' [or ... ] offer another story: instead of showing a politician kissing a cow, you can propose a story about the problems of farmers forced to sell their milk cheaply. And then [...] introduce the necessary [*potribne*] interview. This way you get to have your cake and eat it. Is this information publicly important? It is. Is the relevant guy inserted there? He is. Is everyone happy? Everyone's happy. Is this a compromise? It is. But it's one that hasn't damaged the viewer.

Many of my interlocutors among the employees of Hromadske TV and other *nezalezhni media* would call Svitlana's 'compromise' self-censorship (Fedirko 2020). And it was clear that Svitlana herself did not like the various 'necessities' of her profession. Yet, in her rationalisation of her predicament she insisted: 'This is, in a sense, about creativity [*tvorchist'*] and a certain freedom of action [*svoboda dii*].'

Remarkably, Svitlana spoke about her pragmatic choices and skilled manoeuvring that preserved her autonomy in the face of managerial 'requests', within the same coordinates within which she criticised the work of her students, and within which many of my interlocutors within *nezalezhni media* would criticise her own work as inimical to professional journalism. If, for my interlocutors from *nezalezhni media*, the path to anti-oligarchic reform began with individual journalists' acceptance of the first principles of liberal media professionalism, Svitlana's case demonstrates that such professional visions might have a more complex relation to newswork than the liberals would expect. Svitlana presented herself as someone committed to informing the public, and forced by that commitment to work against unfortunate constraints at Channel 3 that nevertheless gave her an opportunity to bring important news to millions of people every day. She thought that those who left 'oligarchic' channels for media outlets such as Hromadske TV, or for non-media jobs, were naïve: too 'rigid, aggressive, non-conformist' to be able to 'communicate well with others': 'Those who say, "I've refused to work" [at an oligarchic channel] – well, great, it means you're tired of your profession. Your task is to broadcast information [*donosyty informatsiiu*]. Any information is important.' And to do that task well – to be able to do it with all the resources of the mainstream television, 'Something has to be sacrificed because it's a normal thing. [...] There is 15 or 20% of information that we are forced to show [*vymusheni pokazuvaty*] to be able to show the rest.'

## **Conclusion: 'actually existing' liberalism, liberalism in fragments**

The dilemmas with which Svitlana and many other Ukrainian reporters and editors grapple encapsulate the general contradiction between the globally circulating liberal norms of journalistic work and the structural conditions under which such work, as dependent wage labour, takes place (Champagne 2005; Lebovic 2016; Roudakova 2017). If living this contradiction some of my interlocutors in Kyiv became cynical or demoralised, and others left the profession or sought out employment within the small sector of *nezalezhni media*, Svitlana opted for compromise. In so doing, she drew on the powerful cultural repertoire of the liberal vision of professional journalistic self to navigate and rationalise the limits on her autonomy that she encountered in her daily work. Svitlana balanced ideals of autonomous creativity and public vocation with the

practical accommodation of censorial instructions, to realise a vision of public-service professionalism that was both at odds with that of the liberal media reform movement and reproduced some of the key elements of the reformer's ideology.

By focusing on Svitlana's engagement with the figure of autonomous journalist as a particular configuration of the liberal subject in Ukraine, I have explored one aspect of actually-existing liberalisms, namely, the way that these social formations are constituted through uneven institutionalisation of various elements of liberal ideology. I outlined how liberal ideas of journalistic professionalism, 'transferred' into and taken up in Ukraine as part of a larger postsocialist project of liberal modernisation, were elaborated in a context of a movement for media reform. This movement responded to the oligarchic predicament of Ukraine's postsocialist capitalism by seeking to establish a network of organisations within which it would be possible to realise their vision of good journalism as fully as possible. I then analysed in detail how people like Svitlana take up, rework and reproduce this vision in surprising ways, giving it a new life in the context of a media organisation against which this kind of vision was directed in the first instance.

To appreciate the complexity of this case, and to account for reception and transformation of liberal ideas beyond contexts where they are more 'thickly' institutionalised or indeed hegemonic, we need to learn to see liberalism in fragments (cf. Lempert 2012). First, in fragments in the sense of being incomplete. One powerful critique of liberalism points to how liberal aspirations fall short of their goals, how they are fragile, inconsistent, violent and exclusionary (e.g. Povinelli 2006; Losurdo 2014; also Candea 2021). In contrast, the orientation towards a fragmentary character of liberalism(s) requires recognising inconsistency and contradiction not as utmost liberal failures, but as an inextricable aspect of liberal lives and liberal formations. It prompts us to take supporters of liberal ideology seriously: for instance, as engaged in sincere efforts to better the world *and* producing violent forms of exclusion; as cynically deploying the language of freedom in order to advance their interests, *and* opening a space for self-realisation, and so on. Taking the '-ism' out of liberalism, in the sense of deflating liberal claims to coherence and universalism, this regained sense of complexity ultimately makes for a more powerful critique of contradictions of actually-existing liberalisms. It allows us to better grasp the different ways in which liberal ideologies operate, as for instance through cultural models of personhood that inform both liberals' ethical lives and their justifications of illiberal practices.

Second, in fragments in the sense of being a composite of multiple elements: sometimes, perhaps, a hegemonic, all-encompassing social and cultural order; but more often, a set of disarticulated, partial orders, single institutions or cultural structures, or indeed figures of personhood disjointed from structures and contexts in which they can be fully realised. This brings liberal social formations into view as composites of fragments whose integration with one another or with other non-liberal elements, and whose grounding in particular forms of social organisation, is an open empirical question. Some of these liberal fragments, such as the professional norms of journalism, might travel 'as a set of already elaborated arguments' (Sartori 2014: 4). Others, such as the liberal subject in its different configurations, might be encoded in a plethora of forms of relatedness and figures of personhood (e.g. that of the autonomous professional) whether they 'travel' globally, or emerge locally.

To see Ukrainian media liberalism from this perspective is to go beyond assertions that the liberal reformers, who are dependent on the support of their Western

backers and lack broad public legitimacy, and Svitlana, who upholds the oligarchic media machine with her pragmatic compromises, are evidence of Ukraine's incomplete 'transition' to liberal democratic political culture, or of internal incoherence of liberalism more generally. To see liberalism in fragments is to understand that, in the contradictory force field of the global empire of capital, both the reformers and those whom they seek to reform are part of the same actually-existing liberalism.

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## Le libéralisme en fragments: l'oligarchie et le sujet libéral dans le journalisme ukrainien

Cet article explore la place de la subjectivité libérale dans la culture professionnelle des journalistes ukrainiens afin d'analyser un processus plus général par lequel les idées libérales sont transférées des contextes du libéralisme hégémonique au cœur du système capitaliste mondial, vers ses marges postsocialistes. Je décris comment certains idéaux anglo-américains de bonne pratique journalistique, qui codent les traits de la subjectivité libérale, sont empruntés et élaborés par un mouvement financé par l'Occident pour une réforme libérale anti-oligarchique du journalisme ukrainien ; et j'examine comment ces idéaux sont repris dans les médias contrôlés par les oligarques, un contexte que les réformateurs considèrent comme hostile au libéralisme. À travers le portrait ethnographique d'une rédactrice-correctrice d'une grande chaîne de télévision ukrainienne détenue par des oligarques, j'analyse la façon dont elle retravaille ces idéaux professionnels de manière à soutenir le patronage oligarchique et à étendre la portée du libéralisme en Ukraine. Cela révèle comment, dans le champ de forces contradictoires du capitalisme mondial, les réformateurs et ceux qu'ils cherchent à reformer font partie du même libéralisme existant. Je propose que pour mieux comprendre des cas comme celui-ci, nous devons apprendre à voir le libéralisme par fragments : comme toujours partiel et incomplet, et comme constitué d'éléments multiples.

**Mots-clés** journalisme, oligarchie, libéralisme, sujet libéral, Ukraine