Letter from Ukraine

This article was written before Russia unleashed its brutal and genocidal war on Ukraine. Of course, some of our conclusions and especially reflections on the possible future outcomes have been made irrelevant by the current hostilities, the flow of millions of refugees, the unprecedented Western sanctions against Russia, and the blocking of entire social media platforms by the Russian government, which led to some Russians self-styling themselves as "digital refugees". This is especially ironic from the perspective of the co-author Roman Horbyk, who was turned into a rather "analogue" refugee by the Russian army. However, many findings of our research on Clubhouse have been validated and developed by the current war: the tireless participatory potential of the Ukrainian society, its aspiration towards democracy and historical agency, and the readiness to self-organise and improvise with the available digital tools, since mobile phones are now used to send air attack alerts to the population and identify Russian military targets, and Starlink satellite internet covered Ukraine's territory within hours to support Ukraine's critical infrastructure. At the same time, many other aspects now loom as grim warnings of the weakness and lethargy of the Russian opposition, weak participation of the society, the Kremlin regime striving to control and steer both legacy and new media, produce fake news and hijack any attempts at grassroot participation. The dialogue from "Putin Squads" sounds not like an absurd curiosity but a genuine threat. Against this background, the long-standing effort of some media scholars, including ourselves, to compare Ukraine and Russia, seems even more relevant: the world overlooked not simply how Putinism evolved into a militarist fascist regime but also the extent to which Ukraine is a different political and media system, society and culture. There will be an even greater need for such comparative research and in-depth work on Ukraine, and this article should be considered only one of the beginnings of this long overdue project.

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