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BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, BBC MEDIA ACTION CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

BRAVE NEW MEDIA – EPISODE 2 - TRANSCRIPT

00.00

[STING: BRAVE NEW MEDIA.

[STING SETTLES INTO INTRO BED.]

00.09

MAHA TAKI

Hi and welcome to Brave New Media...

A podcast where we hear from independent media organisations from around the world

...so that we can explore the future of public interest media and learn from their successes and failures.

In each episode we'll hear from one media outlet that has significant challenges to overcome

– and we talk to specialists about possible solutions...

I'm Maha Taki from BBC Media Action – the BBC's international charity.

In this episode of Brave New Media, we are going to meet two journalists, based in Ukraine, who are running a public-interest platform, Zaborona.

Through their story, we will learn about some of the obstacles independent media face in wartime and the fight against information disorder in Eastern Europe...

Just a heads up, this episode contains first-hand accounts of the Ukrainian war, which may be distressing to some listeners.

[STING BED FADES INTO EPISODE MUSIC.]

01.03

KATERINA SERGATSKOVA

I guess I've read "We" by Zamyatin when I was maybe 13 years old, and this is the age when you dive into, you know, very interesting spaces of our world, you just discover something that you never knew before. And I read "We" and then I read Orwell... what can I say? I never thought that I will see how this kind of dystopia would realise in our reality. Everything that Russia is doing right now with Ukraine and with information, it is just Orwell, and the "We" novel. I don't think that Zamyatin or Orwell, they didn't expect, you know, the level of what people are capable of. This is just terrible. I don't know how to find the right words for that. But my whole life, I tried to bring some justice to this world, you know, to make something better, you know, to raise awareness on human rights, on diversity, peace, and now everything is destroyed by one country, yeah.

02.49

MAHA TAKI

That was Ukrainian journalist Katerina Sergatskova on how the Russian information environment is like something out of the dystopian novels she read as a teenager, such as George Orwell's 1984 and Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin's science fiction novel We.

And it's Katerina who we will be speaking to in this episode, along with her husband Roman Stepanovych.

Before the war, they co-founded Ukrainian public-interest media platform, Zaborona... Which now has an audience reach of around 1 million per month.

For more information on their audiences, check out the show notes, where there's also a transcript and a link to Zaborona's website.

If you head to their website, you'll find incredibly well-designed articles, which use text, photos, graphics and even comic strips to tell compelling stories.

These are all drawn by illustrators and artists from Ukraine... who are using the platform to share their experiences of the war.

Zaborona also have a YouTube Channel. You'll hear some clips from their videos throughout this episode.

Now, Zaborona was originally based out of Kyiv.

But when we spoke to Roman and Katerina, they had just moved their headquarters.

[MUSIC FADES]

04.00

KATERINA SERGATSKOVA

I'm Katerina Sergatskova. I'm a journalist and editor in chief at Zabarona Media, and I'm currently in Lviv. This is our new headquarters of Zaborona.

ROMAN STEPANOVYCH

My name is Roman Stepanovych. I'm also a co-founder of Zaborona media.

I'm a husband of Katya and yeah, well, we're based in Lviv in our new headquarters. It's small, it's a tiny office for six. Yeah, so temporarily, we're here. And we don't know for how long. We were before in Kyiv. We were based there. But we decided to move to a safer place, not because that particular area has been shelled, but just the understanding that it can be shelled, or people have to spend time in shelters and basements. That doesn't help for making good journalism. So this is why we moved west.

[MUSIC RISES]

05.02

MAHA

Before the war, Katerina and Roman used their platform to report on taboo topics in the country... topics which weren't being reported on by traditional media.

They started Zaborona in the aftermath of the 2013 Maidan Revolution. A revolution that led to the overthrow of the pro-Russian president.

[ATMOS RISES]

05.23

KATERINA

We discovered that we have more freedom than any country in the post-Soviet space actually. And it was great to feel like you're really doing well comparable to Russia or Belarus. And in 2017, we started to, to notice not very good tendencies in the society. Like it was a lot of you know, conservative things. And that's how we started Zaborona. We wanted to raise awareness on human rights violations and LGBT community and diversity and everything that you should write about when you're an independent journalists.

So yeah, we started Zaborona and actually Zaborona is translated as "taboo".

Somehow we managed to tell the, like hundreds of stories about Ukraine and in post-Soviet space and about the different vulnerabilities.

[BRIEF MONTAGE OF PRE-WAR ZABORONA STORIES]

06.54

And now, after Russia invaded Ukraine, we only can focus on war crimes and violations.

[BRIEF MONTAGE OF ZABORONA WAR STORIES.]

MUSIC FADES.]

07.25

MAHA

Roman shared his experience of when the Russians invaded Ukraine back in February 2022.

07.30

ROMAN

So we've been living in that tension for quite a long time, I guess since January, you know, after Biden's speech that Russia will invade Ukraine, this is like 99%. And that was like, a lot of news. And that became kind of toxic because it never happened. And it just keeps you being very nervous and anxious.

[MUSIC RISES.]

And you just cannot really understand what to do, will it happen or not? And come on, we we've been living in this war for eight years in eastern Ukraine. And all the thoughts were like, yes, this may happen in eastern Ukraine, like in a bigger scale.

[MUSIC RISES.]

This is, this is horrible, of course, but no one thought that this may happen in Kyiv, or elsewhere in central Ukraine.

And I remember, it was the 22nd of February, there was a news report that it's going to happen in 48 or 72 hours, something like this. And on the 24th Of February, we were at home.

So we live on the 20th floor. So what is great about living on the 20th floor, you have a big window, and you see a panoramic view of Kiev and this is very beautiful.

But it's also you can hear stuff very well, whatever happens in different parts of the city. And, yeah, so we were at our apartment in Kyiv.

[MUSIC FADES.]

We were sleeping in our bed. And I woke up because of distant explosions. And it feels like maybe it was in my dream because when I woke up, it was quiet, and Katya woke up as well.

And so I took a glass of water, came back to the bed, and five minutes later shelling again, and we were like okay, this is it.

[MUSIC URGENTLY RISES AND THEN FADES AWAY.]

09.42

MAHA

While not all their colleagues followed as planned, Zaborona still have a team of reporters dotted around the country who are collecting evidence of war crimes and stories that showcase the bravery of the Ukrainian people.

The trouble is many of these reporters have little to no experience of war contexts.

And after putting themselves at risk to gather stories, they then must go the extra mile to ensure they can't be perceived as fake. Roman explains.

10.10

ROMAN

You just don't know how people will react when it happens. And in the very beginning people say yeah, I will go. And then you say, we will do a report from there and we'll decide who goes into fields, who's staying in the newsroom on a news feed. No, just people get... this is shock and shock does very unpredictable, very unpredictable things. Yeah, some people say like, oh, I'm a patriot to my city. I will stay in my city. I will not go anywhere. And that doesn't make any sense. Some people just cannot make a right choice or they cannot make themselves move.

[FX TRANSITION.]

11.06

ROMAN

We just want to document it as much as we can. Because this is very likely after a war stops, we will not see it again. And we should just remember to remember how what kind of people we can be, like the very best of us.

[MUSIC RISES]

11.31

ROMAN

We have a name. We have a history. But during this war, we are rebuilding it in some places from square one. Like reporting, because people who used to go in fields, you have to adjust them to go to dangerous fields to hostile environments, not everyone you know, is happy to make it or not everyone is ready. Not everyone has proper skills or even first aid training. That all has to be done in a very short period of time. Someone has to organise this.

[MUSIC MOVES THE CONVERSATION ON]

12.12

ROMAN

We did some, some great stories covering Russian war crimes in cities that are under occupation. Talking to people who are not afraid to talk and even say their names. Of course we try to not show it [their names] for their own safety, but people are very brave, they just want the world to know that this is real. And this is why they are okay to say their names, to risk their lives just not to let anyone say that that story was invented by someone. I guess this is the post, post world of Russian propaganda we have right now. So you have to prove that it's not fake. Before that, you had to prove that the fake has as a chance to be a real thing. Now it's the opposite - you just do as much as you can just to prove it's not fake.

[SOUNDSCAPE TO ILLUSTRATE SORROW + LOSS]

13.25

MAHA

Before the war broke out, Katerina, who was born in Russia, has frequently been the target of smear campaigns because of her heritage. Katerina didn't want to go into details about the kinds of discrimination she has faced, but she did talk about the motivations behind people's prejudice.

13.41

KATYA

I don't like to talk about that, because people are just stupid... people just blaming you for no reason because they see something different. And also people often use some labels to discredit you, you know, because they see you as a competitor.

Just to explain who I am - I moved from Russia to Ukraine when I was 13. And went to Ukrainian school in Simferopol, Crimea. And after that I returned to Russia. And I worked there as a journalist for some time.

I worked for an opposition newspaper. And you just can't work properly as a journalist under the Putin regime. So in 2008, I just returned to Ukraine and lived there. So yeah, but I don't feel like I'm a Russian, you know.

14.56

MAHA

Before the war, Ukraine had a diverse media scene, with outlets presenting a variety of views. But since the Russian invasion, Ukrainian media outlets have adopted a unanimously patriotic approach to their reporting. I wanted to know whether this has changed the way independent media outlets collaborate with each other... so I asked Roman.

[MUSIC RISES.]

15.17

ROMAN

Small media, independent media, that used to be competitors. Now they just like work as one. And if we know there's someone from another media, posted a picture on Instagram, and he is in that village, which is very hard to get to, and he's there doing reporting. We'll definitely go call him and try to collect as much information as we can. Probably we will post it under embargo after they publish it, but there is no, there's no competition, like real competition right now.

15.55

MAHA

When I spoke to Roman and Katerina, it was earlier on in the war. And while there was so much disinformation that was being created by Russian mainstream media, Roman still felt that the side of truth was prevailing.

16.08

ROMAN

It's definitely a side of truth, because this is not civil war, or when both sides and some people are not - cannot decide on which side is, which side they are. It's very, it's very easy right now, it's black and white. And right now it's very important just to show the world what is happening and to show as much information as we can, because that should become a part of modern history and also grounds for further investigations in Hague or elsewhere.

[TRANSITION TO THEMED MUSIC.]

17.02

MAHA

When Roman Stepanovych and Katerina Sergatskova shared Zaborona's story, I was struck by their strong sense of purpose – which is to document the war, so that future generations will have a reliable record of it and so that there is enough evidence for any future investigations into Russian war crimes.

But, it goes without saying that even with this strong sense of purpose, operating out of a war context is significantly emotionally and physically challenging... Particularly when the rest of the world is beginning to lose interest.

I wanted to get an understanding of how these difficult contexts can be best navigated, so I spoke to former BBC War Correspondent Allan Little.

Allan has been on the frontline of many world-changing events, from the first Gulf War to the breakup of Yugoslavia.

I asked him what he made of Katya and Roman's story.

17.54

ALLAN LITTLE

I was very moved by it. To bear witness is the most important part of being a journalist, I think. And what they seem determined to do is make sure that there are people on the ground gathering reliable evidence about what has happened. And I think that is a brave and very noble thing to do.

And I think it's really, really important to acknowledge that, compared to what they're doing, everything I did, as a war correspondent was easy and straightforward. Because I had my home to come back to, nobody was gonna burn it down. Nobody was threatening my home or my family. And that's the principal difference.

18.37

MAHA

So I've heard you talk about the strong journalistic motivation to expose suffering and injustice in the hope that if the world, here's what's going on, somebody will do something to stop it. And you've also talked a lot about the challenges towards journalists today, you know, the ubiquity of information, the mistrust of the image. Can you summarise what you think these challenges are and especially in the context of Ukraine today, for Katya and Roman?

19.06

ALLAN

Yeah, I think the challenge is to establish beyond reasonable doubt what's true, and there is always a lot of pressure to be balanced. And balance is not the same thing as impartiality. If you go into a cafe, and one man is arguing two plus two equals four, and another one is arguing with equal conviction and passion that two plus two equals six. It's never right to say the truth lies somewhere in between. It's part of your job as a reporter to make a judgement about the quality of evidence

upon which competing claims are based. And the quality of evidence upon which the contention two plus two equals four is based, is much higher than the other side. So it's not always wrong to give more credibility and more weight to one side of an argument. So I think one of the challenges is to expose mythmaking, to expose propaganda, and to deconstruct the statement based on partly on who's saying it, and and getting out on the ground, 'shoe leather' journalism - being there, interviewing eyewitnesses, and, and eyewitnesses will sometimes lie as well. And what I've found is that it's, it's worthwhile asking corroborating detail. Ask for details that you, that you won't necessarily use. But if they're able to, say, give detailed accounts of what they saw, then the likelihood is they're not making it up.

But this is, this is a dangerous thing to do, because you're finding out things about people who don't want to be found out. So you have to be clear about your own capacity for risk. You have to be clear about your own emotional reserves. How much can you go on exposing yourself to this sort of stuff? And again, you've got to know when you've had enough when you need to take a break.

20.57

MAHA

What is the impact on journalists, when they're witness to their witness testimony of terrible events, fails to bring about the hope change? Like how do they continue? How do they continue to motivate themselves to risk their lives when those in power, and the public is not moved to action, and there's no change.

21.15

ALLAN

One of the great paradoxes of democratic society is that people are free to choose. And that freedom includes the freedom to turn a blind eye. It includes the freedom to simply ignore the suffering of others. And you've got to get used to that. And you've got to accommodate yourself to that reality. And at the end, you reach the Martha Gellhorn destination, which is the bearing witness in itself is worth it for its own sake, whether it leads to any change in public opinion or not.

But sometimes the act of bearing witness does move public opinion. In the end, in the former Yugoslavia there was intervention, which ended the war and mitigated the suffering and to some

extent punished the wrongdoers. There are lots of men sitting in prison today who were the perpetrators of appalling war crimes, because in the end public opinion was moved by the journalism that was taking place there. So you know, it can happen, but even if it doesn't, it's still worth doing.

22.16

MAHA

And if you were to give Katya and Roman one piece of advice, what would that be?

22.23

ALLAN

Keep going, stay safe. Document as much as you can. Keep the evidence safe, store it up, make sure what you're hearing is true, seek corroborating detail. Keep believing that one day this will be over and see the bigger picture. But keep going with that up close and personal detail and even detail that seems to be irrelevant. Keep asking keep asking people for their experiences, even if some of it seems to be inconsequential. Nothing is inconsequential in those circumstances. But keep believing in the - in the virtue, I think, of the idea of bearing witness.

I think a journalist has got to be very careful about becoming a combatant. I think you should be one or the other. The Ukraine war for Ukrainians is a war of national survival. It's a different kind of war. So you know, I'm not going to make judgments about the choices they make except to say that, you know, if you, being a journalist bearing witness, collecting evidence, documenting it, archiving that evidence, storing it up for future use, is valuable in itself.

23.46

MAHA

That's it for this episode. Thank you for listening.

We want this podcast series to be of practical use – so please do reach out to BBC Media Action on Twitter with your thoughts on what we should be covering.

Next time, we'll be talking to one of the founders of El Surti, a Paraguayan digital platform that is trying to meaningfully connect to their online audiences.

Subscribe to Brave New Media to make sure you don't miss it.

[TRANSITION POINT.]

This episode was a Holy Mountain production for PRIMED, a project that supports the provision of public interest content.

PRIMED is led by BBC Media Action, the BBC's international charity.

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