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Central European Journal of Communication

Volume 17 | No 4 (38) | Fall 2024

Scientific Journal of the Polish Communication Association

Table of Contents

426 *Editors' Introduction*
Marco Mazzoni, Agnieszka Stępińska

429 *Campaigning for European and National Elections. A Cross-Country Comparison between Germany, Hungary, and Romania*
Delia Cristina Balaban, Xenia Farkas, Mihnea S. Stoica

447 *To Be or Not to Be: The United News Marathon as a Source of Information and Object of Criticism during the War in Ukraine*
Mariana Kitsa, Oleh Haliv

460 *Journalism and Populism: The Attitudes Editors-in-chief Have Towards Populist Rhetoric Vary Depending on the Audience Structure of the Publications They Oversee*
Magnus Tomas Kevisas

477 *Unpacking Presidential Decisions to Use Force: Rhetorical Definition of the Enemy in William J. Clinton's Justifications of Military Engagements*
Marta Kobyłska

494 *Diversity for Sale? Moldova's Nation Branding in the Age of Commercial Nationalism*
Gianina Vulpe, Kirill Filimonov

513 *A Descriptive Inquiry of the PR Professionals in the Czech Republic*
Markéta Kaclová

531 *Doing Privacy: Exploring the Limits of Self-Determination*
Jakub Nowak, Johanna E. Möller

550 *Critical Discourse Analysis of Maximalist and Minimalist Lifestyles: A Corpus Linguistics Approach*
Aneta Duda

568 *Through the Lens of the Media: Media Logic, Fear, AI*
Interview with David L. Altheide by Norbert Merklovity

578 *Book Reviews*

590 *Events*

595 *Notes on Contributors*

To Be or Not to Be: The United News Marathon as a Source of Information and Object of Criticism during the War in Ukraine

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the analysis of the phenomenon known as the United Television Marathon (Telethon), which was launched after the beginning of the 2022 fullscale invasion of Russia into Ukraine. Ukraine's leading nationwide TV channels joined together to inform citizens about events in the country—24/7—around the clock. However, despite the apparent advantages of such a phenomenon, the United Telethon has also been a subject of criticism due to noncompliance with journalistic standards and engagement. In our article, we analyzed the content of the telethon during the most significant events that took place in the Autumn of 2022. For the study, we chose separate slots for all the Ukrainian TV channels involved in the production of the television marathon. The subject of the study concerned the approaches to inviting guests to the audiovisual recording studios of the channels, the indicators (in percentage ratio) regarding specific categories of guests, the tendency of invitations to the guest studios of speakers from political parties, state organizations, and independent experts. The next stage was the analysis of the uniqueness and importance of the information broadcast on the telethon air. To find out how often Ukrainian media refer to information from the telethon as a primary source, we conducted a content analysis of Ukrainian online media regarding the sources of information they refer to in their materials.

Keywords: war in Ukraine, United Telethon, TV, on air, critics, journalistic standards.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's fullscale invasion of Ukraine fundamentally changed the latter nation's information space. From the outset of the war, the largest national TV channels began to work within the framework of „The United News” („Edyni Novyny”) a single television marathon (henceforth the Telethon). The Telethon offers viewers depictions of events at the frontline, an analysis of the problems faced by Ukrainian refugees, an explanation of how the war in Ukraine is perceived beyond its national borders, and an examination of the geopolitical situation and economic problems caused by the Russian invasion.

The Telethon started on the first day of Russia's fullscale invasion of Ukraine, on February 24, 2022, to inform Ukrainians about the progress of the war (United Media 2022, February 27). Throughout 2022, there were multiple producers of the Telethon as each had a certain onehour slot for TV production every day. The Telethon became not only a challenge for large national TV channels to maintain 24/7, but also resulted in significant changes in the editorial policy of the channels. The key aspect is primarily the guests who were present on the air of the channels in a certain period. The usual practice of the privately owned TV channels was to invite political figures close to their owners as guests who agreed with the TV channel to manage their broadcast. This practice changed in the conditions of the Telethon. The guests were to be exclusively people who either had important information or were able to present analyses of ongoing events. These were all military experts, soldiers, representatives of authorities – as the primary source of information, international observers, European leaders, ordinary Ukrainians. Nevertheless, there were a lot of critics of the Telethon:

A project that initially received much praise as a rare display of unity among Ukrainian broadcasters, the United News marathon is now increasingly criticized for incomplete and sometimes inaccurate reporting, as well as for the presence of former staff of proRussian channels among the presenters. There are also fears of censorship disguised as necessary wartime restrictions. (Lyushnevskaya, 2022).

In Ukraine's state budget of 2023, UAH 1.6 billion was provided for the national Telethon. Discussions were held in Ukrainian mass media circles about the expediency of the Telethon in 2023 and the allocation to it of a significant quantity of taxpayers' funds, so it is important to analyze the relevance, uniqueness and importance of the content presented in the broadcasts of the telethon. While, the purpose of the Telethon was to refute fake news and disinformation, which Alyukov et al. (2023) argue Russia disseminates widely via many information sources.

METHODOLOGY

For the study, we chose the autumn period of 2022. It was at this time that the effective counteroffensives of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in Kharkiv region and Kherson, as well as massive Russian missile attacks on the country's energy infrastructure, occurred. Therefore, it is interesting to explore whether representatives of the government and the political elite often appeared on the air of private TV channels participating in the telethon to comment on the successes of the Ukrainian military, thus creating a positive image for themselves. Was the airtime sufficient so that the producers of the Telethon, which was broadcast on all TV channels, allocate times specifically to military experts and official representatives of the authorities, because during the war they were the official sources of information. The research consisted of several stages, of which the first was to analyse the theoretical developments and media materials regarding the operation of the telethon. Since the 24/7 Telethon is a unique phenomenon, there are few studies on this topic in the scientific field. At the same time, media materials about the Telethon mostly concern the allocation of funds for its operation. This initial stage employed the theoretical method, the methods of comparison, analogy, generalization, as well as the general philosophical methods of induction and deduction. The second stage involved the monitoring of the content of the Telethon. For our research, we selected individual sixhour slots of private TV channels that produced the Telethon. While most Ukrainian TV channels, from national to regional levels, broadcast the Telethon, a separate group of TV channels and media groups produce the content. The initial participants were *Suspilne Ukraine* (Ukraine's single channel National Public Broadcasting Company), *I+1 Media* (privately owned commercial; established in 1997; market leader has seven TV channels) (TV channel 1 plus 1 is a leader of watching in January 2022, February 1); *Starlight Media* (privately owned commercial; has six TV channels, such as *ICTV* and *STB*) and *Inter Media Group* (the smallest of Ukraine's privately owned commercial channels; has one TV channel). Also involved is the Directorate of Television and Radio Programs of the VRU, which belongs to the *Verkhovna Rada* of Ukraine (Official webportal of the Ukrainian parliament). The TV channel, *We Are Ukraine*, established in November 2022 by the employees of two defunct TV stations (*Ukraine* and *Ukraine24*) joined the production team of the marathon in the same month.

The design of the research program for the analysis of the invitees to the guest studios (see Table 1) was based around the broadcasts of a TV channel for 6 hours per day for 1 week during 1 month in the autumn of 2022 (*I+1* in September; *ICTV* in October; and *We Are Ukraine* in November) and the newsworthy events that occurred in the region, see Table 1).

Table 1. Framework of the research program of guest studios during the Telethon in Autumn 2022.

| TV channel Broadcaster | Month of 2022 | Week | Main Newsworthy Events |
|---------------------------|---------------|------|---|
| 1+1 | September | 714 | The HQ of the political party United Russia was blown up in occupied Melitopol In the Kharkiv region, Ukrainian forces liberated the town of Balaklia and nearby villages Russian missile attack |
| ICTV | October | 815 | Explosion on Crimean Bridge to Kerch Repulse of Russian attacks in Bakhmut and Soledar; Massive Russian missile attack on the energy infrastructure Exchange of prisoners of war Resolution recognizing the regime in Russia as terrorist, Russian drone attack |
| We Are Ukraine | November | 916 | Moscow announced withdrawal of Russian forces from left bank of Dnipro River in Kherson. Successful Ukraine military action on the Kinburn Spit The extension of martial law and general mobilization in Ukraine The G20 summit, Russians fired on liberated Kupyansk |

We analyzed whether the invitational approaches to guests to the audio visual recording studios of the channels differed, highlighted the percentages for certain categories of guests, traced the trend of invitations to independent speakers and those from politics, power organizations, and the military. The data processing method was manual. For the analysis, we used videos of the TV channels' slots on YouTube. The next stage was the analysis of the uniqueness and importance of the information broadcast on the air of the telethon. One of the criteria for the importance and novelty of information is a link to the original source in other media. To find out how often Ukrainian and world media refer to information from the telethon as a primary source, we conducted content analysis. In the Google search engine, we entered the keyword "telethon" and the phrase "about it on the air of the telethon", selected the heading "News" in the search results, and recorded the number of such links during the weeks of autumn 2022. Media that referred to information from the telethon were also singled out. The summarized results are in Table 2. Finally, using the data summarization method we summarized the results of the conducted research and identified any trends.

Considering that the Telethon is produced by several media groups, not all channels have the opportunity to produce a full sixhour slot every day. However, we were able to analyze individual channel slots that were available online.

RESULTS OF THE TELETHON: BENEFICIAL OR HARMFUL?

The pertinent TV broadcasters identified their guests to the audience, as and when they appeared in the studios, enabling the researchers to identify and categorise them (see Table 2). The 24/7 format enabled the broadcasters to bring knowledgeable people into the studios throughout the day and night to provide news updates and analyses.

Table 2. Studio guests of United Telethon broadcasters
in September, October, and November 2022.

| Category of Guests Number of Guests N = 100% | Politicians % | Independent Military Experts % | Government officials / official sources of information / other guests ¹ % |
|--|------------------|---|---|
| September 714, 2022 1+1 TV | N = 51 | 5.8 | 9.8 |
| October 815, 2022 ICTV | N = 76 | 9.2 | 10.5 |
| November 916, 2022 We Are Ukraine | N = 90 | 11.12 | 11.1 |

Notes:

1: Other guests included representatives of local selfgovernment bodies, advisers to official officials, observers, and experts from other fields who are authorized to comment on military issues

2: The politicians included representatives of two political forces – the pro government majority “Servant of the People” and “The Voice”

At the end of 2022, there was a flurry of criticism regarding the allocation of funds from the state budget for the continuation of the United Telethon. The critics' main arguments concerned the marathon's pointlessness, its irrelevance, and the lack of new information (Pavlichenko, 2022). In order to confirm or refute these claims, we decided to find out the frequency that primary information appeared in the Telethon's broadcasts, and how often mass media outlets cited the Telethon as a primary source. In the first period, 714 September, a key news item was the information that the Ukrainian Armed Forces had liberated Kiselyvka and that only Chornobayivka separated them from Kherson. For the first time, Oleksandr Samoilenko, Chairman of the Kherson Regional Council, appeared on the broadcast of the Telethon and voiced his assessment of the news. Subsequently, the most popular of Ukraine's online mass media referred to the Telethon when reporting the news or cited Samoilenko and the Telethon by stating early in their reportage: “he [Samoilenko] stated this on air on the national [United] Telethon...”. Overall, 16 online mass media referred to or cited the Telethon in their reportage (see Table 3, Column 1)

In the second period, 815 October, information from the Telethon's broadcasts were mostly concerned with several waves of Russian cruise missile attacks targeting Ukraine's energy sector and the heavy toll in lives lost. As with the news broadcast by the Telethon in September, Ukraine's online media outlets (see Table 3, Column 2) cited the Telethon as the primary source for their reportages.

Russia's barrage of missiles launched at Ukraine, the damage they caused on Ukrainian cities, counterbalanced by the liberation of Kherson dominated the Telethon in November. During this period, 24 of Ukraine's online media outlets cited the Telethon as the primary source for their reportages 916 November (see Table 3, Column 3).

Table 3. Mass media outlets that referred to the United Telethon as their primary source of information

| Analyzed weeks of 24/7 Broadcast of United Telethon | September 7–14, 2022 | October 8–15, 2022 | November 9–16, 2022 |
|---|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Media Outlets | (n=16) | (n=19) | (n=22) |
| Armyinform (https://armyinform.com.ua/) | X | X | X |
| Dzerkalo Tyzhnia (https://zn.ua/) | X | X | X |
| LB.ua (https://lb.ua/) | X | X | X |
| New Voice (https://nv.ua/) | X | X | X |
| Radio Liberty (https://www.radiosvoboda.org/) | X | X | X |
| Slovovidilo (https://www.slovovidilo.ua/) | X | X | X |
| Susipilne (https://susipilne.media/) | X | X | X |
| TSN (https://tsn.ua/) | X | X | X |
| Ukrainska Pravda (https://www.pravda.com.ua/) | X | X | X |
| Ukrinform (https://www.ukrinform.ua/blocklastnews) | X | X | X |
| DW (https://www.dw.com/) | | X | X |
| Gordon (https://gordonua.com/ukr/) | | X | X |
| Korespondent.net (https://ua.korrespondent.net/) | | X | X |
| Pryamyy (https://prm.ua/) | | X | X |
| Unian (https://www.unian.ua/) | | X | X |
| Zahid.net (https://zaxid.net/) | | X | X |
| RBC-Ukraine (https://www.rbc.ua/) | X | X | |
| Glavkom (https://glavcom.ua/) | X | | X |
| Focus (https://focus.ua/) | X | | |
| Slovoproslovo (https://slovoproslovo.info/) | X | | |
| Zmina" (https://zmina.info/) | X | | |
| Zbruch (https://zbruc.eu/) | X | | |
| Fakty (https://fakty.com.ua/ua/) | | X | |
| Hromadske (https://hromadske.ua/) | | X | |

| Analyzed weeks of 24/7 Broadcast of United Telethon | September 7–14, 2022 | October 8–15, 2022 | November 9–16, 2022 |
|---|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Media Outlets | (n=16) | (n=19) | (n=22) |
| BBC Ukraine (https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian) | | X | |
| Express (https://expres.online/) | | X | |
| Forbes.ua (https://forbes.ua/) | | X | |
| Interfax-Ukraine (https://interfax.com.ua/) | | X | |
| Obozrevatel (https://www.obozrevatel.com/) | | X | |

DISCUSSION

The main aim of the creation of the National Telethon was to fight Russian propaganda and fake news. But, even before the outbreak of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it was clear that modern online tools could be used for both accurate reporting and disinformation campaigns (Virostková, 2022). Consequently, any approaches for refuting fake news must involve a wide range of means and methods. The most novel method was as Goldbart (2022) explains: "Ukraine's biggest media groups have united to broadcast one all-encompassing news service to cover the conflict, as they urge the world to impose "media sanctions" and turn off Russian channels". Just as Selvarajah and Fiorito (2023) declare the first days of the Russian invasion were of extreme importance for the ensuing conflict, so too was the justified decision to start of United Telethon on the first day of the conflict.

The 2022 fullscale Russian-Ukrainian war not only resulted in deaths and injuries but also affected the lives and safety of the populace through the destruction of healthcare facilities and disruption to the delivery of healthcare and supplies (Haque et al., 2022). Putzyata (2023), after analyzing the structure of the national telethon, argues it consists of informational subplots concerning a broad range of sociopolitical, military, economic, medical, culturalhistorical, sports, scientific, and logistical topics (Putzyata, 2023). However, our research found the main themes of the United Telethon were military and sociopolitical. The United Telethon did highlight medical and humanitarian themes, but only when Ukraine liberated captured territories or new medical and social programs were provided. Also, despite the argument that the economy is vital during wartime, the United Telethon mostly lacked any information and discussions on economic topics (Welfens, 2023).. Two of the most significant aspects of the United Telemarathon are its 24/7 broadcasting and the huge number of invited commentators, experts, and authorities.

A principal focus of research into the era of broadcast mass media pivots around the concerns of representation, which as Hoskins (2010) suggests include the

notions of accuracy, veracity and objectivity (Hoskins, 2010). Martial law has the tendency of restricting a great deal of available peacetime information. Indeed, “[u]nder martial law, the Ukrainian government imposes certain restrictions on the work of journalists covering the war (...) Reporting restrictions include the prohibition on publishing information that could endanger Ukraine’s national security or harm the Armed Forces” (Reporting Ukraine Guide 2025). Despite being unable to determine or verify the accuracy and veracity of the information broadcasts by the Telethon, we did examine the objectivity of representations due to the quantity and core roles of the experts, whom the broadcasters invited as commentators or special guests.

The study discovered the majority of experts in the Telethon were members of the majority political party *Sluga Narodu* (Servant of the People). The dominant presence of these propresidential party is partly because they occupy the leading positions in the government and parliament, for which reason the broadcasting channels invite them as officials. The other reason is as Payne explains: “if the media are present, and they are undermining the political military strategy, it makes sense to control them. If they are behaving in a nonneutral way, it may even seem appropriate to target them”. In May 2022, the government disconnected three TV channels—*Pryamiy*, *Pyatiy*, and *Espresso*—from the digital TV broadcasting network but allowed them to retain the ability to broadcast via satellite and online platforms. The government’s stated reason was that all three supported the narcissistic former president and opposition leader, Petro Poroshenko (Mahda, 2022). Such a policy does not strengthen muchneeded national and political unity.

Moreover, unity must be democratic, and not authoritarian, to be effective for the country. The authorities’ rhetoric that now is “not the time” for other issues, apart from the war, may seem quite convincing to many citizens (Stepanenko, 2022). Indeed, during the first year of the war, the United Telethon played a significant role in supporting civic society, increasing both its patriotism and confidence in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In a comment to the BBC publication in the material “Telemarathon: how it changes the Ukrainian society and the media market”, Volodymyr Paniotto, director general of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, and a professor at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, notes that “the uniformity of the information space contributed to the cohesion of society and improved attitudes towards state institutions and the president.” In support of Paniotto, Korba (2022) argues “[t]his was influenced by both the war and the lack of opposition channels that constantly criticized the authorities and Zelensky personally”.

Kulias (2022) declares that while the Telethon can be forgiven for overly emotional reporting during the war, it must still observe key journalistic standards. But as mentioned above, the most of the guests and commentators in the

Telethon represent one political party. Therefore, the expectation of the norm of a balanced argument was not met. The question, therefore, is how—during martial law—can the balance be maintained between adhering to the journalistic standards and the restrictions?

Connelly et. al. (2019) partially answer this question, although writing about US information restrictions in Iraq and Afghanistan:

in this Information Age, it is not unreasonable to expect governments and other groups to conduct propaganda and censorship – in times of both war and peace (e.g., the Bush administration’s ban on photographing coffins returning to the United States with the bodies of soldiers killed in action in Afghanistan and Iraq, or generally denying terrorist groups the oxygen of publicity). (Connelly et al., 2019).

The authors also explain that the new challenge for authorities is to struggle with propaganda and fake news, which in the Information Age are spread rapidly through digitized social media networks. Karpchuk (2022) argues that war creates an aggressive environment, which also affects the communication processes in the information sphere of the state, in particular, there is more emphasis on information, and less on deliberation. So, it is clear that government, especially during a war, tries to spread information that will have a positive, optimistic, and encouraging influence on society. In addition, our research indicated that the information in the United Marathon is unique and valuable, which is evidenced the quantity of Ukrainian as well as international media (United Telemarathon, 2022) that cite use the information from the United News as their primary source. The United Telethon fulfilled its main aim of refuting Russian propaganda, as Oleinik (2023) argues: “it was determined that despite the severe restrictions imposed by the government, the war propaganda in Russia appeared to be relatively ineffective. President Putin’s messages tended to be ‘lost in transmission’.

Hybrid warfare coined in 2005 when used to describe Hezbollah’s strategy in the 2006 Lebanon War (Kaldor, 2012) and comprises, as Bell (2023) explains, a type of conflict that blends conventional and unconventional methods, including military operations, cyber warfare, disinformation campaigns, and economic pressure. Baker et al. (2023) argue that as the Russia’s Ukrainian invasion clearly shows, the use of hybrid warfare should be met with a strong reaction from the international community at the earliest possible stage, especially from peace loving neutral countries. Otherwise, the future will be an expanded unlawful and barbaric military conflict (Baker et al., 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

The research shows the success of the Armed Forces in the advanced positions of the Russia's invasion of Ukraine war does not significantly affect the list of guests invited to the United Telethon. Those broadcasts, that mention the major achievements of the Armed Forces, are not dominated by political figures, who are given time in the audiovisual recording studios, which could thereby shape their positive image in the eyes of society. As a rule, experts usually comment on military topics. Therefore, from the analysis of the selected slots (see Table 3, Columns 1–3), it can be seen that the speakers of most military topics are military experts – independent observers, or representatives of power structures, competent in understanding the situation at the frontlines.

The presence of politicians on average does not exceed 10–11% of the total number of guests. However, among them there are mostly representatives of the progovernment party and the majority in the Parliament or, as in the case of the TV channel “I+I”, the political group “For the Future”, which many Ukrainian media associate with the owners of the TV channel “I+I”.

The presence of representatives of only the proruling party can be explained by their leadership positions in parliamentary committees. Politicians are often invited to the audiovisual recording studios as representatives of parliamentary committees, not political forces. On the other hand, the presence of opposition politicians in the broadcasts is rare, for which reason the Telethon is often criticized. According to observers and opposition politicians, the presence of representatives of nonruling parliamentary parties on the airwaves of the nationally broadcasted Telethon is limited because they could, on air, criticize the current government. This would negatively impact not only public consciousness but also society's perception of government and state institutions and during the period of martial law. This, in turn, could negatively affect morale and stability within the country, and lead as a result to defeats on the battlefield. The number of guests in the slots of differs from one broadcaster to another but essentially depends on the time of day when the content is produced, the situation at the front, social and political news, as well as the editorial construction of the slot. Some of the Telethon's broadcasters maintain the tried and trusted traditional format of guest studios, whereas others try new ones. For example, “We Are Ukraine”, prefer their guests to give expert analysis in a conversational format, as opposed to a data filled monologue. By contrast, “ICTV” distracts the audiences of the guest studios every hour with informational news releases – both short and fuller. However, there is a trend that despite the uneven saturation occurring throughout the information day, military experts and representatives of authorities, both competent in matters of military operations, remain

the main speakers of the Telethon. This strategy helps to maintain the expertise and keep the information field in line with the realities of war.

Ukrainian's trust in the United Telethon is declining. According to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, the share of those who trust the news marathon decreased between May 2022 and October 2023, from 69% to 48%. By December 2023, this figure had dropped to 43%.

Simultaneously, during 4–10 December, 2022 a survey (N=1200 respondents) was conducted that sought to identify the level of trust the public had in the United Telethon, which revealed that approximately onethird of the respondents had lost all trust in the Telethon (Trust the United Telethon (2023)¹). The loss of trust by the audience can be explained by the unchanged format of the broadcasting of the Telethon. Since the beginning of the invasion, the creators of the Telethon have mostly used the same approaches to creating content, without offering viewers new variations of information and analytical programs. In addition, the Telethon is constantly criticized because of the participation of government officials in the programs and the absence of opposition politicians. Viewers associate this with media censorship and the government's desire to have absolute influence on the policy of the news Telethon.

It should also be remembered that television broadcasting in the early 2020s is experiencing a highly competitive environment with other platforms, both analogue and digital, that inform the public about the course of events. For example, according to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 44% of respondents now receive information from *Telegram* channels, 43% from TV (older respondents), 36% from YouTube channels, and 34% from online news outlets.

The information produced by *Telegram* channels can differ significantly from that presented by professional media outlets in the news Telethon. In particular, this applies to Ukraine's successes on the battlefield and in the international arena. Given the disappointment of Ukrainians with the promises made on TV in the first weeks of Russia's largescale invasion, they are now more attentive to both positive and negative information. Therefore, *Telegram* has become a place where you can get various data, including from Russian sources. In the Telethon, meanwhile, information is presented exclusively according to agreed rules that would not harm the information security of the state.

Many Ukrainians are also tired of the constant negative information generated by the invasion. So, they look for lighter, often entertaining, content, which poses another challenge facing the news Telethon.

¹ The method of computerized telephone interviews allowed us to interview 1200 respondents living in all regions of Ukraine, except for the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. The sample also excluded both the residents of those territories temporarily not controlled by the Ukrainian authorities until February 24, 2022 (the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the city of Sevastopol, certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions), and Ukrainians citizens resident abroad.

Despite the criticism of the United Telethon, our research proved that it would continue to be an important source of information, particularly a primary source for many Ukrainian online media. So, this phenomenon will continue as long as it is in demand and useful for society. To avoid any negative criticism, the broadcasters should invite guests from across the political spectrum, particularly the opposition, as this strategy would support democratic values and be proUkrainian.

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