8 An Unexpected Battlefield: Weaponization of Online Piracy as a New Domain in Digital War

Kateryna Boyko

On February 24, 2022, users of the biggest Ukrainian torrent tracker[1] called to suspend file-sharing in order not to overload communication infrastructure and thus help the state and society cope with the first strikes of the Russian military. In the meantime, already in April 2022, Russian cinemas started so-called 'unofficial screenings' of blockbusters and cartoons taunting Western sanctions that included, in particular, the withdrawal of the major Western studios like Warner Bros., Universal Pictures, Disney, Sony and Paramount (Pogosian 2022). It quickly appeared that the full-scale war had touched even the sphere of unauthorized content distribution on the levels of the state and private initiatives. This chapter defines the role of intellectual piracy during the Russo-Ukrainian War. In particular, it seeks to explore to what extent piracy can be weaponized by state institutions or harbor subactivist grassroots resistance practices as a new domain of digital participative warfare.

I argue that while copyright and circulation of unauthorized content have often been politicized historically, now they have become an element of digital participative warfare for offensive and defensive purposes. On the one hand, one can observe how Russia and Belarus, following Soviet traditions, started to encourage intellectual piracy as a symbolic gesture to defy Western sanctions but also disseminate malware via pirated content on torrent trackers and similar pirate spaces. The Ukrainian context demonstrated the unprecedented mobilization of the pirate communities who contributed to the Ukrainian war effort as voluntary data warriors.

After a short presentation of theoretical concepts and methodology, the chapter highlights how colonial and postcolonial conditions have shaped intellectual piracy

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1   A torrent tracker is a website that facilitates exchange of cultural content – both authorized and unauthorized. Although it does not host cultural content on its servers directly, it contains a library of torrent files that allow users to establish direct and partially anonymous connections between each other's computers with the help of special software and hence share cultural content with each other.

in Ukraine. It proceeds with changes in attitudes towards piracy among the adversary states after Russia's full-scale invasion. Afterwards, I explore how several Ukrainian pirate communities contributed to the Ukrainian war effort, specifically focusing on the biggest torrent tracker in the Ukrainian language segment. The conclusions section draws historical parallels with piracy on the state service in contrast to the self-mobilization of communities in the grey zone to protect their state.

Remark on Theory and Methodology

Digital war has been conceptualized as a subfield within the mediatization of war, focusing on integrating digital media practices into warfare (Horbyk 2023a: 121–122). In this process, mundane and seemingly 'civilian' practices are routinely weaponized. The meaning of the concept 'weaponization' may range from metaphorical 'over-politicizing things that had been, and should remain, neutral or peaceful' (Mattson 2020: 250) to utilizing something as a weapon in the war context – 'a means of gaining advantage or defending oneself in a conflict or contest' (DuBois King 2015: 155). This study takes inspiration from both of these definitions. It explores how the phenomenon from a peaceful context, like intellectual piracy, can be utilized to gain an advantage in wartime, targeting internal or external audiences. Notably, a few previous studies that give a passing reference to the weaponization of copyright or piracy discuss security risks from unauthorized content use (Bal 2023) or, on the contrary, using patented medicines as instruments of influence in the Global South (Keeyaa 2019). The current chapter brings a communication grassroots perspective to the discussion started by Little and Imasogie (2022), who emphasize the legal aspects of wartime piracy in Russia.

Furthermore, previous research shows that some pirate practices like torrent use imply the existence of groups that unite like-minded people (Beekhuyzen et al. 2011; Diamant-Cohen/Golan 2017; Holmström 2015) with a common aesthetic or ideological agenda (Boyko 2021; Lindgren/Linde 2012, Mylonas 2012; Nowak 2016). Since such communities are rooted in routinized everyday practices of content consumption, one can approach civic-oriented pirate practices as instances of subactivism (Bakardjieva 2009, 2012a, 2012b). Maria Bakardjieva bases her idea on Ulrich Beck's notion of subpolitics (Beck 1997 [1996]). Beck argues that politics no longer resides only in formal institutions such as political parties or trade unions. Instead, grassroots-oriented collective and individual actors outside the traditional political system may 'appear on the stage of social design' (Ibid.: 103). Therefore, subactivism is a level of civic engagement that comprises individual actions within one's private sphere that may have a political or ethical underpinning:

> A kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life. It is constituted by small-scale, often individual, decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and are difficult to capture using the traditional tools with which political participation is measured (Bakardjieva 2012b: 86).

In addition, Channell-Justice (2022), Krasynska and Martin (2017) show the vital role of informal movements in the Ukrainian public sphere, especially during the mass mobilization periods, such as the Euromaidan protest in 2013–2014. Then, despite the presence of oppositional politicians and NGOs, the protest primarily functioned as "a decentralized conglomeration of independent coordinating movements that united people according to their interests, skill sets, ideology, and even industrial sectors" (Krasynska/Martin 2017: 441). The absence of a single leader and reliance on multiple informal individual initiatives are considered as one of the reasons behind Euromaidan's success. Can pirate communities become an instance of such an informal movement that contributes to Ukraine's resistance against Russia's aggression?

The study primarily centers around the Ukrainian case; however, it uses developments in Russia and Belarus as a background for occasional comparison. It is based on digital ethnographic observations (Sarah Pink et al. 2016) of the biggest and the oldest Ukrainian torrent community, which is here called by a fictional name *Komora*² and 20 interviews with its participants conducted in two phases (2020–2021 and 2024). Additionally, interviews with a lawyer and a media expert were conducted in 2022. Although the observations which lasted from 2019 to 2023 mainly stuck to the torrent tracker's Forum and the Telegram chat, the study approaches the observation field as multi-sited (Marcus 1995) and 'fuzzy', meaning that it lacks 'clear boundaries with regard to many dimensions' (Nadai/Maeder 2005: 4). My observation field is not bounded to a group or territory; instead, it is created by connections between things and processes crossing online/offline contexts (Hine 2009; Postil/Pink 2012). Thus, the Telegram posts about the post-invasion pirate practices in Russia and Belarus served as an invitation to explore publications on the issue in the news media.

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2   In order to prevent identification of my informants, both the torrent tracker and the interviewees are ascribed aliases. For the same reason, I withhold the links that lead to the torrent tracker or conversations in the respective Telegram chat. I still mention names of the torrent-trackers that have already been revealed in academic literature, IP protection reports, and mainstream media since they are well known.

Faces of Ukrainian Piracy

Copyright infringement is not rare in Ukraine. It has been presented as problematic in reports about intellectual property (IP) violations for decades (for the first time, it appeared on the Special 301 report in 1998). In the pre-invasion reports issued by the Office of the United States Trade Representative (IIPA 2022 Special 301 Report…) and European Commission (Report on the protection and enforcement… 2020), Ukraine (together with Russia) was the only Eastern European country on the priority watch lists. Indeed, the consumption of pirated cultural and entertainment content is still very popular, although this habit is slowly declining. In 2018, a survey for the anti-pirate NGO *Clear Sky* demonstrated that 89 percent of respondents supported fighting piracy, while only 14 percent of users were ready to pay for the content, and 6–7 percent had previous experience doing it (Zakusylo 2018). The research conducted by the Ukrainian Anti-Pirate Association in 2021 estimated that 89 percent of all pirate websites were streaming platforms, 10 percent – torrent trackers, and 1 percent – websites that posted links to pirated content (IIPA 2022 Special 301 Report…: 105). These pirate websites rely on mixed funding, usually advertising and sometimes voluntary donations of users.

In Ukraine, piracy has been strongly intertwined with the postcolonial condition (Young 2012). And it is not a rare combination. Historically, one of the earliest instances of intellectual piracy dealt with British 'colonies at home': publishers in Scotland and Ireland not only produced cheaper reprints but also published censored books. Such practices were followed by the newly founded United States that, throughout the nineteenth century, refused to recognize British copyright (Balázs 2011: 399; Johns 2010; Eckstein 2016: 162). Thus, intellectual piracy originated 'not driven by profit alone; it also signalled a resistance to the authority of the former colonial power' (Fredriksson 2012).

In Ukraine, the circulation of unauthorized content was historically associated with resistance to censorship and a national struggle against the Russian Empire. During the Tsarist times, when publications in Ukrainian were mainly forbidden, establishing local underground publishing houses or smuggling forbidden literature from abroad were common (Karpenko/Maimeskul 2011; Starodub 2004; Svitlenko 2003). During Soviet times, underground circulation of the content was not only about escaping the gloomy reality of the socialist state and getting some entertainment beyond the state's control and propaganda (Mattelart 1994: 274). Unofficially reproduced and distributed literary works or political essays, aka *samvydav*, DIY music recordings, and smuggling texts from abroad are estimated as a locus of the parallel public sphere, 'a heroic act of resistance' (Haigh 2007: 172). In the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, which suffered from a systematic Russification policy (Satzewich 2003), *samvydav* and Ukrainian music were associated with cultural resistance and the 'emergence of a modern Ukrainian identity' (Ibid.: 165;

Helbig 2012). It became a base for the national revival during Perestroika and later contributed to the proclamation of Ukraine's independence in 1991 (Kuzio 1990).

Ukraine's postcolonial legacy resulted in the traditional distrust of state authorities, who had represented a foreign metropolis with foreign interests for centuries. Distrust in the authorities (Kuzio 2012), visible on every pre-invasion poll, and 'weak criminal, civil, and administrative enforcement' of the IP rights by these very authorities (IIPA 2022 Special 301 Report...: 103) contributed to a widespread positive attitude towards piracy and equating it to the freedom of speech and pluralism.

However, the picture is much more complicated than that. Modern Ukrainian piracy developed in conditions where the news media market and a market of legal entertainment content had limited infrastructural sovereignty (Horbyk 2023b), meaning that a lot of media infrastructure and institutions were subordinated to the Russian ones. The entertainment content market was subjected to Russia for a long time: most cinema distributors were branches of Russian companies. Ukrainian OTT platforms such as *Oll.tv*, *Megogo*, *Sweet.tv* and *Kyivstar TB* usually did not purchase foreign content directly from foreign distributors but from Russian platforms. For example, before the invasion, the Ukrainian streaming services would buy content from the Russian company *Amediateka*, which held exclusive rights to broadcast movies and series from HBO, FOX, Showtime, Starz, BBC on the Ukrainian territory (Dankova 2022). Thus, it was, for example, impossible to watch *Game of Thrones* in Ukraine legally without a Russian intermediary. Combined with the prevalence of Russian language content in the mass media, this created limited legal opportunities to consume Ukrainian language content (at least before implementing language quotas and the 2019 language law).[3]

Pirates, in their turn, are driven by market logic and not bound by copyright agreements. Therefore, they tried to satisfy the needs of their customers by providing free-of-charge and diverse content, particularly in Ukrainian, that could otherwise be unavailable. However, there was a place for idealistic projects that mobilized the community to collect, preserve and disseminate content in Ukrainian. In such communities that reside on the edge of legality, civic logic prevails sometimes, as it happened after Russia's full-scale invasion.

Therefore, after the proclamation of independence, Ukraine inherited both a postcolonial attitude towards piracy as an act of resistance to the state and the

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3   "The Law of Ukraine On Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language" adopted in 2019 demanded that the websites and social media pages of state institutions and local municipalities, state companies, Ukrainian news media, and retailers be in Ukrainian. TV channels and streaming services must broadcast all movies and series either in Ukrainian or dubbed into Ukrainian. This was one of the factors that encouraged Netflix and Amazon Prime to start providing Ukrainian dubbing or adding subtitles to their content.

cultural content market heavily dominated by the former metropolis, organization-
ally and content-wise. The pirates filled the niche of Ukrainian language content
that targeted audiences driven in particular by their national identity in content
consumption.

After February 24, 2022: How do the Adversaries Frame Piracy?

After the full-scale invasion, Ukraine and Russia changed their official attitudes to-
wards piracy. Russia and its ally Belarus partially legalized piracy to demonstrate to
the West their disregard for international law as well as to give their populace ac-
cess to the content of major Western distributors. Thus, in early March 2022, the
biggest Russian torrent tracker, *Rutracker,* banned in Russia since 2016, was deleted
from the list of prohibited websites and unblocked (Naumova 2022). In Decree 299
from March 6, 2022, the Russian government provided that patentees from "un-
friendly" countries would receive no compensation for infringement (O vnesenii iz-
menieniya... 2022). Following this line, in January 2023, Belarus adopted a law per-
mitting the use of movies, music and software without acquiring permission from
copyright holders of the 'unfriendly' countries (Bohdaniok 2023). In March 2023, the
deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, former Russian president Dmitriy
Medvedev, urged using pirate services and disseminating pirated content to 'inflict
maximum damage on the Western copyright holders' (Medvedev prizval... 2023).

In addition, some court decisions from that time proved that 'restricting in-
tellectual property protection in Russia is considered a legitimate wartime tactic'
(Peppa Pig losses... 2022). On March 3, 2022, Judge Andrei Slavinsky from the Kirov
court dismissed the trademark infringement case regarding the Peppa Pig image
and 'specifically justified his decision by referring to the American and British sanc-
tions against Russia' (Little/Imasogie 2022: 316). Western scholars interpreted the
appeal court's subsequent cancellation of this decision as a potential 'Russian strat-
egy to use the threat of removing intellectual property rights to protest sanctions or
deter other countries from further penalizing Russia.' (Ibid.: 318)

The Russian cinema market was also turned upside down. After sanctions from
Western film distributors, cinemas started 'acquiring' film copies from other for-
mer Soviet states, particularly Kazakhstan. They invented sophisticated screening
formats to bypass Russian laws that formally had to be abided. For example, an 'ex-
ternal organizer' could 'hire' a cinema to hold a 'cinema party' while the cinema was
'unaware' of its content. Another format has been called 'free pre-screening service'.
The viewers watched a legal Russian short movie or cartoon preceded by an unau-
thorized full-length foreign movie (Kirillova 2022).

Such cinematic piracy unbalanced the Russian cinema market: Russian movies
became disadvantaged compared to much cheaper pirated Western film copies.

Thus, local film distributors requested the cinemas to abstain from pirate screenings when Russian blockbusters were on. It happened in particular with the Soviet nostalgia-inspired sci-fi movie *One Hundred Years Ahead* (2024, dir. Alexander Andriushchenko) and the WWII action with the *popadanstvo* elements[4] – *The Dugout* (2024, dir. Mark Gorobets) that were on in April 2024 (Mingazov 2024). Although some cinemas followed the demands and put Russian cinemagoers on a strict movie diet of propagandistic films, it did not increase the box office significantly (Mimikonian 2024).

Similarly to Western movie distributors, many publishing houses have also terminated cooperation with Russian colleagues. Trying to stay afloat, local publishers started printing summaries of the books for which they had not acquired the copyright. According to the representative of one of the biggest Russian publishing houses, *Eksmo*, such summaries 'include key ideas of the book without using direct quotes from it' (Lebedeva 2023). This publisher planned to issue the scandalous memoir *Spare* by Prince Harry exactly in the summary format because the copyright holder *Penguin Random House* stopped working on the Russian market in 2022 (Ibid).

In the wake of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian market of entertainment content failed the check for the copyright commitment. Having faced sanctions by Western copyright holders, Russian distributors had to choose between respect to IP rights and the market logic that, on the one hand, demanded satisfying the population's needs in the content but, on the other, did not contradict the state's policy. By looking the other way or even explicitly encouraging piracy, Russian state actors performed a symbolic return to the Soviet practices of state piracy that for decades enjoyed selective recognition of foreign copyright (Kiriya/Sherstoboeva 2015: 842; Haigh 2007: 168) and joined the Universal Copyright Convention only in 1973 (Senzeva 2012: 154). The tectonic shifts of the entertainment content market led to its decentralization. Contrary to the pre-invasion situation, Russian cinemas had to rely on the supplies of film content from the former Soviet colonies. The cinemas also turned to various rogue survival tactics that were in line with anti-Western state rhetoric and the general nihilism of Russian society.

At the same time, Ukraine appeared on a split regarding IP protection. On the one hand, Ukrainians have been fighting and dying on the frontline, in particular, for liberal values, including respect for copyright. The progress in combating piracy has been strongly associated with Euro-Atlantic integration. Being tied by the obligations to its international partners, Ukraine – unlike Russia – has never used piracy

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4   *Popadanstvo* is a pulp science fiction genre popular in Russia. It usually features stories about characters from one era (typically our times) who end up in the past (or sometimes in the future, or in an alternative timeline) where they had to cooperate with characters from that era in order to save Russia from enemies and increase Russian state power (Zabirko 2018).

as a leverage of influence. On the other hand, at the moment of invasion, consumption of unauthorized content was still widespread and continued to be so amid the decrease in general income. It was not a proper time to change the habits of people under permanent stress when one part of the population was hiding in the corridors from the Russian missile strikes, and another, in between fights on the frontline, heavily relied on torrent trackers or unofficial streaming services to access the content (Interviews with Mykola and Serhiy 2024). In addition, after the invasion, Ukrainian TV channels – the major fighters against piracy in Ukraine – suffered substantial financial losses (Boyko/Horbyk 2023) and fired their anti-pirate departments (Interview with media expert 2022).

Ukraine had to adjust its framing of piracy to bypass all the pain points. It emphasized security concerns: downloading unauthorized files that might include malware may hinder individual security and compromise military operations. For example, the 2023 report from the State Service of Special Communications and Information Protection of Ukraine stated that Russian hackers disseminated malware through pirate spaces. According to the report, Russian intelligence services trojanized 'cracked' software. They published it on torrent trackers to get access to the computers of the users who downloaded it (Russia's Cyber Tactics... 2023: 29). In this vein, the Service announced that 'it is not time for pirates' (the State Service Telegram channel, Oct 15, 2022).

Another security case concerned Starlink terminals which have been the main internet gateway on the frontline. In 2023, Space X started to warn Ukrainian users about downloading pirated content via Starlink terminals. In light of Elon Musk's ambivalent allegiances, pirate practices were interpreted as those that could potentially compromise military operations. "This can lead to disabling the service, leaving somebody without communication. Yes, this means that one should not download torrents and other junk via the Starlink terminals", wrote the admin of the community *People's Starlink* in a Facebook post (Starlink mozhe blokuvaty... 2023).

Some illegal streaming platforms were banned in the package with other content providers from 'the aggressor state'. In 2023, the primary media regulator in Ukraine – the National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting – issued a list of the banned media services connected to Russia that, apart from legal providers like the above-mentioned *Amediateka*, included several clusters of illegal streaming services. A popular platform *HDrezka* was one of them (Perelik audiovizualnykh... 2023). The reasoning behind such a decision was not piracy. 'The service targets the audience of the aggressor state, its interface utilizes the Russian language. It also disseminates movies that, according to the law on cinematography, are banned on Ukrainian territory', commented the member of the regulator Maksym Onoprienko (Yakovenko 2023).

Amid potentially increased interest in pirated content consumption, the Ukrainian state has been inflicting pinpoint tactical strikes that dealt with cy-

ber security, the reliability of communication technology, and limiting access to Russian propaganda. This has not resolved tensions between the 'European' values rhetoric and pirate consumption practices. Another aspect of this phenomenon is the civil practices performed by pirate communities.

Therefore, the adversaries employ different strategies towards piracy. Russia and Belarus, while framing the attack on Ukraine as a part of the struggle against the West, allow the expansion of pirate practices on the legal content market. However, it is not an act of copyright defiance per se but an attempt, if not to inflict economic damage to the symbolic enemy than to demonstrate to the populace that the damage has been done. Ukrainian state, in turn, approaches piracy as a field of information warfare, thus trying to limit security risks from pirate websites being channels for Russian propaganda and a source of malicious malware. While the Ukrainian general public overall agreed with the government's line, it is doubtful that in practice it changed media consumption habits significantly.

Ukrainian Pirates and the Limits of Civic Logic

The existential threats of the full-scale war reshuffled the identities of those involved in piracy, putting civil and national identities at the forefront and pushing them to join national resistance. Sometimes, it happened literally: some people involved in the underground content market voluntarily joined the military. At the beginning of the invasion, one smaller Ukrainian torrent tracker asked not to expect new releases because the people responsible for them had joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). An underground dubbing studio, while announcing the cancellation of *The Mandalorian* dubbing, praised their colleague who enlisted in the army: 'Special thanks to the actor XX who instead of the fictional star wars protects us and our country from the country-dung-Russia as the AFU member in the real war' (Feb 22, 2023).

The war also affected pirate practices and forced the involved actors to announce allegiances. First and foremost, it went about separating from the Russian cultural sphere content-wise. According to the media expert I interviewed, after the invasion, unofficial platforms were removing Russian content and Russian TV channels. Ukrainian underground dubbing studios that had previously dubbed into Russian stopped doing it (observations of their TG channels). Those pirate spaces that already focused on the Ukrainian language content joined charity campaigns. One of the smaller torrent trackers posted banners leading to the *Come Back Alive* crowdfunding initiative and the recruitment center of the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade of the armed forces. Instead of showing online casino ads, streaming services also provided major Ukrainian volunteer foundations with free advertisement spots or substituted advertisements with English-language videos urging to support Ukraine.

Therefore, at the beginning of the invasion, many pirate spaces decided to take a stance rather than stay neutral. In such cases, the pirate platforms' admins demonstrated the prevalence of civic logic over market logic, such as when they deliberately narrowed the choice of cultural content. It did not exclude embracing the zeitgeist and following their spontaneous responses to the invasion but also meeting the demands of the Ukrainian audience. In addition, pirate spaces also encouraged their users to participate in resistance by donating to the war effort or joining the military. They engaged in subactivist practices and encouraged the users to follow their example.

The pirates' contribution to the war effort did not happen without controversies that questioned the extent to which such practices may be accepted. For example, an unofficial streaming platform *HDrezka* mainly targeted the Russian market, although it was allegedly founded by Ukrainians. In 2020, it started expanding on the Ukrainian language content market when it hired a Ukrainian underground dubbing studio to dub foreign films in the national language (Litzkevych 2023). It was one of Ukraine's most visited websites for a long time (Sayenko 2023). From the very beginning of the invasion, it adorned its interface with Ukrainian flags as well as slogans of defiance to the Russian aggressor (e.g. the *Russian warship, go f*ck yourself* meme). It also added special announcements to every episode of popular TV series issued at that time, encouraging audiences to choose the Ukrainian dubbing over the Russian:

> Ukrainians! Watch your favorite TV series in Ukrainian and invite your loved ones to use HDrezka. We try to translate all interesting projects. Let the Russian dubbing repeat the fate of the Russian warship. Together towards victory! Glory to Ukraine! (online observations, September 5, 2022).

Users from Ukraine and Western European countries could see this adamantly pro-Ukrainian interface. However, according to journalists, the website looked neutral when accessed from a Russian IP (Litzkevych 2023). In October 2024, one year after the website's ban on Ukrainian territory, it returned to a neutral interface if accessed from Sweden.

Such situations pose a question of whether supporting the Ukrainian resistance was a marketing tool to secure different audiences or a sincere act because 'they are against the war like all decent people', as a Ukrainian torrent user interpreted the pro-Ukrainian branding of *HDrezka* on Feb 27, 2022 (Observations, Komora's Forum). And to what extent is support from such controversial spaces acceptable? Indeed, this pirate online space also continued to work for Russian audiences. Still, simultaneously, it provided free advertisement spots for Ukrainian charities and military units that could potentially boost crowdfunding campaigns. As mentioned above, this tension was resolved by the state ban, but it exemplifies the complexities

of marginal communities' involvement in resistance in times of existential threats. The right choice between the Machiavellian *il fine giustifica i mezzi* and reputational risks is not so obvious. In the case of *HDrezka*, one had not only to factor out the IP protection issue but also to weigh up the advantages of stronger crowdfunding against the risks of keeping the Ukrainian audience on the website that provided, in particular, Russian propagandistic content.

Komora Goes to War

After investigating the role of piracy during the war on the macro level of the states and the mezzo level of the pirate platforms, it is time to look at the micro level – individual subactivist practices of pirate users on the example of *Komora*. It is the biggest Ukrainian torrent tracker that offers exclusively Ukrainian language content (original or translated) and has more than 1,23 million registered users (October 2024). The tracker was founded in 2007 in retort to the persistent dominance of the Russian language in Ukrainian cultural industries. Then, its main aim was described as 'to unite sympathizers' who would record the Ukrainian-dubbed audio track from the TV channels, synchronize it with the original video and then 'disseminate it by creating swarms on the tracker'. With time, this initiative has grown into an underground project that in the 2010s not only raised funds to dub classical movies or popular TV series into Ukrainian but also advocated for the use of the Ukrainian language by local cultural industries (publishers, press, distributors) and global corporations like Netflix (Boyko 2021).

No doubt, their practices changed after Russia's full-scale invasion. It was evident in the unofficial Telegram chat dedicated to *Komora* (at that moment, it counted around 800 participants). Firstly, this group unanimously rejected their own rule to discuss solely cultural content and united to support each other and resist on the information front. Secondly, their attitudes towards state institutions changed rapidly.

Because of the nature of their activity, pirates are considered, but also consider themselves, in opposition to the state and authorities. In *Komora*'s case, with its systematic and altruistic efforts to accumulate and promote the Ukrainian language content online, this opposition also had ideological undertones. For example, this is how one of *Komora*'s former users Olha estimated their activities in the interview from March 2024: 'It was protection of Ukrainian culture from the Russification policy' often performed by state institutions. In such a context, the opposition between law enforcement and the *Komora* pirates had two prerequisites: copyright protection and decolonial struggle.

An episode from January 2022, when *Komora* stopped working for over a week, is exemplary. Nobody knew what had happened, and users in the Telegram chat sug-

gested different versions. One was the authorities' interference: 'What happened to the website? It seems the authorities are involved. Russki's torrents are open, the Ukrainian is closed.' Some users were eager to interpret potential law enforcement interference as an attack on the Ukrainian cause: 'Yanukovych also persecuted Ukrainian dubbing.' Others tend to see the root of the problem in copyright infringement: 'It is considered piracy in Europe... Our president made a career in the field of intellectual property.' Even when the users discussed the possibility of such interference in ironic tones, the discontent with the current elites was explicit.

With the first hours of the invasion, everything changed. Unity was the key to the nation's survival, and communities acting on the edge of the law, like football ultras, hackers, and pirates, felt this too. In the interview, Olha, who had already stopped consuming pirated content by that moment, explained the feeling: "As said by Taras Chmut [the head of the *Come Back Alive* charity – KB], we are the state, we are the AFU. People. The state is not something amorphous, incomprehensible. It is us."

In the eyes of the Telegram chat participants, during the first months of the invasion, the president, the military and the law enforcement institutions represented and led the whole nation. Volodymyr Zelensky, labelled as 'green snot' in the discussion about *Komora's* malfunction just a month before, was rapidly promoted to 'an involuntary national hero'. The state and the military were treated as the only trustworthy information source. Discussions about the responsibility of the elites for the AFU retreats in the South did not find much support. Users reposted Zelensky's addresses, instructions and updates from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Security Service, AFU, and their natural enemy in peaceful times – the Cyber Police. Some posts encouraged joining official cyber resistance units. Simultaneously, users praised first and foremost the resistance of the whole nation: 'Heroes are not on the Bankova street [where the President's Office is situated – KB] but on the frontline'; 'Neither assassination of the president nor nuclear strike won't change anything. Our nation is resolute.'

During that time, the pirate chat users were preoccupied with the same issues as other Ukrainians lucky to find themselves in the rear. Partially, their practices were directed at the community's cohesion and solidarity. Apart from news updates and meme sharing, they tried to support each other, especially those who ended up under the occupation. In the logistical chaos of those days, the community helped to establish connections between people from different cities, thus serving as a trusted circle of strangers. Apart from raising awareness via signing petitions and contributing to the war effort by sharing crowdfunding calls, the users tried to contribute to Ukraine's information security. They united to block malicious channels on social media: any user could post a call to file massive complaints about the channel that disseminated Russian propaganda and disinformation. Other community members would follow the link and complain. They also posted much information regarding wartime media literacy, debunked and prebunked fakes in

the form of warnings regarding possible upcoming disinformation. Sometimes, during the discussion, they even debunked official instructions disseminated by the authorities in a fit of collective hysteria. For example, some users were skeptical about searching for and painting over marks on the ground that allegedly meant to coordinate Russian saboteurs or missile strikes.

Not bound by rules and laws like when they disseminate unauthorized content, such communities could apply a wider arsenal of practices than state institutions or NGOs. The chat participants engaged in hacktivism of a kind. During the first months, they self-organized via chat to troll Russians from acquired databases or unleash DDoS attacks on Russian state institutions. At some point, a user shared a database of Russian bank accounts. The chat participants decided to transfer funds from those bank accounts to the AFU charity accounts. After several enthusiastic efforts, it appeared that they could not acquire sms confirmations to finalize the operations. Rather than being frustrated, the users seemed satisfied that they managed to irritate the adversary with multiple bank messages.

So, who are these people? As the active releaser, Levko described the *Komora* community in the interview from March 2024:

> These are not [explicitly] socially active people. Perhaps when they sit at their computers, they are socially active. These are not public people. But I would not say that they are not revolutionary. These are active people. When there was Maidan [protest – KB], surely everybody was on Maidan. There was no room for discussion.

Levko's answer is slightly contradictory in the part about the extent to which the Komorians can be seen as activists. However, it captures precisely Bakardjeva's concept of subactivism (2009). These torrent users perform everyday routine practices that are hardly noticeable to the outsider's eye (like choosing Ukrainian dubbing over Russian or scanning and uploading old Ukrainian books) based on their ideological stance: to distance themselves from the former metropolis. In times of crisis – like a mass protest against the corrupt pro-Russian president or the war – these people 'appear on the stage of social design' (Beck 1997[1996]: 103) by contributing to resistance. On the one hand, it happens not because of their everyday subactivist torrent practices but because of the values that underpin them. On the other hand, one cannot entirely discard the potential of subactivist practices to contribute to social change. What enables these "small-scale, often individual, decisions and actions" (Bakardjeva 2012b: 86) to do so?

Privateers vs. Pospolite Ruszenie?

Two historical parallels can describe the role of the pirates during the Russo-Ukrainian War. Practices of the Russian and Belarusian pirates have been officially approved by the states to enhance their economic and rhetorical confrontation with the West. In this aspect, they remind privateers – seaborne pirates from the Golden Age of Piracy who served their states while robbing enemy ships. In the Ukrainian case, we observe the self-mobilization of pirate communities to join national resistance. It can be seen as a modern analogue of *pospolite ruszhenie* or, in Latin, *motio belli* – a tradition of military mobilization of the nobility and peasants on the territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (13th-18th centuries), which also included the lands populated by Ukrainians (Mytsyk 2011). Of course, current phenomena are colored by other historical circumstances, particularly the proliferation of digital communication.

While observing the torrent community for years, I noted that torrent users not only technically unite into swarms to share content but also episodically unite into teams to solve various kinds of tasks – from signing petitions in support of the Ukrainian language to digitalization of LP vinyl records, making subtitles, sharing the content via swarms etc. These teams are loose, anonymous, dispersed in space, easy to quit, but still functional. From the perspective of an individual user, it may look like unsystematic and chaotic actions that still have a specific vector – promotion and dissemination of Ukrainian language content. On a larger scale, such individual unsystematic subactivist practices can potentially contribute to social change because they presume collaboration within a community that envisions their activity's ultimate aim. In other words, these practices are dispersed on an individual micro level but systematic on the mezzo level of the community.

In the mediatized world, such subactivist practices are embedded in and enabled by digital networks and communication technologies. Communication in different spaces – be it various threads of the Forum, different chats or private messages – lies at its core. In Ukraine, since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014, the smartphone-mediated culture of connectivity has provided an interface between the state, the military, the civil society, business and society at large, opening up the war field (previously rather controlled by the authorities) to a variety of actors and participatory practices (Horbyk 2022). As demonstrated here, this connectivity culture extends to embrace even the communities in conflict with the authorities. I argue that this opens a new domain in digital participatory war: one where experiences, energies and skills of the communities in the grey zone or even outright hostile to the state may be mobilized as data warriors either in its defense or, potentially, turned against it. The strikingly different cases of Ukrainian versus Russian/Belarusian online pirates demonstrate how this domain may be approached in very different ways.

At the same time, these data warriors' media practices within this domain could be seen as a manifestation of a broader and newer approach to participatory communication. Together with Roman Horbyk, another book contributor, we conceptualize such practices as swarm communication (Boyko/Horbyk 2023: 52). Such communication is non-vertical and fluid. It can have all sorts of hidden hierarchies and structures that nevertheless are invisible from the aside because they are flattened and eclipsed by the unity of common action: all work toward the same goal in ways they individually determine. Swarm is flexible and elastic, which makes it very resilient. It can quickly disband around the issues that are solved or lose relevance and likewise quickly reassemble around new problems. It can be characterized by individual chaotic movements that still have the same vector on a large scale. Swarm communication unites dispersed and unsystematic individual practices into collective action that may contribute to social change or increase a nation's resilience in crises.

Throughout history, the circulation of unauthorized content in Ukrainian has been one of the resistance practices against Russian imperial influence. Since the independence, when the legal cultural market was still oversaturated with Russian language content, such initiatives as *Komora* became a unique space for the informal preservation and propagating of cultural content in Ukrainian. In the late 2000s to mid-2010s, it attracted, consolidated, and mobilized the pro-Ukrainian community and, in this way, served as a nation-building tool. However, with legal changes that enforced the use of Ukrainian in the media and the Russian full-scale invasion that decreased the use of Russian in public spaces even more, Ukrainian pirate users seemingly achieved their noble aim. What forms will this phenomenon take amid the discussions about the necessity to respect copyright as part of the Ukrainian Eurointegration path?

In the meantime, Russia and Belarus returned to old Soviet practices of a selective IP regime, which further saturated their image as rogue states neglecting international legislation (obviously, these violations are absolutely dimmed by numerous war crimes committed in the course of the war). While now such behavior triggers deeper concerns in the IP infringement reports, one cannot exclude further weaponization of piracy via copyright tug-of-war and spreading malware in case of worsening security situation and other big players like China stepping into the conflict.

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