

TELLING STORIES THAT MATTER

Interview with

NATALIYA GUMENYUK

Navigating the Frontlines: Insights on War Reporting, Storytelling, and Ethical Journalism

Nataliya Gumenyuk is a Ukrainian journalist, author, commentator, and documentary filmmaker specializing in foreign affairs and conflict reporting, co-founder of the Reckoning Project, an NGO which documents war crimes in Ukraine for future prosecution.

In this exploration, we navigate the complexities of her decision-making process in choosing storytelling formats, delve into the profound responsibilities journalists bear in shaping public perceptions of conflicts, and uncover the nuanced strategies Gumenyuk employs in war zones, from navigating danger to building trust with sources.

Nataliya's unique perspective from covering the war in Ukraine adds a special layer to her advice. Even though her work often involves intense and heartbreaking stories, the principles she shares are universally applicable. At the core of Nataliya's approach is the belief that every story, no matter how distant, can be made meaningful to your audience. We'll unravel the importance of finding a unique angle that explains why a story matters, and the skill of keeping a sharp eye for hidden connections.

Nataliya's insights go beyond the world of war journalism; they touch on the heart of journalism as a whole. As we uncover the complexities of the craft, we learn that, for Nataliya, being a journalist means taking on a profound responsibility—to act as the eyes and ears of the people, connecting them with the truths that shape our shared understanding of the world.

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Journalists have this unique tool of being the voice of the people who are there, but the eyes and ears of the public

Throughout your career, you have been a part of many projects, ranging from writing articles, war reporting, producing podcasts, and producing documentaries, you even wrote books. You have managed to produce journalistic pieces in all formats: written, audio, and video. How do you decide what type of format is best suited for the story you are covering?

How do you decide? According to the topic! Some topics are more visual, and some topics are more fitting for the reportage, for example when there are a lot of new answers. If there is a lot of in-depth talk with somebody, then it could be a podcast. If there is a bigger story and there is a development you do a film. So it really depends, but I am the biggest fan of the written reportage.

So you would say that the reportages are for you personally, the most fulfilling?

The writing gives an incredible opportunity to say a bit more.

I would like to know what responsibilities do journalists have in shaping public perceptions of conflicts?

I think that the main task of a good journalist, especially from the field, is to be the eyes and the ears of the people, and let the public know and feel as if they were there, that would be the major thing. I always claim that you cannot

think that political opinions and decisions are based on some intelligence or something else. The most important thing for somebody to make a decision is to be informed and understand what is going on around the country, from villages to the biggest cities. For example, in Kiyev if you speak about the government, people at least somehow know what is happening in Crimea. Journalists have this unique tool of getting to the place, being there and being the mouth and voice of those who are there, but the eyes and the ears of the public, and connecting the people with the public. And that would be with the war or any conflict situation. That, for me, is the most important thing.

Reporting from war zones is not without danger. How do you cope with the danger, and what helps you keep going each day?

You don't cope with danger, it's your responsibility, professional responsibility to measure the risk and to be prepared. It's not like "danger is coming" out of nowhere, no, you really know where you are going, are you going to a place that is liberated, are you going to the place closer to the front line, and so on. There is a different protocol for working in different places. You need to have the risk map of what you can do and there are particular rules of what you need to have with you, who you need to inform, what are the means of the communication, and what means of the defense. For example, if you go to the place that is closer to the front line then you probably need to have the car, you need to have the fuel, and you probably need to reach out there and know where the last point possible for you to be is, where is the most secure place to hide, so that you are not stuck there when it's late and dark. It's really a lot about the obligation, duties, the practice of how you work, and mitigating the risk. It's not really some danger that can occur all of a sudden.

Building trust with sources is crucial in journalism. In a conflict zone, how do you establish and maintain trust with the people you interview?

It's the easiest to maintain trust in the conflict zone because people know you and you are there with them and you share the risk at some point. But there still are some particular ethical things, you need to be sensitive to the people and respect them. You need to provide them some limit of control, telling them how you would use this material, and how they can reach out, and they would trust you if they see the reasons that you are genuinely interested in their story and you explain how you would use it. You can of course also betray the people but that's more about how you are as a person.

Now we would like to talk about the Reckoning Project, I would like to dive into the precise work of the journalists - collecting witness statements to document war crimes. I read that for that they have to collect the evidence in real-time, shortly after the war crime happened, and I wondered, given that most people who experience a tragic event are traumatized or are in shock, I ask myself how do you make sure that people are ready to talk about what happened in such a short time?

What is interesting is that people are more open to talking about it in a short time rather than later. But we need to understand what is short time. You don't speak to the person the next day after the funeral. You can speak a few words but then return in a week or so. From our experience, for instance, the people who left Mariupol and who experienced the horrors in the first months of the sudden war, by now, they are not very much ready to speak because they have already chosen to forget these events. But within the first month, people want to share their story. Our major rule is that we talk to the people who want to share their stories, sometimes you can understand that a person is doubting but it's more willing to tell, so you explain how and for what their story will be used, and then a person agrees. If a person doesn't really want to speak then you don't do that. For instance, in the recently liberated territory in the Chernihiv region or the Hersonu region - you meet the people, you talk to people, you get to know the people and then you ask for them to speak about their stories, but you do not delay that much.

Did it ever happen, that you canceled a story because you noticed that people were not that comfortable talking about it, or you had to respect their well-being and boundaries?

There were cases where we didn't start, and there were stories that we didn't use. But sometimes people are not open to speaking and sharing, and that's ok, it's quite actually quite common.

8 things to have in mind if you want to work as a journalist



1. Even though not every story is relatable, you need to make the story relevant to the audience.

2. Your story should be original and have a very special hook to keep the audience interested.

3. You need to be able to answer in one sentence why your story is important and what's unique about it.

4. Ask a lot of questions, talk a lot to people, be social.

5. First try to explain the story for yourself before explaining it to the audience. So you first answer questions to yourself as an author, and then you are able to answer the questions for the audience.

6. Understand the ambitions of what you do and always remember what your unique goal is.

7. To find interesting stories worth telling, you have to have an open eye all the time, see connections and connect the dots.

8. The main task of a good journalist is to be the eyes and the ears of the people and connect the people with the public.