

# Keep Ukraine connected

*interview with the campaigners*

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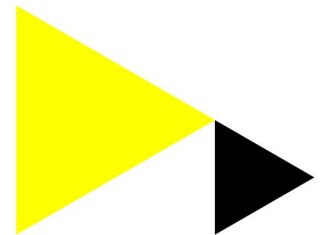
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# DISPATCHES FROM UKRAINE

TACTICAL MEDIA  
REFLECTIONS AND  
RESPONSES

EDITED BY  
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**THEORY  
ON  
DEMAND**

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The logo for the Institute of Network Cultures features the text 'Institute of network cultures' in a red, lowercase, sans-serif font. The text is overlaid on a complex, abstract network of red lines that form a dense, interconnected web-like structure.

The logo for waag futurelab consists of the word 'waag' in a bold, black, lowercase sans-serif font, followed by a circular icon containing a stylized white house or flame shape, and then the word 'futurelab' in a bold, black, lowercase sans-serif font.

# KEEP UKRAINE CONNECTED: INTERVIEW WITH THE CAMPAIGNERS

## GEERT LOVINK

Mariupol went offline the minute the last 5G transmitter was destroyed. As soon as I heard about the Keep Ukraine Connected initiative,<sup>1</sup> I became curious about their activities. How do internet techies initiate a campaign to support Ukrainian internet service providers with hardware? Keep Ukraine Connected has been organized by the Global NOG Alliance.<sup>2</sup> NOG stands for Network Operator Group. In these groups, of which there is usually one per country, network engineers exchange information about their work. NOGs have existed since the early days of the internet and the members also have a certain influence on the further development of internet protocols and techniques. The Global NOG Alliance is an association of friends from the industry dedicated to helping NOGs around the world. Now they are helping Ukrainian Network Operators keep the internet running through the war by fundraising and collecting and distributing equipment. As René Fichtmüller explained to the German magazine *Zeit Online*, the highest priority is so-called splicing equipment. This makes it possible to re-join severed fibre optic cables that have been cut, for example, by a bomb. But generators are also always important, because without electricity, servers and switches cannot be operated and consequently there is no internet. “Ukraine was and is a highly networked country and internet access,” René Fichtmüller explains. “For example, Ukraine was one of the world’s leading countries in smartphone payments and social media is extremely important for young people, even, or especially, in times of war. For all this to work, the fibre-optic and mobile networks must be intact. But the experts on the ground lack the material.” For instance, with enough generators it is possible to bring villages or individual businesses back online.

Fichtmüller also told a Czech news website that stolen graphics cards from computers in corporate offices and datacenters are currently being traded.<sup>3</sup> “I’ve also seen photos indicating that some providers have to deal with destroyed PoPs (Points of Presence), both in metropolitan and long-distance networks. Satellite connectivity via Starlink can be a good backup, but this can also be a risk, as the satellite signal can be misused to locate the receiver, which can then become the target of an attack.”

I had a short email exchange with Sander Steffann (based in Apeldoorn/NL), who, at some point, also joined the Tactical Media Room. With the help of others, he was so kind as to answer questions.

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1 Pritchard, C. (2022, June 28). *Keep Ukraine Connected*. Global NOG Alliance. <https://nogalliance.org/our-task-forces/keep-ukraine-connected/>.

2 Pritchard, C. (2022a, May 25). *About us*. Global NOG Alliance. <https://nogalliance.org>.

3 Slížek, D. (2022, April 12). *Keep Ukraine Connected: Jak pomoc ukrajinským poskytovatelům internetu putovala i z Česka*. Lupa.cz. <https://www.lupa.cz/clanky/keep-ukraine-connected-jak-pomoc-ukrajinskym-poskytovatelum-internetu-putovala-i-z-ceska/>.

**Geert Lovink:** Can you tell us about your Ukrainian partners? Where are they located and what are the challenges they are confronted with? What kind of damage are they dealing with?

**Sander Steffann:** We are working mainly with the Ukrainian Internet Association (the Network Operators Group), the Association of Rights Holders and Content Providers (a broader Telecoms organisation), and a company called DEPS, based in Lviv, who are handling distribution of the equipment we're providing. Since the war they have pivoted from reselling equipment to distributing it to Network Operators in need all over Ukraine. They don't charge us, or the people the equipment is distributed to. We have also had some support from the Ministry for Digital Transformation—they've been instrumental in helping us get the paperwork right for the border crossing.

**GL:** Can you give us an update where the Keep Ukraine Campaign stands at the moment? We're now four months into the invasion.

**SS:** We're very proud of the network of volunteers that's building up around the campaign. In particular our volunteer drivers, who are doing a brilliant job of ferrying equipment over the border. We still have some significant challenges. We potentially have several hundred pallets of equipment in our database—some of which are coming from outside the EU. We need useful and flexible short and long term storage solutions: While some of the equipment is in high demand and can be shipped quickly, we expect a lot of it will be of more use during the reconstruction phase. Most logistics companies work on the basis of high product flow, so it's been difficult for us to find suitable spaces. We are also trying to navigate the maze that is customs and borders so we can get better at receiving donations as well as delivering them. In particular we are seeking contacts in the Polish government who can help us by providing safe, speedy passage for our drivers at border crossings. We are also looking for expertise in Customs and Taxes so that we can spend the money we've raised more efficiently.

**GL:** John Gilmore once said: "The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it." One can also interpret this statement as a call to ignore the damage caused by inner-European conflicts over ancient borders of competing empires. Why take sides, perhaps instead continue business as usual? The internet as such doesn't need Ukraine. Maybe the other way round, yes...

**SS:** Our chair Rene Fichtmuller says it best: "Our Tech Community is one big family. We don't think in colors, we don't think in races or genders, we don't think in borders." Unlike big operators, who are free to choose the profit motive if they wish, our aim is to help people learn about and benefit from access to the internet. Right now the people in need of help are in Ukraine. Tomorrow, it could be a tsunami in Bangladesh, an epidemic in Haiti, or some other conflict that has destroyed connectivity somewhere in the world. We hope to take what we learn from our Keep Ukraine Connected Taskforce and apply that knowledge wherever it is needed. The internet is now an integral part of all our lives. The connectivity it provides deserves to be protected.

**GL:** Do you believe internet engineers should listen to directives from Brussels to ban Putin's propaganda television channels on the Web such as *RT* and *Sputnik*?

**SS:** As individuals we are all free to live by our own conscience. Since we are working closely with the Association of Rights and Content Providers—which includes television channel operators—we have discussed this in depth with our Ukrainian colleagues. The conclusion we came to is that instead of banning the Russian propaganda outlets—a staple of Ukrainian television for much of the population since long before the war—we would instead support the connectivity of Ukraine-based channels that the Russian forces have been working hard to bring down, and promote alternative ways of getting to those channels wherever relevant. Removing misinformation from the internet is a Sisyphean task—you can keep rolling that rock up the hill all you like—it's just going to roll back down again. Better to give people access to more reliable sources of information instead.