цукр.

FESTIVAL DE L'INFO LOCALE · NANTES · 24 SEPTEMBER 2026

How *(and why)* I transformed my newsroom with AI

Cukr — an independent local
newsroom in Sumy, Ukraine.
30 kilometres from the Russian border.*

* There is a nuance. I come back to it in a minute.

Dmytro Tishchenko · founder

What AI does for us today

20–25

AI assistants in daily work

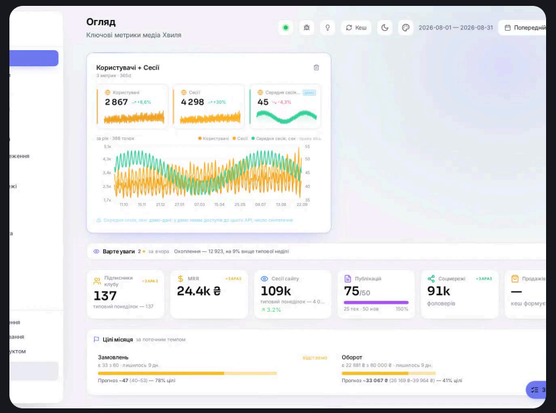
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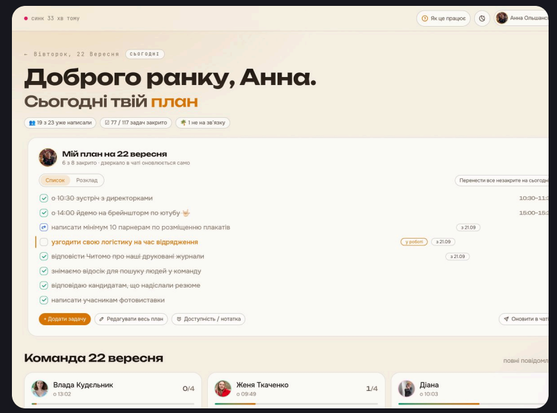
developers on staff

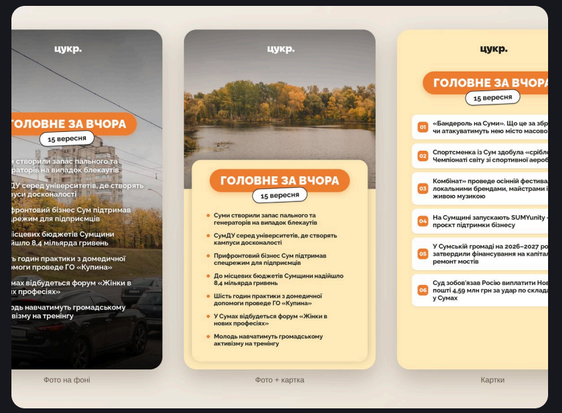
~$370

a month for all our AI

Every text is checked before the editor. Every comment gets two draft replies.
Every morning the team plans in one place.









How AI sits inside our editorial work



Author

writes the text

Claude

checks our standards

Finds something in 9 of 10 texts

Claude

checks sensitive terms

Editor

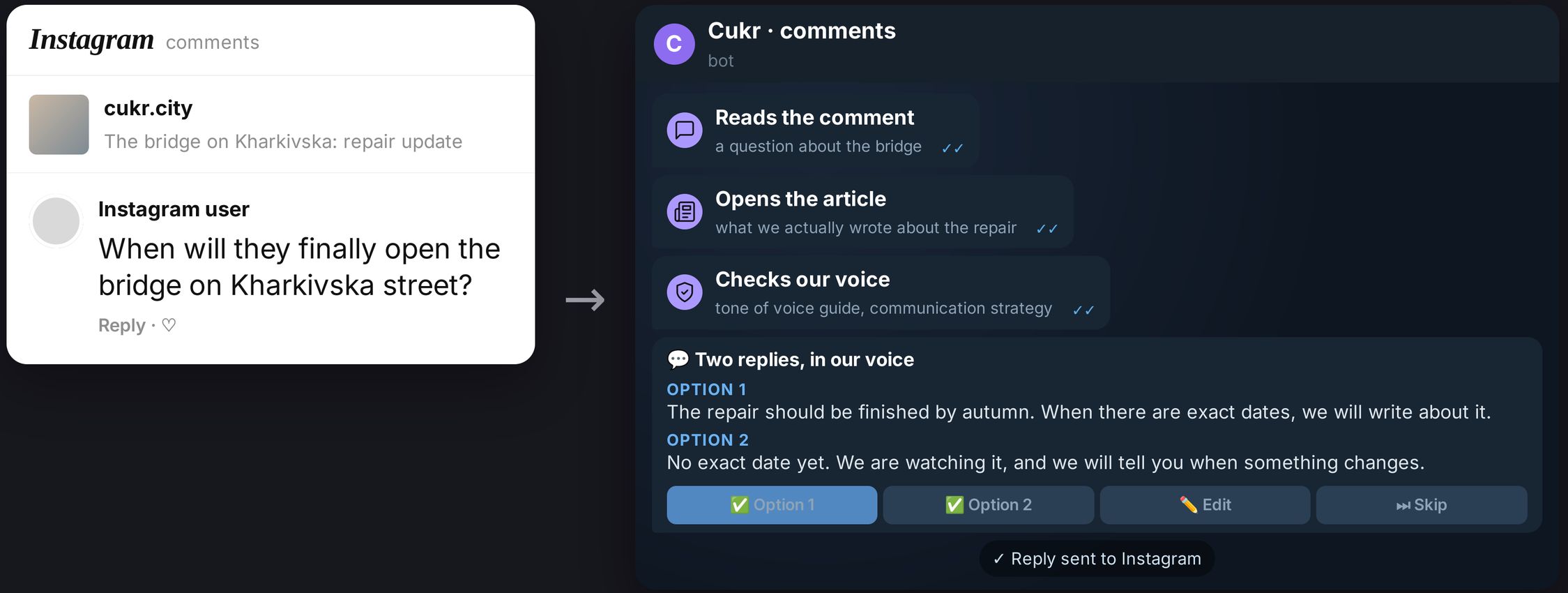
works on meaning, not typos

Person

publishes. AI never does

Yes, AI can be wrong too. But it is far easier for an editor to find 2–3 mistakes than 10–15 — and there is time left to give the author real feedback.

Comment moderation, in five seconds



30+ comments a day used to be answered by hand. Now about an hour a day is saved, for under $10 a month.

I am a forced innovator.
We have no developer, no analyst, no finance manager.

Why did a newsroom of 25 people build all this? We started Cukr in 2019, one year before the pandemic. Then Russia launched its full-scale invasion. Everything new we built, we built because the old way had stopped working.

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1 Where we work

Now — why. What it means to be a newsroom 15–20 km from the front line.

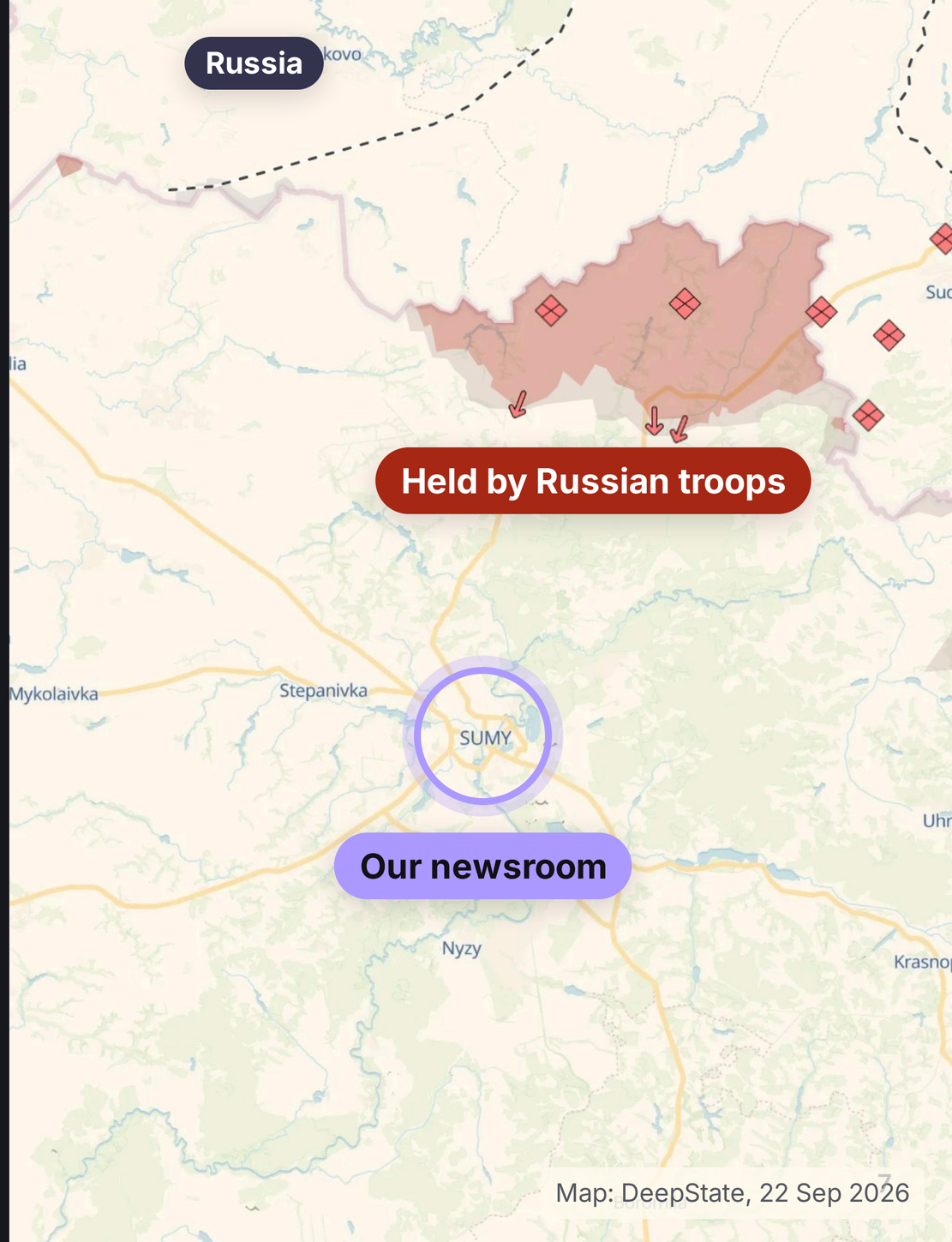
Sumy

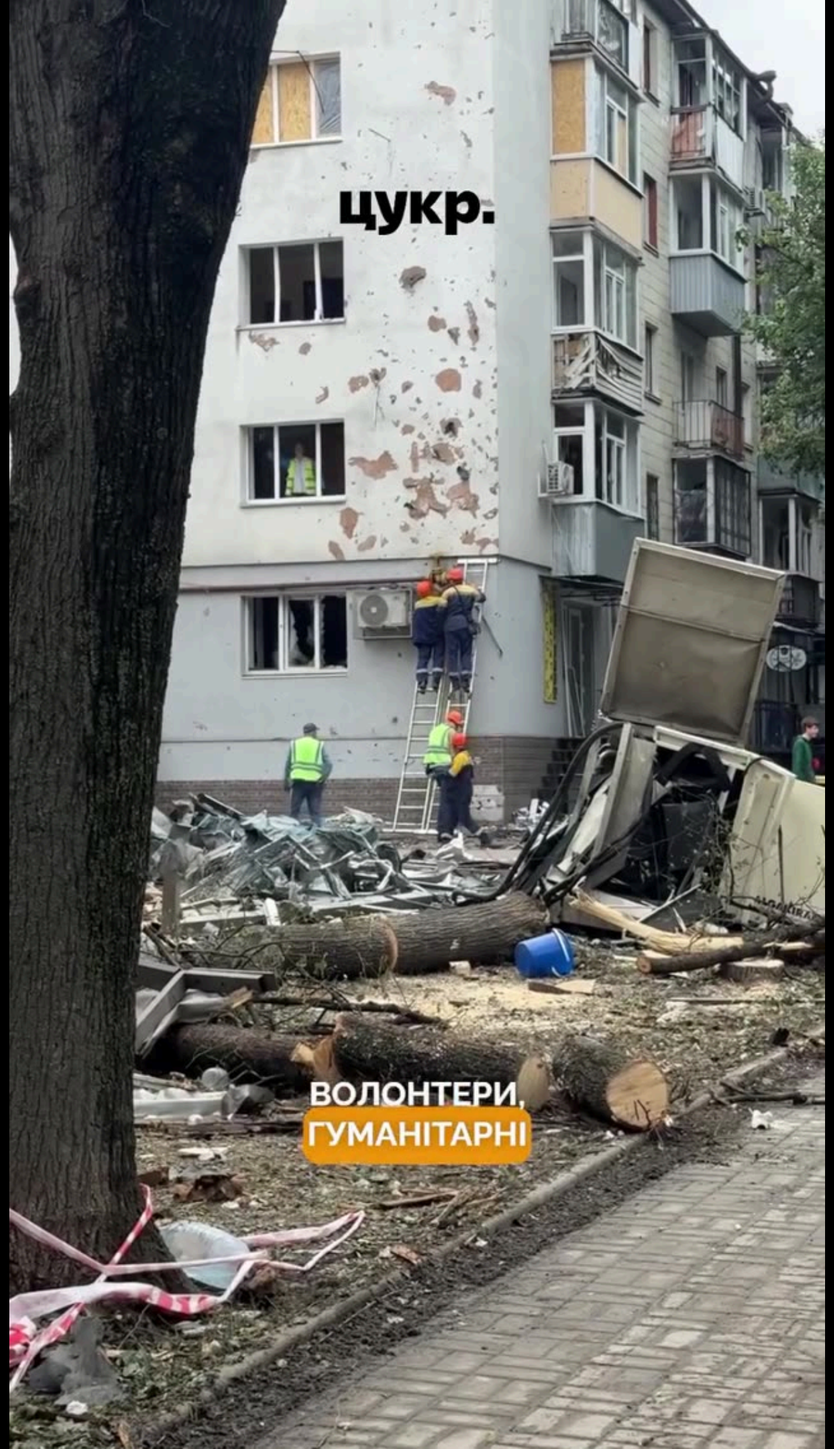
30 km to the Russian border

15–20 km to the front line itself

2019 we have published since

Russian troops hold a strip two to four kilometres deep inside our region. We get seconds of warning, not even minutes. The alert is on almost all day, and few shelters are really open — so most people just stopped going.





3 JULY 2026 · FILMED BY OUR REPORTERS THE NEXT MORNING

An evening strike, and a day of mourning

Five guided bombs in eight minutes. Four people killed, among them a mother and her five-year-old daughter. 33 injured, seven of them children.



6 AUGUST 2026 · VIDEO FIRST PUBLISHED BY SERHII STERNENKO

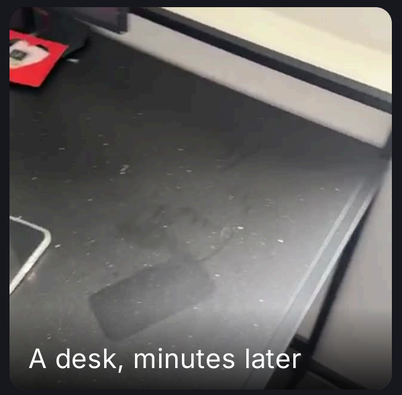
An FPV drone hunting a man on the street

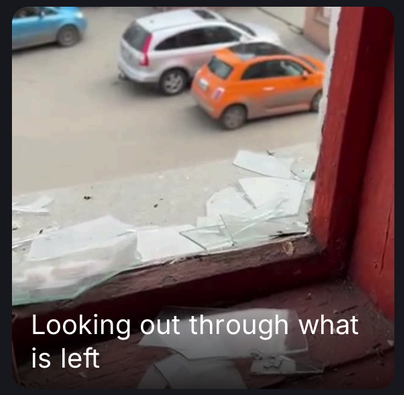
He hides from the first drone behind a kiosk. Seconds later a second drone comes. The author of the video says it hit him.

13 APRIL 2025, 09:14 · PALM SUNDAY · OUR OFFICE CCTV

Our own security camera


The facade, from the street


A desk, minutes later


Looking out through what is left


Glass on the pavement

🔇 MUTED ON PURPOSE

18 windows

blown out on both sides of our building by one blast wave. The real recording has very loud explosions — we muted it for this room.



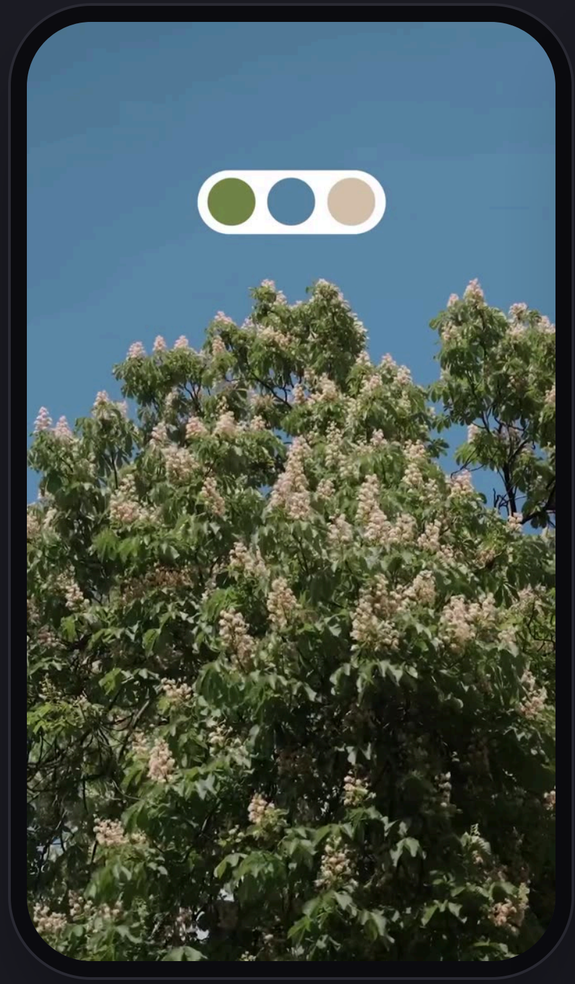
And the same afternoon, we were working

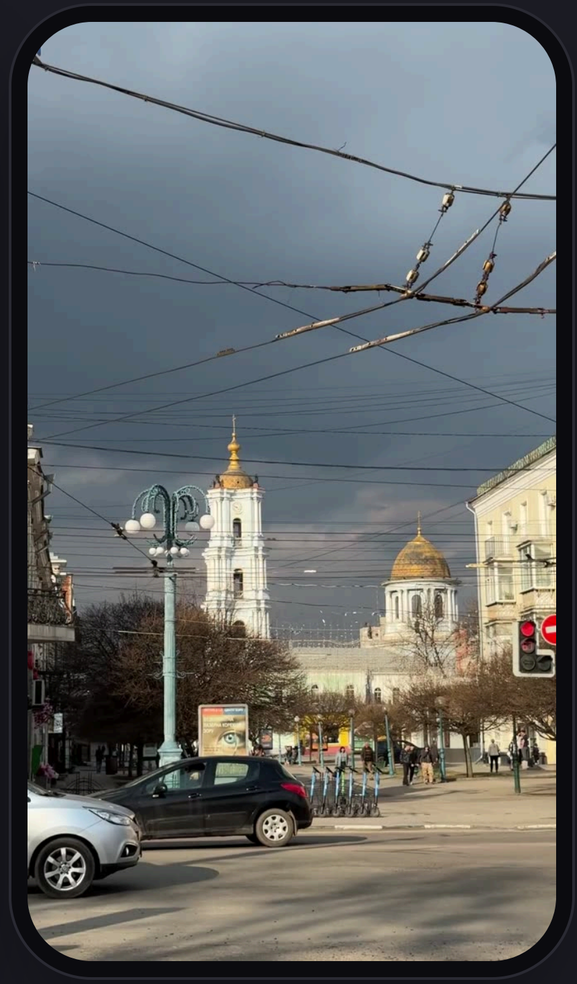
Our reporter doing a live hit for a national TV channel — on a phone, in front of the damaged building. That channel has no crew in Sumy. When something happens here, they call us.

And this is Sumy too

Next to the strikes, we look for people’s stories and show what the city lives by besides the war.

Spring in a park. An ordinary Wednesday morning in the city centre.





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2 What this does to a newsroom

As a business, not as a story.

The problems we had to solve

WHAT WE WERE MISSING	THE PROBLEM IT CAUSED
A developer	Every technical job needed money we did not have. So it did not happen.
An analyst	Our data sat in 15 services. Nobody read it together.
A finance manager	We counted the money. Nobody planned it.
Spare time	Reports, transcripts, comments and stats ate the few people we had.
Any margin for error	When one person left, the way we worked left with them.
Money for IT	Contractors spent 44% of our budget on management — the norm is 15–25%. About a quarter paid for features that did not work.
Speed	Without automation, we lose to anonymous Telegram channels.

And the rest of it

The ad market shrinks with the city. In July Russian drones burned down Epicentr, a huge hardware store in our city.

People leave, are mobilised, burn out. There is nobody on the market to hire.

Grants help, but at some point you write projects instead of doing journalism.



We buy our own power to stay online



A diesel generator in the yard — 8 kW, it carries the office



Four portable batteries on a shelf, about 2 kWh, charged between outages



An inverter and 5.8 kWh of batteries in the newsroom



A second inverter with batteries — also the office. At home we have the same

Not a choice. Russia keeps hitting power plants and substations, so we keep buying generators and batteries — to stay online even when mobile networks in the city go down. Last winter some days had about six hours of power out of twenty-four.

Not a website. An ecosystem.

25

people, 7 departments

794

paying members of the Club

6

printed issues, the 7th in print

A news site, four social channels, a café, a shop, a yard in the city centre, a printed magazine. A newsroom cannot live in a vacuum, so we look for what the city is missing.









> **“A subscription is how I compensate for my own passivity.”**

From our regular audience research. The war made people ask who they are and what they belong to, and answers like this started coming back. We want people to pay for the Club like they pay for utilities or Netflix. Not out of sacrifice, like money for a dying kitten on the street.

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3 How it grew

Everything from here on exists because of a row in that table. We use Claude.

From laughter to 20+ assistants

2023

Laughed at

ChatGPT, alone, via a US number

2024

Blind test

8 texts scored blind. Claude won

2024

Wise Editor

first team project, built on our guides

2025

Bottom-up

editors ask for their own assistants

2026

Dashboard

MVP in a week, full system in months

Now

20–25

assistants, by the team or with my Claude Code

All this time we fed the AI our context: research, strategy, audience surveys, communication guides. Without it, every project would have been weak — and the team would have quietly sabotaged it.

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What changed in how we manage

We built AI into processes, not into people. And nobody was ordered to use it.

We did not order anyone

First reader

Show Claude your text once before the editor. A request, not an order.

Responsibility

Stays with a person. Nothing is published automatically.

Policy

Minimal. Walk the process yourself first, write rules later.

Bottom-up

Editors now bring the requests for new assistants.

A weekly question, a quarterly audit

EVERY WEEK

“What annoyed you?”

The answer goes into the instructions. One assistant was rewritten about 30 times.

EVERY 2–3 MONTHS

90-day audit

We export Claude Team use and ask Claude for patterns: the same context pasted again, “redo it”, the wrong model.

Then we fix the instructions, not the people.

Fix the process, not the person

SAME MISTAKES IN POSTS

Check moved to the editor

We did not take AI away.

MANAGERS CHASING NUMBERS

Dashboard for all

Access by page, donor deadlines included.

NEWCOMERS SHY TO ASK

Knowledge base first

Leave, bonuses, standards. Then a manager.

DIGGING INTO OPERATIONS

Weekly brief

One question from Claude for the planning meeting.

If you took me out of the team tomorrow, they would keep using it.

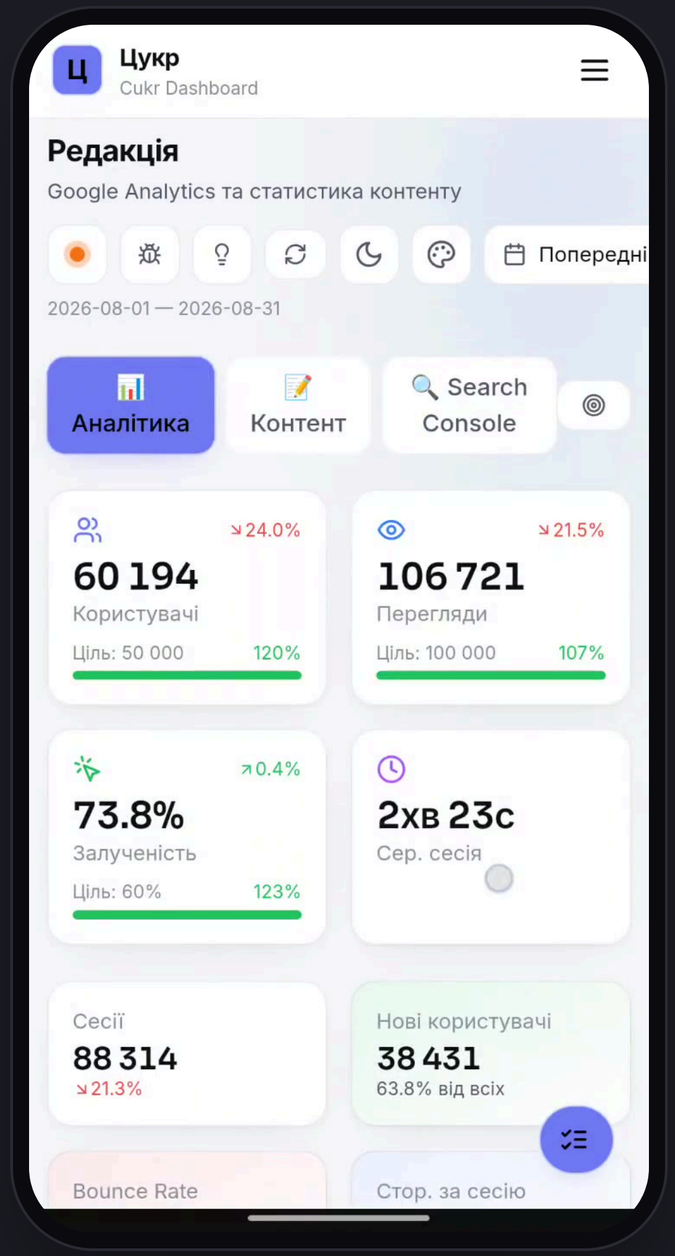
For most of this year I have not managed the team day to day — I am not even the CEO any more — and the system held. But some new people never started using AI at all. Adoption is not an event.

An analytics platform, built without a developer

One screen instead of 15 systems: newsroom, Club, shop, socials, finance, HR, tasks.

20+ integrations, built through Claude Code. Nobody was hired.

We see what brings people into the Club — an article, an event — and can scale what works.

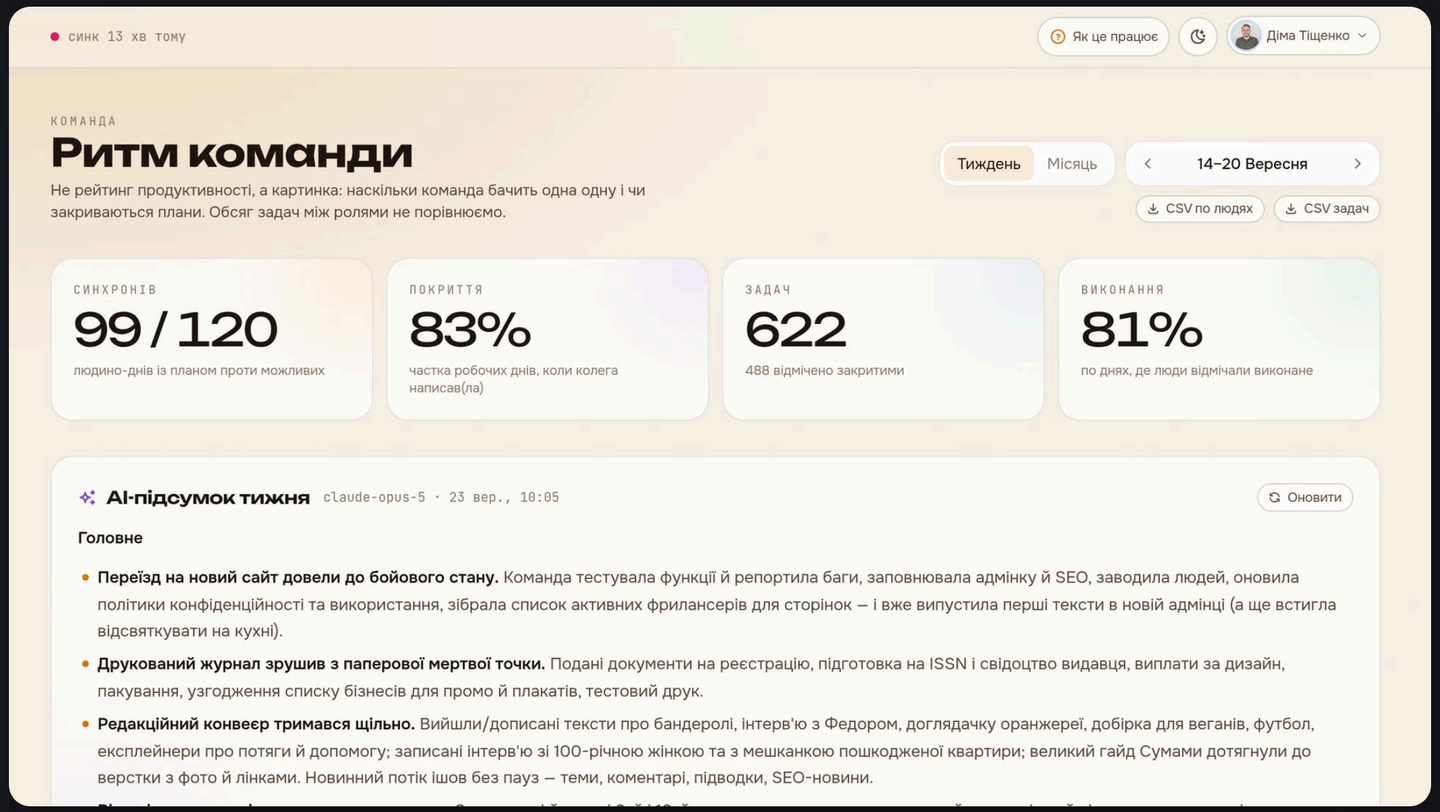


Synchron: one plan for the team

Everyone writes the day’s plan in a minute.

Every week and every month, AI writes a summary: what got done, where the time went.

14–20 September: 99 of 120 plan-days, 622 tasks, 488 done.



More tools, each from one pain

+500 FAKE SUBSCRIBERS A MONTH

Spam filter

63 signals, NSFW check. About two weeks to build.

DIGEST TOOK “HALF AN HOUR”

Digest bot

Drafts every evening. An editor approves. Out at 8:30.

LOST AFTER A HOLIDAY

Chat summary

A manager asks Claude what the team discussed and where they need help.

PLANS LOST IN CHAT

Synchron

Plans, calendars, room booking, HR sync. A couple of evenings.

Our social media bot: version 1 and 2

Khveska, checks our social posts
version 1

2025

📊 **Score: 7 / 10**

Good: the fact comes first, concrete details.

Main problem: no link.

❌ **What does not work**

1. Banned office phrase
   - You wrote: “Read more on the site”
   - Fix: put the link inside the sentence

A mark out of ten, on a person’s work, every day. The team was offended. They were right.

Khveska, checks our social posts
version 2

now

🔍 **Post about the bridge repair** — fact first, reads well

🔧 **Small things**

✅ **What works:**
- The main fact is in the first sentence
- Real numbers, no clichés

💡 **Next time:**
- The headline could say when exactly it opens

🔄 Rewritten versions (tap to open)

Same rules, no mark. Three states: Fine · Small things · Questions. About two months in, someone wrote in the chat: “for the first time, no repeat mistakes”.

It also opens the article behind the link. Once it found a missing fact about the wounded.

Someone who woke up to an explosion doesn't need a bot telling them their work is bad.

Almost everyone on our team has lost a relative or a friend in this war. So criticism has to motivate, not humiliate. About two months in, the bot's weekly digest congratulated the social media team: no repeated mistakes that week. It did not take their work. It taught them to see what they used to miss.

Grants: we apply only where it makes sense

A separate Claude project knows our mission and our strategy for the next few years. Before anyone writes a word, it checks each call: does it fit our goals? So we find the donors that are really ours — and stop spending days on calls that were never for us.

It also keeps our standard texts and legal data. Now the team can write applications, not only me.

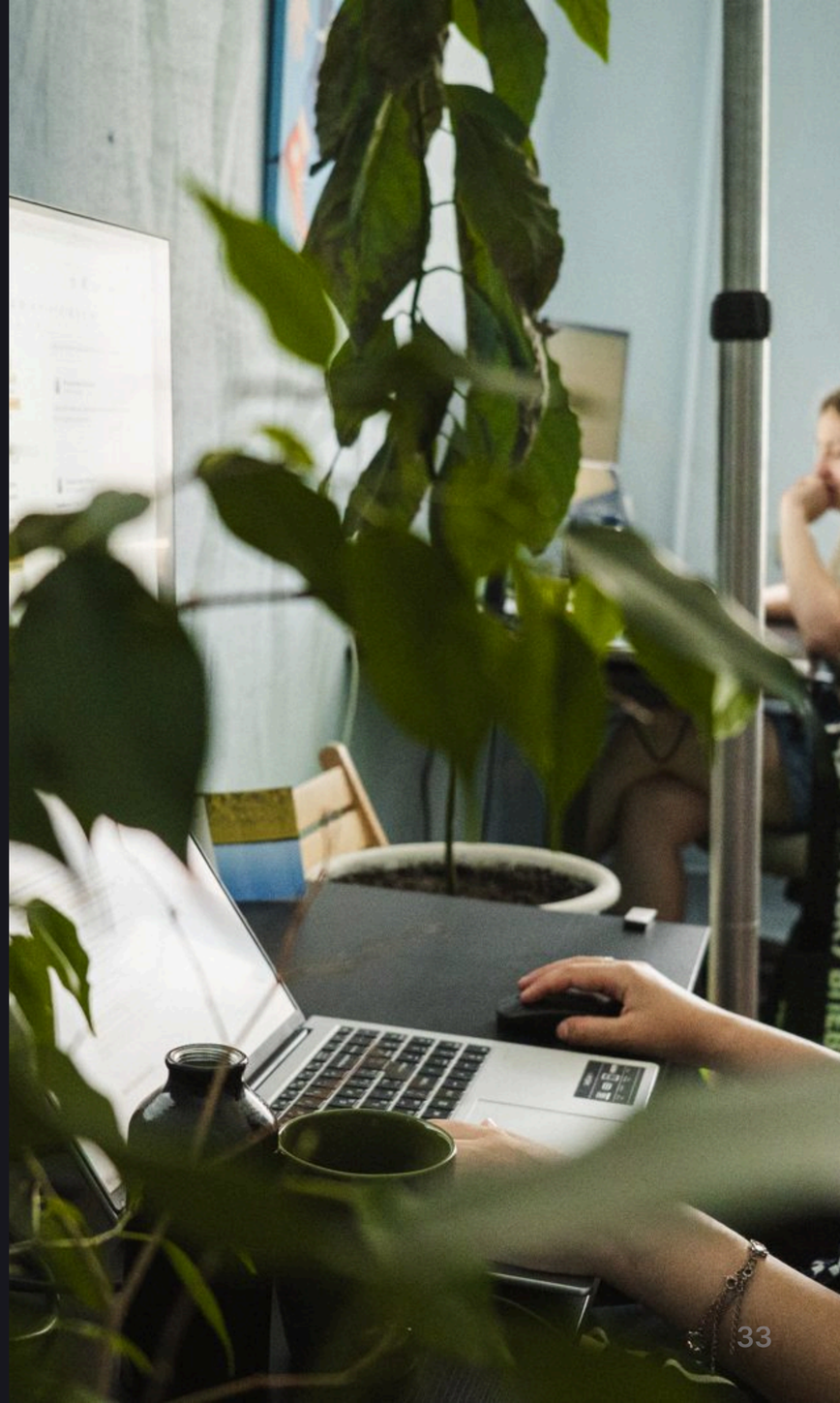


5 What none of this solves

Without this part, the talk is an advertisement.

What none of this solves

- It does not stop the strikes, or the blackouts, or bring back the people who left
- Free time is easy to lose. Ask where the hours will go before you free them.
- Adoption is not an event. You have to keep adding new habits, rules and tools — and someone in the team has to keep selling the idea
- The team's scepticism is a healthy instinct, not laziness



Scepticism is not resistance. It is responsibility without support.

NO SUPPORT

25%

of frontline staff feel enough support from leaders

NO TRAINING

36%

say they were trained enough

TOOLS DO NOT FIT

Made for bosses

popular AI tools fit desk work of managers better

FASTER ≠ BETTER

40% / 29%

of chatbot users say work got faster / better

RISK LANDS LOW

“Publish”

whoever presses it answers for the mistake

BCG, Gallup, Pew. Every one of these we met in our own team — and each is answered by something you saw today.

Where we drew the line

- No generated photo or video of a real event. Only archive repair and clearly labelled concept images.
- Children and war: double verification, always
- Generated or edited images are always labelled.

Another newsroom in our city used an AI image with a real story: ~100,000 views and 200+ angry comments — “do you not have a photographer?”



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6 What I would tell you from our experience

So that these mistakes cost you
less than they cost us.

Five habits

- Look for the task, not the tool. Write down the work you repeat every week — that list is where a machine goes.
- Write down your own steps before you hand a job over. “Do it for me” gives a generic answer; your instructions give your answer.
- One assistant per type of task. A universal one is average at everything. We have 20+.
- The knowledge base decides the result. Mission, voice, audience, old edits — then a newcomer does not start from zero.
- Do not start by building a dashboard. First export the data you already have and talk about it with the assistant you already pay for.

How many hours a week does your team spend on routine? Count them — that list is where you start.



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Thank you

Dmytro Tishchenko · dmt@cukr.city
cukr.city · Sumy, Ukraine
shop.cukr.city · we ship to France

“A local newsroom is 25 people who keep choosing to stay.”

Instagram · @tweeph | Facebook · @tweeph | LinkedIn · @tweeph

DW Akademie

This trip is made possible by DW Akademie. That is where the dw in dw.cukr.club comes from.

Support this newsroom

Monthly membership or a one-off amount. 794 people in Sumy and beyond already pay for it.

The deck and 35 clips

dw.cukr.club — everything you saw today, in English.