



UNIVERSIDADE
CATÓLICA
PORTUGUESA

WAR JOURNALISM AND PROPAGANDA: A
COMPARATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF US MEDIA
COVERAGE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Dissertation submitted to Universidade Católica
Portuguesa to obtain a Master's Degree in Communication
Studies, Journalism

By

Ana Milosavljevic

Faculty of Human Sciences

September 2024



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Abstract

The US government has positioned itself as a leading force against the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which some consider a proxy-war between the US and Russia. As in all wars, the media play a critical function in the framing of the conflict and informing the public. Both are highly impacted by whether media outlets engage in war journalism or war propaganda that echoes government narratives. A quantitative content analysis of four media outlets in the US spanning the ideological and organizational financing spectrum were analyzed. The research also compared articles published at differing time periods. The results suggest that most media promote war propaganda by attributing responsibility for the war solely on Russia, ignoring relevant historical context about the history of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), overly relying on official sources, and portraying US involvement uncritically positive. Our findings found significant differences between mainstream and alternative media in terms of war propaganda and consistency across editorial ideologies and time periods. The study contributes to the academic fields of study surrounding war propaganda, journalistic norms, and media management and economics.

Keywords: war journalism; war propaganda; agenda-setting; framing; Russia-Ukraine war; Ukraine; Russia; U.S.A.

Resumo

O governo dos Estados Unidos posicionou-se como uma força líder contra a invasão russa da Ucrânia em 2022, posição que alguns consideram ser uma guerra por procuração entre os EUA e a Rússia. Como em todas as guerras, os meios de comunicação desempenham uma função crítica na forma como o conflito é enquadrado e na informação transmitida ao público. Ambos são fortemente influenciados (em vez de impactados) pela decisão dos meios de comunicação na forma como utilizam o jornalismo de guerra ou a propaganda de guerra para fazerem ecoar as narrativas governamentais. Foi realizada uma análise quantitativa de conteúdo de quatro meios de comunicação nos EUA, abrangendo o espectro ideológico e de financiamento organizacional. A pesquisa também comparou artigos publicados em diferentes períodos de tempo. Os resultados sugerem que a maioria dos meios de comunicação promove propaganda de guerra ao atribuir a responsabilidade pelo conflito exclusivamente à Rússia, ignorando o contexto histórico relevante sobre a história da Organização do Tratado do Atlântico Norte (OTAN), confiando excessivamente em fontes oficiais e retratando a intervenção dos EUA de forma acrítica e positiva. Os nossos resultados revelaram diferenças significativas entre os meios de comunicação tradicionais e alternativos, em termos de propaganda de guerra, e consistência entre ideologias editoriais e períodos de tempo. Esta análise contribui para os campos acadêmicos de estudo sobre propaganda de guerra, normas jornalísticas e gestão e economia dos meios de comunicação.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo de guerra; Propaganda de guerra; Definição da agenda; Enquadramento; Guerra Rússia-Ucrânia; Ucrânia; Rússia; EUA

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Introduction

We sought out to investigate US reporting on the war in Ukraine and to better understand the presence of war propaganda in media outlets today. To gain a fuller understanding of the issue, we examine the topic from multiple angles. We also included a sample of media outlets that capture the breadth and variety in the US media landscape: *The New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Democracy Now!*, and *The Daily Caller*. We analyzed both mainstream and alternative media outlets regarding the presence of war propaganda narratives. We also investigated outlets from across the ideological spectrum: liberal and conservative. Lastly, we compared the presence of war propaganda rhetoric from the first day of the Russian invasion to more than two years later when in May 2024 the US government approved Ukraine's use of American weapons to strike inside Russian territory. This policy is seen as an escalation of what some consider a proxy war between the US and Russia. We hope that with such research we can further the discussion about war propaganda today about this ongoing war, instead of addressing it many years later when it might be too late.

The concept of war propaganda was also explored in the aftermath of 9/11 and the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. In the case of 9/11, the US government framed its response to the attacks as one that all freedom-loving people must support. Bush famously said "you're either with us, or you're with the terrorists." Oversimplification that is based on emotion as opposed to facts is one of the key attributes of war propaganda, according to some of the pioneers in the field such as Lasswell (1938) and Bernays (1942).

Lasswell (1938) wrote how propaganda seeks to "whip up hatred of the enemy" and represent it as a "murderous, menacing aggressor" (p. 195). Bernay (1942) asserted that such techniques were useful for war propaganda because they "strengthen the belief of the people that the enemy is responsible for the war." (p. 236). In the case of 9/11, the oversimplification about the nature of the attacks was weaponized for the American government to pursue wars of aggression against sovereign countries that had nothing to do with 9/11.

On February 22, 2022, the Russian military invaded Ukraine, only one in a series in aggressions against the country, such as the annexation of Crimea. As the world watched in horror, the United States positioned itself as a leading force in support of Ukrainian sovereignty and safety. While at the time of writing, the United States does not officially have any boots on the ground, so to speak, but others have argued that the United States is

directly involved in this war in other ways. In fact, some have argued that the war in Ukraine is an expression of a proxy conflict between the United States and Russia (Hughes 2014, p. 106; Foster 2022). Such arguments may be strengthened by statements within the United States government, such as Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin who said that through the war in Ukraine, he would like to see “a weakened Russia.”

Today, the US media largely represents the war in Ukraine as a binary conflict: a struggle between the Free World and totalitarianism. In Hyzen and Hilde Van den Bulck’s 2024 study on US war propaganda on the war in Ukraine, they consider the war in Ukraine to be of a proxy-war character. According to such a definition, the US government requires war propaganda to “declare its position towards, evaluation of and actions relating to the war as a message to its citizens, to the warring parties and to its allies” (Hyzen and Hilde Van den Bulck, 2024, p. 2). Hyzen and Hilde Van den Bulck (2024) justify their own study of this topic by remarking that the war in Ukraine provides an “interesting case to understand how propaganda operates in the 21st Century” (p. 2).

Crucially, Hyzen and Hilde Van den Bulck (2024) explore the role of the media in the framing of the war in Ukraine in line with war propaganda. They write: “Notably, U.S. involvement was never fundamentally questioned in the briefings (nor media), creating a crucial premise to the frame: that the U.S., as a leader and protector of the free world, was involved and would be an active political participant in this war” (Hyzen and Hilde Van den Bulck, 2024, p. 14).

Indeed, every war is different. Yet our study on US reporting reveals many similarities in the way the media cover wars generally, including the war in Ukraine. As we will explore, journalists face various pressures both during both times of war and peace. From social and career pressures to the economic interests of the forces behind media organizations, journalists must often battle contradicting demands and motivations. Journalists bear a heavy burden, but also a large responsibility. During wartime, even more so. As we’ve seen, US journalists have a checkered past in this respect. We hope our findings about the presence of war propaganda in US reporting can better inform journalists to better serve the public, not those in power.

I. Literature Review

1 War Propaganda and Journalism

Assessing whether war reporting constitutes propaganda or journalism is not a simple task. There is no preset checklist of characteristics that can answer this question and instead it requires comprehensive investigation of the particularities of the war being covered, the political economy of the media, and the sociological development of the profession of journalism. In order to adequately analyze the character of American reporting on the war in Ukraine, I will first explore and define the aforementioned elements and justify the application of each to my research.

1.1 Why is war propaganda used?

War propaganda cannot be defined in isolation. As such, its purpose and role can best be understood in relation to the objective needs of wartime, especially from the vantage point of a wartime government. War is most commonly associated with tanks and bullets, however, just as essential is the ideological weaponry that motivates people to use the aforementioned armament. Lasswell (1938) explains why he views propaganda as having the utmost importance of during wartime:

It is public opinion and propaganda in wartime which calls forth the most strenuous exertions. The conduct of war, conceived as a psychological problem, may be stated in terms of morale. A nation with a high morale is capable of performing the tasks laid upon it because of a certain momentum, which can only be measured when serious resistances appear (p. 8).

As such, this author defines propaganda as content that manipulates the target audience into performing or supporting a particular action. Its purpose is not to change reality in and of itself, but to present a particular version of reality that lends credibility to particular narratives and policies (Lasswell, 1938). It inspires individuals to act in a manner that promotes, maintains, and expands that specific view of reality:

By propaganda is not meant the control of mental states by changing such objective conditions as the supply of cigarettes or the chemical composition of food. Propaganda does not even include the stiffening of moral but a cool and confident bearing. It refers solely to the control of opinion by significant symbols, or, to speak more concretely and less accurately, by stories, rumors, reports, pictures and other forms of social communication. Propaganda is concerned with the management of opinions and

attitudes by the direct manipulation of social suggestion rather than by altering other conditions in the environment or in the organism (Lasswell, 1938, p. 9).

Bernays (1942) built off of Lasswell's theoretical foundation and identified six principles of strategy for war propaganda:

- 1- "Fasten the war guilt on the enemy.
- 2- Claim unity and victory, in the name of history and deity.
- 3- State war aims [. . .] Security, peace, a better social order, international laws [. . .]
- 4- Strengthen the belief of the people that the enemy is responsible for the war, with examples of the enemy's depravity.
- 5- Make the public believe that unfavorable news is really enemy lies. This will prevent disunity and defeatism.
- 6- Follow this with horror stories [which] should be made to sound authoritative" (Bernays 1942, p. 236).

Jacques Ellul's (1973) seminal work, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, also contributed to the body of work that designates which elements are most needed in order for propaganda to be successful and effective. In this piece, he agrees with Lasswell regarding the end-goal of propaganda:

The essential objective of pre-propaganda is to prepare man for a particular action, to make him sensitive to some influence, to get him into condition for the time when he will effectively, and without delay or hesitation, participate in an action. Seen from this angle, pre-propaganda does not have a precise ideological objective; it has nothing to do with an opinion, an idea, a doctrine (Ellul, 1973, p. 17).

While action is the sought-after end result, the belief in a certain idea of ideology is a necessary presupposition for action. According to Ellul (1973), in order to avoid the aforementioned problem of independent and critical thinking on the part of the masses, propaganda must be "continuous and lasting," wherein an individual "must not be allowed a moment of meditation or reflection in which to see himself vis-à-vis the propagandist" (Ellul, 1973, p. 19). By inundating the masses with a particular world view or idea, devoid of relevant facts, the atmosphere within society becomes one that is favorable to the acceptance of propaganda.

Ellul (1973) also contends that propaganda thrives insofar as it is aimed at the masses, and not at any one particular individual or type of person. He claims that propaganda aimed at the average person, with the most common motivations, feelings, and myths, is the most successful. Ellul (1973) justifies this assertion by noting that the group pressure to conform exerts a unique and sizeable influence on individuals. In this respect, propaganda exploits this psychological process in order to influence people's actions. In the context of war, propaganda seeks to inspire actions such as physically fighting in the war, working to supply the necessary materials, and promoting positive public sentiment in support of said war.

However, Ellul (1973) and Lasswell (1938) both note that war propaganda can only hold up for so long, given that people will eventually begin to notice inconsistencies between the official narrative and their own lived experience. As awareness grows, debate within a certain range of opinions deemed acceptable will follow. Such was the case as the Iraq invasion went on, as certain politicians who were initially in favor of the Bush administration's invasion became critical. Patrick and Thrall (2004) call this phenomenon the "pressure of paradox," and demonstrate its validity using the public's shifting opinion on the war in Iraq:

A campaign advertisement for Senator John Kerry, the 2004 Democratic presidential nominee, illustrated the paradox perfectly. Run in Iowa and New Hampshire in fall 2003 and early January 2004, Kerry's ad begins by arguing that the Bush administration should have created a more robust plan for rebuilding Iraq: "The problem is you declared 'mission accomplished' when you had no plan to win the peace." Seconds later, the ad argues that Bush's plan already costs too much: "We shouldn't be cutting education and closing firehouses in America while we're opening them in Iraq" (Rutenberg 2003, cited by Patrick and Thrall, 2004). Kerry's ad reflected the dual and conflicting pressures on Bush – the public expected progress in Iraq, but not at the expense of other matters (p. 12).

Propaganda uses various rhetorical tools to accomplish the goal of portraying a certain version of reality. We will now discuss some of these tools.

1.2 Us or Them and Enemy Construction

As mentioned, war is sometimes regarded as something used to unite an otherwise divided society and nation. In order to unite during a war, most of the media takes part in constructing an enemy to unite against (Irvin-Erickson, 2017). This concept, defined as “us versus them,” relates to previously discussed propaganda techniques that perpetuate black and white thinking (Walton, 1997). Lasswell (1938) argued that one of the primary goals of propaganda is to whip up hatred of the enemy and represent the oppositional country as a “murderous, menacing aggressor” (p. 195). Zollmann (2018) writes that such propaganda depicts “the enemy in contrast to the noble aims of the home state” and is “used to legitimize the war effort to the public in the home country” (p. 230).

Machin & Mayr (2012) define the aforementioned binaries as “structural oppositions.” They define structural oppositions as carrying ideological connotations, such as good/evil. Machin & Mayr (2012) write that structural oppositions can often be communicated even through just the mention of one word, as the word that is used to describe the enemy frequently carries an implication that the opposing party possesses opposing characteristics. Fillmore (2006) explains that through the use of enemy construction via structural opposition, the country engages in the act of self-identification. He elaborates on this concept by describing the context of the Cold War:

The relationship between the United States self and the Soviet Union enemy is mutually constitutive – production of a state’s identity is inextricably linked to the construction of the other. That is, the self is defined in relation to the difference of the other. American identity was constructed in response to the differences of its perceived enemy. Soviet identity (as perceived with the United States) was articulated in contrast to its difference with the United States (p. 7).

During the Cold War, enemy construction was essential in validating the nuclear arms race and the broader competition for power and hegemony across the globe (Cox, 1984). More recently, in US media, the explicit and implicit meaning behind media discourse describing Saddam Hussein as an enemy was to encourage and justify a US invasion of Iraq. Zahid (2016) describes this process:

After September 9, 2001, CNN, Fox News, and other mainstream print and electronic media networks successfully manufactured an “outside enemy” – bin Laden and transformed him into Enemy Number One posing a threat to the West. This consent

manufacturing by media developed a *casus belli*, a justification, a political legitimacy for waging a war, frequently conveyed by George Bush Jr. in his speeches expressing unilateralist pre-emption in sugar coated words like “defensive war” or “a war to protect freedom” (p. 6).

Irvin-Erickson (2017) analyzes American and Russian propaganda regarding the conflicts in Iraq and Ukraine, respectively. He argues that the “us versus them” narrative provides “an organizing framework for collective action, defining a community’s identity, its values and goals, and the stakes of its struggles, vis-à-vis another in a conflict” (Irvin-Erickson, 2017, p. 2). He further writes that the “us versus them” rhetoric frequently manifests as good/bad and victim/perpetrator binaries, which “shut down critical analysis of a conflict” (Irvin-Erickson, 2017, p. 5). In contrast, the ethical principles of journalism are to foster critical analysis – a topic we will explore in subsequent chapters.

Ahmadypour et al. (2010) summarizes why these techniques are tied to propaganda, writing that the media have knowingly or unknowingly become “tools in the hands of political actors” (p. 29). By uncritically propagating the government’s narratives of a certain war, the media provides the means for “political actors to acquire power and dominance upon their rivals under the framework of democratic discourse, international human rights” (p. 29).

1.3 Propaganda in the Digital Age

Traditional conceptions of propaganda such as Ellul’s (1973) theory presuppose a static and unidirectional relationship between the party producing propaganda and the receiver. However, contemporary studies about propaganda explain that this dynamic has shifted due to the rise of the internet and social media (Wanless& Berk, 2021; Hobbs, 2020). Wanless and Berk (2021) write about this phenomenon, calling it “participatory propaganda.”

Wanless and Berk (2021) build off of and contrast with Ellul’s theory as they describe that with the rise of these new forms of communication, the separation between the “sender and receiver” is becoming blurred. In the modern day, an actor can not only attempt to manipulate its target audiencebut also co-opt “its members to actively engage in the spread of persuasive communications, to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Wanless& Berk, 2021, p. 123). The propagandist secures “buy in” and

amplification from those being influenced, all while the origin of the message is obfuscated (Wanless& Berk, 2021).

1.4 War Propaganda vis-à-vis War Journalism: What is the difference between the two?

Given the broad definition of propaganda as messaging that manipulates people based on incomplete and misleading narratives, one might suppose that what distinguishes propaganda from journalism are whether facts are present or not. However, this is not entirely correct. Of course, there is propaganda that contains blatantly false information with the intention of misleading the public. However, more successful propaganda instead includes some aspect of the truth. This form of propaganda is based on a selection of particular facts that support a larger conclusion or ideology. Wardle and Dekakshan (2017) summarize this concept within what they call an information disorder framework. The categories of the framework are as follows: disinformation, in which categorically false information is deliberately used with malicious intent, misinformation, which refers to false information that is propagated with no ill intent, and finally mal-information, which is information that leverages certain facts to achieve a certain political agenda or objective.

Hyzen & Van den Bulck (2024) disagree with Wardle and Dekakshan's (2017) argument. They state that war propaganda cannot be solely achieved through "fake news". Instead, they write: "Though mis/disinformation will likely be deployed in the process of a propaganda campaign, facts and truths play an equal if not more important role" (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024, p. 4). They define propaganda as selectively conveying truths in manipulated contexts, while downplaying information that does not paint a favorable picture of the propagandist (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024). Notably absent from this definition and all definitions explored thus far is intent. Meaning, conscious intent to manipulate is not a necessary prerequisite to qualify certain types of journalism as propaganda. Therefore, journalists can promote government propaganda without an intention of maliciously manipulating the public (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024).

Simply because propaganda promotes a certain ideology or narrative which supports the interests of the propagandist (i.e., a government, political party, or corporation) does not mean that all parts of the propaganda can be dismissed as false. Indeed, this logic is one often utilized by warring parties. For example, in *Propaganda and Ethics of Persuasion*, Marlin

(1989) asserts that during both world wars, the Allies considered enemy narratives as propaganda and as such promoted the idea that everything the enemy says is a lie.

In 1997, Douglas Walton analyzed the role of propaganda in reporting on the Second World War. He analyzes a hypothetical example of reporting on two separate battles, wherein the Allies win one battle and the Axis wins the other. In this hypothesis, it is said that the news service in Great Britain only reports on its victory, while Germany does the same. As such, both countries are omitting part of the story that does not show their respective armies in a positive light. Walton (1997) argues that this type of omission is the most crucial when trying to identify propaganda:

What makes the propaganda at odds with a balanced critical discussion, or a presenting of information that "tells the whole truth", is the selectivity type of bias evident in the discourse. It is not that the propaganda lied, or was deceptive in reporting what was not true. The problem, from a point of view of informed and rational thinking, was that the propaganda showed evidence of a bias, by ignoring those facts that had no propaganda value, or would even have had propaganda disvalue (p. 21).

The Allies had very sophisticated mechanisms in place to produce propaganda. American president, Woodrow Wilson, created a government agency called the Committee on Public Information with the intention of disseminating materials in support of America's participation in the war. The committee had a "news division" which was explicitly designed as a "machinery for the collection and issuance of the official news of government" (Creel, 1920, p. 70). Walter Lippmann (1922), a journalist and intellectual at the time, criticized reporting based on Allied communiqués which exaggerated Ally victories. Lippmann (1922) wrote: "We have learned to call this propaganda. A group of men, who can prevent independent access to the event, arrange the news of it to suit their purpose. That the purpose was in this case patriotic does not affect the argument at all" (p. 26).

Journalists like Lippmann prompted a debate within society regarding the role of propaganda. Within this debate, some argued that propaganda had unjustly been smeared as solely a negative phenomenon. Edward Bernays, the so-called father of public relations, argued that whether "propaganda is good or bad depends upon the merit of the cause urged, and the correctness of the information published" (Lippmann, 1928, p. 48). What is unclear about this logic is who is assigned the responsibility or duty to assess whether a cause is

good or bad. Whether a cause is good or bad is relative, as an idea can be good for one party and bad for another.

The justification for the use of propaganda during wartime builds on this logic. Walton (1997) describes how propaganda is justified by claiming that putting forward certain facts serves the enemy and may result in a loss of life. This type of black and white thinking, wherein there is always a good and evil side, obscures the gray nature of reality (Walton, 1997).

1.5 The Birth and Debate of Journalistic Principles

Journalism as a profession was born from the debate about propaganda as well as in the Yellow Press. The Yellow Press refers to the way that news was covered in the United States in the late 19th century, which was characterized by an emphasis on sensationalism and lack of factual accuracy with a focus on profit and commercial success. However, as the public grew weary of such approaches, pivotal stories were broken by people who went undercover to obtain sensitive information about social issues that they would then bring to the public's attention. Upton Sinclair's expose on the meatpacking industry and Nelly Bly's on mental institutions gave the press a whole new meaning to the public.

It was in the wake of this transition that the American code of journalism ethics was created. In 1922, five editors of American newspapers developed this code and as a result formalized what we now consider to be the profession of journalism in the United States of America. Within this code, impartiality is named as indispensable, stating "news reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind" (American Society of Newspaper Editors Code of Ethics, 1922).

Since this time, journalism academics have continued to discuss and debate the merits and validity of the tenets, in particular the concept of objectivity and neutrality. Some have argued that there is no such thing as objective journalism. Berge and Luckmann (1966) explore the sociology of knowledge and assert that reality is not a static object but rather, on an individual level, is shaped by our socio-economic and cultural background. In particular, each person's perception of reality is constructed as they engage with existing societal norms in combination with their on lived experience (Berge and Luckmann, 1966). Tuchman (1978) applied this theory to journalism, arguing that the act of making news involves the

construction of reality, rather than reflecting reality. Therefore, following this argument, there is no possibility of objective coverage, rather simply one version of events unfolding. Mohamed Kirat's (2014) research on news framing supports this line of thinking by claiming that because the news presents facts in a certain way, with a certain context and certain assumptions, the news media serves as propaganda. Kirat (2014) writes:

News media are not presenting the truth, but they present what they want for people to think of as truth. Framing is inventing reality. It is brainwashing since it does not give the public and the audience a room for thinking, rather, it does all the thinking for them and tells them how they should react and feel about happenings and events. People consciously agree with what is being presented to them because they are psychologically convinced that what they receive is accurate. The framing technique is all about manipulating facts to make them support certain ideologies and certain set of objectives to maintain the status quo and serve the establishment (p. 7).

According to Ellul (1973), propaganda does not “lead to a choice...but to arouse an active and mythical belief” (Ellul, 1973). In contrast, journalism seeks to provide facts for the consideration of the public. While journalists have subjective limitations, the profession of journalism was not founded with the intention of serving specific interests. In 1965, Lippmann remarked in a speech that the creation of the profession of journalism:

introduces into conscience of the working journalists a commitment to seek the truth which is independent of and superior to all his other commitments—his commitment to newspapers that will sell, his commitment to his political party, his commitment even to promote the policies of his government (Sotirovic, 2019, p. 9).

As mentioned, some academics have a less optimistic view of the ability of journalists to rise above these “commitments.” In a piece analyzing the differences between propaganda and journalism, Mira Sotirovic (2019) writes that due to the subjective limitations all people have, “the best journalists can do is to admit their limitations in accessing truth and to criticize, agitate, and prod social scientists and statesmen to establish more usable information and more visible institutions” (Sotirovic, 2019, p. 9).

Sotirovic (2019) emphasizes that just because journalists are fallible insofar as they have their own life experience and subjective blind spots does not mean that they are automatically propagandists. The key differentiator between a professional journalist and one promoting propaganda is the critical consideration of all assertions and assumptions by

other parties, but also those held by the journalist him or herself. Sotirovic (2019) argues that “when journalists treat all truth claims as equal instead of weighting evidence in their degree of support, and when they do not challenge politicians and their talking-head pundits when they are lying, spinning, and being evasive, they become complicit in their propaganda” (Sotirovic, 2019, p. 14).

1.6 Contradictory Journalistic Communities

During wartime, all segments of society are affected in some way, shape, or form by the country’s involvement in a war. Shoemaker (1991) summarizes why this is the case and that “none of these actors – the individual, the routine, the organization, or the social institution – can escape that fact that it is tied to and draws its sustenance from the social system” (p. 75). As such, the pressures on journalists are heightened and exacerbated during wartime (Allan and Zelizer, 2004).

Others support the fact that journalists are not independent of the social, economic, and political context of the society in which they were born and live in (Wei et al., 1996). The professional duty of journalists to serve as neutral and impartial watchdogs (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007) is one that must be intentionally practiced. Journalists are not impermeable to the same social and ideological divisions that exist within the broader public.

Carey (1989) pioneered this type of approach to journalism studies, wherein the focus is less on the impacts resulting from the media, but rather the cultural context that journalists are born and operate in. According to this argument, journalists are not independent proponents of novel ideas, but instead represent those already prevalent in society, contributing to the shaping of the discourse in the public sphere without necessarily being the initiators of new lines of thought. While understanding the context in which journalists are socialized is helpful, it does not absolve them of their professional duty to question common ideas and, most importantly, find and verify evidence that either supports or refutes them.

Barbara Zelizer’s (1993) concept of journalists comprising an interpretative community also supports this perspective. This framing was proposed with the aim of expanding the definition of journalists as solely a community of professionals. Zelizer (1993) writes:

Journalists, in this view, come together by creating stories about their past that they routinely and informally circulate to each other – stories that contain certain constructions of reality, certain kinds of narratives, and certain definitions of appropriate practice (Zelizer, 1993, p. 5).

During wartime, the two communities of which journalists belong to (the professional and cultural/national ones) contradict each other (Zandberg & Neiger, 2005) and challenge the journalist in their professional quest to collect, verify, and publish facts. In a study examining this tension between nationality and profession, Zandberg and Neiger (2005) write:

On the one hand, the professional community calls upon the journalist to tell a story that will be, or will appear to be, factual, objective and balanced. Although it is known that this cannot be fully achieved, these values are still at the core of the profession's ideology. On the other hand, the national-cultural community calls upon the journalist to take part in the conflict, to be its representative and its weapon, in the battle of images and soundbites – to tell an unbalanced, unobjective story. The journalists are torn between two contradicting desires: the professional desire for objectivity and the national desire for solidarity (Zandberg & Neiger, 2005, p. 1).

Famously, Chomsky and Herman (2002) propagate an alternative understanding of why journalists operate the way they do in wartime. In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, the authors argue that journalists must adhere to certain economic and political views in order to “survive” as a journalist. They write: “The media are indeed free – for those who adopt the principles which the ‘social ends’ demand” (Herman & Chomsky, 2002, p. 304). Lenin similarly wrote that the freedom of the press meant the freedom for the wealthy elite who own the newspapers to mislead the public in favor of its interests (Resis, 1977).

1.7 Journalists as Biased Actors

While journalists in Western countries identify as “committed to a form of journalism marked by its objectivity and political neutrality” (Patterson & Donsbagh, 1996, p. 1), research shows that their personal beliefs play a role in their work. During the time of research, Patterson and Donsbagh (1996) noted that most newspapers demonstrated a centrist editorial ideology so as to appeal to the most commercial interests and political affiliations. These authors also found that while partisan beliefs were secondary to a

professional orientation overall, there are moments when partisan beliefs play a stronger role in reporting:

When they [journalists] move from facts to analysis, their decisions are subject to errors of judgement and selectivity of perception. As a result, partisanship can and does intrude on news decisions, even among journalists who are conscientiously committed to a code of strict neutrality... In all likelihood, most of this nonobjective reporting is not the result of a conscious effort to take sides (Patterson & Donsbagh, 1996, p. 12).

Despite evidence that personal biases and opinions impact, to the detriment of, war reporting, journalists have underestimated this phenomenon. Shamir (1988) investigated the perceptions of Israeli journalists of the use of national *versus* professional approaches to reporting. A high percentage of those inquired responded that they were willing to place the nation's morale and image ahead of professional journalistic values. What's more, journalists included in the study did not identify a conflict in such a subordination of journalistic norms.

War is often seen as and used as a way to unite a divided population, sometimes against an external enemy force. Thus, as the government riles people up behind a certain ideology and understanding of the dynamics of the war, any journalist or person who presents something that runs counter to these themes is often labeled as a traitor to their country. This type of environment contributes to the difficulty that many journalists face in attempting to uphold a fundamental principle of gathering and verifying facts to present all sides of a conflict (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Allan and Zelizer (2004) write:

It is their [war journalists'] very commitment to some rendering of national identity, even patriotism, that is likely to engender a change in journalistic work. It may entail a migration toward vague word choice, the absence of a broader perspective, the lack of explicit images, even the wearing of flag pins (p. 4).

Zandberg and Neiger's (2005) study of the contradiction between national and professional identity found that while journalists employed a biased, national framework in their reporting, they were able to switch to a professional lens after some time passed. The study explores the reporting on the Second Intifada and how Israeli journalists initially reported using a patriotic frame as opposed to a professional one. However, five days

following the outbreak of rebellion by Palestinians, Israeli journalists were able to reassert their professional values and norms. This shares parallels with the American media establishment's initial acceptance and insistence on the US government's allegations that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction at the start of the Iraq war in 2003. After a period of time, American journalists have reckoned with these mistakes.

Researchers have also explored the question of how to avoid this instinctive bias that many journalists take up. Zandberg and Neiger's (2005) study suggests that journalists cannot be neatly categorized into either members of a national or professional community, but rather that the two identities are dynamically intertwined. They write that "journalists have to balance, constantly, between the two in relation to the external events and the political environment" (Zandberg&Neiger, 2005, p. 8). This concept bears relevance not only to the way journalists approach their work, but to how the media outlets they work for relate to their reporting.

The previous authors also cite an example that illustrates how media outlets can, during times of war, overemphasize the national identity to the detriment of the professional one. In 2003, NBC journalist Peter Arnet gave an interview to Iraqi television (with permission from NBC) and remarked that the US invasion had thus far failed due to "Iraqi resistance." Because of these remarks, NBC fired Arnet. Zandberg and Neiger (2005) wrote that "while he saw it as objective journalism, the audience and his superiors saw it as anti-American journalism" (p. 8).

1.8 Foreign Wars and Journalism

Now that we've established that journalists are part of two sometimes contradictory communities, we will investigate what causes them to align with one over the other when covering a foreign war. Research shows that the way journalists approach foreign wars and conflicts depends on the political context of their home country and how its government relates to the conflict in question (Nossek, 2004). This trend is of particular interest given that one of the primary principles of journalism ethics, according to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007), is to maintain independence from the parties covered, such as the government.

Nossek (2004) investigated a theory explaining what factors result in the particular orientation journalists take in reporting on foreign wars. Specifically, he tested the theory that "the more 'national' the report is, the less 'professional' it will be, i.e., the closer the

reporters and editors are to a given news event in terms of national interest, the further they are from applying professional news values” (Nossek, 2004, p. 1).

Nossek (2004) tested three factors related to whether a journalist employs a national or professional frame: the type of event, the location of it and its relevance to the domestic politics of the government, and the context, including the timing and historical background. The interplay of these factors coalesces to how a journalist relates to a war and, according to Nossek (2004), whether they see the event as “ours” or “theirs.” Through his research, he found that when journalists view an event as directly connected to their nation, they are more likely to utilize a national-based or patriotic framework to the reporting, as opposed to an objective, distanced, and neutral framework. He also found that if a topic is not considered neither “ours” nor “theirs,” journalists are more likely to employ a professional orientation.

Nossek (2004) based his research on Roeh and Cohen’s (1992) definition of open and closed reporting, which refers to how factual and impartial it is. Nossek (2004) adapted and built on this research to define the following criteria to assess how open or closed a story is:

- 1- “Balance: Is only one position presented? Does the rival viewpoint get the same amount of exposure?
- 2- Fact/commentary: Is the report fact or partly commentary?
- 3- Neutrality: Is the coverage biased toward one of the parties or does it maintain objectivity and avoid partiality?
- 4- Labels: Are the adjectives emotive or neutral? Labels can indicate the journalistic professional frame (Entman, 1991,cited by Nossak, 2004).
- 5- Historical references: Does it link the event to past events in the report text, with source citations?
- 6- Scope of coverage: How many items on the news pages were devoted to the subject? How many days did the coverage last?
- 7- Prominence: Where were the items located – initial pages or inside pages? (Nossek, 1990,cited by Nossak, 2004). Position in a newspaper is a criterion for measuring newsworthiness (Servaes, 1991,cited by Nossak, 2004). According to the literature, if a story has a more national frame of reference, it will generally be defined as domestic news as opposed to foreign news and vice versa.

- 8- Story source: Who supplied the newspaper with the story? Where is the source of the story located? This criterion is important both for measuring the newsworthiness of an event and as a factor affecting the news frame of the story (Servaes, 1991 p. 32, cited by Nossak, 2004).
- 9- Information sources: Who are the parties referred to directly or indirectly in the story as sources of information, i.e. secondary sources? Who are the story's spokespersons (direct and indirect)? The choice of sources is important in terms of the frame of coverage (Liebes, 1992, cited by Nossak, 2004).
- 10- Emphases: Which aspects of the story are highlighted in the report? What is the story's main point/main themes?" (Nossak, 2004, p. 13).

As we have shown, a delicate interplay between propaganda, journalistic communities, and ethical principles exists. We are interested in the forces that motivate and cause journalists and news outlets to behave in one way as opposed to the other, which is why we will next discuss the political, economic, and sociological underpinnings of the American media landscape.

2 Political Economy and Professionalization of Journalism

In the previous chapter, the distinctions between war journalism and war propaganda were explored, in addition to the varying motivations and guiding principles behind each. These phenomena do not occur in a vacuum, but rather are heavily influenced by the context of a larger media landscape and broader society. Historically, there has been a debate about how to approach understanding the forces behind these paradigms.

One school of thought focuses on the impact of political and economic structures on media. The other framework argues that the professionalization of journalism, in a sociological and cultural sense, are most relevant to the study of war propaganda and journalism. In this chapter, we will discuss how these two frameworks are interdependent. Nixon (2011) justifies why such an approach is more fruitful in analyzing war coverage. He writes:

...combining the two theoretical positions would produce a theory of journalistic ideology with a more holistic understanding of ideology and, thus, more explanatory power. The ideology of journalists should be seen as a political-professional issue and a political-economic issue: If journalistic ideology is the thought that guides practice, then that thinking is related to the political-economic relations of news production as much as it is related to professional norms (p. 142).

In the late 19th century, Karl Marx developed an approach to analyzing the political and economic relations that make up the capitalist system. During the 1960s, a time of mass upheaval across the world, communications academics began to apply Marxist theory to analyzing media ecosystems. Wasko (2014) describes the political economy approach as the study of the “corporatization, commercialization, commodification and concentration” of the media. Murdock and Golding (1973) emphasize why understanding the economic underbelly of the media system is so important to analyzing the media and journalism:

The range of interpretive frameworks, the ideas, concepts, facts and arguments which people use to make sense of their lives, are to a great extent dependent on media output, both fictional and non-fictional. Yet the frameworks offered are necessarily articulated with the nexus of interests producing them, and in this sense all information is ideology (p. 22).

At the same time, some academics have also criticized political economy as too “reductionist” insofar as it “reduces complex phenomena to simplifying economic explanation” (Hardy, 2014, p. 13). Hardy (2014) describes how some critics claim that political economy oversimplifies the diverse interests and dynamics influencing the decisions of editors and reporters, including journalistic norms and culture. Zollmann (2017), however, argues that “corporate control and professional journalism are not antagonistic moments; they can rather be seen as two sides of the same coin. Although professionalism grants autonomy to journalists, commercial market barriers and constraints, as well as a problematic realization of professional norms, limited the range of permissible debate in the press” (p. 14).

2.1 What is political economy?

Political economy is broadly referred to as the study of the “production, distribution, and consumption of resources to sustain human existence” (Hardy, 2014, p. 25). Political economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo pioneered classical political economy, focusing on forces such as supply and demand and how they influence the decision-making of producers and consumers alike. Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels further developed political economy in their critique of it and spearheaded the concept of class analysis. In Marx’s seminal work, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, he describes how the capitalist mode of production centers upon the exchange of commodities and the economic impacts of such a mode of production on different classes within society.

Murdock and Golding were some of the most prominent academics to apply the political economic framework under Marxist theory to communication studies in the 1970s. According to Marxist theory, they write, “mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities” (Murdock & Golding, 1973, p. 205-206). The concept of a commodity in this context is a product whose primary purpose is to generate profit (Marx, 1867). Thus, political economy of media claims that the primary (but not the only) mission of the media is to sell its products: information and entertainment. The social impacts of these products reach far beyond the moment of consumption. Murdock and Golding (1973) write:

...the media are the major source of information about, and explanations of, social and political processes. The mass media therefore play a key role in determining the forms

of consciousness and the modes of expression and action which are made available to people (Murdock & Golding, 1973, p. 1).

Mosco (1996) defined the political economy of media as “the study of the social relations, particularly power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources” (p. 25). Using the political economy of media approach, the power relations are investigated via ownership schemes and the corresponding levels of influence and control that media companies exert in the broader society. Mosco (1996) clarified how Marxist political economic theory translates to communication studies:

The political economist asks: How are power and wealth related and how are these in turn connected to cultural and social life? The political economist of communication wants to know how all of these influence and are influenced by our systems of mass media, information, and entertainment (Mosco, 1996, p. 4)

Political economy originating from Marxist theory seeks to analyze the character and interests guiding the products that the media produce, including war journalism and propaganda. But other journalism theorists argue that professionalization of journalism and the associated cultural norms play a more important role.

2.2 Professionalization of Journalism Framework

The other framework used to assess the media’s role in society is through the sociological examination of journalism as a profession. This approach argues that the dominant ideology expressed in the media is the result of journalistic practices and norms. This includes news sourcing, the professional norms of objectivity, and separation of editorial and commercial aspects of media organizations (Hampton, 2010).

Bennett (1990) argued that these journalistic norms and culture were linked to the presence of propaganda within journalism. According to his “indexing theory,” journalistic norms prioritize sources and opinions that were already prevalent within political institutions (Bennett, 1990). By adhering to this journalistic norm of relying on such political figures, he argues that officials in the government are making the news (Bennett, 1990). In an update, Bennett (2010) explains that the range of permissible debate within the press coincides with that occurring within political institutions, i.e., it “expands when there is broad institutional debate on issues such as abortion, and shrinks when institutional debate narrows on issues such as the decision to invade Iraq” (p. 106). Regarding coverage of the Iraq war, Bennett

notes that because of the dominance of the official narrative, “public opinion reflected this daily flow of official spin from a mainstream media that had become an unwitting propaganda arm of government” (Bennett, 2010, p. 110). The result is that “the news often seems more a record of the ebb and flow of political power than a steady or independent discussion of the issues over which those power struggles are waged” (Bennett, 2010, p. 106).

2.3 Economic and Sociological Development of Journalism

To study the political economy of the media, we must examine its political and economic history. Industrialization drastically transformed every aspect of society. As such, it also greatly impacted the sphere of media and journalism. Industrialization improved certain aspects of journalism, while it also brought about challenges that affected producers and consumers of news alike. For example, industrialization facilitated large-scale production and distribution of newspapers, markedly improving the distribution and access to information:

Industrialization, like the rise of mass politics and the market revolution, called forth a new type of newspaper. The industrial paper took advantage of new machines to achieve efficiencies in production; but these in turn introduced economies of scale requiring mass distribution. Expanding readerships enticed new mass advertisers (such as department stores), which provided revenue to pay for the expansion of staff and the industrialization of news work (Nerone & Barnhurst, 2010, p. 1).

In order to purchase and maintain the capital necessary for such production, newspapers required a certain “financial underpinning” (Murdock & Golding, 1973). This financial prerequisite had far-reaching effects on the profession of journalism, both due to the direct corporate takeover of the media as well as the indirect influence of corporations via advertising.

This shift had profound impacts on the sociological underpinnings of what is now known as journalism. The first newspapers throughout the country were political in nature (Zollmann, 2017). Those owned by wealthy members of society explicitly published pieces that aligned with their political ideology, and the same applied to working-class papers that were reader-funded (Zollmann, 2017). As advertising began to play a heavy role in the

financing of papers, even the working-class papers had to reorient themselves and their target audience in order to survive. Zollmann (2017) describes the results of this process:

In what followed, radical newspapers had to adjust to advertising pressures in order to survive in the market. That meant a redefinition of target audiences, upmarket orientation and political conformity. In the end, the press came under control of ‘capitalist entrepreneurs’, while the radical press was either dismantled by or absorbed into the new system” (Zollmann, 2017, p. 14).

Zollmann (2017) argues that this economic and political transformation of journalism directly ties to its professionalization. He posits that journalistic principles such as objectivity were born in this transition, writing: “with the corporate integration, the press had to appear neutral because it could not overtly support their owners and corporate funders as in the partisan tradition” (Zollmann, 2017, p. 14). Conboy (2004) summarizes this development, saying “the institutionalization of journalism has been accompanied by its integration into the political and economic status quo” (p. 110).

2.4 Appealing to a Mass Audience of Potential Consumers

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the American code of journalistic ethics prioritizes reporting in service of the public above any other party. However, with the corporatization of the press, that mission was put under strain. Murdock and Golding (1973) describe the consequences this shift had on journalism:

Nonetheless, the crux of the system is that information is a commodity, to be packaged, distributed and sold in whatever guise and context guarantee commercial survival. For the press such survival is increasingly problematic and the desperate search for readers, the right readers, demands an increasingly moderate, apolitical, entertainment-oriented press (p. 23).

With these newly imposed demands of the market, the contours of journalism shifted. Murdock and Golding (1973) continue, asserting that commercialization:

...will mean less space, less chance for background discussion, even greater reliance on the handful of agency sources, greater passivity, less risk-taking, the evacuation of politics. News becomes a means of handling social change, a comforting reaffirmation of the existing order. Any threat is explained away as temporary, deviant or

inconsequential. Underlying conflicts of interests and political process are reduced to a necessary concentration on the arresting mythologies of the superficial drama of legislative life. These limitations, as we show below, are part of the demands of commercial information production in a situation of economic pressure (p. 23).

This commercial pressure to appeal to the widest audience relates to the discussion in the previous chapter about the prioritization of a national identity over journalistic principles. Murdock and Golding (1973) wrote that in order to speak to and connect with as many people within a country as possible, the media invoke a nationalistic language and rhetoric. In doing so, they create a “common community between medium and audience” and, furthermore, are able to blur social divisions within any given nation. Henceforth, the tendency of both media companies and journalists to promote nationalistic interests can be regarded as bearing connection to the economic interests guiding the enterprise.

2.5 Shift to “Soft News”

In McChesney’s (2003) political economic analysis of the US news media, he writes that the commercialization of the media impacted both *which* stories and themes were to be explored and *how* they were reported on. Due to the emphasis on the profit motive, throughout recent decades, many corporations implemented budget cuts and layoffs to remain financially competitive. A 2017 study by Radio Television Digital News Association found that media mergers lead to increased layoffs (RTDNA, 2017). This trend has impacted the ability of media outlets to effectively serve as watchdogs, as they are chronically understaffed. In 2000, two executives at the public relations firm Edelman noted that due to the reduction in reporters and resources there is an “an increased likelihood that press releases will be used word-for-word, in part if not in whole” (Reeds et al., 2000, p. 25).

McChesney (2003) also argues that the commercial interests at the fore of media outlets’ business strategies produce inherent conflicts of interests when considering possible investigative journalism stories to explore. In addition to budget-constraints and fears of libel legal proceedings, the turn away from investigative journalism has ushered in an epoch of “soft news”:

The flip side of the reluctance to spend money on investigative or international coverage, and the reluctance to antagonize powerful sources, is an increased emphasis

on largely trivial stories, that give the appearance of controversy and conflict but rarely have anything to do with any significant public issue (McChesney, 2003, p. 1).

McChesney posits that this shift in prioritization also affects how the press cover and relate to the excesses of people in power. He claims that:

A politician stands a far greater chance to become the object of news media scrutiny if she or he is rumored to have not paid 10 parking tickets or if they failed to pay a bar bill than if they used their power to quietly funnel billions of public dollars to powerful special interests. The justification for this caliber of journalism is that these stories are popular and therefore profitable, and commercial news needs to “give the people what they want,” but to a certain extent, leaving aside the question of whether journalism should be determined by marketing polls, this is circular logic (Greppi, 2002, p. 2, cited by McChesney, 2003).

The irony of this approach is that producing trivial content that aims to entertain viewers actually ends up causing them to turn away from news consumption (McChesney, 2003). This decline in viewership then in turn brings about more layoffs and budget cuts (McChesney, 2003). Therefore, the corporate profit-motivated logic is ultimately helping to bring about a decline in its own reach and influence (McChesney, 2003).

McChesney (2003) concludes by linking this tendency to the economic structure of the corporate news media and explains why the interests of media corporations are inherently linked to the broader system which, from a journalistic point of view, should be critically observed and engaged with:

In short, the corporate news media have a vested interest in the corporate system. The largest media firms are members in good standing in the corporate community and closely linked through business relations, shared investors, interlocking directors, and shared political values with each other (McChesney, 2003).

Beyond the long-term operational impacts, this alignment of interests deeply impacts the quality and type of journalism that is pursued. Journalists are tasked with questioning those in power, but this becomes more complicated when their job becomes selling the news as opposed to investigating the news. Both political economy and sociological approaches to this question bear relevance.

Cornia et al. (2018) write that due to diminishing budgets and restructuring, professional journalistic norms regarding this separation are also shifting. Their study showed that “journalists are now expected to develop new skills (e.g. business thinking), to change their working practices (e.g. collaborating with marketing professionals to promote their stories), and to fulfil new roles (e.g. that of subscription sellers)” (Cornia et al., 2018, p. 186). As such, this shows that the shift from separation of editorial and commercial segments of media organization towards the integration of the two is deeply connected with the profit motive.

2.6 Media Ownership

The aforementioned economic structure provides the impetus towards consolidation and monopolization because many firms cannot survive economically and are then consumed by a wealthier individual or corporation. However, the issue of ownership concentration has always been a salient issue within American society. Benjamin Franklin, a founding father of the United States, himself owned seven newspapers and magazines and book publishing companies while serving in a national functionary position (Isaacson, 2003, p. 126). The trend towards consolidation and corporate monopolization has only intensified in recent decades. In 2012, it was reported that six companies controlled 90% of the US media market (Lutz, 2012). This data is even more shocking when compared with 1983, when 50 companies controlled that same percentage of the market (Lutz, 2012).

Generally, academic research argues that diversified media ownership promotes democratic values and principles within society. Baker (2006) writes that “the basic standard for democracy” is “a very wide and fair dispersal of power and ubiquitous opportunities to present preferences, views, visions” (p. 7). Meanwhile, research shows that media outlets under the same ownership tend to publish similar views due to both economic and political reasons (Baum and Zhukov, 2019). It is more economically efficient to adhere to one consistent editorial line, as journalists can cross-reference and cross-promote each other’s work. Politically speaking, the owners of media organizations select editors who share their viewpoints and ideology and, as a result, editorial and news content “tend to follow the economic interests of media ownership” (Baum and Zhukov, 2019, p. 39).

2.7 Sources

McChesney (2003) also describes that the commercialization of the media and concentrated media ownership has exacerbated an already-existing norm within the profession of journalism to rely on official sources. Zollmann (2017) explains the interplay of the economic and sociological elements with the reliance on official sources, writing:

Over time, the journalists' dependency on these sources grows because they deliver the essential ingredients of their reporting. Elite sources tend to be seen as more credible due to their 'status and prestige' in society. Following other, less credible sources may as well enhance the costs of research and fact checking, in particular if media organizations anticipate 'criticism of bias and the threat of libel suits' (p. 2).

Financial pressures, including budget cuts, further exacerbate this because journalists are put in a position of choosing whether to risk their career and livelihood, or risk their sources of information. McChesney (2004) writes that journalists "discover that they cannot antagonize their sources or they might get cut off from all information" (p. 69). Hampton (2010) describes the reality of this predicament, writing: "Such a deprivation of access would, of course, severely hamper a journalist's effectiveness, and by extension his or her career prospects" (p. 9). McChesney illustrates the implications of this trend with an example:

Indeed, in the current environment, it is decreasingly the case that the reporter will bother to investigate to find out who is telling the truth if there is a factual dispute among official sources. The professional reliance upon official sources as the basis for news — always a problem — has been reduced to the absurd. To investigate factual disputes among official sources would take time and cast the pall of bias over the journalist, depending upon whom the findings favored. When, for example, in 2002 Democrats criticized Halliburton for not paying taxes under Dick Cheney's leadership, the press ran the charges and a response from Halliburton denying the charges. No journalist, in the professional mainstream press at least, appeared to attempt to investigate to determine who was telling the truth (Bumiller, 2002, p. C5, cited by McChesney, 2003).

Even when journalists go against the tide of the dominant position, Hampton (2010) attributes this to the willingness of official sources to challenge a particular policy or decision, not the willingness of the journalist to do so. He cites the "celebrated examples of

‘Fourth Estate’ journalism as the publication of the Pentagon Papers and the exposure of the Watergate break-in and cover-up” (Hampton, 2010, p. 12) as relying on leaks with officials who were “at odds” with their colleagues and superiors.

This overreliance on official sources is especially concerning in regards to war reporting. In this respect, the role of the press in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq is an infamous example of this overreliance. Hayes and Guardino (2010) investigated the range of voices and sources included in the eight months leading up to the American invasion of Iraq and found that in ABC, CBS, and NBC evening coverage was heavily skewed towards official sources from the Bush administration:

George W. Bush and his underlings, while not holding full sway over the news, garnered twice as much attention as any competing source. Administration officials comprised 28% of the networks’ source quotes (a total of 1,718 in all). Bush himself was the source of more than half (53%) of all the quotes in the category, meaning that the president accounted for 15% of all statements in the pre-war period, more than any other single source. Not surprisingly...the vast majority of the quotes attributed to Bush and other administration officials — 78% — were supportive of military action (Hayes and Guardino, 2010, p. 14).

McChesney (2002) writes that “In matters of international politics, ‘official sources’ are almost interchangeable with the term ‘elites,’ as foreign policy is mostly a preserve of the wealthy and powerful few” (p. 95). McChesney (2004) also argues that such an uneven approach to sources tends to include facts that ideologically uphold the interests of advertisers and corporations. As a result, overreliance on official sources is pertinent to any investigation of whether reporting constitutes propaganda.

2.8 Government Deregulation and Media Convergence

The monopolization of the media market did not occur spontaneously but was instead facilitated and promoted through government deregulation of the industry. Since the 1980s, government policy has “predominantly been aimed at enabling media mergers, like the ones between AOL and Time Warner, or CBS and Viacom in recent years, and allowing more concentrated media ownership within local markets” (Ward, 2007). In particular, the policies of the Reagan administration allowed for the vertical and horizontal integration of various forms of media into one entity (Holt, 2011). This has been referred to as “media

convergence” and concretely involved the consolidation of film, television, and radio companies into one (Holt, 2011). As a result, “a single company could control production through point of sale not just within but also across media” and “The unchecked corporate power that spread across industrial lines created a media environment that was beneficial to private, not public interests” (Holt, 2011, p. 4).

The commercial interests guiding the major media corporations in the US have created a situation in which they not only lobby for deregulation, but they also limit the public’s access to information about said regulations. In 2002 the biennial review of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was announced with many concerned that the chairman, Michael Powell, would advance further deregulation of the media industry. Ward (2007) investigated the level of reporting on the issue by the news companies that were in question:

A Lexis-Nexis search for varying search terms including ‘FCC,’ ‘deregulation’ and ‘Powell’ in three of the largest and most reputable US daily newspapers, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, reveals that a total of 125 stories appeared in those three papers over a three-year period between September 2002... And September 2005. That amounts to an average of just over one story per newspaper per month (Ward, 2007, p. 219).

When observing the distribution of the stories over time, a clearer picture emerges. Essentially, the majority of reporting on the FCC rule changes occurred only with major events and decisions, but nothing in between (Ward, 2007). Contrast this to the level of public interest in the FCC proposed changes, best encapsulated by the fact that “between June and September 2003, the FCC and members of Congress received over three million emails, almost invariably voicing opposition to the proposals” (Ward, 2007, page 219). In summary, Ward writes:

For once, this illustrates the reliance of media on official sources and authority-induced media events. Only when political or legal decisions were actually taken did the media report. But furthermore, it reveals the lackluster way in which the American news media approached an issue that they preferred not to talk about, because of the vested interests of their parent corporations (Ward, 2007, p. 219).

Even the most powerful media corporations cannot sustain themselves independently, but must recruit and nurture relationships with advertisers. In the next section, we will examine the ramifications of advertising on journalistic content and principles.

2.9 Advertising as a Form of Social Control

In 2004, Robert Craig used a case study of an Iowa student paper and its relationship with its advertisers as a way to understand how businesses “employ their advertising to socially control and thus censor viewpoints they do not like” (Craig, 2004, p. 1). During the Vietnam War, the paper published anti-war stances that many speculated led to conservative advertisers revoking their funds (Craig, 2004). The study therefore investigated the commercial and government pressures on the newspaper’s editorial board to self-censor. The case study revealed that indeed some advertisers ceased their financial relationship with the paper in the wake of its advocacy of “antiwar, feminist, and anti-establishment positions” (Craig, 2004, p. 249). Craig concludes the case study by claiming:

This study shows how advertising revenue is a structural mechanism that allows corporations and small businesses to undermine mainstream media’s political diversity as well as to discipline media for business related content they do not like. The media’s reliance on advertising revenues to operate does not bode well for an informed and actively engaged public and a democratic society. In times of national crisis, when the government would also like to censor and control the press for “national security reasons,” the pressures outside and inside the newsroom may be difficult to withstand (Craig, 2004, p. 250).

This case study added to a larger body of research that confirms these assertions. In 1992, Soley and Craig surveyed news editors and reporters about the influence advertisers were exerting on their reporting. 90 percent of editors responded that advertisers had withdrawn their funds to influence the type of content being published (Soley & Craig, 1992). Approximately one third claimed that advertisers had been successful in influencing said content via this tactic (Soley & Craig, 1992). The trend was especially pronounced in smaller newspapers, with 16.7 percent of 100,000+ circulation newspapers reporting that they had been influenced, as compared to 41.9 percent at papers with 25,000 to 50,000 readers (Soley and Craig 1992).

The influence of advertisers on journalism is not limited to explicit directives. Chunovic (2002) argues that journalists sometimes voluntarily or instinctively put commercial interests above the principles of journalism. For example, in 2001, the trade publication *Electronic Median* found that the vast majority of TV station executives found their news departments “cooperative” in shaping the news to assist in “nontraditional revenue development” (Chunovic, 2002, p. 6). What this entails is using advertisers as experts in stories and promoting events or narratives that support the interests of major advertisers (Chunovic, 2002). Furthermore, in 2000, the Pew Research Center’s survey of journalists revealed that one-half of journalists admitted to self-censoring themselves in response to the commercial interests of their employer or advertisers (Pew Research, 2000).

Until now, we have explored the political and economic forces at play within the American media industry. All of these trends have influenced the current state of the media market that we will examine next.

2.10 Media Market Segmentation

The US media market has undergone several transformations in its short lifespan. From the penny press to the advent of the internet, journalism has constantly had to adjust and reinvent itself in the face of massive societal shifts. The current makeup and format of the news media industry is of particular relevance as the researcher seeks to identify and analyze a cross-section of the US media to gain a representative picture:

Since the 1990s, the US commercial journalistic field has sub-divided into three segments, all of them operating online and some with still substantial offline components: a mass infotainment segment consisting of well-established websites such as Yahoo!, BuzzFeed, Huffington Post and rising stars such as Vice and Vox, as well as local commercial television news; a partisan segment represented by (conservative) Fox and (left-liberal) MSNBC, mostly conservative talk radio, and the political blogosphere; and a ‘mainstream’ quality segment led by national newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, the national network news and general news magazines such as *Time* and leading regional newspapers (Rodney, 2019, p. 2).

2.11 Alternative Media

In addition to ideological divides across media, journalism studies classifies news organizations as mainstream or alternative (Atton, 2010). These categories are related to the sociological and cultural questions we have explored in this chapter thus far. Atton (2010) writes, “Alternative journalism ‘belongs to the public’: it is concerned with ‘emancipationist self-representation’” (Hartley, 2009, p. 322 and p. 310, cited by Atton, 2010). By contrast, professional journalism is “‘top down’, ‘expert and representative’” (Atton, 2010, p. 172). This difference in orientation by alternative media represents a “direct challenge to the ‘regime of objectivity’ that dominates professionalized journalism” (Atton, 2010, p. 172). Atton (2010) expands on this, writing:

The normative ideal of professionalized journalism emphasizes the factual nature of news. It is based on the empiricist assumption that there exist ‘facts’ in the world and that it is possible to identify these facts accurately and without bias (the journalistic norm of detachment). The normative ideal of alternative journalism argues the opposite: that reporting is always bound up with values (personal, professional, institutional) and that it is therefore never possible to separate facts from values (pp. 172-173).

Atton (2010) also argues that alternative media have a different approach to sources than mainstream media, writing that alternative media outlets tend to “treat non-official sources (such as factory or shop workers, minor government officials, pensioners, working mothers, the unemployed, the homeless, even school children) as primary definers in their stories” (Atton, 2010, p. 173). Atton (2010) argues that this practice “overturns the professionally-routinised hierarchy of access to the media” dominant within mainstream media outlets (p. 173).

This distinction impacts the way that mainstream and alternative media outlets frame news events. Cissel (2012) conducted a study comparing the coverage of six mainstream outlets with six alternative outlets regarding their coverage of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests. The protests, met with violence from the police, were centered on economic inequality in the US and the role of the banking sector in perpetuating it. Cissel (2012) found that the mainstream media “placed the protesters at fault of the violence, and conversely, the alternative media sources focused on the brutality of the police and their violent acts on the

peaceful protestors” (p. 74). Cissel (2012) contends that these differences in framing are at least partially attributable to the economic backing of the outlets in question:

While it is naïve to assume that the reasons for these differences lie in media ownership alone, this study calls to question the agenda, intentions and motive behind the various frames. For example, out of the 12 people sitting on the board of *The New York Times*, all 12 of them had an interest tied to at least two other major corporations, businesses, banks, advertising companies, pharmaceuticals or industries under government influence (p. 74).

There are clear and substantiated links between the political economy of the American media and its journalistic principles. From ownership consolidation to advertising, the economic backbone of the media system in the US has wide-stretching impacts on journalism in general and war journalism in particular. In the subsequent chapter, we will examine the American reporting on the war in Ukraine thus far in an effort to better contextualize the research on the level of war propaganda in the US journalistic community on this topic.

3 Reporting on the War in Ukraine

On February 23, 2022, Russia launched its ground invasion and aerial bombardment of Ukraine, which as of the date of writing is still ongoing. The motivation for such an invasion is disputed and largely depends on which ideological and geopolitical framework one is approaching the invasion from. Russia claimed that it is defending its territorial integrity by responding to the threat of potential expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to Ukraine, which borders Russia (Zollmann, 2023). It also claimed that it was “liberating” the Ukrainian people generally and in particular those in the Russian-speaking eastern part of Ukraine through a “denazification” of the country’s leadership (Zollmann, 2023). Meanwhile, the US government asserts that the decision to invade Ukraine was the choice of Russian President Putin based on personal aspirations regarding power and influence in the world (Zollmann, 2023; Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024).

What is certain and broadly agreed upon is that the invasion has had far-reaching impacts of the war in terms of civilian deaths, economic crises, and risk of nuclear catastrophe (Zollmann, 2023). In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Germany, and other members of the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization (NATO) decried the invasion, announced their military support of Ukraine, and imposed economic sanctions on Russia (Zollmann, 2023). Some have described the conflict in Ukraine (dating back to 2014) as a proxy war between Russia and the US and NATO (Hughes, 2014, p. 106; Foster, 2022). As a result, Hyzen & Van den Bulck (2024) argue that the US government requires “propaganda campaigns to declare its position towards, evaluation of and actions relating to the war as a message to its citizens, to the warring parties and to its allies” (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024, p. 2).

There has been high public interest, which is reflected in the levels of engagement with news media. Kersley (2022) found that many news outlets experienced some of their highest levels of engagement in the wake of the invasion. Within the UK media ecosystem, *The Guardian* reported that February 2022 was its fifth-biggest ever month for page views, *The Telegraph*'s video content about the invasion was engaged with three times more than usual, and *the Times* gained 1,000 new subscribers every day for the first two weeks of the invasion (Kersley, 2022)

Like every war, it is especially important for journalists to offer well-rounded coverage with the mission of being as objective as possible. However, given some have regarded the conflict as a proxy war (Hughes, 2014; Foster, 2022), US media coverage of the invasion of Ukraine is of particular importance. As such, in this chapter, we will examine studies on empirical reporting about the 2022 invasion of Ukraine as well as reporting on earlier periods of the conflict to understand the most prevalent themes and trends.

3.1 War Journalism Pre-2022 Russian Invasion

Scholars have already performed some studies on the differentiation between propaganda and journalism in regards to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Nygren et al., 2018). Already in 2018, journalism researchers investigated reporting in mainstream media about the 2014 war, interviewing and analyzing media in Ukraine, Russia, Poland, and Sweden. The research explored how the framing of the war was impacted by journalistic cultures, power relations in the respective media ecosystems, and journalistic activism.

Journalists in Ukraine that were surveyed shared that they felt an inability to practice the journalistic norm of impartiality due to their personal connection to the war and what they described as a responsibility to protect the national interests of Ukraine. One journalist interviewed in the research said:

There have been many discussions on this issue [impartiality of journalists]. And while for the Poles, the Swedes... The answer is obvious: they have to provide two or even three, four perspectives in this conflict, stay emotionless and reserved. For us these things are contestable already, because, figuratively speaking, when your mother is being offended, should you be tolerant towards the offender of your mother? (Nygren et al., 2018, p. 10).

As such, the ethical qualms that journalists face under wartime is especially pronounced when the home country of a journalist has been invaded in an act of aggression, as is the case in Ukraine. This pressure creates a breeding ground for propaganda, as journalists perceive that reporting on the war is a black and white activity, wherein any given report or headline aids one side or the other. Nyrgren et al. (2018) write of their interviews with Ukrainian journalists: “In many cases, self-censorship was fueled by the journalists’ fear that some of the stories could be used by ‘Russian propaganda’ and thus bring harm to Ukraine” (p. 11).

A 2017 study on the framing of Ukrainian, Russian, and US TV coverage of this war, sheds light on the relationship between journalists and the government (Roman et al., 2017). The researchers analyzed each media outlet’s sources, mentioning of fatalities, and description of the warring parties (Roman et al., 2017). They found that the approach to each of these issues in each country mimicked the way the issues were framed by the respective governments. Regarding the US media’s reliance on official sources, the researchers note the consistency with “U.S. ‘journalistic tradition’ to emulate the U.S. government agenda in reporting on wars” (Roman et al., 2017, p. 15).

3.2 War Propaganda in Covering the War in Ukraine

A 2024 qualitative and quantitative analysis of US war reporting and propaganda regarding the current war in Ukraine sheds light on the specific mechanisms used to propagate the US government’s narrative on the war (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024). For one, Hyzen and Van den Bulck (2024) found that US reporting includes Cold War propaganda narratives that “characterize the Russia-Ukraine conflict as Russia vs. the ‘Free World’” (p. 16). In line with our earlier discussion of structural oppositions in the first chapter, the US media in this case have identified Russia, the aggressor, as bad, and the US

as representing good in supporting the plight of brave Ukrainians in the fight for “freedom and democracy.” The authors explain how this connects with propaganda framing, writing:

This framing mainly follows the war propaganda strategies to claim unity and to represent and project international law, security, social order and peace but also to place war guilt on Russia and strengthen the belief that Russia is both corrupt and responsible. Notably, U.S. involvement was never fundamentally questioned in the briefings (nor media), creating a crucial premise to the frame: that the U.S., as a leader and protector of the free world, was involved and would be an active political participant in this war. Following this premise, U.S. government messaging followed two tracks: the U.S. showed leadership by providing the most aid and military assistance to Ukraine and the U.S. was leading unified allies against tyranny and injustice (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024, p. 13).

Hyzen & Van den Bulck (2024) note that the media in their sample followed US government framing by not questioning its involvement in the war. They conclude that through inclusion of this narrative in US journalism, the government was successful in its war propaganda efforts (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024). The researchers write that this confirms “Herman and Chomsky and wider propaganda model studies as well as the indexing model that put journalist–elite source relations at the heart of this process” (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024, p. 17).

Their findings of war propaganda in the reporting about the war in Ukraine “showed how propaganda was generated mostly through facts rather than mis/disinformation” as “Official statements from Putin, Biden and Zelensky were not false but rather carefully curated by the media” (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024, p. 17). While some facts were present in US reporting, others were not. This includes “Ukraine’s tenuous history with democracy and corruption” (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024, p. 17).

However, one year into the war, Hyzen & Van den Bulck (2024) note that the pressure of paradox came to fruition in Ukraine in respect to corruption. In their study, they quote *The Guardian*, which reported:

After avoiding criticism of the authorities at the start of the war, Ukrainian journalists have begun reporting allegations of corruption by officials again. But wartime censorship and the army’s role in protecting their country from an existential threat

has made reporting on the military a challenge (Koshiw, 2023, cited by Hyzen& Van den Bulck, 2024, p. 2).

Another 2024 study analyzed the moral framing in Ukraine war coverage in Ukraine, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the US (Parmelee, 2024). One of the frames explored is the fairness/cheating frame, which refers to international law and order. The UK and US outlets used this frame by describing the invasion as unprovoked and illegal, while Russia used this frame in mentioning corruption in the US and Ukraine. Parmelee (2024) noted that Russia also used this frame to describe US aid to Ukraine as a “money-laundering operation” which was “aimed at defrauding American taxpayers” (p. 11). In both the US and Russia, the media emphasized leveraged moral frames that were in accordance with the narratives of their respective governments (Parmelee, 2024).

3.3 Comparing Ukraine War Reporting Framing Across Countries: American, Chinese, and South African Framing

Akinloye Akinboade et al. (2023) investigated how news framing about the war in Ukraine varied between the US, China, and South Africa analyzing *The New York Post*, *The Global Times*, and *The Citizen*, respectively. Using a descriptive content analysis, the researchers found that the news frames utilized in the reporting aligned with the ideological orientation of their target audience (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023). The researchers sought to analyze the news frames used because of the correlation between news frames and propaganda (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023). The research compared the news framing in the first week of the war, from February 24 until March 2, 2022, to the second week of the war, from March 3 until March 11, 2022. The researchers assessed the usage of the following frames: conflict, human impact, economic consequences, attribution of responsibility, sources, and tonality.

Within each of these frames, the researchers analyzed the words, phrases, and statements made, which they state constitute the “tone” of the reporting (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023). The researchers chose to use a descriptive content analysis because it “enables researchers to systemically examine descriptive [sic] of the content of media outlets and make inferences from them” (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023, p. 21). Furthermore, the researchers justify their chosen research technique by claiming:

Content analysis research on publications of news organizations show how their news frames can shape the discourse and how the language they use conveys the dominant message (Weiler& Pearce, 1992, cited by Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023) in the process of assessing the relative extent to which news organizations' specified references, attitudes, or themes permeate a given message or document" (Weber, 1985, cited by Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023).

The results of the Akinloye Akinboade et al. (2023) study revealed significant framing differences between the American, Chinese, and South African news outlets and correspond to the ideological differences between each respective government's political positions and objectives. This is best illustrated when examining the attribution of responsibility frame: "During the first week of the war, the tone and language (75%) of *New York Post* and their attribution of responsibility (60%) clearly pointed to Russia as the aggressor, while *Global Times* joined other Chinese state media outlets to advocate for diplomacy simultaneously blaming Western powers for sparking the conflict (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023, p. 25).

One explanation for the way the *New York Post* frames the war is the broader history of news framing about Russia in the US. In the book *Journalism and Foreign Policy: How the US and UK Media Cover Official Enemies*, Oates and Rostova (2022) write that, over the last century, the media in the US and Russia consistently characterize each other as world threats. The authors describe the nature of American representation of the Soviet Union, which we note bear resemblance to the present-day relations between the US and modern-day Russia. Oates and Rostova (2022) describe that, throughout the Cold War, US discourse represented the Soviet Union as its arch-nemesis in terms of democratic values and progress and framed the Soviet Union as dominantly to blame for the looming threat of nuclear war.

Akinloye Akinboade et al. (2023) suggest that the framing of the *Global Times* reflects and aligns with changes in China's political and economic interests in the war in Ukraine (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023). In particular, China's positioning as a so-called neutral party dedicated to diplomatic solutions to the war (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023). The authors claim that this is "based on the anticipation that protracted conflict could drive a wedge between the United States and other frontline NATO states which are vulnerable to serious energy deficiencies and the burden of the influx of millions of refugees" (Hoffman-Martin, 2022, cited by Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023, p. 26). As such, the researchers

claim that the framing used by the *Global Times* aligned with the Chinese government's interests (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023).

Another significant finding of this study is regarding the usage of the economic consequences frame. The researchers found that, from the first to the second week of reporting on the war in Ukraine, the “share of *New York Post* of economic impact frame reporting dropped from 78% to 20%, while the share of *Global Times* rose from 22% to 72%” (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023, p. 25). The researchers claim that the shift in framing in the *Global Times*' reporting can be linked to the economic effects that China itself felt as a result of the war:

China is regarded as the largest importer of global about 70% of crude oil and 40% of its energy needs. The rising commodity prices, especially of energy and agricultural products, directly affected China which resulted in increased production costs and higher consumer prices for the Chinese State. The Russia-Ukraine war also brought extreme uncertainty to the global stock market, that culminated in global stock market volatility, such that the Chinese stock market sharply declined on 10 March 2022, reaching the lowest level since the 2008 financial crisis (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023, p. 26).

The authors conclude by remarking that “Stories or accounts that create emotional arousal in the recipient are much more likely to be passed on.” This bears particular relevance to the study's finding that the *New York Post* used the human impact frame twice as much as *The Citizen* and six times that of the *Global Times* (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023). News framing based on provoking an emotional response increases the salience and broad acceptance of said frame and the conclusions that are inferred from it. As such, the study supports the assertion that news framing is an effective approach to propaganda.

While not included in the quantitative research, Akinloye Akinboade et al. (2023) remark that the tones of Russian reporting are also subject to the same ideological correlations between frames and government policies. In particular, “One of the key tones of Russian messaging of Russia-Ukraine conflict is the idea that Ukraine itself, the language, and culture are simply just products of Russian history and culture” (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2023, p. 29). While this study notes similarities between the US and Russian reporting on the war, other studies have explored the differences.

3.4 Differences between American and Russian Reporting

Studies have been conducted analyzing and comparing specifically American and Russian reporting about the war in Ukraine (Chernov, 2023; Oleinik, 2023; Zollmann, 2023). The conclusions based on such studies are divided, with Chernov (2023) asserting that the differences between the two countries demonstrate that the media in the US serves as an independent government watch-dog, while Oleinik (2023) and Zollmann (2023) challenge these claims.

Pavlik (2022) describes ten impacts of the war in Ukraine for journalism and news media, primarily by referring to shortcomings within Russian media. This author emphasizes how war reporting compares between democratic and authoritarian states:

In a democracy, independent journalism acts as the Fourth Estate, essentially a check on government. This is a vital role during war when lives are at stake. But in an authoritarian or totalitarian state such as Russia, the role of the media is far from a Fourth Estate or government watch dog. During the war in Ukraine, the Russian media have been reduced to the role of government lapdog and act as a propaganda mechanism for the Putin regime. The result is increasingly a society living in an alternate, untruthful reality. Moreover, Russia has weaponized its state media propaganda (Pavlik, 2022, p. 10).

Chernov's 2023 study of media frames in CNN, an American media outlet, as compared with Russia's gazeta.ru, builds on and supports Pavlik's (2022) conclusions. Like Pavlik, his emphasis is on the limitations of Russian reporting, writing:

Freedom of speech in Russia became one of the first casualties of war. The use of the words "war" or "invasion" are prohibited in Russia, whether in print, on air, or online, on news sites or social media platforms (Tebor, 2022, cited by Chernov, 2023). Only descriptions of the conflict as a special military operation are permitted (Pavlik, 2022, p. 2, cited by Chernov, 2023). Propaganda and disinformation also emerged as indispensable tools in this hybrid warfare. The victory in the war cannot be achieved solely on the battlefield, but it also requires media support to justify the war, persuade the population of the country which committed an invasion that it is justified. It also needs to influence the international community to accept the discourse of the events offered by the warring sides (Chernov, 2023, p. 2).

Chernov (2023) asserts that because CNN never referred to the war as a “special military operation” such as in Russia, that its framing was objective and independent. In contrast, he claims, Russian frames such as “defence of Donbass people and ‘demilitarization’ and ‘denazification’ of Ukraine...aimed at shedding a favorable light on the war, and they were not chosen by the media themselves. They had to use the frames given to them by the government. These frames reflected a false reality and were rigid, meaning that no matter whether the situation on the ground contradicts to them or not, the media had to stick to them” (Chernov, 2023, p. 11).

Chernov (2023) then goes on to acknowledge the role of propaganda tactics in all countries, writing that “this influence is sought by any society, but the nature of such influence differs” (p. 2). His research investigates the framing and issue-cycle of media coverage in Russia and the US due to the differing levels of freedom of speech in the respective countries. One of the stated research questions is “Will the frames of war on the Russian side fluctuate more in their interpretations than on the American side due to the falsity of the Russian claims?” (Chernov, 2023, p. 6). Here Chernov refers to the “falsity” of the Russian claims. In this chapter, we will examine other academic research analyzing these Russian claims in relation to media coverage.

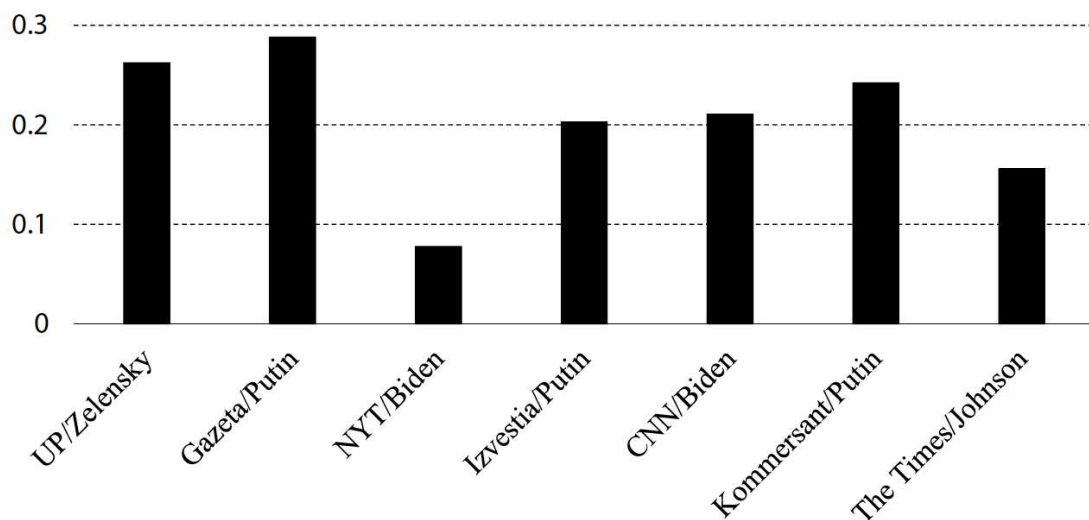
3.5 Comparing War propaganda effectiveness between the US, UK, Ukraine, and Russia

While Chernov (2023) claims that US reporting about Ukraine shows that it is independent of the government and free of biases, Oleinik’s (2023) comparative content analysis of media coverage in Russia, Ukraine, the US, and UK indicates otherwise. In his study, he assesses the effectiveness of war propaganda in each of these media landscapes using classical war propaganda theory from Ellul and Lasswell, who we discussed earlier in our literature review. War propaganda in this study is defined as the propagation of some war-related messages and concealment of others (Oleinik, 2023). He describes how government narratives in the US, UK, Ukraine, and Russia all possess this characteristic of selective omission. Oleinik (2023) compares the ideas conveyed in speeches of the heads of state with ideas disseminated by the media to understand how effective the media in each of the selected countries are at promulgating propaganda.

The results of Oleinik’s study are significant. Figure 1 depicts his graph regarding the extent to which propaganda is transmitted by the media or how closely the media’s messages and narratives resemble the war propaganda of the respective government. According to the methodology, the lower the standard deviation, the more alignment there is between the media and the government’s messages. One of the findings of the study is that American and British media in the sample align with government narratives more than the Russian and Ukrainian outlets analyzed (Oleinik, 2023). Oleinik writes that “This alignment is achieved without the media being explicitly controlled or restricted by the U.S. and U.K. governments” (Oleinik, 2023, pp. 14-15).

Figure 1

Message Alignment (Sum of Standard Deviations) (Adapted from Oleinik, 2023, p. 15)



Oleinik explains that while Russia exerts more explicit control over the media, the impacts of such a system of control may not be as is dominantly discussed insofar as the news outlets follow specific government mandates of what positions to express and how. Instead, Oleinik (2023) writes:

The imposed restrictions seem to work one way at best preventing ‘undesirable’ messages from being transmitted yet failing to propagate the ‘desirable’ ones. Instead of promoting the war, some Russian mass media tended not to devote significant attention to it by using, inter alia, the strategy of cynical distancing from the official narrative (p. 16).

Now that we have examined what percent of propaganda is disseminated by news media, we will closely investigate the content and framing of said propaganda.

3.6 Western media's omission of NATO eastward expansion as it relates to the war in Ukraine

In 2023, Zollmann examined how the causes for the invasion of Ukraine were framed in the US, UK, and German media during the first two weeks of the war. Using both quantitative and qualitative content analyses, Zollmann (2023) explores the inclusion of “two competing explanatory frameworks: the dominant Western news media narrative assumes that Russia/Putin’s imperial ambitions and nefarious traits have caused the war, and a second narrative, advanced by several scholars, former diplomats and selected journalists, asserts that NATO’s eastward expansion created the context for Russia’s invasion” (Zollmann, 2023, p. 1). His research indicates that the latter framework, regarding NATO’s eastward invasion, is significantly de-emphasized in the news framing across American, British, and German media. He asserts that this journalistic approach is “contrary to the historical and documentary record, and links to a marginalization of non-military solutions to solve the conflict (Zollmann, 2023, p.1). Thus, this author’s research reveals nuance that is missing from Pavlik (2022) and Chernov’s (2023) arguments.

Zollmann bases the prescriptive aspects of his study on theories of journalism that emphasize the responsibility of news media to “balance a diverse set of arguments made on all sides of a conflict and consider their factual veracity” (Zollmann, 2023, p. 2). He further prefaces his research by stressing the importance of this approach to all parties directly and indirectly involved in a war:

...It is the news media’s task to critically reflect on the official justifications of war to limit a ‘government’s war-making powers’ (Nichols and McChesney, 2005: 37, cited by Zollmann, 2023, p. 2). This should, of course, include a critical investigation of Russia’s role (p. 2).

To shed light on the framing of the war in the selected media outlets, Zollmann’s research counts the news items that describe Russia’s invasion as “unjust and/or aggression conducted in violation of legal standards” and the “news items indicated that Russia’s invasion could have been conducted in response to NATO enlargement” (Zollmann, 2023, p.6). For the countries included in the study, the US, UK, and Germany, this researcher

picked three countries from each market: “two leading liberal broadsheets as well as one right-wing tabloid with high circulation in each country” (Zollmann, 2023, p. 6).

Zollmann’s (2023) findings show that the US, UK, and German media overwhelmingly emphasize Russia’s imperial aspirations as opposed to NATO expansion. This is demonstrated by the article count for each frame: “3.6 times more articles in the two-week period identified Russia as the aggressor as opposed to mentioning NATO expansion (3.1 in the US, 2.5 in the UK and 7.9 times more articles in Germany)” (Zollmann, 2023, p. 6). His research does not seek to dispute the validity of the framing of the invasion as an act of aggression, but merely the reason for the dearth of alternative frames within the “Western consensus.” He writes:

Such reporting was facilitated by the fact that the Russian invasion was obviously criminal, reckless and unjustifiable. It led, however, to the point when the news media surrendered their obligations to impartially cover different sides of the story. Even if we unpack those news articles that included keywords about NATO expansion, the main thrust of coverage remained the same (Zollmann, 2023, p. 7).

Zollmann (2023) stresses that covering the war in Ukraine impartially must include proper investigation of the historical background to US-Russia relations, in particular examining the Russian declaration that NATO expansion was a provocation. Specifically, he cites historical documentation that shows the US had promised Russia it would not expand NATO eastward. He writes:

That Washington made a categorical promise to Moscow was confirmed by Jack F Matlock, former US Ambassador to Russia in Moscow (1987–1991) (McCgwire, 1998, p. 26, cited by Zollmann, 2023). Furthermore, declassified US government documents, published in 2017 by the National Security Archive, shed light on how these assurances unfolded. In a meeting with Gorbachev on 9 February 1990, the then-US Secretary of State, James Baker, evoked the concept that NATO would expand ‘not one inch eastward’ on three occasions (Zollmann, 2023, p. 10).

Beyond Zollmann (2023) and other academics such as Forsberg and Patinäki (2023), members of the US government elite also considered NATO expansion to be an unnecessary provocation of Russia. In 1995, several retired high-level Foreign Service, State Department and Department of Defense officers wrote a letter to the US Secretary of State concerning NATO enlargement, writing:

In our view, this policy risks endangering the long-term viability of NATO, significantly exacerbating the instability that now exists in the zone that lies between Germany and Russia, and convincing most Russians that the United States and the West are attempting to isolate, encircle, and subordinate them, rather than integrating them into a new European system of collective security. (Davies, 1995, cited by Zollmann, 2023, p. 12)

In addition to the systemic omission of these historical facts, Zollmann (2023) claims that the US news media has “applied double standards that serve the interest of Western powers” (p. 5). Citing the 500 military invasions and interventions conducted by the US in conjunction with NATO in response to decisions made by sovereign states, he notes that “the news media has rarely framed NATO states as aggressors or imperial powers” (Zollmann, 2023, p. 5).

Based on Zollmann’s (2023) content study and literature review about the history of US-Russia relations, he offers several meaningful contributions to the academic understanding about the consequences of journalism which covers wars devoid of larger context. In particular, he asserts, “The news media has advanced military at the expense of diplomatic solutions” (Zollmann, 2023, p. 16). He links the broad trend of report framing in the US of the war in Ukraine with the government’s policies and warns of the consequences, writing: “News media framing is in line with the Biden administration’s April 2022 announcement of weakening Russia via militarily supporting Ukraine (Bertrand et al., 2022, cited by Zollmann, 2023). This policy has led to a deadly prolonging of the war (Benjamin and Davies, 2022: 79, cited by Zollmann, 2023)” (Zollmann, 2023, p. 16).

Zollmann’s (2023) study demonstrates that the news framing of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in the US, UK, and German media are framed in a way that lacks relevant historical context. This trend is also visible in reporting about other aspects of the conflict in Ukraine, including reporting on the Euromaidan protests and the outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

3.7 American Reporting about Ukraine in 2014

In the 2016 book, *Ukraine and Russia: people, politics, propaganda and perspectives*, one chapter is dedicated to the way Ukraine is represented in Western media. Dyczok (2016) argues that during this time, “The fast changing, complex story was usually narrated through

rather simple frames” (Dyczok, 2016, p. 186). For example, she claims that the 2014 Euromaidan protests were also covered by the news media in a way that obscured the complexity of the situation. According to Dyczok: “Narratives were usually framed in rather simple terms. A struggle between Russia and Europe, East and West Ukraine, police versus protesters” (Dyczok, 2016, p. 186). She elaborates on the lack of nuance in media reports, writing:

Most media made efforts to use expert commentary and voices from Ukraine (National Public Radio, 2014). Yet much of the coverage did not clearly explain that the protests were coming from various parts of the country and sectors of society that transcended the simple East/West divide. For example, few reports noted that many protesters were chanting pro-European slogans in Russian. Or that public opinion polls showed widespread dissatisfaction with the Yanukovich ruling elite nationwide, including in Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk (Dyczok, 2016, p. 188).

Based on Dyczok’s (2016) analysis and argument, the over-simplification of reporting on the political situation in Ukraine in 2014 bears resemblance to how the US media are now covering the 2022 Russian invasion of the country. We will now compare reporting on the war in Ukraine to another war to further explore the role of news media in producing oversimplified journalism in alignment with government policies and objectives, i.e. war propaganda.

3.8 US Media Coverage of war in Ukraine versus Yemen

In their 2024 study, Bachman and Brito Ruiz conduct a comparative study of US coverage of the war in Ukraine with reporting about the eight-year-long war in Yemen to understand if and which biases were present in the reporting. Regarding their selection of these particular conflicts, the authors write:

Though no two armed conflicts are exactly alike, there is reason to compare US media coverage of the two because: (1) civilians have been victims of both conflicts; (2) both conflicts have undermined food security; (3) the US has provided military support to a party to each of the conflicts; and (4) the conflict in Yemen is in the Global South whereas the conflict in Ukraine is in the Global North (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 1).

Another aspect of the authors' rationale for choosing these two wars was because of the differing nature of the US' involvement, saying "In the conflict in Yemen, the US has been supporting the coalition's ability, as a collection of foreign actors, to launch its airstrikes and maintain its blockades. Meanwhile, in the conflict in Ukraine, the US has been supporting Ukraine's ability to counter Russia's attacks" (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 25).

The researchers investigated the coverage and framing by studying *The New York Times* (*NYT*) headlines by counting the number of stories on each war and their placements. They evaluated the media frames used, including attribution of responsibility, and documented the descriptive and normative terminology used (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024). The authors chose to study headlines because they serve as a "gate through which readers enter the stories they read" (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 1). Meaning, headlines convey the general orientation of a given article in just a few words. Sun and Cheung (2022) argue that headlines do not simply convey information, they also carry ideological and political connotations as well as beliefs and values that are dominant within the writers and editors, the media outlet, the target audience, and the broader society. Secondly, the authors justify their analysis by noting that some readers do not read further than headlines and therefore these readers consume a framing of certain details or facts devoid of context that may or may not be expanded upon in the article in question (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024).

One of the significant findings of Bachman and Brito Ruiz's (2024) study was the stark difference in the scale of reporting on the war in Ukraine as compared to the war in Yemen. The rate of stories produced about Ukraine was exponentially more than that about Yemen (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024). Taking into account the vast difference in the duration of each conflict, 7 years in Yemen and 9 months in Ukraine, this finding is striking and telling. Over the course of 7 years, the *NYT* produced 545 stories about the war in Yemen (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024). In contrast, after 9 months of war in Ukraine, the *NYT* produced 1,149 articles on the subject (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024). The researchers further note that "Ukraine coverage surpassed that of Yemen (547th story) in under three months" (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 30).

The researchers conclude that this finding in and of itself reveals "a significant lack of objectivity and extensive biases" (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 38) within the *NYT*. They emphasize that this difference is not due to the news value of cultural proximity, but instead

is linked to the position of the US government relative to each conflict, writing “it is clear, geopolitically, that elite US officials have reason to focus on Ukraine rather than Yemen” (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 38). Furthermore, they write, the US is supporting a side fighting aggression whereas in Yemen the US government is supporting Saudi Arabia, an aggressor (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024). Thus, this analysis of the *New York Times* coverage of these conflicts can be regarded as reflecting the interests of the US government overall.

Beyond the differences in the amount of news articles covering each war, Bachman and Brito Ruiz (2024) find that the framing of the coverage also differs. They assess the usage of episodic *versus* thematic framing in the coverage, wherein an episodic frame is defined as one that narrowly focuses on specific events without general context, while a thematic frame “identifies or recognizes patterns or trends” (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 1). For coverage of Ukraine, the coverage consists of a “balanced mix of episodically and thematically framed headlines” while coverage of Yemen is overwhelmingly episodic (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 38). The result of this is that reporting about Yemen gives “the impression that civilian harm is largely incidental rather than systemic or symptomatic of the coalition’s violence” (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 38). The authors claim that this disparity is due to the ideological alignment of the *NYT* with the geopolitical interests of the US political elite:

The US position in each conflict, and its relationships with the actors involved, may also help explain why coverage of Yemen is largely episodic rather than based on contextual information and broader elements of the conflict... This is important because the US shares responsibility for the human suffering in Yemen. The neutral language we found, and the benefit of the doubt afforded to the coalition, then, appears to be more than mere coincidence; not only does the coalition benefit from the neutral language, so, too, does the US (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 38).

Bachman and Brito Ruiz’s (2024) study supports the claim that when it comes to war, there is a “hierarchy of victims,” as Stephen McCloskey stated (2022, p. 141). While the *NYT* portrays Ukraine as “heroic” and Russia as “villainous,” its neutral, sanitized coverage of the carnage and which parties are responsible in Yemen “creates worthy victims in Ukraine and implicitly unworthy victims in Yemen” (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 27). It’s worth noting that the greater worth placed on Ukrainian lives compared to those of

civilians in the Middle East broadly is vivid in other aspects of US reporting on the war in Ukraine. McCloskey provides a few examples of the racist undertones to reporting in Ukraine and the corresponding conclusions:

Aljazeera anchor Peter Dobbie, for example, was struck by how ‘prosperous, middle class people’ who ‘are not obviously refugees trying to get away from areas in the Middle East that are still in a big state of war... look like any European family that you would live next door to’ (Aljazeera, 2022). In a similar vein, Philippe Corbé, a French journalist with BFM-TV, said ‘We’re not talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Putin. We’re talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives’ (Bayoumi, 2022). An implication of the comments by Corbé and Dobbie is that residents of some Middle-East countries can expect to be bombed because of their location which somehow reduces their expectation for solidarity and support (McCloskey, 2022, p. 142-143).

Bachman and Brito Ruiz (2024) stress that this type of biased approach to war reporting has far-reaching consequences for the audience’s interpretation and the society at-large. In particular, they emphasize the ideological impacts of such reporting and how these ideological conclusions relate to the actions that people do or do not take in response to government policies:

The effects of such framings go beyond simply shaping the individual impact of each story — they define and sustain narratives that condition states’ actions and the public’s ability to hold their representatives accountable for foreign policy decisions. By defining the salience, morality, and responsibility of an issue, media coverage serves to generate public pressure or relegate crises to be functionally forgotten. These perceptions of urgency, or lack thereof, shape both policy formulation in response to developing conflicts and condition the types of aid and support afforded to affected populations. As such, we can trace a connective line between the way we approach and frame stories, and the actions that we take to address the sites they emerge from (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024, p. 39).

II. Empirical study

3 Methodology

This research sought to understand to what extent US reporting on the war in Ukraine constitutes war propaganda along the theoretical foundations we have explored and defined in the literature review. Several studies discussed in the literature review informed the way we analyzed US media in this study. As a result of this research and background information, this study employed a quantitative content analysis.

One of the studies referenced to design this study is a study conducted by Oleinik (2023) on war propaganda effectiveness regarding the war in Ukraine. Oleinik (2023) compared media outlets across four different countries (US, UK, Ukraine, and Russia), in noting both limitations of the study and opportunities for further research he wrote:

Ideally, war coverage in several media from the same country should be studied. A combination of traditional media, including newspapers with print editions and online versions, and online news portals seems desirable. This approach allows getting a more balanced picture within each case (p. 9).

Further, Oleinik justifies the use of content analysis for such research as the methodology was “first developed during and after WWII to detect and counter Nazi propaganda” (Lasswell, Leites, & Associates, 1949 R. K. White, 1949, cited by Oleinik, 2023, p. 4). In this study, a quantitative content analysis was used for the following reasons: measurability, comparability, and reproducibility. In this research, we measure the presence of each variable in each article analyzed. This allows us to compare the articles in a consistent and scientific way. As a result, it is straightforward for other researchers to apply the methodology to another sample, adding to a body of work that will allow academics, journalists, and citizens to better understand today’s journalism.

To understand the contours of the US media landscape regarding its inclusion of war propaganda, it was necessary to analyze the two types of media outlets (mainstream and alternative) as well as the two dominant ideological categories (liberal and conservative).

4.1 Research Design

As mentioned, content analysis was first utilized to investigate propaganda and politics, but has increasingly been used in other fields of communication studies such as journalism studies. This is because content analysis offers several benefits to researchers. Waples and Berelson (1941) wrote one of the earliest descriptions of content analysis,

explaining the thrust of the methodology as such: “Systematic content analysis attempts to define more casual descriptions of the content, so as to show objectively the nature and relative strength of the stimuli applied to the reader or listener” (p. 2).

Harold Lasswell, who we cited in our discussion of war propaganda, describes several reasons why communication studies should leverage content analysis in their research. For one, he writes that by using content analysis, “we are able to arrive at rather unambiguous descriptions of fundamental features of society” (Lasswell, 1941, p. 12). He also stresses the value of a *quantitative* content analysis as one approach to investigating these questions, asking: “Why, then, be quantitative about communication?” (Lasswell, 1949, p. 52). He responds with: “Because of the scientific and policy gains that can come of it” (Lasswell, 1949, p. 52). It is for these reasons that this research employs a quantitative content analysis methodology.

Franzosi’s (2007) overview of content analysis also guided the development of this research. In his overview, he cites Berelson’s (1941) concise definition of content analysis as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (p. 2). Franzosi writes that, according to Berelson, the quantification of content analysis results in a “systematization, rigor, precision, and exactitude in definitions and measurements, with objectivity and replication of procedures and findings, in other words, with a scientific approach to social science” (p. 2-3). He adds that the goal of such an approach is to “rigorously test hypotheses drawn from broader theoretical frameworks” (Franzosi, 2007, p. 3). This rigor “lies in hypothesis testing carried out in a systematic and scientific way” (Janis, 1943, p. 429–430). To test the research hypotheses, this research conducts several descriptive and inferential statistical analyses which we will detail later on.

Franzosi (2007) defines the elements common to all content analyses, which were also incorporated in our research: a coding scheme with coding categories, a coder, and a body of text. The coder applies the coding scheme to said body of text with the goal of documenting the frequency of occurrence of coding categories (Franzosi, 2007). The coding categories are to be based on a topic or theme that is expressed through a statement or direction which “refers to the positive, negative, or neutral reference” (p. 5). Franzosi bases this guidance on Lasswell, who “refers to positive and negative direction as indulgence and deprivation” (*1942, p. 2, cited by Franzosi, 2007 p. 23) and measures the “intensity” or

“magnitude” of the direction (*Lasswell, 1941: 3–4; *Lasswell, 1942: 8, cited by Franzosi, 2007 p. 23). Franzosi (2007) acknowledges that the topics and themes are infinite, but that generally speaking, in a political context (such as in the study of war propaganda) they can be categorized as “1. Persons (Roosevelt, Stalin, ...), 2. Groups (Americans, Russians, ...), 3. Agencies (Congress, Soviet, ...), 4. Policies (War, Peace, ...), 5. Participations (Enlist, Subscribe, ...), and Ideas (Democracy, Nazism, ...)” (p. 5).

While these broad categories can help, Franzosi (2007) describes that the delineation of the coding categories is not a simplistic one. He writes that most schemes are created through a dynamic process that involves a “careful reading of the text, design of preliminary coding categories, fitting of texts into these categories, and refinement of categories till most text can be fitted into the existing set of categories given the specific research needs of the investigator” (p. 5). Franzosi also notes that designing mutually exclusive categories is most favorable when creating the coding categories (p. 7).

4.2 Research Questions and Research Model

The primary topic of interest in this research is US reporting and journalism about the war in Ukraine, specifically:

If and how much US reporting about Russia’s invasion constitutes war propaganda.

Within this broader research question there are three sub-research questions. The first is: how do mainstream media compare with alternative media regarding war propaganda about this conflict? Second, how do outlets with a liberal editorial ideology compare to those with a conservative one? And lastly, how does the presence of war propaganda (if there is such content as defined in our literature review), compare between the first day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 23, 2022 and more than two years after the start of the war? For the latter, we will examine articles published in May, 2024 about the US government’s approval of Ukraine using American weapons to strike within Russian territory, which is considered an escalation of the war.

4.2.1 Research model

To study these questions, we had to transform these concepts into variables to investigate in the quantitative content analysis. As such, our independent variables were defined as: outlet type, editorial ideology, and time period. Our dependent variables are based on our literature review of what constitutes war propaganda and include: attribution of responsibility, official sources, and portrayal of US involvement. In line with our literature review, the presence of war propaganda in the reporting is related to these variables as follows. The more the blame of the war is focused on Russia and Russia alone, the more the reporting constitutes war propaganda. The more reliance on official sources, in particular American official sources, the larger the characterization of war propaganda applies. Finally, the more positive and uncritical of US involvement in the war, the more the reporting resembles war propaganda as opposed to journalism.

To provide a fuller understanding of each of these variables, we analyzed several sub-variables for each, covering different aspects of each. For example, we did not simply document who was blamed for the war in Ukraine in each article (Russia, the US, both, neither). We also included questions that would further paint the picture of what narratives are being included in each article. For example, under attribution of responsibility, we also looked at whether Putin is described in a strongly negative light. Adding further detail to each of these sources provides a more informative analysis.

These descriptive statistics provide insight into the presence of war propaganda in US reporting on the war in Ukraine. However, we sought to go even further than just this. We also looked to understand how the inclusion of the said war propaganda varies across media, which is far from a monolith. It is for this reason that we also conducted correlation tests to assess the relationship between our independent and dependent variables.

4.3 Theoretical Underpinnings of Research Design

Our literature review addressed existing research on the topic of war propaganda in US coverage of the war in Ukraine. We seek to further understand the nature of this reporting to contribute to the ongoing debate about journalistic principles of objectivity generally, but during wartime in particular.

The first variable “Attribution of Responsibility” sought to understand which involved party is blamed for the current war in Ukraine in the media outlets analyzed. This variable

is based on Zollmann's (2023) study of Western news outlets and how they overwhelmingly failed to mention NATO's role in the lead up to the war in Ukraine. In particular, he describes the systemic omission by American, British, and German news outlets to describe additional contributing factors to the war, in addition to Russian geopolitical goals, which includes the expansion of NATO in spite of promises by Western leaders that such expansion would not occur. His analysis further demonstrated that the majority of Western media outlets he analyzed overwhelmingly described the war in Ukraine as unprovoked, which he contends is a biased portrayal of the war. As such, we included a variable regarding whether the invasion was unprovoked to better understand any differences in US reporting on this.

Zollmann (2023) also argues that the "dominant Western news media narrative assumes that Russia/Putin's imperial ambitions and nefarious traits have caused the war" (Zollmann, 2023, p. 1). As such, within the attribution of responsibility category we included an additional variable designated to assess whether news pieces analyzed describe and emphasize Putin in a particularly negative light. This description of Putin also is based on our theoretical discussion of the concept of enemy construction in war reporting. Mayr & Machin (2012) discuss how enemy construction is facilitated through structural oppositions, such as is democracy versus dictatorship, good versus evil, etc. Zahid (2016) describes the role that these structural oppositions play in crafting "us versus them" in war propaganda.

Lastly, within the attribution of responsibility variable, we included a question about whether the articles sampled describe how NATO's eastward expansion was considered a provocation by Russia and the fact that Western leaders had agreed not to expand NATO after the reunification of Germany. These variables are based in Zollmann's (2023) research, wherein he provides a historical and diplomatic record about NATO's eastward expansion. These variables are particularly relevant to the definition of propaganda we discussed in the literature review. Specifically, Walton (1997) who defines propaganda as one that can be identified by omission of facts which do not have "propaganda value."

The second overarching variable in our coding scheme is regarding sources. Our literature review discussed the importance of source selection in war reporting. Gans (1980) classified sources as either knowns or unknowns. Of known sources, the most commonly used are those within the government. As such, within this variable we included a coding category for which types of official sources were used in each news piece (American, Russian, both, or neither). Regarding unknown sources, we were interested to understand

which civilian sources were cited (ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, neither, or both). Gans (1980) conducted a study of US television networks and a news magazine and found that news dominantly relies on known sources – four times more frequently to be exact. Hayes and Guardino (2010) described how this overreliance on official government sources was linked to the presence of propaganda within US reporting on the war in Iraq.

One of the variables in this study was the type of outlet (i.e. mainstream or alternative). Based on the literature review's exploration of the corporatization of the media and its effects on reporting, we were interested in examining whether the type of outlet had an effect on the inclusion of war propaganda about the war in Ukraine. In particular, authors including McChesney's (2003) and Cissel (2012) inspired the researcher to include outlet type as a variable in the study.

As is also discussed in the literature review, Ellul (1973) writes that war propaganda is always propagated not for the sake of it but for the sake of supporting a concrete policy. Akkerman et al. (2022) argue that in the context of the war in Ukraine, a key interest at play has been the US weapons industry. US involvement in the war in Ukraine has dominantly been expressed the transfer of billions of taxpayer dollars in weapons to Ukraine. Thus, this subcategory of the coding scheme sought to understand how the news outlets analyzed framed US policies regarding involvement in the war. For this reason, we analyzed whether the portrayal of US involvement in the war in Ukraine was positive, negative, neither, or not applicable (if any description of US involvement was absent) and whether the fact that US funding for the war in Ukraine originates from taxpayer funds.

Within the category regarding US involvement, we also included variables that are related to the aforementioned structural opposition and “us versus them” narratives. Specifically, we investigated whether the articles analyzed included mention of the following: a connection between the war in Ukraine and a broader struggle for freedom and democracy, a description of the Ukrainian army and soldiers as brave, and a depiction of Ukrainian President Zelensky as a worthy ally of the US. Mayr & Machin's (2012) and Zahid's (2016) studies on these topics provided the theoretical inspiration for these variables.

Zollmann (2023) describes another risk associated with the war in Ukraine which is the possibility of escalation into a larger world war, including nuclear war. Zollmann's (2023) study showed that, generally, Western outlets (that he analyzed) omit this aspect of the war. As such, we were interested to see whether such findings were consistent in our

sample of four US-based news outlets. To measure this, we looked for whether each article described the risks of escalation, including the possibility of nuclear war between the US/NATO and Russia.

For each of these objectives, we have linked the goals, relevant theory, and appropriate indicators that were used to measure the outcomes in Table 1.

Table 1: Research Objectives, Questions, Theory, and Variables

Research Objectives	Research Questions	Literature Review	Variables
Understand presence of war propaganda in US reporting about war in Ukraine	RQ1: Is US journalism about the war in Ukraine objective and independent?	Journalistic principles War propaganda versus journalism	Attribution of responsibility for war Sources US Involvement
Analyze differences in reporting between mainstream and alternative media outlets	RQ2: To what extent do mainstream differ from alternative in inclusion of war propaganda?	Political economy of the media	Attribution of responsibility for war Portrayal of US involvement
Analyze differences in conservative versus liberal outlets	RQ3: How do liberal outlets compare to conservative ones in terms of war propaganda?	War propaganda versus journalism	Attribution of responsibility for war Portrayal of US involvement
Probe differences between reporting at the start of Russian invasion versus two years later in accordance with an escalation of the war	RQ4: After over two years of war, do outlets change their inclusion of war propaganda?	Reporting on war in Ukraine	Portrayal of US involvement

4.4 Coding Variables

Based on these research objectives, we developed a coding manual to concretely identify the presence of these variables in our sample. As mentioned, our three overarching categories were: attribution of responsibility, sources, and US involvement. The coding manual can be referenced in full in Appendix A.

For attribution of responsibility, we looked for whether the article attributed blame for the war to Russia, the US, both Russia and the US, or neither. We also investigated several particulars that shape the framing around blame. First, we examined whether the article described the war in Ukraine as unjustified or unprovoked. In line with Zollmann's (2023) study, describing the war as such is a characteristic of reporting that blames Russia for the war and omits relevant historical context regarding NATO's role. Next, we asked if the article described Russian President Vladimir Putin in a strongly negative light in relation to enemy framing techniques discussed in the literature review (Bernays, 1942). For example, one article included US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi comparing Putin to Hitler.

To complement these aspects related to attributing blame to Russia, we also searched for any elements that attributed blame to NATO. We coded for whether or not the sample articles mentioned that NATO expansion was considered a military threat by Russia and whether the history of NATO expansion in relation to the war is mentioned. In line with Hughes (2014) and Foster (2022), we define the war in Ukraine as a proxy war between Russia and the US and NATO. The historical context related to the war in Ukraine revolves around NATO expansion, which the US is a leading member of. As such, in this context, the US and NATO are synonymous regarding their role in the war in Ukraine.

For sources, we looked for which official sources were used by media: only American official sources, only Russian official sources, both, or neither. We also analyzed the media's inclusion of non-official sources, in particular civilian sources. In particular, we looked at whether ethnic Ukrainian sources, ethnic Russian, both, or neither were used.

Lastly, we assessed how the sampled articles portray US involvement in the war in Ukraine: positive, negative, or neutral. To assess this, we examined how much critical reporting there was in relation to official US government policies (i.e. weapons and funding to Ukraine, intelligence sharing, etc.).

Moreover, within the category related to US involvement, we investigated whether the articles in question linked the war in Ukraine to a larger struggle for freedom and democracy

as well as if the Ukrainian military is described as brave and/or heroic. In contrast, we also coded for framing that was more related to a negative view of US involvement, including taxpayer funding for US involvement, charges of corruption against the Ukrainian government, and risks related to escalation and nuclear war that may result from US involvement.

4.5 Samples Composition and Data Collection

This study sought to contribute to journalism studies as an academic field of study by breaking down the results by type of media (mainstream or alternative), by editorial ideology line (liberal or conservative), and by comparing the reporting on the war in Ukraine across two time periods (the day of the invasion and more than two years later when the US approved Ukraine's use of American weapons to strike inside Russian territory).

Amongst the varying mediums of journalism (articles, broadcast, social media, etc.) we have chosen to focus solely on articles available online due to widespread reliance on online reporting (as opposed print) for the general public.

The vast majority of these articles were written with the objective of exclusively being written material, while one outlet included (*Democracy Now!*) features written transcripts of its broadcast television material online. These transcripts were analyzed in this study and the limitations of such an inclusion are mentioned later.

4.5.1 Media Outlets Analyzed

As previously discussed, this research's objective was to investigate war propaganda amongst a breadth of media outlets, regarding type of outlet (mainstream and alternative) and editorial ideological leaning (liberal and conservative). As such, the chosen news outlets that were investigated are: the *New York Times* (NYT), the *New York Post*, *Democracy Now!*, and the *Daily Caller*.

The NYT is widely referred to as both the "newspaper of record" and also representative of liberal mainstream media in the United States (Cavari et.al., 2017; Esteve-Faubel et.al., 2020; Guo et al., 2015; Koshkin, 2019; Koutieba, 2018; Mohammedwesam, 2017; Yuryshchev, 2017).

Likewise, the *New York Post* is a prolific mainstream outlet, but conservative-leaning. Akinloye Akinboade et al. (2023) justify the use of the *New York Post* in their descriptive

content analysis of war reporting on the war in Ukraine, writing: “The *New York Post* is the largest subscription-based news outlet in the United States, the news reporting style and editorial stance is regarded as conservative-leaning and has remained largely consistent over the years.” As such, the *New York Post* is taken to represent the mainstream conservative media outlets in the United States.

Democracy Now! is an alternative media outlet with a liberal editorial ideological line. *Democracy Now!* is primarily known as an audiovisual outlet, however, they publish their reporting in transcript version, which was analyzed in this research. As such, there are limitations with our inclusion of *Democracy Now!* in the research given that broadcast journalism bears some difference from written journalism given the incorporation of visual elements. These differences influence several factors such as framing (episodic or thematic) (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, in Semetko & Valkenburg’s (2000) study, they concluded that in comparing news framing, it was more relevant what orientation the outlet had to news (sensationalist or serious). These findings suggest the medium of media (press versus broadcast) is not the most critical factor to consider when examining news reporting (although it certainly it remains a factor worth consideration). As such, these limitations did not disqualify our use of transcripts of *Democracy Now!*’s program in the research.

Democracy Now! is known for its critical stance towards the US government and military, with a particular focus on the impacts of US policies on civilian population. The network gave airtime to voices who were critical of the Bush administration’s claims about Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction and questioned the morality of the US’ invasion of both Iraq and Afghanistan. The outlet was also critical of Obama, in particular his policy of using drone warfare in countries like Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

The *Daily Caller* was started in 2010 by Neil Patel and Tucker Carlson, who is a well-known conservative news anchor and political commentator. Carlson and the *Daily Caller* are both well-known for critical stances towards US foreign policy from a conservative point of view. In particular, the outlet is known for focusing on the financial costs of US wars, including on the national debt, taxpayer burden, and impacts to veterans. The outlet, while overall supportive of President Trump’s presidency, they did criticize his refusal to withdraw the US from Afghanistan during his term.

4.5.2 Articles Analyzed

As mentioned, the articles included in this sample were based on two events: the first was the first day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 23, 2022. The second key date considered was in connection with the US government's decision to approve Ukraine's use of American weapons to strike into Russian territory. The news relating to the US government's decision was reported on either May 30 or 31 of 2024.

To collect the articles the researcher utilized the *New York Times'* and *Democracy Now!'s* website search function, as well as Google Advanced Search. *The Daily Caller's* site search uses Google's and the *New York Post's* site search tool does not allow for a search based on specific dates. Using all of these tools, we included all of the following keywords included together: "Ukraine", "war", and "invasion".

Our initial search retrieved 26 articles. Articles that were not directly about the invasion of Ukraine were removed from the analysis. For example, the *New York Times* featured a story about the atmosphere amongst Ukrainians in New York City in light of the invasion. This article focused more on the sociological and cultural ties of Ukrainians to Ukraine and less on the politics of the invasion. In addition, articles published on the day of February 23, 2022 but *before* the official Russian invasion (which occurred late in the evening US Eastern Standard time) were excluded from this analysis. After selecting the relevant articles, we were left with a sample of 20 articles to include in our analysis.

To ensure data accuracy and completeness, the researcher scanned the relevant search tools a second time to ensure that all relevant articles were taken into account.

4.6 Inter-Coder Reliability

Prior to beginning our analysis, the researcher conducted an inter-coder reliability test to ensure the rigor of the primary researcher's analysis. The researcher and a colleague also pursuing a master's in journalism at Católica analyzed four different articles in the sample and coded them according to the coding manual. Both coders analyzed the same articles, one from the *New York Times*, one from the *New York Post*, one from the *Daily Caller*, and one from *Democracy Now!* The inter-coder reliability was 89%, which is greater than the widely accepted inter-coder reliability threshold for research of 75%. During this inter-coder reliability test, there were five characteristics for which the coders differed in their interpretation. For these, the two coders met and discussed their understanding of the articles

and criteria in question and came to alignment. This process helped the primary coder and researcher to more objectively code the remaining articles.

4.7 Validity and Biases

As is in the case in any research, it is prone to human error and biases. Both are unforced, human errors referring to anything from mistakenly coding for a field that did not align with the article at hand. Biases refer to the predisposition to assume certain things based on subjective opinions. The researcher acknowledges that both of these are risks to any research and incorporated steps to the research to mitigate these errors as best as possible.

To ensure the validity of the coding conducted after the entire sample of 20 articles was analyzed, the researcher coded the sample for a second time after one week of not referencing the original material or the original coding data. This test and retest added another layer of validity to the results compiled by a single researcher. This was done to ensure that the coding was consistent and not biased by the initial moment the samples were analyzed.

In the next chapter, we will discuss the results from our research. These include both descriptive statistics, which compile the frequency at which each variable is present within the various dimensions we analyze. It will also explore the correlation analyses we conducted to see whether or not certain variables are related to one another. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the body of literature on war propaganda. However, we must again stress that due to our small sample, our conclusions are limited in scope.

4.8 Data Analysis

Based on the literature review, three primary variables were assessed in this research, including: attribution of responsibility, sources, and US involvement. Within each of these overarching themes, additional variables were delineated and expressed in the form of mutually exclusive statements and questions.

This research employed a coding scheme based on the paragraph unit of measurement. This is as opposed to using the presence of certain words, as Oleinik (2023) and Zollmann (2023) used in their examinations of reporting on the war in Ukraine. Zollmann (2023) noted the limitations of using keywords for such analysis, writing “Database studies have limitations as they are based on keyword searches that exclude other text” (p. 5). By

analyzing the reporting on the level of paragraphs, this research is able to assess the context of such terminology before determining whether the outlined variables are present or not. The articles were coded manually due to the small sample size. Microsoft Excel was used to organize and document the data analysis.

To address the research question at hand, the data analysis leveraged both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to evaluate the coverage across various media outlets. For both of these analyses, the statistical software SPSS was used. The methods of analysis examined the data from several different angles in order to provide a more robust contribution to the existing body of literature on the topics of journalism and propaganda.

The first lens with which the data was analyzed was at the highest level, analyzing all articles together. The next lens with which the data was analyzed was by editorial ideology, i.e. conservative or liberal ideology. Lastly, the analysis examined the characteristics of the sample according to the two dates included: February 23, 2022 when the Russian military officially invaded Ukraine and May 30 and 31, 2024 when the US government authorized Ukraine's use of American weapons to strike within Russian territory.

4.8.1 Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive analysis examined the overall characteristics of the articles included in the study. As such, the frequency at which each variable was present is compiled and aggregated in both tables as well as visual charts. The analysis of the sample includes the frequency at which each variable included in the coding manual is present. This type of univariate analysis empowered the researcher to better understand the extent to which articles and outlets in this particular sample employed war propaganda themes as opposed to independent journalism.

4.8.2 Inferential Analysis

The inferential analysis employed in this study was chi-square tests and Pearson correlation tests. To answer the research questions at hand, the researcher used these tests to explore the relationships between the type of media outlet and the three primary variables: attribution of responsibility, official sources, and portrayal of US involvement. We conducted a chi-square correlation test to analyze the relationship between editorial ideology

and the aforementioned variables. Lastly, we used a chi-square test to look at the relationship between these same variables and time period.

Chi-square tests provide insight into whether there is a relationship between the two variables and further how strong the relationship between the two variables is. The results of these analyses provide a detailed understanding of how US media outlets report on the war in Ukraine, offering insights into potential biases and the distinction between journalism and propaganda in the coverage.

III. Results and Discussion

5 Results

To adequately answer our research question regarding war propaganda in US reporting on the war in Ukraine, we approached it from several different angles. By analyzing war propaganda by outlet type, we are able to gain insight into the role that ownership and funding, editorial ideology, and time period play. By analyzing the editorial ideology, we explore the political divide in the media and whether it impacts the inclusion of war propaganda. Lastly, we broke apart our sample based on time period to understand if the inclusion of war propaganda ideas was connected to the phase of the war. Altogether, our findings, which are limited, contribute to the academic body of work on war propaganda generally, and about Ukraine specifically.

5.1 War Propaganda by Outlet Type

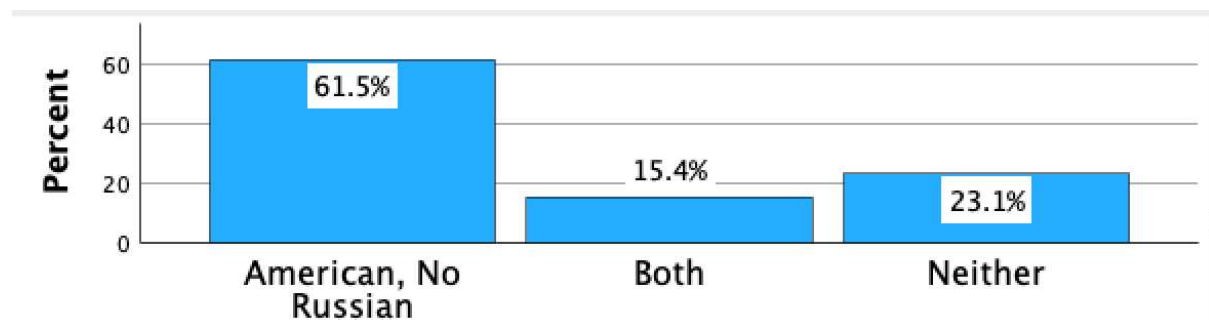
5.1.1 Mainstream Outlets

Of the mainstream outlets analyzed, 100% of the articles published during the time periods analyzed attributed responsibility entirely to Russia. 70% called the war unprovoked and 46% described Russian President Putin in a strongly negative light. 15.4% of mainstream articles analyzed included a mention of NATO expansion but none of the articles cited NATO's historical promises not to expand eastward.

Regarding known sources, 61.5% of the articles included only official American sources, 15.4% included both American and Russian government sources, and 23.1% included neither.

Figure 2

Official Sources in Mainstream Media

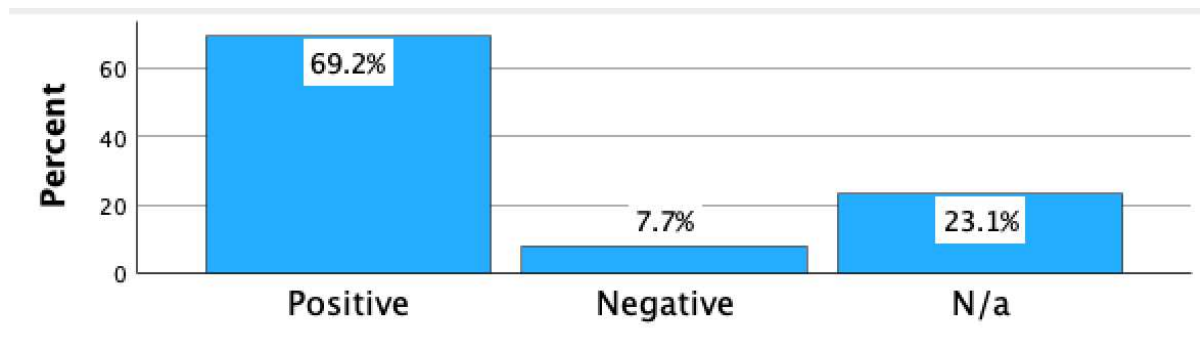


Of civilian sources, not a single article used an ethnic Russian civilian source while 10% of the articles analyzed used Ukrainian civilian sources. No articles included both civilian sources.

Overwhelmingly, mainstream media articles described US involvement in the war in Ukraine in a positive light. Only 7% described US involvement as negative and for the remaining articles the variable was not applicable given the article did not include any mention of US involvement in the war.

Figure 3

Portrayal of US Involvement in Mainstream Media



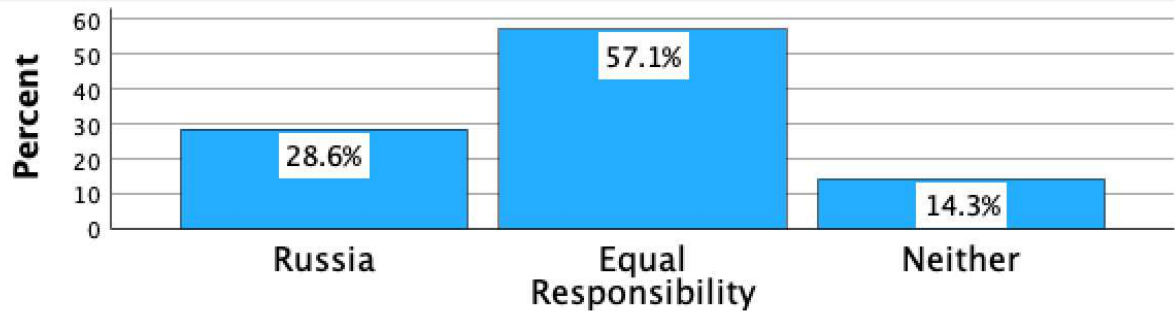
Of the subcategories relating to US involvement, 40% of mainstream articles linked the war in Ukraine to a larger struggle for freedom and democracy. 15.4% of articles described Ukrainian soldiers as brave and 23% described Ukrainian President Zelensky in a positive light. None of the articles mentioned taxpayer funding for US involvement nor allegations of corruption in Ukraine. Lastly, 23% of the mainstream articles mentioned risks of escalation and/or a possibility of nuclear war.

5.1.2 Alternative Outlets

Of the alternative outlets included in this sample, 28.6% attributed responsibility for the war in Ukraine to Russia, 57.1% attributed equal responsibility to the US and Russia, and 14.3% did not attribute responsibility to either the US nor Russia. 29% of the alternative outlets called the invasion unprovoked and 14% described Putin in a strongly negative light. 15.4% of the articles mentioned NATO expansion eastward but none mentioned NATO's promises not to expand eastward.

Figure 4

Attribution of Responsibility in Alternative Media



Regarding the use of official sources, 42.9% of the alternative media articles used both American and Russian sources. 14.3% of the articles cited American but not Russian sources. 28.6% cited Russian but not American sources. 14.3% did not cite either Russian nor American official sources. None of the alternative media outlets analyzed during the time periods in question used ethnic Russian nor Ukrainian sources.

Figure 5

Official Sources in Alternative Media

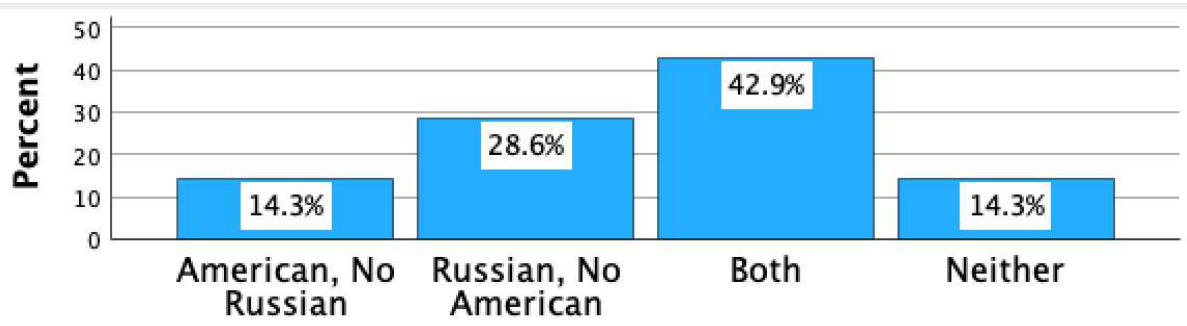
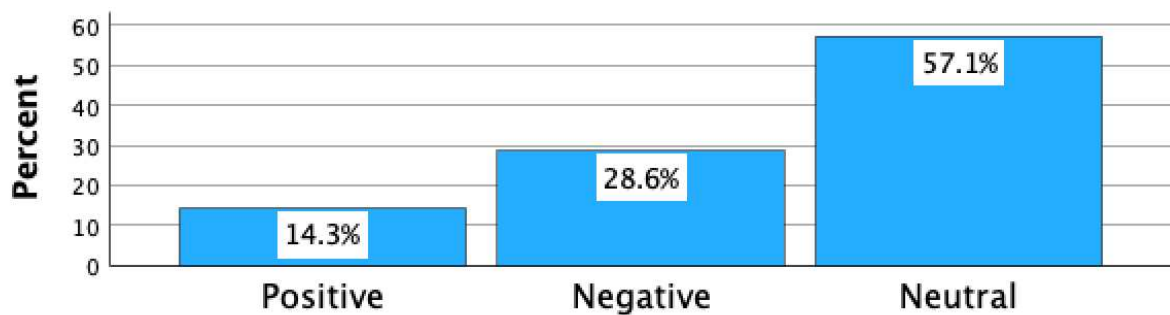


Figure 6

Portrayal of US Involvement in Alternative Media



Overall, alternative media outlets characterized US involvement in the war in Ukraine as neutral, 57.1% to be specific. 28.6% described US involvement as negative and 14.3% described it as positive. Regarding the additional themes relevant to US involvement, none of the articles from alternative media linked the war in Ukraine to a larger struggle for freedom and democracy. 15.4% of the articles described Ukrainian soldiers as brave and 29% described Zelensky in a positive light. None of the articles in the sample mentioned taxpayer funding for US involvement and none mentioned allegations of corruption in Ukraine. 43% of the articles from alternative media outlets mentioned risks of escalation and nuclear war.

5.1.3 Relationship Between Outlet Type and War Propaganda

We conducted chi-square tests to understand the individual relationships between outlet type and three variables: attribution of responsibility, official sources, and portrayal of US involvement.

The chi-square test assessing the relationship between the type of outlet and attribution of responsibility in the war yielded an alpha value of 12.381 which is larger than the p-value of 0.002. This indicates that the type of outlet in question and attribution of responsibility are not independent variables and are instead correlated. The Pearson value was 0.787, indicating the relationship between the two variables is strong and positive. In summation, according to our limited study, it appears that the type of outlet impacts whether or not an article will focus blame onto Russia and Russia only. As was discussed in the earlier section, mainstream media outlets are most likely to possess such attributes.

Our next chi-square test was analyzing the connection between outlet type and official sources. The result was an alpha value of 7.521 which is greater than the p-value of 0.057. The Pearson value was 0.613, revealing a moderately strong positive relationship between the two variables. In essence, these findings reveal that within this sample the type of outlet bears relevance when examining the use of official sources. In our analysis, mainstream media overwhelmingly relied on only official American sources. Alternative media were more likely to leverage both American and Russian official sources.

Our final chi-square test for these variables assessed the relationship between outlet type and portrayal of US involvement in the war in Ukraine. For this test, the result was an alpha value of 13.114, which is greater than the p-value of 0.004, demonstrating a correlation

between the two variables. The Pearson value was 0.810, indicating a strong positive relationship between outlet type and portrayal of US involvement. As such, the type of outlet in question is related to reporting on the war in Ukraine in an uncritically positive manner.

5.2 War Propaganda and Editorial Ideology

To assess the differences between liberal and conservative outlets, we compiled descriptive statistics to evaluate the presence of each of our variables. We also conducted chi-square inferential statistical tests to probe if there is a relationship between editorial ideology and war propaganda.

5.2.1 Liberal Media

Of the liberal outlets we analyzed in this research, 77.8% attributed responsibility to Russia while 22.2% attributed equal responsibility to both Russia and the US. 56% described the invasion as unprovoked and 44% depicted Putin in a strongly negative way. The majority, 89% did not mention NATO expansion and 0% mentioned NATO's promises not to expand.

Regarding sources, 44.4% used only American sources, 11.1% used only Russian, 22.2% used both, and 22.2% used neither American nor Russian official sources. One article of the nine articles from liberal outlets cited a Ukrainian civilian source and no articles cited ethnic Russian civilian sources.

Figure 7

Official Sources in Liberal Media

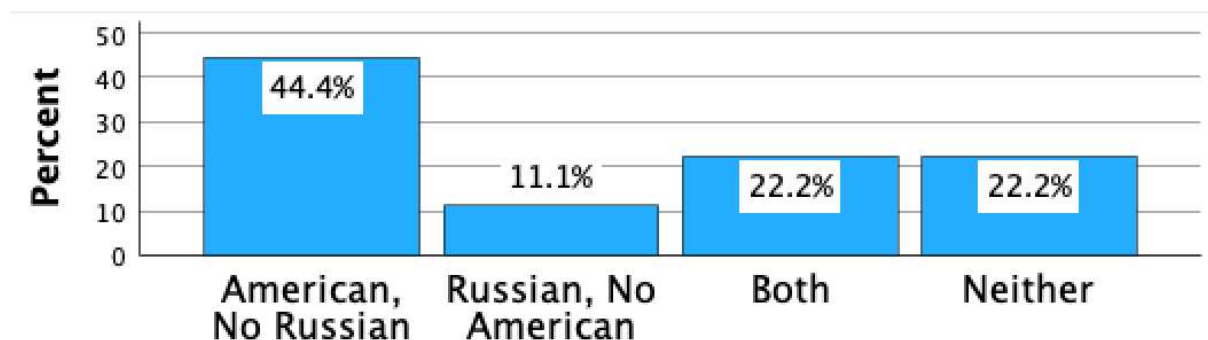
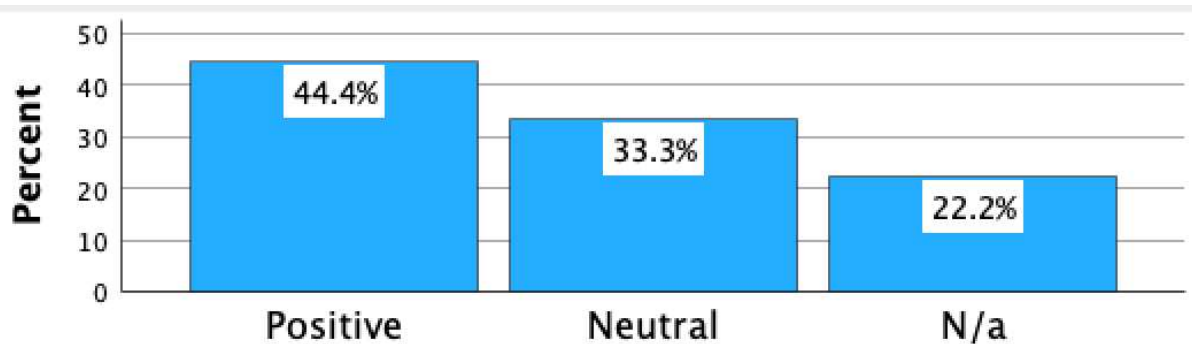


Figure 8

Portrayal of US Involvement in Liberal Media



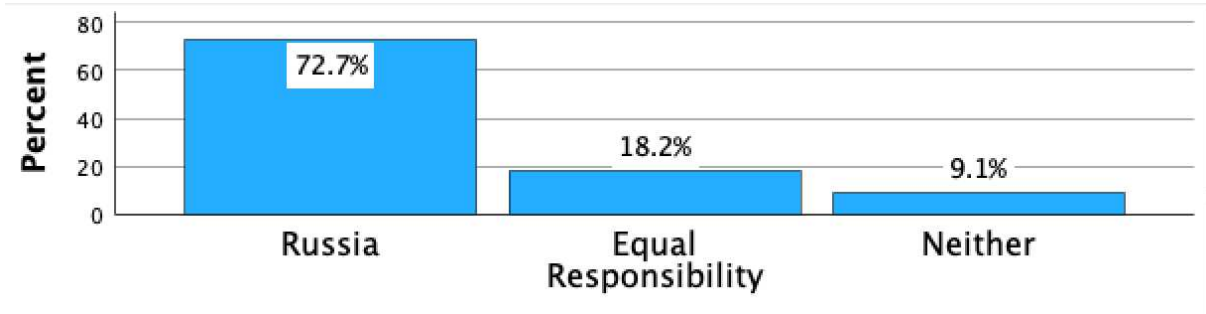
On the topic of US involvement, 44.4% described US involvement positively, 0% described it as negative, and 33.3% described it neutrally. The remaining part of the sample did not depict US involvement at all. 33% of the articles connected the war in Ukraine to a struggle for freedom and democracy. 22% described the Ukrainian armed forces as brave and 33% described Zelensky in a positive light. 0% of the liberal outlets sampled mentioned taxpayer funding for US involvement nor corruption in Ukraine. 44.4% mentioned the risk of the war escalating with US involvement.

5.2.2 Conservative Media

Of the articles from conservative outlets, 72.7% blamed Russia for the war in Ukraine, 18.2% assigned equal blame to the US and Russia, 9.1% attributed blame to neither, and 0% blamed the US. 55% described the war as unprovoked and 27% portrayed Putin in a strongly negative light. 90% of the articles from conservative outlets omitted discussion of NATO expansion and none of the articles in the sample discussed the historical record of NATO.

Figure 9

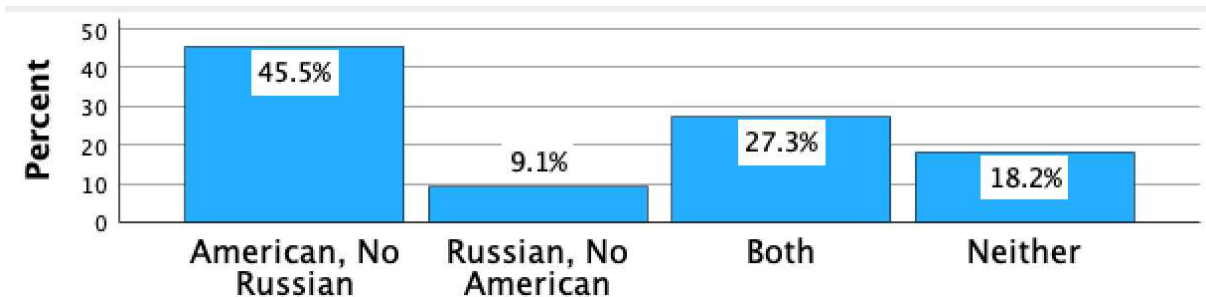
Attribution of Responsibility in Conservative Media



45.5% of the conservative outlets used only American official sources, 9.1% cited official Russian sources, 27.3% used both, and 18.2% cited neither. Only one of the 11 articles from conservative outlets included testimony from an ethnic Ukrainian civilian in the Donbass region that was being invaded. No articles included ethnic Russian civilian sources.

Figure 10

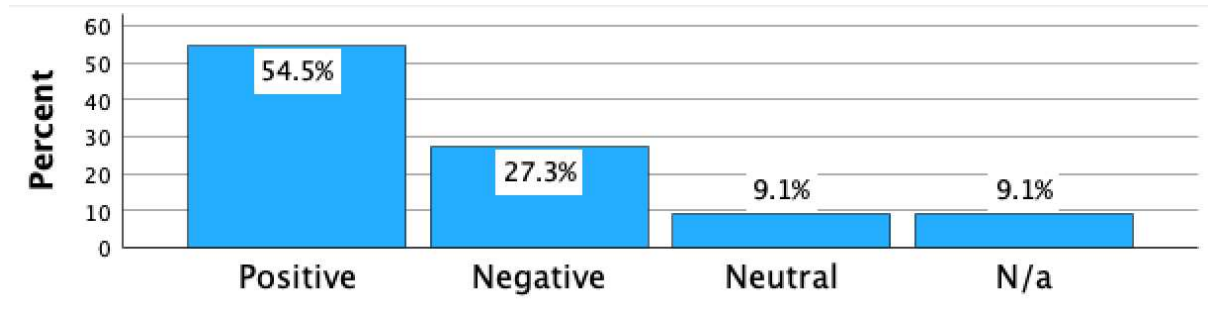
Official Sources in Conservative Media



The majority of these articles portrayed US involvement positively (54.5%), while 27.3% described it as negative, 9.1% depicted US involvement as neutral. This variable was not applicable for the remaining part of the sample. 81% of the conservative outlets connected the war to freedom and democracy. The same two articles by the *Daily Caller* portrayed Ukraine's military as courageous and Zelensky as an ally. No articles mentioned taxpayer funding nor corruption, and 81.8% did not mention risks of nuclear war or escalation.

Figure 11

Portrayal of US Involvement in Conservative Media



5.2.3 Relationship Between Editorial Ideology and War Propaganda

We conducted chi-square tests to understand the individual relationships between editorial ideology and three variables: attribution of responsibility, official sources, and portrayal of US involvement.

The chi-square test analyzing the relationship between editorial ideology and attribution of responsibility revealed that there was a correlation, with an alpha value of 0.875 and a p-value of 0.646. However, the Pearson value was 0.209, which indicates the relationship between the two variables is fairly weak. As such, it appears in this case that editorial ideology is not a major element of media associated with who the media will attribute responsibility to for the war in Ukraine.

The chi-square test conducted for editorial ideology and official sources indicated there was no relationship between the two. The alpha value was 0.112 while the p-value was 0.990. Again, editorial ideology does not appear to be a critical factor to US media's strategy with regards to official sources.

Lastly, the chi-square test for editorial ideology and portrayal of US involvement showed that the two variables were dependent on one another. The alpha value for this test was 4.579 which is greater than the p-value of 0.205. However, the Pearson value of 0.478 indicates the strength of the association is moderate to weak. Unlike the previous two chi square tests, editorial ideology and portrayal of US involvement in the war do have a positive association, although fairly weak.

5.3 War Propaganda’s Evolution Over Time

Our last angle of analysis was time period. As was the case in the previous two dimensions, we conducted chi-square inferential statistical tests to understand if the inclusion of war propaganda frames increased, decreased, or stayed the same over time. We also compiled descriptive statistics of all our variables.

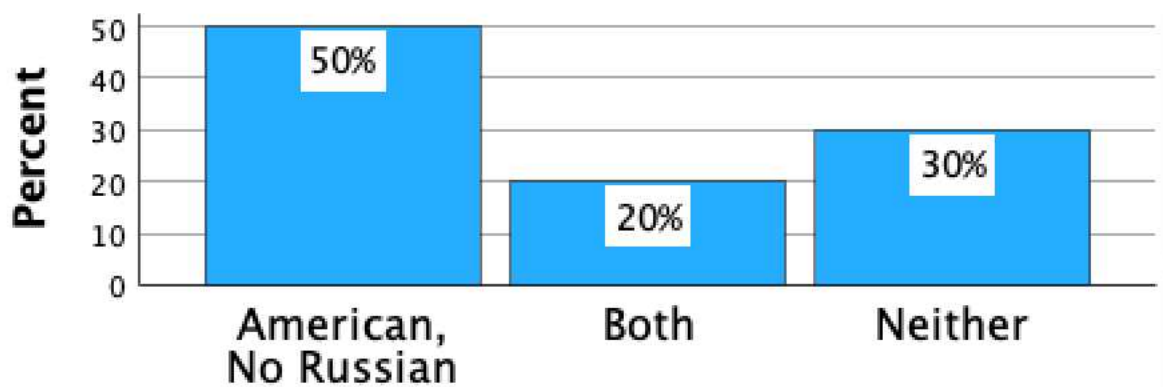
5.3.1 Mainstream Outlets - February 23, 2022

In articles written on the day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, February 23, 2022, 100% of the mainstream outlets in this sample attributed responsibility solely to Russia and said it was an unprovoked action. 60% described Putin in a strongly negative light. 20% mentioned NATO’s expansion eastward, but none of them cited historical and diplomatic records of NATO’s previous promises not to do so.

In terms of official sources used in this subsection of the sample, 50% used American but not Russian sources. 20% used both and 30% used neither. Two of the ten articles from mainstream sources cited ethnic Ukrainian civilian sources while none of the articles included ethnic Russian civilian sources.

Figure 12

Official Sources in Mainstream Outlets on February 23, 2022

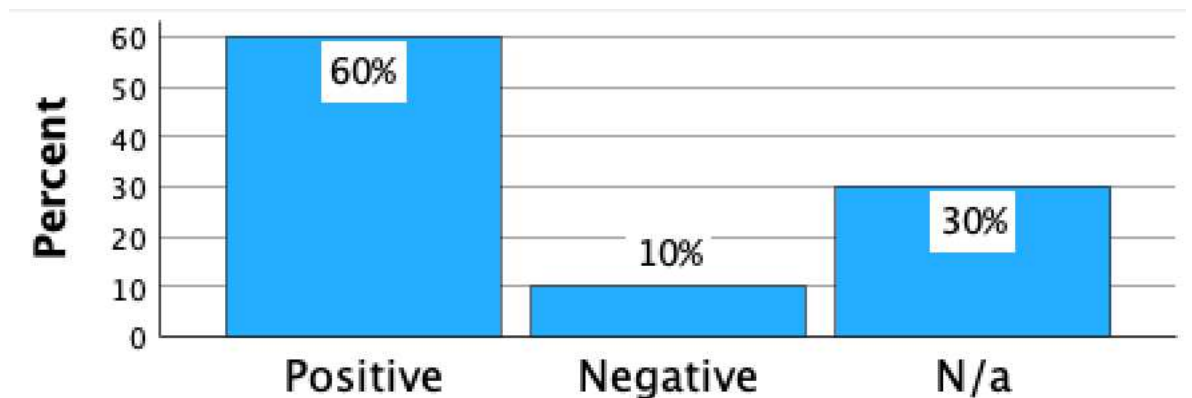


The mainstream media outlets analyzed overwhelmingly portrayed US involvement on the day of the invasion as positive. 60% described it as positive, 10% as negative, and 30% of the sample did not depict US involvement at all. 50% of the articles said the war in Ukraine was connected to the broader struggle for freedom and democracy. 20% depicted Ukrainian soldiers as courageous and brave while 30% depicted Zelensky in a positive

light. That 30% was solely comprised of *New York Times* articles. Three of the four *New York Times* articles on this date mentioned Zelensky in a favorable light. None of the mainstream media outlets mentioned taxpayer funding of US involvement, nor allegations of corruption in Ukraine, nor the possible risk of escalation and nuclear war.

Figure 13

Portrayal of US Involvement in Mainstream Outlets on February 23, 2022



5.3.2 Mainstream Outlets - May 30 or 31

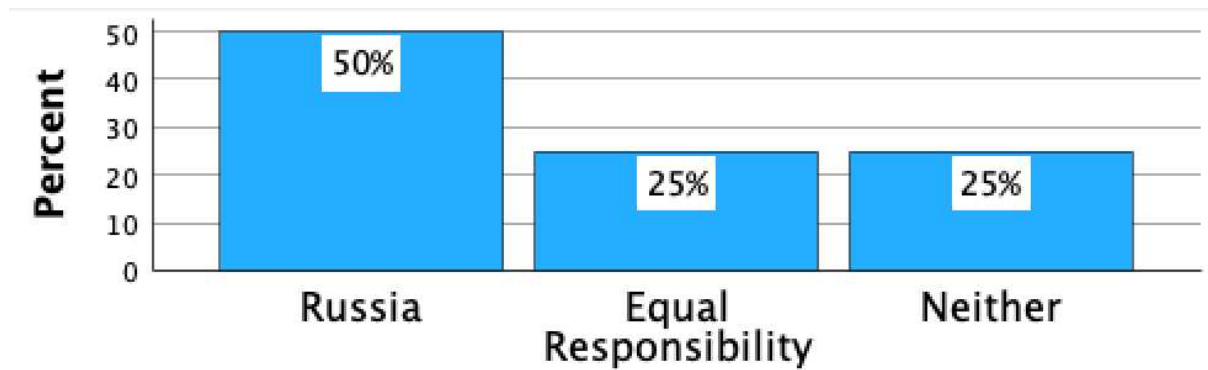
100% of the articles from mainstream outlets published on May 30 or 31 in 2024 about the US government decision to allow Ukraine to use US weapons to strike in Russian territory attributed responsibility to Russia. There was no mention whether the war was unprovoked and no mention of Putin in a strongly negative way. None of these articles mentioned NATO expansion nor the historical record of NATO in this respect. 100% of the articles used only official American government sources. There was no usage of ethnic Ukrainian nor ethnic Russian civilian sources in these articles. 100% of these articles described US involvement as positive. None of the articles associated the war with a larger battle for freedom and democracy, none of them described Ukrainian soldiers as brave nor Zelensky in a positive light. None of the articles invoked taxpayer funding nor mentioned allegations of corruption in Ukraine. Notably, all of them described potential risks of escalation with this policy decision.

5.3.3 Alternative Outlets - February 23, 2022

50% of the articles published by alternative media outlets in this sample on the day of the invasion of Ukraine attributed responsibility to Russia. 25% attributed equal responsibility between the US and Russia while 25% did not attribute blame to either of the two parties. 25% described Putin in a strongly negative light. None of the articles in this sample from alternative media outlets mentioned NATO expansion or the historical record of NATO and its relationship with Russia.

Figure 14

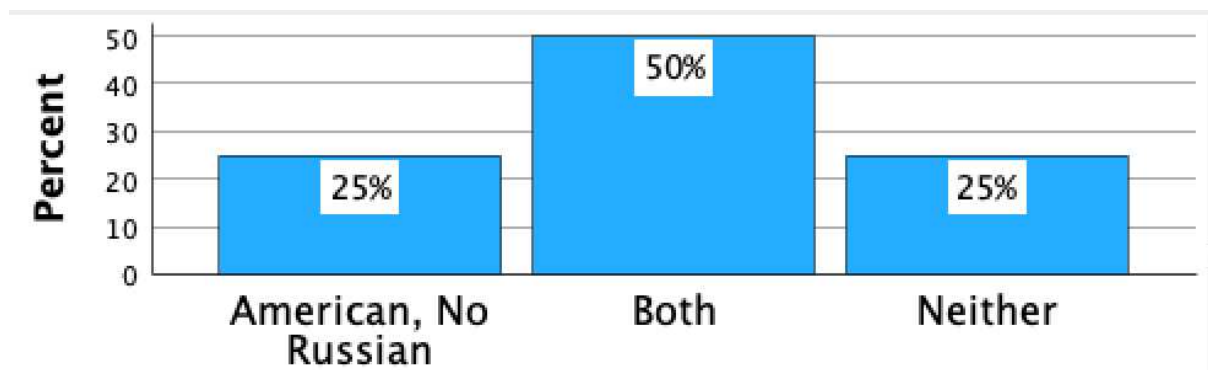
Attribution of Responsibility in Alternative Media on February 23, 2022



On February 23, 2022, the articles included in this sample from alternative media outlets varied in their official sources. 50% included both official American and Russian sources, 25% included only American official sources, and 25% included neither source.

Figure 15

Official Sources in Alternative Media on February 23, 2022



On this date, the alternative media outlets included in the sample were overwhelmingly neutral about US involvement (75%). 25% of the articles were positive about US involvement. None of the articles linked the war to freedom and democracy, however half of the articles associated the Ukrainian military with bravery and described Zelensky favorably. Both of these articles were from the *Daily Caller*. None of the articles mentioned taxpayer funding nor Ukraine's corruption record. Only 25%, or one article, mentioned the risk of nuclear war, which was from the outlet *Democracy Now!*

5.3.4 Alternative Outlets - May 30 or 31

100% of the articles the alternative outlets in this sample published on May 30 or 31 about the US government decision to allow Ukraine to use US weapons to strike Russian territory placed equal responsibility on both the US and Russia. There was no mention of the nature of the war, whether it was provoked or not. Similarly, these articles did not describe Putin at all, so the variable about describing him in a negative light was not applicable. None of the articles mentioned NATO expansion or promises not to expand NATO. Two of the articles from this section of the sample included only Russian sources, while one article included both Russian and American official government sources. There was no inclusion of civilian sources either from an ethnic Ukrainian or Russian background. Two of the articles (one from *Democracy Now!* and one from *Daily Caller*) portrayed US involvement as neutral while the other *Daily Caller* article on this date portrayed US involvement as negative. None of the article invoked freedom and democracy nor labeled Ukrainian soldiers as brave. None of the articles described Zelensky positively. None of the articles mentioned taxpayer funding nor corruption in Ukraine. Two of the three articles (66%) mentioned escalation of the war as a potential risk associated with the US change in policy.

5.3.4 The Relationship Between War Propaganda and Evolution of Time

We conducted chi-square tests to understand the individual relationships between the date of publication and three variables: attribution of responsibility, official sources, and portrayal of US involvement. We investigated these relationships to better understand the how the evolution of a war impacts the presence of war propaganda in US media.

The chi-square test for the relationship between date of publication and attribution of responsibility yielded an alpha value of 5.0 which is greater than the p-value of 0.082. The

Pearson value was 0.50, representing a moderate connection between the two variables. Therefore, we conclude that the time of publication bears slight relevance on the presence and extent of war propaganda in reporting.

There was a moderately strong positive association between date of publication and official sources, with an alpha value of 6.667 which exceeds the p-value of 0.83, while the Pearson value was 0.577. As such it appears in our sample that the date of publication is associated with the approach to official sources.

Lastly, our chi-square test between date of publication and portrayal of US involvement showed that the way an article portrays US involvement was connected to whether the article was published on February 23, 2022 or May 30 or 31 of 2024. The alpha value of 3.254 is greater than the p-value of 0.354. The Pearson value is 0.403, characterizing a moderately strong relation between the two. This means that the evolution of time and a war bears relevance to the inclusion of war propaganda.

6 Discussion

This research sought to answer the question: how can we characterize US reporting about the war in Ukraine? By characterize, we mean to ask: does the war reporting constitute journalism or propaganda? To answer this question to the fullest ability possible, we also sought out to answer several questions that are subsets to the main research question. We did this in order to enrich our contribution to the academic literature on the question of war propaganda and war journalism.

Within our main research question, we sought out to understand the role of the type of the media outlet (mainstream or alternative), the editorial ideology of the outlet (liberal or conservative), and the date of publication (at the onset of the invasion versus two years later in accordance with what is broadly referred to as an escalation of the war). Overall, our findings found that war propaganda was present in US reporting about the war in Ukraine because of the overwhelmingly attribution of responsibility to Russia, overreliance on official American sources, and uncritical positive portrayal of US involvement. However, our research found that the presence of such war propaganda generally varied based on the type of outlet in question (mainstream or alternative). In every segmentation of our data, the majority of the sample exhibited the following: attributed sole responsibility for the war to Russia, lacked historical context regarding NATO expansion, primarily relied on official American sources and excluded official Russian sources, primarily relied on official sources and lacked civilian sources, and portrayed American involvement in the war uncritically positive.

Our findings align with Hyzen and Van den Bulck's (2024) research who analyzed CNN and Fox News's coverage during the first week of the war in Ukraine. As they concluded, our research found that the mainstream outlets in the sample "follow US government framing by not questioning US involvement in the war" (Hyzen and Van den Bulck, 2024, p. 16). In addition, in accordance with Hyzen and Van den Bulck's (2024) research, our results which show the presence of war propaganda in place of journalism confirm existing academic research and literature about the topic, including: Lasswell (1938), Bernays (1942), Herman and Chomsky (2002), as well as the indexing theory that Bennett (1990) established.

6.1 War Propaganda in Mainstream Media

100% of the mainstream media articles attributed responsibility for the war to Russia. This shows consistency across editorial ideologies (conservative versus liberal) as well as independence from the time period. Our results also show that the mainstream outlets in our sample tended to depict Putin in a strongly negative light, with 46% of the articles from these outlets doing so. One *New York Post* article contained the headline “Nancy Pelosi compares Putin's Ukraine moves to Hitler.” Furthermore, 40% of those same articles connected the war in Ukraine to a struggle for freedom and democracy. 15% of the articles described Ukrainian soldiers as brave and courageous while 23% characterized Ukrainian President Zelensky as a positive ally. These findings align with Bernay’s (1942) criteria for war propaganda, wherein it “strengthens the belief of belief of the people that the enemy is responsible for the war, with examples of the enemy’s depravity” (p. 236). These attributes also constitute propaganda because according to Lasswell (1938), one of the goals of propaganda is to “whip up hatred of the enemy” and represent it as a “murderous, menacing aggressor” (p. 195).

The mainstream media also demonstrated war propaganda attributes with its lack of historical and diplomatic context about the war in Ukraine, in particular about the US and NATO’s historical commitments not to expand further eastward. 15.4% of the articles from mainstream outlets mentioned NATO expansion, frequently framed in the context of Putin’s remarks and justification for the war. None of the mainstream articles mentioned the historical facts regarding NATO’s promises not to expand. These findings align with Zollmann’s (2023) study that showed an overwhelming omission of such facts from US, UK, and German reporting on the war.

Further showing the presence of war propaganda in war reporting about Ukraine in this sample is the use of sources, official and unofficial. As mentioned, the majority (61.5%) of the articles from mainstream outlets in this sample cited an official American source but not an official Russian source. Furthermore, 10% of the mainstream media articles included ethnic Ukrainian civilian sources but none included ethnic Russian sources. This overreliance on official sources as opposed to non-official sources, in this study civilians throughout Ukraine, aligns with several authors we cited in our literature review. For one, McChesney (2002) describes how “official sources” can be understood as referring to elite that advance a foreign policy that preserves the interests of the wealthy and powerful. He

also argued that the uneven approach to sources as exhibited in the mainstream outlets in our sample “tends to include facts that ideologically uphold the interests of advertisers and corporations,” therein arguing that this overreliance on official sources is tied to the political economy of the media. Given this overreliance is most exacerbated in the mainstream media outlets, we conclude that our research confirms this argument.

Related to the structural oppositions used to describe Russia in this reporting, we also investigated the portrayal of US policies. War propaganda seeks to lend credibility to and create support for the policies of a government, according to Ellul (1973) and Zollmann (2018). Ellul described how propaganda’s aim is to prepare a person for a “particular action,” while Zollmann (2018) explains that the depiction of “the enemy in contrast to the noble aims of the home state” is “used to legitimize the war effort to the public in the home country” (p. 230). Our research showed that of the mainstream media included in the sample, almost 70% portrayed American involvement positively. Meanwhile, none of the articles mentioned taxpayer funds as the financing of US involvement, nor did they mention corruption within the Ukrainian government (which is propagated by Russian war propaganda as discussed in the literature review).

6.2 War Propaganda in Alternative Media

The articles from alternative media included in this sample differed in various dimensions from the mainstream media outlets. For one, the majority (57.1%) of these articles attributed equal responsibility for the war in Ukraine to both Russia and the US. They categorized the war as unprovoked in roughly 29% of the articles, compared to 70% of the mainstream articles. Approximately 15% of both mainstream and alternative media sources included mention of NATO expansion as a reason for the war, and both lacked any mention of historical context regarding NATO’s history. These findings, along with others, align with Cissel’s (2012) research which showed the distinctions in coverage by mainstream and alternative media. Our research may suggest that, as Cissel posits, the differences in coverage between the two types of outlets may be attributable to the differences in economic structures. Specifically, the private financial interests of those who own the respective media outlets. For example, within our sample, *New York Times* and *New York Post* are both owned by corporations which are traded on the stock market.

Our research on the use of sources also confirmed that there are some differences between mainstream and alternative media in terms of war propaganda. 42.9% of the alternative media articles used both American and Russian sources, as compared to 15.4% of the mainstream media articles. However, the alternative media articles included in the sample also lacked civilian sources, either ethnic Ukrainians or ethnic Russians living in Ukraine. This is similar to mainstream media articles, wherein only 10% of those articles included civilian Ukrainian sources and none of them included an ethnic Russian civilian source. These findings confirm a broad overreliance on official sources, but because both mainstream and alternative media exhibit this, it is unlikely that it is attributable to the economic differences in the organization of the outlets. Thus, our findings disagree with Atton (2010) who stated that alternative media primarily use non-official sources.

McChesney (2004) argued that journalists generally rely on official sources because of the pressures not to antagonize them, which might in many cases mean a career death sentence. However, the official sources being cited in the articles included in this sample were primarily stemming from official statements on the part of government figureheads, as opposed to confidential or exclusive testimony from an official source. Thus, it is unlikely that journalistic cultural norms, in this sense of the terms, are primarily responsible for this difference in our results.

Another difference between mainstream and alternative media in our sample is the portrayal of US involvement. The majority of alternative media articles (57.1%) were neutral when it came to portraying the US's role, whereas mainstream media overwhelmingly depicted it positively. This finding also challenges Atton (2010), who argued that alternative media ideals are based on taking a stance in line with certain values. A noteworthy difference in the reporting on US involvement between the types of outlets was the inclusion of a mention of the risks of escalation and nuclear war associated with US involvement in the war. 43% of the alternative media outlets included this aspect of the conflict, whereas 23% of the mainstream media articles did the same.

6.3 How Does the Outlet Type Relate to War Propaganda?

According to our findings, the differences between mainstream and alternative media with regards to war propaganda can be seen as related to the relationship between the type of media outlet and likelihood that it includes war propaganda narratives. Our chi-square

tests overall revealed that the relationship between media outlet type and war propaganda was strongly positive across all of our dependent variables (attribution of responsibility, official sources, and portrayal of US involvement). Our findings complement the existing research on the distinctions between war journalism and propaganda, however, they are still limited in their breadth due to our small sample.

6.4 How do liberal outlets compare to conservative ones in terms of war propaganda?

When investigating the differences in war propaganda between liberal and conservative outlets, we found more similarities than differences. Both conservative and liberal outlets primarily blamed Russia approximately 70% of the time. Similarly, 56% of liberal outlet articles described the invasion as unprovoked and 55% of conservative outlets did the same. In both cases, the majority of articles, roughly 90%, excluded any mention of NATO expansion and none of the articles in our entire sample discussed the historical context of NATO.

There were some differences between editorial ideology and structural oppositions used in the reporting. For example, 33% of the liberal outlets connected the war in Ukraine to a broader struggle for freedom and democracy globally whereas 81% of the conservative outlets did the same. Both liberal and conservative outlets described the Ukrainian armed forces as brave and courageous at a similar rate, 22% and 18% respectively. 33% of liberal articles painted Ukrainian President Zelensky in a positive light while 18% of conservative outlets did the same. Across ideological leanings, no articles included mention of taxpayer funding nor corruption in Ukraine. Regarding mentions of the risks of escalation and nuclear war, 44% of liberal outlets mentioned this while 82% of conservative outlets did the same.

The same trends emerge when we take a look at usage of official sources. Approximately 45% of the articles within liberal and conservative outlets, respectively, included only official American sources (and no Russian sources). Across the board, there was an overreliance of official sources given a lack of civilian sources (ethnic Ukrainian or Russian).

Lastly, regarding US involvement, both liberal and conservative outlets tended to depict it positively. 44.4% of outlets from liberal media sources did so while 54.5% of conservative outlets did the same.

While there were significant similarities between the liberal and conservative outlets, the chi-square test we conducted showed that there was a relatively weak relationship between the editorial ideology of an outlet and its inclination to use war propaganda. This finding may suggest that factors other than ideology, such as a political economy or journalistic norms and culture are more probable causes of war propaganda.

6.5 Potential Reasons for War Propaganda Consistencies Across Ideologies

One potential reason for the alignment between liberal and conservative outlets regarding war propaganda about the war in Ukraine is due to journalistic norms and culture. Bennett's (1990) indexing theory asserts that journalistic norms prioritize opinions and sources that are prevalent within political institutions. Another framework to understanding this trend is careerism, or orientating oneself towards what is best for one's career and not what is in the interests of the public from a journalistic perspective. Chomsky and Herman (2002) argued that journalists must align with certain views in order to survive in the industry.

Another potential explanation for this alignment between editorial ideologies is the contradictory communities that journalists belong to: national and professional. According to Nossek (2004), if a war is considered as directly connected to the country of the journalist, they are more likely to employ a national orientation to the reporting. As the war in Ukraine is considered by some to be a proxy war between the US and Russia, this may explain why journalists across ideologies are employing a national framework to report on the war and thereby integrating war propaganda from US government narratives. As mentioned in our literature review, Shamir (1988) showed that journalists think that during times of war that it is acceptable to subordinate professional values to national ones. However, the war in Iraq and now the war in Ukraine are showing the grave danger to such an exception.

The last potential reason for these results we will explore is one related to the political economy of the media. With the pressures of commercialization and the need to secure and maintain advertisers and other financing for a media outlet, there is a tendency for media to try to appeal to the largest possible audience (Murdock and Golding, 1973). However, it is important to investigate, if it is the case that such narratives of war propaganda appeal to the largest audience, why that is? Bennett (2010) claimed that public opinion about the war in Iraq was a consequence of the mainstream media's coverage, not the other way around.

6.6 Evolution Over Time – Mainstream Media

The variables we assessed changed to varying degrees based on the date of publication. For mainstream outlets, the attribution of responsibility was unchanged. 100% of the articles blamed Russia both on the first day of the invasion as well in May 2024. However, 60% depicted Putin in a negative way on the day of the invasion while there was no mention of him in any of the sampled articles published on May 2024 about the US's decision to allow Ukraine to strike into Russian territory. More articles mentioned NATO expansion (20%) on the first day of the invasion than two years later (zero). All mainstream media outlets were consistent in omitting relevant historical context.

On the day of the invasion 50% of these articles relied on American official sources. Two years later, 100% of them followed such a practice. On the day of the invasion, 20% of articles cited ethnic Ukrainian civilian sources while none included ethnic Russians. Two years later, civilians from either ethnic group were excluded.

On February 23, 2022, 60% of the articles described US involvement as positive, compared to 100% of the articles on May 30, 2024. Regarding mention of the risk of nuclear war or escalation, articles from mainstream outlets failed to include such information on the day of the invasion. However, in the May 2024 articles, all of the sampled mainstream media articles mentioned such risk.

6.7 Evolution Over Time – Alternative Media

For the alternative media outlets in our sample, the attribution of responsibility shifted between the first day of the invasion and more than two years later. On the day of the invasion, 50% singularly blamed Russia for the war. In May 2024, 100% of the articles assigned equal responsibility for the war.

Some of our variables were completely absent from articles in May 2024, such as a description of the war as provoked or unprovoked. Similarly, the May 2024 articles did not mention Putin at all. None of the articles, whether in February 2022 or May 2024, included NATO's expansionist policies nor the alliance's historical record on such policies.

Regarding official sources, 50% of articles included both official American and Russian sources on February 23, 2022 while two thirds of the articles on May 30, 2024 included only Russian sources. However, it must be emphasized that the sample size for the articles in May 2024 was quite small, only three articles were published on that day in

alternative outlets about the US policy change towards Ukraine. Civilian sources were missing across the board.

The percentage of alternative media articles characterizing US involvement as neutral stayed relatively consistent across time periods, at 75% in February 2022 and 66% in May 2024. None of the articles across the time periods linked the war to a noble struggle for freedom and democracy. Half of the articles on February 22 associated the Ukrainian army with motifs of bravery and described Zelensky as a good leader, but such connotations were missing from May 2024 reporting.

Across time periods, no articles mentioned taxpayer funds in relation to US support of Ukraine nor corruption in Ukraine. 25% of the articles on the first day of the invasion mentioned the risk of nuclear war, which was *Democracy Now!* In May 2024, 66% of the articles, or two of three, mentioned the risk of nuclear war escalation.

6.8 War Propaganda's Evolution Over Time

Overall, there were minimal differences over time within both mainstream and alternative media in our study. For the mainstream outlets, war propaganda stayed consistent or increased. For example, in 2022, 50% of the articles cited only American official sources. In May 2024, 100% of the articles relied only on American sources. However, there was a shift in mentioning risks of further escalation. On the first day of the invasion, not a single mainstream media article mentioned such risks. However, regarding the US government's decision to allow Ukraine to strike inside Russian territory with American weapons, all of the articles related it to the risk of nuclear war and escalation.

Of alternative media outlets, there was similar consistency. Many of our variables were completely absent from the reporting, thus we were limited in that sense. However, there was one important difference. On the day of the Russian invasion, 50% of the alternative media articles singularly blamed Russia for the war. In May 2024, 100% of the article assigned equal blame to Russia and the US.

Our inferential analysis showed that the connections between time period and our variables was at best moderate. As such, our results indicate that the pressure of paradox has not influenced reporting for these outlets. According to Patrick and Thrall (2004), the pressure of paradox refers to the pressures that are exerted on the government and media as a result of a changing public opinion in opposition to war propaganda. This may be because

public opinion in the US is quite divided. A Pew Research poll published May 8, 2024 indicates that about a third of Americans think the US is providing too much support. Equal shares also believe the US is providing the right amount and not enough. The remainder of those polled say they are not sure.

These findings contradict those of Zandberg and Neiger (2005) who found that the contradiction between the national and professional identities for journalists evolves over time during a war. It appears with the war in Ukraine, outlets that integrate war propaganda remain consistent inasmuch even over two years on and after the US government's decision to escalate its direct involvement in the war.

Overall, our research yielded several interesting considerations when it comes to war propaganda and the war in Ukraine. We found that consistently the outlets in our sample uncritically included war propaganda narratives consistent with US government rhetoric and policy, including attributing sole responsibility for what they call an unprovoked war to Russia, hyper-demonizing Putin, and excluding relevant historical facts. Meanwhile, as discussed in our literature review, Russian media uses war propaganda narratives around taxpayer funding and corruption in Ukraine to justify its invasion (Parmelee, 2024). Our research aligns with what Roman et al. (2017) remarked was a mimicry by the media of government talking points.

In this sense, our findings point to a unique consistency in the way that war propaganda behaves. Marlin (1989) showed how during both world wars, both sides used selective omission to support their war objectives. In our analysis, we can see how the US media exhibits this same phenomenon today, with other research showing that Russia does the same (Parmelee, 2024).

While every war is unique, our research added to the body of literature that identifies trends between wars and the war reporting on them. Hayes and Guardino (2010) did an investigation on the usage of sources in the eight months leading up to the war in Iraq and found that coverage heavily skewed towards official administration voices. Across all parameters (outlet type, ideology, and time frame), 45% of articles in our sample relied on only American official sources.

As we discussed the relationship between outlet type and war propaganda was strong, compared to the relationships between ideology and time period. These differences indicate that it is possible that aspects that differentiate mainstream and alternative media are at play

when it comes to war propaganda. One of these is differentiators is the funding model, or the political economy of the media. Because the limitations of this study, primarily the small sample size, we are unable to make any grand conclusions about the nature of US media in this sense. Future research could focus in on just outlet types, analyzing a larger sample for a longer period of time and closely investigating the economic background of the outlets chosen.

7 Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the extent to which war journalism in the US about the war in Ukraine functions as war propaganda. By analyzing differences between alternative and mainstream media, conservative and liberal outlets, and comparing coverage between the first day of the invasion and the coverage on May 30, 2024, regarding the US policy decision to allow Ukraine to use American weapons to strike into Russian territory, this study aimed to uncover patterns of bias and propaganda across different media landscapes.

The findings revealed several key insights. First, alternative media was generally less likely to singularly blame Russia for the war compared to mainstream media. However, both types of media exhibited an overreliance on official government sources, with a notable failure to include civilian perspectives or relevant historical context, such as NATO's expansion. Alternative media tended to present a more neutral stance on US involvement in the conflict, while mainstream media overwhelmingly portrayed US actions in a positive light.

When examining ideological differences, the study found a surprising consistency across conservative and liberal outlets. A majority of outlets in both ideological camps solely blamed Russia for the war and relied heavily on official American sources. Similarly, around half of the outlets within each ideological trend uncritically portrayed US involvement positively, indicating that ideology may play a lesser role in war propaganda than previously assumed.

Over time, our analysis showed that mainstream outlets remained consistent in their attribution of responsibility and their reliance on American official sources. In contrast, alternative media shifted in their attribution of responsibility, with a significant increase in articles assigning equal responsibility for the war by May 2024. However, the reliance on Russian sources grew among alternative outlets, and the portrayal of US involvement remained predominantly neutral.

These findings suggest that the most significant differences in war propaganda are not necessarily driven by ideological biases but by the type of media—mainstream versus alternative. This raises important questions about the economic interests and journalistic principles of objectivity (of lack thereof) that may be guiding media coverage, although the small sample size of this study limits the ability to draw definitive conclusions.

This study's limitations, including a small sample size and potential biases from the researcher, should be acknowledged. The conclusions drawn are therefore tentative and point to the need for further research. Future studies should consider more granular analyses of specific outlets or broader international comparisons. Additionally, exploring the long-term impact of war propaganda on public opinion could provide deeper insights into how media shapes our understanding of conflict.

In conclusion, this research underscores the importance of critical media literacy in navigating an increasingly complex media environment. It could be valuable for media outlets and professional associations to explore the development of ethical guidelines that could mitigate the dominance of war propaganda. For one, prioritization of non-official sources from both sides of a conflict would be of immense value to the public. Furthermore, journalism professionals may benefit from trainings about the potential pressures they may feel during war and how they can manage such pressures, including nationalist tendencies as an example. Lastly, the more transparency, the better. In particular, media organizations have a responsibility to the public to openly address the economic origin of potential biases. But for this to happen, the US government must first take its role as a regulator more seriously.

As armed conflict continues around the world, the need for journalists to operate with integrity and for the public to critically engage with media narratives becomes ever more crucial. The broader implications for journalism in conflict zones are clear: the stakes are high, and the role of the media in shaping the course of history cannot be underestimated.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Coding Manual

	VARIABLE: Attribution of responsibility	
1	Who does the article attribute responsibility to?	1 - Russia 2 - US 3 - Equal 4 - Neither
	Responsibility to Russia	
2	Does the article describe the war in Ukraine as unjustified or unprovoked?	0 – no 1 – yes
3	Does the article describe and emphasize Putin in a strongly negative light?	0 – no 1 - yes
	Responsibility to NATO	
4	Does the article describe how NATO expansion was considered a military threat and provocation by Russia?	0 – no 1 - yes
5	Does the article cite that Western leaders agreed to not expand NATO after the reunification of Germany?	0 – no 1 - yes
	VARIABLE: Sources	
6	Which official sources are used?	1 – American, no Russian 2 – Russian, no American 3 – Both 4 – Neither
7	Does the article use ethnic Russian civilian sources?	0 – no 1 - yes
8	Does the article use ethnic Ukrainian civilian sources?	0 – no 1 - yes

9	Does the article use both civilian sources?	0 – no 1 - yes
	VARIABLE: US involvement	
10	How does the article portray US involvement in the war?	1 – Uncritically positive 2 – Uncritically negative 3 – Neutral 4 – N/a
	US involvement - For	
11	Does the article link the war in Ukraine to a larger struggle for freedom and democracy?	0 – no 1 - yes
12	Does the article characterize Ukrainian soldiers as brave and/or heroic?	0 – no 1 - yes
13	Does the article depict Zelensky and/or the Ukrainian government as a US ally?	0 – no 1 - yes
	US involvement - Against	
14	Does the article mention taxpayer funding in relation to US aid to Ukraine?	0 – no 1 - yes
15	Does the article cite any charges of corruption against the Ukrainian government?	0 – no 1 - yes
16	Does the article describe the risks of escalation, nuclear war, or world war related to the conflict in Ukraine?	0 – no 1 - yes

Appendix B - Sample Coding Sheet

Outlet Name	Article Title	Date	Type of Outlet	Ideological Leaning	Q1
NY Times	On Eve of War, No Exodus From Ukraine, Only Anxiety and Disbelief	23-Feb-22	Mainstream	Liberal	1
NY Times	Putin Announces Start to ‘Military Operation’ Against Ukraine	23-Feb-22	Mainstream	Liberal	1
NY Times	Russian Mercenaries Covertly Entered Separatist Areas of Ukraine	23-Feb-22	Mainstream	Liberal	1
NY Times	Some in Taiwan See Parallels to Ukraine	23-Feb-22	Mainstream	Liberal	1
NY Times	Taking the Fight to Russia_ The West Weighs Ukraine’s Use of Its Weapons	30-May-24	Mainstream	Liberal	1
NY Times	Under Pressure, Biden Allows Ukraine to Use U.S.	31-May-24	Mainstream	Liberal	1

	Weapons to Strike Inside Russia				
NY Post	Biden slaps sanctions on Nord Stream 2 pipeline firm months after waiver	23-Feb-22	Mainstream	Conservative	1
NY Post	Donald Trump says Putin's assault on Ukraine will embolden China to take Taiwan	23-Feb-22	Mainstream	Conservative	1
NY Post	Nancy Pelosi compares Putin's Ukraine moves to Hitler	23-Feb-22	Mainstream	Conservative	1
NY Post	Over half disapprove of Biden's handling of Ukraine in new poll	23-Feb-22	Mainstream	Conservative	1
NY Post	Russia invades Ukraine after months of threats and demands	23-Feb-22	Mainstream	Conservative	1
NY Post	Ukraine family reveals horror of hiding from gunfire, shelling	23-Feb-22	Mainstream	Conservative	1
NY Post	Biden gives Ukraine permission	30-May-24	Mainstream	Conservative	1

	to use US weapons to attack Russia				
Democracy Now!	Nuclear War Risk Rises as Tension Mounts Between Nuclear Superpowers over Ukraine	23-Feb-22	Alternative	Liberal	3
Democracy Now!	U.S. Imposes Sanctions, Ukraine Calls for Stronger Action After Russian Recognition of Breakaway Areas	23-Feb-22	Alternative	Liberal	1