

Debate

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On myths of solidarity and the logic of war

Media as the focus of political media strategies

The Russian army officially marched into Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Since then, a terrible war has played out there in plain sight. A war that is taking place on our own continent, with countless victims, bringing with it war crimes and a wartime economy, destroyed infrastructure, mercenary forces, militias, dead civilians, rape – like any war.

Through the media, we see the war in Ukraine in detail and up close – not like any war. Not like the war in Yemen, in Western Sahara, in Ethiopia, Columbia, Kashmir, or anywhere else. And the refugees from the world's various conflict zones also attract differing levels of empathy – not from those helping on the ground, but from policymakers.

The unequal treatment of different groups of refugees is now the subject of critique in the media, in its role as the fourth estate. Yet when it comes to the media's own role in the war, its position is less neutral. Most media do not expose double standards in the way terrible wars are treated – they practice them themselves. The outrage is understandable yet, after two months of war, newsrooms at home can and must at least ask questions about the possible consequences of political spirals of escalation. What options are there for preventing a Third World War? Instead, those who do not offer analyses of military strategy are immediately vilified as pacifists.

Instead of playing the role of a monitoring authority, many media appear to have chosen the role of a party in that war. In times of war, media are targeted as a vehicle for propaganda (cf. Schiffer 2021, Chapter 3). This is exactly why it is so essential that they fulfil their role in society: putting a greater focus on their true task and particular role as reporters, not taking sides, but instead exposing the claims and manipulations of the naïve and powerful in the media and on social media platforms.

Double standards replace a search for the truth

Truth dies long before the war. Highlighting the development towards this is sometimes considered relativization in itself. In this environment, how can media fulfil their role of examining claims and critically putting them into context? The fact that everyone involved in a war conducts propaganda in order to gain the allegiance of their own followers and the solidarity of others is nothing new (cf. Zollmann 2017).

There can be no war propaganda without lies about the war. The key is to expose them – on all sides.

Russian President Vladimir Putin wants the world to believe that Russia's aim was to prevent genocide in Eastern Ukraine. The introduction of the idea of a »preemptive strike,« which was propagated by American President George W. Bush to legitimize the Iraq war in 2003 and has since entered standard wartime rhetoric, appears significant here. As this Bush doctrine is the subject of debate among experts in international law, it requires consultation with the Security Council at the very least. After all, »preventative strikes« (and indeed »liquidation«) on suspicion do not exist under the rule of law.

It is this Bush-style erosion of international law that Putin is now invoking. The blueprint came from the spurious justification provided for the West's wars in Iraq and Yugoslavia, the latter of which instigated the true »historical turning point« in Europe after the Second World War. Bosnia and ultimately the war in Kosovo, with the secession of Kosovo and the redrawing of borders in the Balkans, were the first violation of the Helsinki Accords of 1975.

One consequence of the war in Kosovo was the NATO doctrine of 1999, which has since taken the German army into numerous wars and represents a new world war order that is often underestimated. It sets out three reasons for war: »humanitarian intervention,« »migration movements,« and »securing resources.« Although this does not justify Putin's actions, conversely, it demands that everyone critically review this misdirection of modern history and, ideally, correct it. If the International Court of Justice in the Hague is to maintain justice and its own credibility, removing itself from any accusation of double standards, Putin's war crimes must be prosecuted alongside those of George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and many others.

Instead of the media putting these questions of international law into context and exposing the double standards of one-sided and interest-led outrage, many choose to join in the frenzy of celebration of Russia's potential exclusion from the interpretive communities – without demanding the same standards in other cases. There have never been calls for sanctions against the USA or UK.

The role of the media would be to remind people that there is a background to the war in Ukraine. At the very least, this includes the following moments (the

failure to report on these was criticized by the ARD Programming Committee in 2014; cf. Daniljuk 2014):

- The EU's 2014 attempt to detach Ukraine from Russia through an Association Agreement, which sounded the death knell for the skeptical, elected government of Victor Yanukovich.
- The USA's unilateral withdrawal from the INF Treaty on arms control in 2019 (executed by then President Donald Trump and not corrected by current President Joe Biden).
- The failure to implement or to continue demanding adherence to the Minsk II agreement.
- Regular NATO maneuvers in Eastern Europe and the revelation of the training camp close to Lviv in Ukraine.
- The rejection of Russia's offer to NATO of negotiations in December 2021, in order to agree mutual security guarantees.

If this list appears one-sided, that is because it focuses on what is missing from the public debate. Only if the deficiencies in the reporting and comment pieces are rectified can the analysis be on solid ground. After all, if the analysis is wrong, the potential solutions will also be wrong. Alternatives need to be discussed. Media need to open up and broaden the space for discourse, instead of working towards narrowing it. What might options for negotiations look like? How can the suggestive dualism – that there is no gap between delivering weapons on the one hand and doing nothing on the other – be debunked (cf. Schiffer 2022b)? Of course, the same goes for this war as for every war: At the end of the war there are always negotiations that nobody wanted to hold before the war – after so many dead and destroyed lives.

Shifts in discourse

The refusal to provide analysis can also be interpreted as strategic communication – as a form of war propaganda, be it deliberate or accidental. It would not be the first time that Europe had (apparently accidentally) slipped into war and the media was too late to ask itself what part they themselves might have played, as they did after the war in Yugoslavia (cf. Beham 2001, Jaecker 2003, Scheufele 2005, Gritsch 2009, 2016; Becker 2016).

Analysis and critique of today's propaganda is quickly put down as ›cozying up to Putin.‹ But the mutual threat is real, as is the mistrust, and the gradual edging towards the limits that make a nuclear attack more likely. In debates on Twitter and on talk shows, those who attempt to highlight the multilayered reasons behind the war are villainized as ›relativizers,‹ ›Putin understanders,‹ purveyors

of ›whataboutery,‹ or even ›conspiracy theorists.‹ Newsrooms can only know what is actually the case once they have conducted research – not before.

Some of the analysis would need to examine the extent to which the story is really about Ukraine and the Ukrainians at all, or to which they have simply become a pawn on the chessboard of international geopolitics. Perhaps the story is about abuse and a proxy war that could also become an economic war – with Germany in the spotlight.

It is quite possible that the rejection of Russia's offers of negotiations in December 2021 indicate that the true conflict is a very different one. Putin voiced his demands for mutual security guarantees to NATO. As a result, the current options for action and negotiation lie at the level of NATO and Russia. Those who want to silence the guns will need to resolve the true conflict that lies beneath – as Johan Galtung never tires of demanding. So why is no-one calling for negotiations between NATO and Russia? Or do we simply not hear of these calls in the media?

Admittedly, this would be a not unproblematic dimension under international law, as it raises NATO up to the level of a sovereign state. But the war forces us all to reflect. This needs to be the subject of discussion – just like the question of whether or not to narrow the debate to weapons supply. It is therefore essential – and this would be the role of the media as the fourth estate in addition to the other debates mentioned that have not been had – to ask who it was that wanted this war, or at least accepted the risk of it? After all, failing to talk about all these options indicates a lack of desire to end the slaughter. Who is benefitting? Certainly not Germany and Europe.

It is implied that relevant discussions and offers of negotiations have already taken place. Some are even talking of appeasement of Putin – a popular comparison with the Nazi era. The true conflict around security interests and the violation of half-hearted commitments, as well as the withdrawal from real disarmament agreements, are not addressed.

Omitting key facts has always been a core aspect of propaganda. In strategic communication, policymakers leave out relevant facts in their arguments. The role of the media should be to highlight precisely this. One example is the German Chancellor's speech on February 27, which simply ignored the »historical turning point« that was 1999 and spoke of the attack on Ukraine as the »first war« in post-war Europe.¹¹

11 NATO's involvement in the war in the Balkans and the German army's first deployment in the Kosovo war in 1999 radically changed the post-war order. The new NATO doctrine, which these actions made possible and implemented, clearly paves the way for possible military interventions outside its own territory (cf. <https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-065d.htm>).

Language and propaganda

Concentrating solely on Putin – demonizing and pathologizing him – provides a distraction from analyzing the situation and is a transparent part of war propaganda in line with Arthur Ponsonby (cf. Morelli 2014). It is worth remembering his ten principles of propaganda – many of which may be frighteningly familiar:

- We don't want war!
- The opponent is solely responsible for the war!
- The leader of the enemy camp is demonized.
- We are defending a noble goal and not special interests!
- The enemy is deliberately committing atrocities; if we make mistakes, it is not intentional.
- The enemy is using forbidden weapons.
- We are suffering small losses; the enemy's losses are significant.
- Recognized cultural figures and academics support our cause.
- Our cause has something holy about it.
- Anyone who doubts our propaganda is working for the enemy and therefore a traitor!

With *weapons* now euphemistically referred to as *capabilities* or *heavy material*, *solidarity* has morphed into *weapons supply*. Even the term *help* for Ukraine is now largely understood to mean *arms*. A few voices occasionally and cautiously ask about the danger of prolonging the killing and dying, but the focus seems to lie on victory and the »destruction of Russia,« as German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock once put it – in contrast to the views of some military experts, who are more likely to caution moderation. Anyone who warns of the logic of war and a spiral of escalation is quickly dismissed as one of *Putin's trolls*; in other words, a traitor. The result is a coherent system of wartime propaganda. As George W. Bush put it: You're either with us (and the war) or against us.

A glance at the history of media reception and depiction of acts of war a posteriori could help newsrooms to detect mechanisms even a priori. The last time that there were so many calls for solidarity was in the war in Afghanistan, which was not allowed to be referred to as a ›war‹ for a long time either. The war should be welcomed out of solidarity for women, girls, and, ultimately, soldiers, the argument went. It was necessary for »humanitarian« reasons (cf. Schiffer 2022a). How much remained of the solidarity that policymakers had preached for 20 years became clear last winter, when the people in Afghanistan were abandoned. It would be wonderful to see more newsroom staff remembering the strategic communication approach, so that they can spot it better next time (cf. Schiffer 2021).

Narrowing the examination of war mandates to a simple yes or no question is in itself war propaganda, the road paved with omissions. The peace movement

is notoriously ignored – constantly criticizing negative developments, but not listened to until asked to talk about the consequences of the political failures afterwards. Every year, newsrooms leave enormous potential for constructive peace journalism untapped when they fail to report on the Kassel Friedensratschlag – the annual meeting of the German peace movement. Nor has there been any critical coverage of the long-postponed transition to alternative energies, outside the environmental and peace movement. After all, it is the question of resources that remains the key reason for war in the future.

Euphemistic terms cover up what the issue is really about. ›Energy security‹ sounds about as good as ›hazard prevention‹ – especially when what is really meant is control and perhaps even war. In Mali, the so-called ›stabilization mission‹ does not sound very different from Putin's ›special operation‹ in Ukraine. Perhaps we also remember the ›surgical operations‹ during the bombardment of Baghdad. These euphemisms are spin – they shine a positive light on the issue at hand, in order to gloss over the unpleasant sides of all wars: mercenaries, destroyed infrastructure, militias, dead civilians. This kind of spin needs to be uncovered for what it really is: war propaganda in the worst Orwellian sense.

As George Orwell did not put it, war is solidarity. One only has to listen to the debates among journalists, for example on *WDR-Presseclub* on April 24, 2022. There is no scrutiny of the premise that anyone warning against supplying arms is lacking in solidarity and deserting the people of Ukraine – further déjà-vu from the Afghanistan war.

A war always includes a war of images and media.

A constant stream of horrific images and heroic stories emotionalizes the conflict and frames those reflecting on it as heartless for steering clear of the heavily armed solidarity spin. The photos from Bucha became a label, a tool of war propaganda, long before any independent investigation could take place. Even if the images are not fake, like those in Rugovo^[2] and Racak in the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, there can be no doubt about their use for propaganda purposes.

Strategically published satellite images are another aspect of the war of images. It is vital that journalists always check whether leaks might be strategic. Once again, much of this checking is being undertaken by *Bellingcat* – an organization that had already been uncovered as an untrustworthy source by *Der Spiegel* during the Ukraine crisis of 2014 (cf. Bidder 2015), but is now accepted as a source by media once again. The fact checking genre is only using a small part of its

2 Cf. WDR story »Es begann mit einer Lüge« [It started with a lie] and my piece on the déjà vu compared to the Yugoslav Wars: <https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Blaupausen-fuer-die-Ukraine-6527247.html?seite=all>

potential to uncover the lies of war. Another part is itself at risk of becoming a stage for war PR.

Deutsche Welle has already uncovered the first fakes among the heroic stories coming out of Ukraine.^[3] All in all, however, there appears to be little awareness of the fact that all sides in a war always operate war propaganda and use any means possible, from censorship to soft power.^[4] While the NATO headquarters in the EU, the East StratCom Task Force (cf. Bonse 2021)^[5], »enlightens« journalists on Russian misinformation, the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs registers under FARA in the USA, thus confirming the involvement of American PR agencies (cf. Becker/Beham 2008).^[6]

While Russia bans the use of the word ›war,‹ expels NGOs, and closes down independent media, »enemy broadcasters« such as RT and Sputnik are banned at EU level, even though the EU is not legally responsible for media outlets (cf. Bonse 2022a; *ibid.* 2022b). Google informs website operators that they will be excluded from Google Ads revenue if their reporting does not toe the line (cf. https://journalistik.online/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/GOOGLE_-Wichtiger-Hinweis_-Aktualisierung-zur-Ukraine.html). These are transgressions of media law that could have far-reaching consequences. Another example is the detention of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, who exposed war crimes – while the war criminals remain unchallenged, with not a single prosecution or even investigation.

While in Russia, only state media are now allowed to report the view of the Kremlin, many Western media are currently degrading themselves to the role of a party in that war – after all, they consider themselves ›on the right side of history.‹ Yet if there is one lesson we should learn from history, it is humility. As Egon Bahr, the architect of the Ostpolitik under German Chancellor Willy Brandt, once said to a group of school students: »International politics is never

3 Deutsche Welle (2022): Faktencheck. Warum diese militärischen Erfolge der Ukraine nicht echt sind. [Fact check: Why these military success in Ukrain are not real.] In: [dw.de \(14.04.2022\)](https://www.dw.de/faktencheck-warum-diese-milit%C3%A4rischen-erfolge-der-ukraine-nicht-echt-sind/a-61473133) <https://www.dw.de/faktencheck-warum-diese-milit%C3%A4rischen-erfolge-der-ukraine-nicht-echt-sind/a-61473133> (25.04.2022)

4 As Jan Jessen reported on the start of the war from Ukraine, many depictions do not match his experiences (e.g. in relation to a bombardment of Kyiv) and he describes the limited access; for example, he is not allowed to travel to the Donbass, in order to report from there (cf. <https://www.nrz.de/region/niederrhein/live-talk-ueber-ukraine-nrz-reporter-schildert-eindruecke-id234914307.html>).

5 Nobel Peace Prize laureate the European Union struggles to be a cradle of peace. Internally, it cultivates the image of a peace project. Externally, the “border protection agency” is committing military-style human rights violations at the EU’s external border. Viewed from this perspective, cooperation with NATO (as a consequence of the Ukraine crisis in 2014) is merely the next logical step – just like the geopolitical interests behind the *Strategic Compass*. (www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-releases/2022/03/21/a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade).

6 14. März 2022: Kaczmarek, Lukas Jan – Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Registration Nr. 7095, FARA https://efile.fara.gov/ords/fara/f?p=1381:200:5018951167338::RP;200:P200_REG_NUMBER:7095 (25.04.2022)

about democracy or human rights. It is about the interests of states. Remember that, no matter what they tell you in history lessons« (cited in Riemer 2013).

Media should surely be asking: What are the interests of the various stakeholders? The interests of Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic states, Poland, NATO, the EU, the USA, China, and many others? Filling in the facts – which is an essential role of journalism, in contrast to PR – may produce a different picture from the simple black and white of good and evil. A dual Manichaeism like that of George W. Bush is the best preparation to gain people's willingness for war – shades of gray and subtle arguments merely get in the way. Well-paid spin doctors know exactly how to exploit that fact.

No to war propaganda!

Media are particularly important targets of strategic communication – i.e. PR – as they give the depictions particular credibility. The horrors they show do not necessarily need to be false in order to achieve the effect of propaganda. All it takes is a failure to put them into context appropriately. When there is no context, there is no understanding of the images, of the events that led up to that snapshot in time.

Self-critique when it comes to media performance, as well as in aspects such as Eurocentrism and the new national consciousness, would do the newsrooms and indeed media and communication studies good – as demonstrated by Noam Chomsky, for example, concerning the USA in his highly recommended interview with Jeremy Scahill (cf. Scahill 2022). Society relies on valid information in order to form its opinions. It will not trust journalism that no longer sees its role as keeping a check on power and manipulation. And that does not only apply in wartime.

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