

Research in Brief

Matteo Emmanuello

Think tanks and war reporting

How selected German media outlets deal with the US think tank ISW in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war

Abstract: Since the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, which violates international law, the conflict has had massive humanitarian consequences and poses particular challenges for war reporting: Complex information situations, strategic influence and the role of non-governmental think tanks shape public perception. This study examines how the German national newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Die Zeit* and the public broadcasters' news outlet *tagesschau.de* use reports (2022–2025) of the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), and what consequences this has for journalistic quality and framing. The ISW engages in strategic communication by presenting the conflict as a resource conflict with clear »good versus evil« dichotomies through selective frames of problem and responsibility as well as economic and military interpretations.

Media often adopt these frames uncritically, presenting the ISW as a neutral authority requiring no plurality of sources, without a transparent classification of its political stance, or reflection on its proximity to the US arms industry. Although ISW information is usually labelled transparently, what dominates are paraphrases without contextualisation, especially in map material. This practice can undermine the democratic function of journalism in times of war when media act as amplifiers of strategic communication rather than critical mediators. This study, which was part of a bachelor's thesis, contributes to media and conflict research, calls for reflective source criticism and the development of standards for dealing with geopolitically positioned actors.

Keywords: war reporting, think tanks, framing, journalistic quality, Russia-Ukraine war, Institute for the Study of War (ISW)

Journalism fulfils key functions in democratic societies: it provides information about political, cultural and economic developments (informative function), creates a basis for open debate and informed decisions (opinion-forming function), and exercises control and criticism, for example by exposing abuses (control function) (cf. Ruß-Mohl & Schultz, 2023, p. 19 ff.). War reporting in particular – understood as media coverage of violent mass conflicts in which states attempt to enforce power-political goals through organised armed violence (cf. Bilke, 2008, p. 141) – is not neutral reporting, but often a constructed representation, characterised by selection, reduction and interpretation. It navigates the tension between ethical responsibility, political instrumentalisation and quality standards (cf. Wolff, 2018, p. 2 ff.). Propaganda, censorship and restricted access to conflict areas make balanced reporting difficult. However, conceptual precision is particularly important, as terms such as »collateral damage« or »anti-terror operation« shape the perception of conflict, while economic constraints intensify the pressure to be up to date and competition from social media (cf. Wolff, 2018). Further, in the digital age, the battle for control of information is becoming a key resource of modern warfare in the form of »computer-assisted propaganda« (Löffelholz et al., 2024, p. 7).

In this context, think tanks are becoming increasingly important. These are organisations that filter »immense amounts of knowledge, facts, data and information« and prepare them for government decision-making processes (Arin, 2013, p. 16). The term originates from military strategic contexts during the Second World War (cf. Riefer, 2020, p. 52); since then, think tanks have been active players in foreign and security policy, forming »epistemic communities« with a shared world view that seek to translate ideas into policy (Arin, 2013, p. 18 ff.). Elite theory approaches position them as key players in a power elite consisting of business leaders, politicians and the media (cf. Arin, 2013, p. 17 ff.). Against the backdrop of a »lean state« and increasing »wicked problems,« the need for such external, permanently operating advice is growing (cf. Falk et al., 2019, p. 9; Vehlken et al., 2018, p. 12 ff.). Think tanks function both as networking platforms and information hubs (cf. Falk et al., 2019, p. 70), and sometimes have clear lobbying characteristics when studies are linked to clear influence goals (cf. Falk et al., 2019, p. 9). The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) is a US security policy think tank, headed by Kimberly Kagan since 2007, specialising in armed conflicts. It is funded by foundations, companies and private donations, including US defence contractors such as DynCorp, CACI and General Dynamics (cf. Ulrich, 2015, p. 123); board members such as General Jack Keane (chairman, architect of the »Iraq Surge« strategy), and David Petraeus (former CIA director) maintain close, ongoing ties to the US defence and financial industries (see the ISW website).

The theoretical framework of this study is based on journalistic quality research and framing theory. Stephan Ruß-Mohl's »magic polygon« defines five central quality criteria of journalism: objectivity, topicality, originality, transparency and factual accuracy (cf. Meier, 2018, p. 242); in the digital age, interactivity is added as a further feature (cf. Geuß, 2018, p. 52). Framing is also used, whereby frames are understood as mental representations that guide perceptions (cf. Goffman, cited in Dahinden, 2018, p. 38). In a qualitative content analysis, categories are deductively formed from the »magic polygon« according to Ruß-Mohl and from framing theory (problem, responsibility, value-based, economic framing and message constructions) (cf. Ruß-Mohl & Schultz, 2023, p. 313). First, ISW reports are examined according to framing categories, and then the coverage of *FAZ*, *Zeit* and *tagesschau.de* is examined with regard to compliance with journalistic quality standards and their use of ISW data.

The analysis shows that the ISW is constructing a consistent problem architecture: in 2022, Russian logistical weaknesses are being emphasised; in 2023, the »gruelling war of attrition« dominates; and in 2025, political actors (Trump, Putin) and drone warfare come to the fore. Responsibility is attributed through causal assertions and geolocated evidence, while value-based dichotomies characterise the reports through moral vocabulary (e.g. »brutal,« »resilient«). Economic framing presents the war as a resource dynamic with deterministic forecasts. Messages construct a coherent narrative by using visual authority and by marginalising divergent reports as »noise«. Overall, the framing analysis shows that the ISW is not a neutral provider of information from various »experts,« but rather a US security policy think tank with close ties to the US arms industry and with a strategic orientation, whose situation reports reveal clear strategic communication elements. The situation assessments are not merely descriptive, but they are characterised by constructions of reality and framing structures that suggest certain strategic interpretations. Despite the inclusion of various available facts, this results in a narrative framing that does not always do justice to the dynamics of the situations and should therefore be assessed as strategic communication rather than neutral reporting.

This strategic communication often transfers into war reporting, especially when journalistic articles uncritically adopt or paraphrase ISW content. An analysis of media coverage shows that both *Die Zeit* and the *FAZ* exhibit a certain degree of source pluralism, but ISW perspectives dominate and contrasting viewpoints are often lacking. Although the *FAZ* includes Russian sources, it largely ignores Ukrainian civil society voices, while *tagesschau.de* strives for multiple perspectives but only provides superficial relativisations. In terms of transparency, the origin of the information is usually consistently stated, but a critical assessment of the ISW with regard to financing or political proximity is almost completely absent – *Die Zeit* merely refers to the ISW's methodology pages without offering

its own critical analysis. With regard to factual accuracy, the media outlets do address general verification problems, but often reproduce isw data as facts without reflection; qualifying phrases such as »presumed« are rare, with tagesschau.de providing the most relativisation and *Die Zeit* the least. In terms of originality, *Die Zeit* often limits itself to pure isw paraphrases, especially in the series »Ukrainekarte aktuell« (Ukraine map update), while the *FAZ* provides independent contributions through expert interviews and historical digressions. Tagesschau.de works predominantly in an aggregating manner and only conducts marginal research of its own. With regard to interactivity, *Die Zeit* relies heavily on cartographic material based exclusively on isw data; the *FAZ* offers a greater variety of sources for maps in older articles, but reduces this from 2025 onwards. None of the media outlets examined exercise a comprehensive source criticism with regard to interactive elements.

It is evident that the media outlets consulted almost universally portray the isw as a neutral, trustworthy source in their reporting, without contextualising it. The isw is treated as a *prima facie* authority, while other sources are treated with greater scepticism – an implicit hierarchy that undermines objectivity, transparency, factual accuracy and originality. In sensitive war reporting, objectivity must provide a clear classification of the isw alongside other sources; transparency requires the isw to be clearly identified as a politically oriented US institution; and factual work requires a reflective approach to uncertainties. This study is not intended as a blanket criticism of the isw or the analysed media outlets, but as a contribution to journalistic quality assurance in an increasingly complex and highly dynamic information environment. It becomes clear that the editorial selection, embedding and contextualisation of think tank information in accordance with journalistic quality criteria is a key element of democratic information dissemination – especially in war reporting, which can have far-reaching effects on social, economic and political decision-making processes. Overall, the analysis shows that consistent quality assurance in the handling of think tank information is crucial to ensuring transparent and comprehensive war reporting.

Matteo Emmanuello, B.A. in Journalism and Corporate Communications from Frankfurt Media University (MU), has been studying Strategic Communications & Society (M.Sc.) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) since September 2025. His research focuses on the intersection of journalism, media, strategic communications and geopolitical conflicts.

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