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1.0 Introduction

My thesis Comparative analysis of western and Russian news framing of the Ukraine war will take a close look at how The Guardian, The New York times and RT frame both wars. News media has been an interesting topic for me ever since the start of the Ukraine crisis in 2014. News media holds great power as they convey information to the public, and because of this I believe it to be important to analyze the information they are conveying. Nowadays there is an abundance of news media, compared to before, when we only had TV and printed press, we now have the Internet. But how can one know if your chosen newspaper tells the truth? Is there evidence for RT to be propaganda? The “conflict” between western media and Russian media have been ongoing since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, but it has escalated drastically after the invasion in 2022. How does the west frame the Ukraine war? Are there noticeable differences between US and UK coverage? Will I find drastically different framing in The New York Times and The Guardian compared to RT? My assumption is that the difference in the UK and US are not very apparent, but RT will differ greatly.

As for the Iraq war I chose to compare its coverage to Ukraine as the Iraq was a war started by the the US and UK. Will western framing of Iraq mirror Russian framing of Ukraine? Will I be able to find differences in framing in the US and UK of the Iraq war? I believe that for the Iraq war there might be more differences in framing from The Guardian and the New York times, but I am not certain if the framing will mirror RT’s framing of Ukraine.

1.1 Theory

““ medium is the message” – in other words, words and image alone do not tell the story; how we receive our news, and via which channels, is a key part of it.” (Tannen, et al. 795) My theory is that the choice of news media can drastically change your view on an event, in this case the Ukraine and Iraq war. By doing my analysis of three different news outlets from three different countries, I believe I will get adequate coverage of the war from different sides and be able to analyze the methods used for framing the war and in which direction they frame it.

1.2 Methodology

I have conducted a discourse analysis of two recent wars. One of them ongoing. The wars of choice are the Iraq war and the Ukraine war. When doing my analysis, I focused on the framing of the wars. To do this analysis I needed literature about both framing, discourse and news media. This literature was needed to guide me in a direction of what to look for when I was reading my material. My main focus is on framing. To do this I looked for certain key words for example “Nazi” which was used in Russian media quite frequently, as well as quotation marks and also propaganda. Analyzing the tools used to create their frames is my main objective. I have conducted a comparative discourse analysis looking at the language of my chosen news media. I chose to do a comparative discourse analysis on the framing of the wars as this gives me an overview of differences in discourse in the selected news outlets.

1.3 Material

My chosen material for my thesis is news articles from The Guardian, The New York Times and RT (Russia Today). For my western perspective on the framing, I chose the mentioned news media sites as I believe them to stand in high regard in both their country of origin and on an international basis. My choice for Russian media landed on RT. A big part of choosing RT is that I have been reading it daily ever since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. It is important to mention that RT is Russian state-owned media made to be read in the west. Knowing this it is important for me to look for ways RT is trying to change the readers associations towards both Russia and the west.

1.4 Framing

According to Sophie Lecheler framing has a variety of different definitions, it can be both theoretical and empirical. It is also mentioned that there are two different framing studies one can apply: equivalency frames and emphasis frames.

Lecheler and Vreeses definition used in their book reads as follows

“a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Lecheler and Vreese. 3)

A news frame can be used to change the perspective of the reader by “stressing certain aspects” (Lecheler and Vreese. 3). This is important for my thesis. When reading news articles, I will be using this definition of framing as a guideline to find the difference between western and Russian framing.

2.0 The Ukraine War

Before my analysis of media surrounding the invasion of Ukraine, it is important to get some historical perspective. The invasion started on the 24th of February 2022, but the buildup started as early as in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea. What led to the annexation was the “coup d’état” called the Maidan Revolution. The Euromaidan (Biersack and O’Lear) revolution in Ukraine angered the Russians as it replaced a Russian friendly corrupt government with a western friendly government. This event also started the civil war in the east of the country in the Donbass and Luhansk. One interesting thing to mention about the events in 2014 is that Russia denied it all. They sent unmarked “green men” to Crimea and held a referendum for Crimea to join the Russian federation. This referendum seems on all accounts to be cheated in the favor of Russia. It took a couple of months for Russia to admit that the soldiers that showed up on the peninsula was the Russian army. This is a prime example of Russian propaganda and shows signs of a Soviet Union way of acting. According to Russia, all the above-mentioned events are the cause of western hegemony and could have all been avoided if NATO did not expand eastward after the cold war, and according to the west, Russia did all of this unprovoked. One of the key arguments between the west and Russia during the 2014 events and during the recent invasion concerns a verbal promise apparently made after the fall of the Soviet-Union. (Wintour) This verbal promise stated that NATO was not going to expand eastward. Western media denies this, while Russian media pushes it. (Biersack and O’Lear)

In the 8 years following the Euromaidan Revolution (Biersack and O’Lear) and the eastern Ukraine conflict, Russia Today has posted many articles blaming everything on the west. At the same The Guardian and The New York Times have articles blaming everything on Russia. It is hard to believe Russia in almost all scenarios, as many of their news articles and presidential rhetoric have traits of propaganda. For example, they completely denied any involvement and claiming the invading forces to be “local forces of self defence” (Russia’s) during the annexation, and in the days leading up to the 2022 invasion they denied preparing to invade. While doing my analysis I will try to find out if there is merit to Russia’s claim that the west is acting “Russophobic”(Some Europeans) without reason, as the Russian media would have you believe.

2.1 UK and US framing of the Ukraine War.

The framing of the war in both the US and UK is very much consistent with each other. They both frame it heavily as a war started by a maniacal tyrant (Vladimir Putin). This framing can be seen in numerous news articles I found in both The Guardian and The New York Times. Looking at specific events it is also easy to see that the narrative and framing are driven in the direction of war. These frames being in sync is interesting, as one might consider the US to not be as aggressive in their rhetoric against Russia as they are very far away from the situation.

When reading excerpts from news articles surrounding the incidents of Bucha, we can see clear similarities in framing. The Guardian’s article has the headline: “How alleged atrocities in Bucha compare to previous Putin campaigns” (Boffey). This article was written on the 3rd of April. An interesting note about this article’s headline is that it uses the word “alleged”. This word is found in a lot of Russian state media to give suspicious doubt about the events in question, whereas I highly doubt The Guardian has this intention. The article itself retells the horrors of what happened in Bucha, but being written as the events were still unfolding, they might have chosen “alleged” to show that more proof was still needed. The article itself is written with a great degree of certainty. It also attacks Putin, as instead of saying “This is a tactic Russia has used before”, The Guardian chooses to put the blame on Putin. (Boffey)

“As horrifying images and testimony have emerged from Bucha, the Ukrainian town 35 miles north-west of the capital, Kyiv, it is becoming ever more likely that [Vladimir Putin](#) has operated by a strict playbook in the north of Ukraine as with elsewhere in the country that has served him well for decades, albeit at a heavy cost to his army.” (Boffey)

When the Guardian uses Putin’s name instead of Russia as a country, they effectively shift blame away from the average Russian and frame the narrative as “Putin’s war”. By telling the reader that this is all Putin’s plan, it seems to sway the reader towards thinking that Putin is a dictator, something Russia would not agree on, but the western media is adamant. I was not able to find any news articles directly calling Putin a dictator, but there are plenty of opinion pieces in The Guardian. This one is written by Viktor Yushchenko, former president of Ukraine:

“International solidarity is the best weapon we have against Russia’s dictator. A united front is now more crucial than ever “ (Yushchenko)

Yushchenko is clearly demonizing Putin with his choice of words. There is an obvious bias involved in this opinion piece as it is written by a former Ukrainian president. But nonetheless, the Guardian decided to publish his written opinion. I believe they chose to print this as they somewhat agree with the statement.

Putin is the main “villain” in The Guardian (Boffey), this seems to be true in The New York Times as well. In two selected articles Putin’s name is used where one would assume Russia to be used. “Putin’s War in Ukraine Shatters an Illusion in Russia” (Tavernise) and “Putin’s Ukraine Gamble Pivots to a Very Different Battlefield” (Kramer et al.)

2.2 Invasion or “Special Military Operation”?

In both The Guardian and the New York Times, the words “invasion” and “war” is used extremely frequently, as in almost all articles cataloged have the mention of the words. The use of this wording seems justified as the Russians are using forces beyond their boarder on an enormous scale. But what about the Russian media, more specifically RT? The word is rarely used after the start of the war, but in the months leading up to the invasion Russia denied that

they had any plans of invading Ukraine “We have never planned [an invasion] and never will [...]” (Russia says) this statement was a lie told with great confidence. An absence of invasion can clearly be seen in plenty of articles from the day it all started, 25th of February. In this article “US to sanction Putin – White House” (US to Sanction Putin) it is simply called an operation or military operation, a word with a much less devious tone to it. It seems to me the word “operation” is chosen over invasion to frame the war as “small incursion”. The framing of the west is more aggressive towards Russia with the use of «invasion» (Arraf). It is also worth to mention the fact that in the headline it is only mentioned as an operation and not a military operation as it is called later in the article. The word «invasion» is mentioned, but only in quotations; “Thursday over what he called an “*invasion*” of Ukraine” (“US to Sanction Putin“)

I believe that the war in Ukraine can objectively be called an invasion, as defined by “Oxford Learner’s Dictionary”(invasion) an invasion is “the act of an army entering another country by force in order to take control of it”(invasion). Even though Russian media and the Russian government insist that the “operation” is to conduct “denazification”(@RT_com) of Ukraine, it seems to lack proof. On the 9th of may 2022 Russia celebrated Victory Day, and in his speech Putin addressed Ukraine;

“We saw the military infrastructure unfolding [in Ukraine]; hundreds of foreign advisers starting their work; there were regular deliveries of the most modern weapons from NATO countries. The danger grew every day,” (Russia’s Ukraine)

His speech seems to me to be a partial admission that the invasion is not only about “de-nazifying” Ukraine, as the speech is quoted in RT, he continues; “Russia gave a preemptive rebuff to aggression” (Russia’s Ukraine). Clearly indicating that this war was started to keep Ukraine out of NATO and keep NATO further away from its borders. Notably there is no change to the wording of the war, it is still called “Special Military Operation” but now Putin has told us what caused it. (Russia’s Ukraine)

2.3 Propaganda

When analyzing Russian State-Owned media, it is important to get some context about what you are reading, because chances are very high that it is straight up propaganda. Christian Mull and

Matthew Wallin mention that Propaganda does have more than one definition, but they simplify it to this: “Ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one’s cause or to damage an opposing cause” (Mull and Wallin. 2) The article goes on to explain that Propaganda can often be truthful information, but selective in the facts one share. (Mull and Wallin. 2) In other words, it can be a way of presenting facts without showing the whole picture to get someone to believe what you want them to believe. RT uses both propaganda and disinformation to spread their narrative and frame the events of the Ukraine war in a way which favors Russia and turns Ukraine into the enemy.

The Soviet Union and Russia have a long history of active propaganda use aimed towards their own people, and now in the digital age they have multiple English state-owned news outlets aimed towards the western world. (Liñán and Vázquez)

A clear-cut example of Russian war propaganda could be seen in a Norwegian NRK article concerning a cabin in the north of Norway. On the cabin door there is a giant “Z” which is also used by Russia as a symbol of the “military operation”. The Russian news outlet severpost.ru uses this “Z” to tell us that there is support for Russia in the north of Norway, this being an outright lie according to the owner of the building. (Horn and Eftestøl)

It seems to me that English Russian media is propaganda for the west, made to turn western citizens against their government.

2.4 Russian framing of the Ukraine war.

The Russian framing of the Ukraine War is vastly different to the US and UK framing. As mentioned earlier, RT uses the word invasion two times in all their headers for the entire war. They call it a military operation. They try to frame the war as nothing more than a small incursion into Ukraine, mainly to conduct a “denazification”, a word only used by far-right extremists and Russia during this conflict. More examples of this can be found on their Twitter or in most of their articles, the Twitter post reads as follows:

“While advancing through southern Ukraine, RT along with Russian troops found a house of a neo-nazi leader in Berdyansk. As a surprise to no one conducting the

denazification campaign in Ukraine, the fascist-inspired symbols are not even covert.” (@RT_com)

Embedded in the tweet is a video showing us findings of Nazi gear, all of which seems to be in mint condition. This is very important for the Russians to legitimize their war in Ukraine, and one would believe it is used in their English press to try and divide the west. RT’s use of «Nazi» is over the top and often used without proof. «Nazi» has only negative associations surrounding it for obvious reasons, so by using «Nazi» often RT is associating Ukraine with the war crimes of World War II. “Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed on Monday that it detained a group of “neo-Nazis” instructed by Kiev to kill popular Russian TV host and journalist Vladimir Solovyov.” (Ukrainian plot) This is just one more example of RT using “neo-Nazi”, the rest of the article gives no attempt to prove their claim.

By using “neo-Nazi” and “Nazi”, I believe RT is trying to frame Ukraine as the “ultimate” evil. “Nazi” for me has no positive connotations at all and it gives me associations of “great evil”. By doing this comparison, I believe they are distancing themselves from reality and using propaganda on a level I am not sure anyone can truly believe.

“War Crimes” has been used by The Guardian (They Were) and The New York Times (Engelbrecht) to describe the events of Ukraine. In this article by RT “Putin asks Macron to help stop Ukrainian “war crimes””, I believe that RT is trying to further sway the west’s association of Ukraine away from the western narrative and towards the Russian framing. This is a strategy they used in Syria as well. (US Military) After Russia entered the Syrian civil war on the side of the Assad regime in 2015, they started accusing the US and its allies of planning chemical weapon attacks on Syrian soil. (Syria 'Chemical) I believe some of these accusations came preceding an earlier attack or before a new attack. Again, it seems that Russia is doing this finger pointing to change western association with its own government.

2.5 Comparative analysis of Russian and western Media concerning the Ukraine war.

Although I was not able to find any clear differences in coverage between The Guardian and The New York times, there are noticeable differences between the west and Russian coverage of the Ukrainian war. I believe that these differences boil down to the fact that the west and Russia

have conflicting interests, it is clear that the west is framing this as a “gruesome” war started by a “tyrant”(Tisdall¹) trying to take control over Ukraine. While in Russia the narrative framing is based solely on defending the “motherland” from “Neo-Nazi” Ukraine and its western allies. My assumption before starting the analysis was that it would be hard to find differences in framing in The New York Times and The Guardian, which I think is apparent, as they are allies both politically and on a military level through NATO this assumption had solid ground. I did not however anticipate the level of which the Russian Media would use quotations and the word “Nazi” as well as evading the word “invasion”.

The first clear difference we see in framing is “Special Military Operation”. I was not able to find this phrase being used in any of the western media material chosen for this thesis. There is also great difference in the way the Ukrainian people are framed. When reading RT, you are told that Ukraine is infested with “Nazis”. In this article, called “Ukraine’s Zelensky shares image of soldier with Nazi insignia” (Ukraine's Zelensky), it is heavily implied that president Zelensky supports these “Nazis”. According to this article the west used to call certain groups in Ukraine “neo-Nazis” as well, but I was not able to find any proof of this.(Ukraine's Zelensky)

While RT and Russia are calling parts of the Ukrainian army “Nazis” and implying the President supports “Nazis”, the western media, in my opinion, seems to be more focused on the Ukrainian people and the terrible acts committed by Russia. The associations you get from the different material are vastly different, but the western media seems to be covering the actual invasion and war, while RT seems to be trying their hardest to justify an unjust “Special Military Operation”.

3.0 Iraq War

The Iraq war started on the 20th of March 2003, following George W. Bush’s “axis of evil speech”, where Bush mentions Iraq (Robertson), and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and it lasted until 2011. One of the goals of the invasion was finding Saddam Hussein’s “WMDs” (Weapons of mass destruction). (Harvey. 197) The Iraq war was very much a controversial war, most wars

¹ NOTE: Opinion piece.

are, but this one more than others. The reason for the controversy might boil down to the fact that there seemed to be no real reason for entering the country. The only reason they had was to remove the regime of Saddam Hussein and his “WMDs”, as he was portrayed by the US government as a tyrant, something he most definitely was. (Harvey)

3.1 Western Iraq framing

When looking at Russians framing of the Ukraine war, I found that Russia does not use the word “invasion” and instead called it a “Special military operation” to describe the conflict. This is not the case for western media during the Iraq war, it is from the beginning framed as an invasion. (James) One of the reasons for this is that the west has a free press, they do not have to address the events following specific guidelines provided by the government. As neither The Guardian nor The New York times are state owned, they can publish what they deem necessary. The effect this has on western framing of the Iraq war is that we can find critical articles (Ahmed²) towards the war as well as supportive (Wedgwood³), which contrasts heavily compared to Russian media framing of the Ukraine war. One reason for this is freedom of press. Freedom of press, the way it is used today, first appeared in the US constitution according to Søren Døsenrode

“Everyone is entitled to publish his thoughts in print, although under the responsibility of the courts. Censorship and other rules alike are not to be introduced again” (Døsenrode. 12)

Although this was written in 1776, it is still in the constitution today. This means that there is no censorship in the US, and I believe also in the UK. As RT is a state-owned news media outlet, I would assume that they do the bidding of the Russian government. As stated above, with freedom of press this is not the case for The Guardian and The New York Times. Having freedom of press and calling the invasion as is; an invasion shows me that they are not trying to hide anything, this increases my trust level for these outlets.

² NOTE: Opinion piece.

³ NOTE: Opinion piece.

With freedom of press their coverage can be looked on without assuming it to be propaganda, it can also be critical towards the US and the UK government, especially in the years following the war. An example of critical reporting can be found in The Guardian: “Why we were sold only one reason to go to war in Iraq” (Woollacott). This article is dated July 2003, just a few months after the start of the invasion. It is hard to judge if this article is an opinion piece or not. The article is highly critical of the reasoning given to the public to start a war: “A degree of fraudulence was thus involved from the start [...]” (Woollacott). This quote is in regard to the British government accusing Iraq of harboring weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Something they never found. It frames the war as unnecessary, and by using “fraudulence” implies that the government lied to the people, it regards the Saddam Hussein threat to be “deterred” if it would ever blossom. It is clear by this article that there is freedom of press in the UK as well, as the article attacks both the US and the UK government for committing fraudulent behavior surrounding the war.

One can also find support of the war in The Guardian, “Iraq: the case for decisive action” (Iraq:) is written in January 2003, a few months before the start of the war. And as the title states, it calls for decisive action and war. This article, same as the one previously mentioned above, might be an opinion piece. It is not clear if it is or not; I believe that The Guardian might not have had clear indicators for this at the time the articles was written. Non the less, this article speaks of evidence of WMDs “Thursday’s discovery of undeclared poison gas shells [...]” (Iraq:) which is in stark contrast to the previous article where it was made clear six months later that there was no WMDs found. This proves that WMDs was a big reason to start the war.

The New York times frame the Iraq war in much the same way as The Guardian. They also call it an invasion and war as in this article “Overview: The Iraq War” (Overview:), where they address it as both an “invasion” and “war”. The article seems to have a mix of support and condemnation for the war “toppled the brutal authoritarian government” (Overview:). Later they cite critics who blame the US for “[...] Igniting the Sunni-led insurgency” (Overview:). For me reading this sends a mixed message but it seems not to be anti-war based on the language use in the article.

I did find an interesting article dating back to June 2003 called “aftereffects: Postwar planning; President picks a special envoy to rebuild Iraq” (Dao and Schmitt). This article tells us that just four months after the invasion, peace is on the horizon, but as we know this was not the case. In my opinion this article misled the general public into believing the war was over. The article mentions a “transition from a military occupation toward civilian” (Dao and Schmitt) again giving associations of peace.

3.2 Russian Iraq Framing

For this section of my thesis, I was not able to find any articles from RT concerning the Iraq war as it started, this is due to the fact that RT was not established at that point of time. So, to discover how the RT framed Iraq, I had to use articles written in the time period of 2010 to present. Even though there is no direct comparison of the start of the invasion, I believe I will still be able to get an adequate idea of how they frame and present the war.

RT’s coverage of the Iraq war is of highly critical nature, as we can see in an abundance of articles for example “Kremlin compares US attacks on Iran to fake “white powder evidence” against Iraq in 2003” (Kremlin). This article reminds us of the “shaky” ground on which the war was started.

“The US campaign for a war against Iraq in 2003 serves as a cautionary tale against saber-rattling and finger-pointing” (Kremlin)

I find this to be a bit ironic as this is exactly what Russia is doing in Ukraine with their “Nazi” claims. The article implies that the US started this invasion based on fake evidence, I would argue that the Ukraine war was started on the basis of fake evidence as well.

The WMD narrative is of great importance as it brings this up on multiple occasions, they even ran an ad campaign to discredit the west. This ad campaign happened around the time of the annexation of Crimea. The ad campaign was removed due to being of a political nature, “political overtones.”(RT London). The use of quotations in this article seems to be in the nature of discrediting the UK’s decision to remove the adverts. By mentioning the WMD’s and running

ads in England, I believe they are trying to sow the seed of doubt in western minds and change the associations to western foreign policy from good to bad.

The coverage done by RT does not seem to be as heavily defined by propaganda as their coverage of the Ukraine war, as the WMD narrative is also present in UK news. It is however heavily focused on pointing fingers at the US, possibly to justify their own actions in Ukraine.

3.3 Comparative analysis of Iraq war framing.

WMD's create a pattern in the coverage of the Iraq war, it is present both on the western and the Russian side. It seems to be used as a tool for fear by the UK and the US to justify the war and later it was used as "proof" of "fraudulent" (Woollacott) discourse to justify a war.

In the western outlets there are conflicting views on the war and invasion, while in RT I was only able to find what I would call "anti-American" rhetoric. It is hard to do a comparative analysis of this war as all the articles from RT are written long after the war was over. It is possible that there would be support for the war if there were articles written before the start of the war, but I do not find this to be likely.

4.0 Conclusion.

The framing of the Ukraine war is vastly different in the west and Russia. In the west they are framing it as a war and an invasion and they mention Putin as the "mastermind" behind the atrocities, while in Russia it is framed as a "Special Military Operation" to "De-nazify" Ukraine. Both sides have accused the other of War crimes, first the New York Times and The Guardian towards Russia, then RT posted their article where Putin asked Macron for help to stop "Ukrainian war crimes". RT seems to try and sway western associations towards Russia by using propaganda tools, for example by using negative associated words when mentioning Ukraine and claiming accusations of war crimes to be "fake news". The Guardian and the New York times on

the other hand are framing the Ukraine war similarly, as I was not able to find any clear differences. Although I assumed that the RT framing would be different from the UK and the US, I was not expecting it to be this huge of a difference.

In Iraq the differences between the US, the UK and Russian framing did not differ as much as I expected, and the western coverage did not mirror RTs coverage of Ukraine. One of the reasons for this is simple: Freedom of press. While RT's coverage is derogatory towards the US, it does still cover the same bases as the UK and the US framing in that there were no WMD's found of the war. The differences I found were mostly the lack of support the war got in RT.

As RT is a state-owned media outlet from what, in my opinion, is a dictatorship country, we find patterns of propaganda and disinformation. Freedom of press is important to help us understand the world from different perspectives and guide our associations in the right direction, without it we are only told what the government needs us to know.

As for the west acting "Russophobic" I found no reasoning for this. What RT is calling "Russophobia" seems to be reporting the facts instead of framing Ukraine as "Nazis".

I believe my findings to be interesting as it shows how big the differences can be when framing war, it shows the clear bias of the Russian coverage and shows that the UK and the US seem to be more factual. My thesis is not enough to prove that the US and the UK are not biased, as that falls outside the scope of my thesis. To do further research the scale needs to be increased, incorporating more articles from more news outlets. As both The Guardian and The New York Times are "left leaning" outlets, it would be interesting to see the difference in discourse and framing when including more outlets. The inclusion of comment sections reactions to articles would also be interesting, for example to see the effect of Russian propaganda, but this as well falls outside the scope of my thesis.

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