

Media Framing Of Russia's Invasion Of Ukraine

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Abstract

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the act of war was covered extensively by global media outlets, delving into how the conflict might affect diplomacy, economics, and national security. This article examines how the New York Times and international newspapers framed Russia's war with Ukraine in 2022, specifically the initial invasion and the first two weeks of the conflict. This study looked at headlines and lead paragraphs from almost 100 articles published by the New York Times and on the International Newsstream database of non-U.S. newspapers. The study found that the New York Times had more headlines with an economic focus, while the International Newsstream articles had more headlines that focused on the military. Additional themes of internal politics were prevalent in the New York Times, with many headlines referencing rising gas prices and the response of individual politicians. The discussion helps put in context the prominent journalistic themes during the first weeks of the war.

I. Introduction

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was covered heavily in the global media. The conflict was portrayed in many ways, affecting diplomacy, economics, and national security. The way this conflict was represented in the media is worth noting as the military actions of nuclear powers like Russia have global implications. However, it is important to note that this conflict has been building for years, if not decades. To analyze the news and framing of this situation properly, one first needs to know the history between Ukraine and Russia. This history provides context for research that came out of Russia's first invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea and why Russia is framed the way it is in Western media.

The history of Russia and Ukraine as independent countries in the modern era begins in 1991 with the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. and Ukraine gaining independence on August 24 of that same year. Before this, Ukraine had been a part of the U.S.S.R. since the Red Army established control in 1919 (Riasanovsky and Steinberg, 2019). From 1919 to 1930, Ukraine kept much of its culture and language with schools and offices operating in Ukrainian. In 1930 came Russification, where non-Russian communities and territories assimilated to Russia's language and culture. In 1991 with the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., Ukraine became an independent country and moved away from the Soviet's communist economic model to a more capitalist economic model. Ukraine did this to be more closely associated with Eastern European countries and the European Union.

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On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, entering what some consider a continuation of the 2014 invasion and annexation of Crimea. The 2014 conflict began in November 2013 when then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich suspended preparations to implement an economic and political agreement between Ukraine and the European Union. This discussion resulted in mass protests from pro-European Ukrainians known as the Revolution of Dignity. This deadly clash between protestors and security forces resulted in the impeachment of President Yanukovich on February 22, 2014. The Russian army invaded Crimea the next day (Fisher, 2014). Then in 2021, Russia started amassing troops along the Russia-Ukraine border while Russian President Vladimir Putin questioned the sovereignty of Ukraine (Perrigo, 2022) and expressed that their joining of NATO would be a threat to Russian security (NATO, 2022). U.S. intelligence reports started saying Russia would invade Ukraine, which the Russian government denied. Then on February 24, 2022, Putin authorized a “special military operation” into Ukraine, launching airstrikes on the capital minutes later (Osborn and Nikolskaya, 2022). This research will examine how American and international media outlets depicted the situation in the news as it unfolded to understand what frames were most common.

II. Literature Review

Given the current situation between Russia and Ukraine, past research on how social media and news coverage impact conflicts in this region and elsewhere can provide insight into how the current conflict is represented in the media. Social media has changed how wars and military conflicts are displayed and have shifted how information is presented. The previous research has highlighted the framing of military conflicts, the emergence of information wars, and the spread of misinformation.

Framing

Framing theory originated in sociology in the 1960s and has since been adapted for the field of communications. It allows for a study of media effects on individuals to be studied on a holistic level (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). Framing is when reporters emphasize a particular angle. This can lead people to believe that this angle is the most important, even if that is not entirely true. Framing is used by news outlets to shape the story and narrative they want to communicate. Framing is the foundation for how people interpret information – as described by Entman, framing is the act of giving some aspects of a narrative more emphasis so that one can use it to define the problem, diagnose the cause, pass judgments, and then offer solutions (Entman, 1993). A story’s frame is often stated in the first couple of paragraphs and then carries through the end, ultimately shaping the reader’s perspective.

Many researchers examine the news by determining whether “the frames in their news reporting are negative, neutral, or positive, depending on the aspect of the crisis focused on, or the news source relied upon, and their temporal variations allow the author to compare the overall similarity in news coverage patterns between news agencies” (Watanabe, 2017, p. 144). The framing of any conflict often depends on which side one views the situation. For example, research by Makhortykh and Sydorova (2017) looked at two public VKonyakte groups, the Russian form of Twitter. One group expressed support for Ukraine’s government, while the other comprised pro-Russia insurgents during Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. They found that the pro-Russia group was more active throughout the conflict while the pro-Ukrainian group was most active during the latter half of July and August. They also found that when one group was particularly inactive, the other was highly active and vice-versa. While there could be many explanations for this, the most obvious is that content slowed down at times of loss and picked up during times of success.

Roman, Wanta, and Buniak (2017) also found the issue of framing in press variation explicitly relating to the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2014. The coverage found that “the U.S. and foreign officials appeared in almost two-thirds of NBC soundbites, with American officials accounting for almost a half of the overall TV channel on-camera sources” (p. 371). At the same time, Russian television station *Channel One Russia* had about 8% of its soundbites coming from Ukrainian officials compared to the lone soundbite from a Ukrainian official featured on *NBC* during the entire conflict (Roman, Wanta, and Buniak, 2017). Researchers also found both the United States and Russia presented the conflict through frames that

largely matched their respective government's views. In America, war reporting in prominent newspapers closely followed the message from American political leaders (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2005), while in Russia, state-owned and controlled media sources touted its government's lines. The use of framing an essential journalistic tool when trying to present a complicated issue, but it can also spread misinformation and contribute to information wars, particularly when news outlets rely heavily on their own government for sources.

Information Wars

The rise of the digital era has made information sharing more accessible to the masses; however, as pointed out by Watanabe (2017), "the competition in covering the Ukraine crisis between the western and Russian media has been described as an 'information war' by media observers" (p. 138). This definition is supported by other researchers looking at the 2014 conflict in Crimea between Russia and Ukraine, as Russian state media used the argument that the current Ukrainian government was comprised of fascists and Nazis to justify their actions to the people of Russia (Watanabe, 2017).

The use of rhetoric and news sources to gain support and frame the war narrative is an example of nations using the internet to gain soft power. For decades, countries have focused on their hard power, a more militaristic approach to international politics, while soft power uses peaceful persuasion to gain influence. The use of soft power in wartime is a recent development and can be seen in Bayulgen and Arbatli's (2013) study of American news coverage in the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict/ The study showed that close to 60% of news articles were anti-Russian compared to less than 10% that were anti-Georgian. The researchers noted that this discrepancy could be because American journalists relied heavily on pro-Georgia reports from the American government to write their news stories. Additional studies have shown that Russia's media use as soft power aided its 2014 annexation of Crimea. Russia took a two-pronged approach of attacking media equipment and news channels and influencing public opinion at home and abroad (Jaitner and Mattsson, 2015).

Misinformation

The ability to spread propaganda is easier than ever, as many news outlets often repost the reporting of others, quoting other news outlets rather than the original source. News agencies such as the Associated Press and Reuters provide the bulk of the content many online publications (Watanabe, 2017). This reusing of quotes and articles means that the same information is being shared on multiple news outlets, raising the possibility of further misinformation.

An organization dedicated to limiting fake news, StopFake.org., found that in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, fake news was not exclusively a product of state-sponsored media or private media outlets, but also spread through individuals (Haigh, Haigh, and Kozak, 2018). Individuals distributing false information is highly relevant in the current war between Russia and Ukraine. Individual accounts circulate incorrect information on social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Some accounts are posing as news sources, while others are just personal accounts reposting content they have found on the internet.

III. Methods

Given the past research and the current conflict, this study asks whether there is a difference in American coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine compared to international coverage. The research will be conducted using a content analysis of news articles to answer this question. The New York Times is the American source, and international articles will be from the International Newsstream, a database of non-U.S. news sources. The New York Times was selected to represent the American media because it is consistently in America's top three highest circulated newspapers. While The Wall Street Journal and USA Today are also in the top three, USA Today has more of a popular culture focus. In contrast, The Wall Street Journal has a more economic focus (Misachi, 2017), making the New York Times the best option for this study. The need for articles to be written in English was a limitation within this study and the reason for selecting the International Newsstream.

The research examined at the first two weeks following the initial invasion by Russia on February 24, 2022, ending on March 10, 2022. The keywords “Russia or Ukraine” in the advanced search function of each database was used to draw the sample, and each eighth article was selected. If the article was an opinion piece or video, the next article was selected, and the eight-count resumed. This study also excluded articles about the number of military casualties on either side. It is difficult to accurately count those numbers in the early stages of a conflict, and the Russian government has published no definitive numbers of Russian military casualties. The analysis included a minimum of 25 articles from each source within the timeframe.

After the sample was selected, each article’s headline and initial paragraphs were examined. This consisted of the article’s text shown above the first advertisement on the New York Times website, the first part of the article that appeared on the computer screen when using the International Newsstream. The headline includes the headline given on the New York Times website and the headline printed in the physical newspaper. This study will also analyze the Times’ sentence-long description of the article. The International Newsstream headline was defined as the article title on the search page.

Based on previous research completed by Makhortykh and Sydorova in 2017, and Roman, Wanta, and Buniak in 2017, the hypothesis for this research is that the articles will fit one of three frames: economic, militaristic, or diplomatic. Articles that match the economic frame will mention sanctions or the financial ramifications of the war. Articles about economic actions taken by independent companies will also fall under this category. The militaristic frame will include articles that discuss troop and weaponry movements, infrastructure damages, and NATO involvement. The diplomatic frame will consist of articles referencing peace talks, negotiations between world leaders, and articles referencing actions taken against Russian embassies by other nations or individuals. If these themes are found within the article, this study will categorize them accordingly. Articles that do not fit within one of the predetermined categories will be coded to see if any additional themes emerge.

IV. Findings

This study analyzed 47 headlines and leading paragraphs from the New York Times and 45 headlines and leading paragraphs analyzed from the International Newsstream. All three hypothesized frames were present. Many articles fit two or more primary frames; when this was the case, the article was categorized according to the more dominant theme. Articles were placed in as many sub-categories as fit, even if they did not fit into one of the three primary categorizations.

Figure 1 below shows the breakdown of all the articles that fit one of the three hypothesized frames. The most common frame for the New York Times was the economy, while the most common frame for the International Newsstream was the military; each category consisted of 18 articles. The least common frame for both publications was the diplomatic frame, composed of six articles.

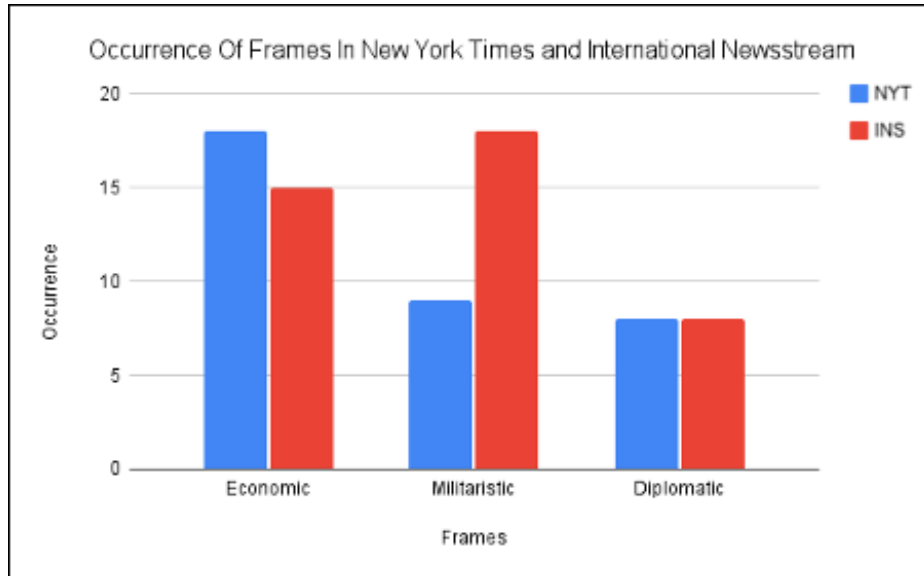


Figure 1: Occurrence Of Frames In New York Times and International Newsstream

There were 12 articles from the New York Times that did not fit any of the three predetermined frames and two from the International Newsstream that did not fit any frame.

The International Newsstream had double the number of articles that fit the militaristic theme as the New York Times. Those articles were often focused on the role of NATO in the conflict and the use of nuclear weapons (Figure 2). In comparison, there was no mention of nuclear weapons in any of the articles published by the New York Times, and the only mention of NATO in the New York Times articles explains what NATO is and answers the question of if Ukraine is a member of the organization (Figure 3).

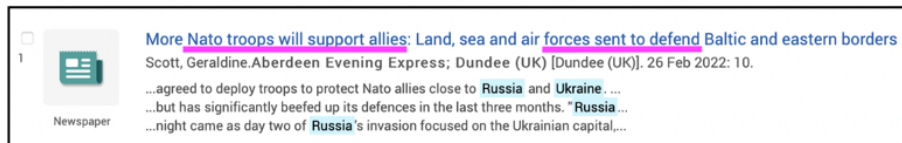


Figure 2: Sample militaristic frame headline from the International Newsstream



Figure 3: Mention of NATO in New York Times headline

A common theme in the New York Times was references from popular culture, specifically late-night television shows. As seen in Figure 4, late-night television host Stephen Colbert made jokes about the economic situation in Russia, which the New York Times then printed as news the following day. Popular culture was a common sub-theme as four articles mentioned popular culture or took quotes from popular culture. Popular culture references included but were not limited to social media, comical television programs, and celebrity opinions. Thus, popular culture tied for third place with sports as the most common subtheme found in articles from the New York Times, trailing oil, and geopolitics (Figure 5). For the International Newsstream sample, oil prices and nuclear weapons were the most prominent subthemes (Figure 6).



Figure 4: New York Times headline featuring popular culture references

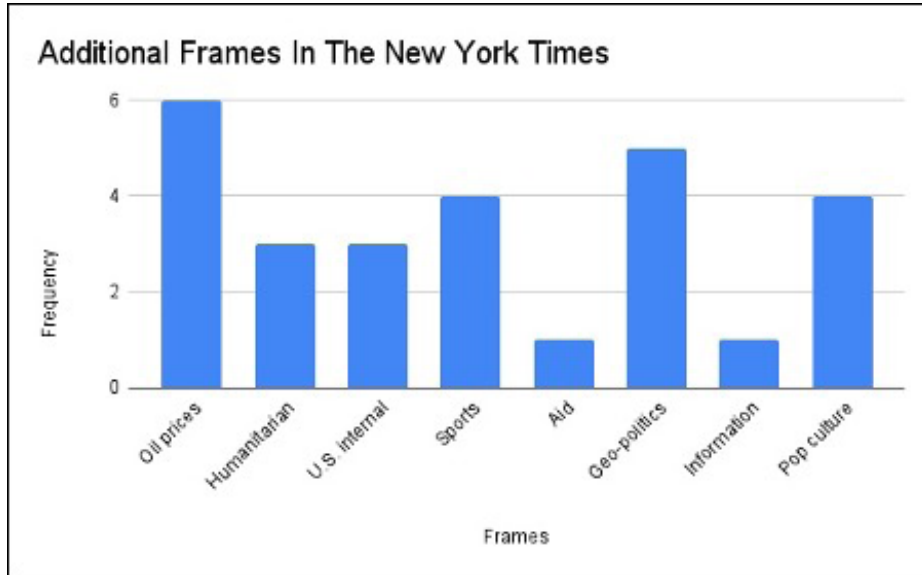


Figure 5: Additional frames in the New York Times

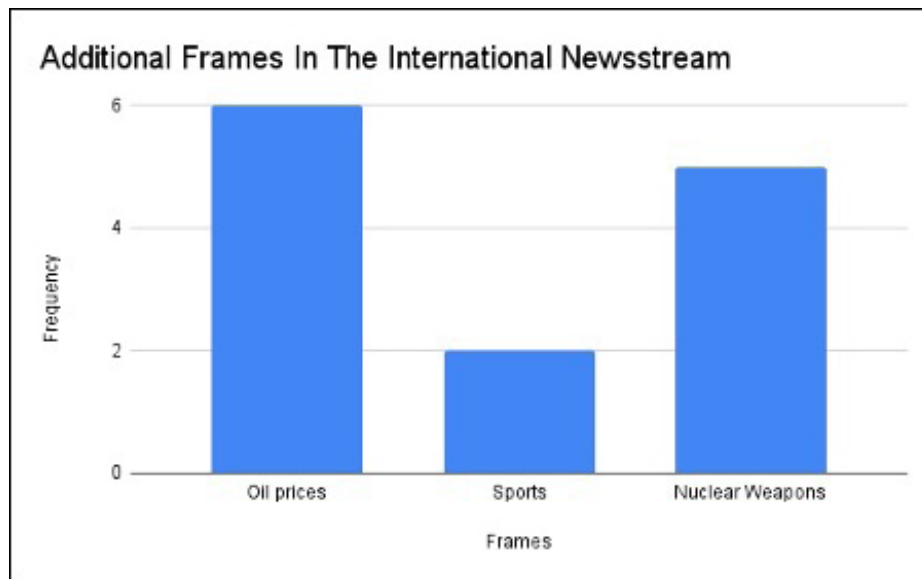


Figure 6: Additional frames in the International Newsstream

The New York Times articles also alluded more often to internal politics than did articles from the International Newsstream. For example, Sen. Lindsey Graham was quoted saying that someone should “take this guy out” in reference to Russian President Vladimir Putin (Figure 7). No headlines from the International Newsstream sample referenced political leader reactions.



Figure 7: New York Times headline about U.S. Senator's reaction to the war

The International Newsstream sample also noted the “Ghost of Kyiv,” a supposed fighter pilot responsible for bringing down multiple Russian warplanes over the Ukrainian capital city (Figure 8). The existence of the “Ghost of Kyiv” was later disproven in articles outside the scope of the study, but the headline exemplifies the information wars occurring during this conflict.

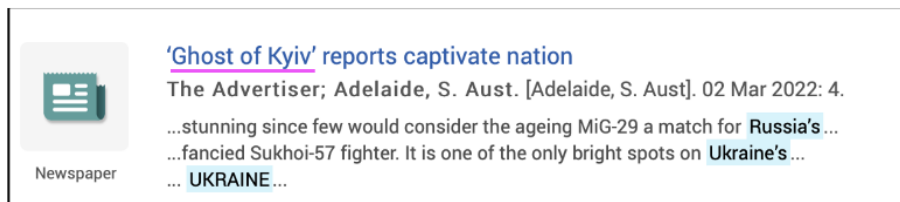


Figure 8: International Newsstream headline mentioning the “Ghost of Kyiv”

It is also interesting to note the differences in headline writing between the New York Times sample and those on the International Newsstream. The New York Times took a more local approach in reporting how the Ukraine war affected Americans. At the same time, articles from the International Newsstream focused more on the conflict itself and not necessarily the ramifications for the people living where they were reporting.

V. Discussion

The findings of this study were in line with the original hypothesis that these news stories would fit within the three frames of economic, militaristic, and diplomatic. Few articles did not fit into any of the three predetermined themes. Sports were a surprising prominent sub-theme; however, given the time frame of the end of the Winter Olympics and the Paralympics, the mention of athletes makes sense. It is interesting to note that many of the Russian oligarchs who faced sanctions are owners or part owners of professional sports teams. So, the mention of those teams makes sense as a secondary theme to articles about economic sanctions.

The focus on the economic ramifications of the war being the prominent frame for New York Times stories was supported by past literature that concluded American newspapers closely follow the message of the American government (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2005). The high number of articles fitting the economic frame from the New York Times is in line with the United States government's decisions in combating Russian forces in Ukraine. At the time of the study, the primary response from the U.S. was to target the Russians economically. The higher number of articles that mention the personal opinions and actions of U.S. politicians also supports the claim that American journalists follow the talking points of the American government.

This direction-taking style of journalism was previously expressed by researchers Bayulgen and Arbatli in 2013 when looking at the Russian-Georgian conflict. Their research found that less than 10% of

the articles were anti-Georgian, while the majority were anti-Russian. This study did not find any articles published by the New York Times or on the International Newsstream that were pro-Russia. The lack of pro-Russia articles could be attributed to Russia being more of an aggressor in this situation than in previous conflicts. In terms of the New York Times, it could be argued that the White House's position influenced the reporting because President Biden is more in favor of Ukraine than former President Trump.

This study seemed to include very little misinformation from either source. The most significant example of misinformation is seen with the "Ghost of Kyiv," mentioned in an International Newsstream article in early March. It was not until May 1st that the Ukrainian government said that the "Ghost of Kyiv" was not real. In a report from the New York Times that day, Emma Bubola wrote that the ghost "has turned out to be one of the more successful pieces of propaganda in an information war that, at times, Ukraine has fought as fiercely as it has on the battlefield" (2022). This news story highlights the presence of the information war co-occurring with the physical fighting in Ukraine, as expressed in previous research by Watanabe in 2017.

The most surprising result of this study was the lack of articles that fit the diplomatic frame. Given that countries, particularly ones that are members of NATO, did not want to engage in military action in Ukraine, this study expected to see more articles fit the diplomatic frame. One possible reason for this could be the study's time frame, as it only looked at the first two weeks of the war and did not examine coverage in the weeks leading up to the conflict.

VI. Conclusion

Ultimately, framing is an important aspect of reporting, and news stories about the same topic can look vastly different depending on who is reporting. More importantly, this research tells us that the presence of misinformation and information wars continue to be a key part of military conflicts in our current digital age. It demonstrates that independent news outlets are not immune to misinformation and play a role in how conflicts are perceived.

The limitations of this study include the relatively small sample size considering the number of articles published each day about the war in Ukraine. Between 2,500 and 3,000 articles were available within the International Newsstream for each day within the study's time frame. In comparison, the New York Times had 828 articles within the time frame. Another limitation is that since the researcher did coding for this study individually, there is a chance that the coder missed specific themes or subthemes within the articles. Lastly, since this is an ongoing conflict, further research would need to be done to see if these themes are present in future war reporting and if they occur at the same frequencies throughout the conflict.

The results of this study can be used further to study the media response to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war to determine if the predominant frames expressed carry throughout the war. Additionally, researchers could compare the results of this study to the results of similar studies during Russia's 2014 invasion and ultimate annexation of Crimea to determine if the media framing is the same. Lastly, researchers could take the data from this study and conduct a similar survey of the headlines coming out of Russian state media to see if the frames are the same or if there is any differentiation between headlines and article content.

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