

The Battlefield as Media Spectacle: The Russia–Ukraine War and the Media

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ABSTRACT: The paper analyzes the process of media involvement in the Russo–Ukrainian war and its effects. The starting point of this study is the hypothesis that disinformation can be no less essential in conducting warfare than weaponry. The paper examines the role of media in covering war and explores how disinformation manages to prevail over military machinery. The analysis primarily draws on the ideas of the Prussian officer and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), who argued that armed struggle constitutes the only effective means of conducting war, with the ultimate aim of destroying hostile forces to eliminate resistance (Clausewitz, 1832/1976). The research traces the origins of the Russo–Ukrainian war to the emergence of a new and complex geopolitical hotspot. These issues are critically examined, analyzed, and interpreted throughout the paper.

KEYWORDS: politics, media, Russia–Ukraine war, disinformation, warfare

INTRODUCTION

According to the well-known Roman maxim *Si vis pacem, para bellum* (“If you want peace, prepare for war”), peace is paradoxically guaranteed through preparedness for war. War and peace thus appear as contrasting yet deeply interconnected concepts. Dangerous parallels exist between them, manifested through propaganda, threats, and death—outcomes that hardly resemble a “victory of life” for those who perish on the battlefield. War discourse is often characterized by excess detail, hyperbole, paradox, and heightened modes of representation.

Throughout history, many “chroniclers of war” have attempted to conceptualize its nature. Among them, Carl von Clausewitz occupies a central place. Clausewitz metaphorically likened war to theater or spectacle—a performance involving heroes, antagonists, evaluators, and, crucially, an audience (Clausewitz, 1832/1976). The audience assumes a decisive role as an ultimate judge, delivering a verdict that is, in effect, final and irreversible. The media serves as the intermediary between battlefield and audience and is therefore expected to operate with objectivity and impartiality, ensuring that the audience’s judgment is informed rather than manipulated.

Clausewitz famously noted that “everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult” (Clausewitz, 1832/1976). Communicating this “difficulty of simplicity” is one of the central responsibilities of the media. From this perspective, the present study analyzes how the Russia–Ukraine war is represented in contemporary media and examines the mechanisms through which audiences are guided toward specific interpretations of reality.

The primary aim of this research is to explore how war becomes an object of observation, how it transforms into a form of “media spectacle,” and what ethical and epistemological dangers accompany this transformation.

The methodological framework of the study is qualitative. It employs narrative analysis, historical and comparative approaches, and political contextualization. Case study analysis serves as the principal research instrument, enabling an in-depth examination of selected events and media representations. Logical analysis and comparative methods are used to identify similarities and differences across cases, while content analysis facilitates the systematic examination of media texts. Deductive reasoning supports the formulation of conclusions based on theoretical premises and empirical evidence.

The theoretical framework of the study draws primarily on framing theory, a core concept within mass communication studies that emphasizes the media’s role in shaping public consciousness. In times of war, when human life is under existential threat, audiences are particularly vulnerable to false or misleading information and may even participate in its dissemination. Framing refers to the process through which news and events are presented within familiar interpretive contexts, guiding audience perception (Entman, 1993). Closely related to agenda-setting theory, framing expands analytical focus by addressing multiple dimensions of interpretation simultaneously. Given the nature of war reporting, framing theory provides an especially appropriate lens for this research.

In addition to framing theory, the study incorporates the hypodermic needle theory (also known as the magic bullet theory), which conceptualizes media messages as having a direct and powerful influence on audiences. Although this theory has been widely criticized for overstating media effects, contemporary propaganda practices demonstrate its continued relevance. Modern information warfare strategies clearly reflect the operational logic of this theory, as media messages are designed to produce immediate emotional and cognitive responses among target populations.

The research reveals the political, technological, ontological, and epistemological foundations of media war coverage and highlights its empirical manifestations. By drawing on Clausewitz's *On War*, the study illustrates the psychology of absolute war—war pursued until the total destruction of the enemy—and examines how state power reshapes warfare through media. Additionally, Dimitri Uznadze's *The Philosophy of War* provides critical insight into the fear of death as a universal human condition (Uznadze, n.d.). Paul Virilio's *The Vision Machine* further informs the analysis by offering a postmodern interpretation of war as a visual and technological phenomenon (Virilio, 1988).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the multifaceted nature of the research problem, the scholarly literature and relevant sources have been organized into several thematic groups. First and foremost, the research topic necessitated an analysis of the foundational theories that define the relationship between media and war, and an understanding of how war became transformed into a "show." In this regard, Guy Debord's seminal work *The Society of the Spectacle* proved instrumental in the development of this study. In this work, the author introduces the concept of the "society of the spectacle" and provides an analytical framework for understanding how images and, more broadly, "media language" supplant reality. Equally essential is Jean Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, in which Baudrillard contends that contemporary warfare constitutes more of a "media show" than reality. This proposition directly relates to our research topic, as does Baudrillard's theory of "simulacra," through which the author cautions that media representations have become far more convincing and authentic than reality itself. According to the philosopher, the world is immersed in a realm of masquerade and parody, in simulation, and this constitutes a game. Parallel to Baudrillard's arguments, Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* must be considered. In this work, the author demonstrates how we perceive the suffering of others through the screen and how media trivializes war.

Alongside the aforementioned foundational works, contemporary research focused on the role of information technologies in constructing war narratives must also be examined. In this respect, the academic articles by Mykola Makhortykh and Maryna Shevtsova, *Social Media and the War in Ukraine*, are particularly noteworthy. In these studies, the authors illuminate the significance of digital media in the coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian war, specifically examining how digital media platforms—Telegram, TikTok, and Twitter—are utilized in the narration of war. Drawing upon analysis of specific cases, the authors demonstrate how visual elements (such as Ukrainian traditional attire, weapons, and other symbols) are employed to amplify the effect of representation, and how the images of victim and hero are constructed through social media algorithms.

Thus, if we synthesize the principal concepts formulated by the aforementioned authors, it can be stated that Debord conceptualizes the phenomenon of war within the context of social relations, noting that war has become spectacle. For Baudrillard, war is simulation—hyperreality. Sontag offers a discussion through an ethical lens, concluding that war has been transformed into a product of consumption, while according to Makhortykh's perspective, war is algorithmic content—TikTok/Telegram war.

WAR AS AN INSTRUMENT OF FEAR

In the matters of politics, war is often an inseparable instrument of fear. The fear of death can be understood as the most ontological fear. As Dimitri Uznadze wrote: "All the conditions of our private existence, every form of our being, are created and driven by the feeling of fear. Fear, therefore, is the governing principle of our entire life. It is the primary regulatory factor in a human's whole existence. In this sense, the fear of death is a permanent and inevitable fact in all of human life." (Uznadze, 2024, p. 596) Thus, the fear of death is an inevitable fact. But how inevitable is war itself within the life of humanity?

The media after the Russia–Ukraine war is the central focus of our research. The 19th-century Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov argued that war, in general, serves the cause of uniting humanity. Dimitri Uznadze, on the other hand, considered Solovyov's view to be fundamentally wrong. War and the fear of death should not, according to Uznadze, form the foundation of the idea of human unification. Yet, examples such as the Second World War demonstrate that war does sometimes give rise to this "ideal". However, this "unification" came at the cost of nearly 60 million lives.

The process is immensely complex. And behind all these processes, either directly or indirectly, always seeps through the image and presence of Russia. Among those "doomed" to war, Ukraine stands at the forefront. Meanwhile, the media has become a kind of watchdog, overseer, and observer of this war—this confrontation, this conflict. However, the media's stance varies drastically depending on the side involved. It's clear that the positions of the opposing sides cannot align.

As early as April 13, 2014, during a speech at the UN Security Council, American political scientist Samantha Power highlighted one key issue among many others: "Russian media spreads propaganda and lies." Thus, just one month after the occupation of Crimea (March 1, 2014), and eight years before the escalation in 2022, she made a highly accurate observation—pointing out that

information warfare would play a central role in the conflict and that Russia would base this war on propaganda and lies. President Putin knew from the outset that such accusations would be made (drawing on Soviet-era experience and recent historical precedent). In his usual manner, he later responded to Power—without naming her directly, a classic Soviet security tactic. Three years later, on June 14, 2017, in an interview with RIA Novosti, he stated: “We have hundreds of television and radio companies. The state does not control them in any way—and it would be impossible to do so!” (Putin, 2017, as cited in TVC, n.d.).

Putin uses the media as an instrument of ideology, persuading his population of the righteousness of his cause. A large portion of the public accepts this as “given.” The Russian president appears on television almost daily, attempting to suppress fear—the fear of death, or more precisely, the fear of inevitable death. He uses media as a megaphone, a tool of mass influence. Thus, Russia follows two tracks—from conquering internal fear to confronting fear on the external (battlefield) front.

In this context, media appears as a false mediator, one that uses the battlefield as a kind of patriotic spectacle, cloaked in nationalist sentiments. In Russian media, war is not portrayed as fearsome, but rather as the only path to the salvation of the “invincible Russian spirit.” This was exemplified by the live broadcast of the opening of the Crimean Bridge connecting Russia to Crimea in December 2019. On that day, Russian media once again enacted a “media occupation” of Crimea, attempting to claim it historically through total media representation—or more precisely, media seizure (since the word “occupation” etymologically means “seizure”).

Russia continues to use the same historical revisionist strategies that were so effectively employed during the Soviet period. It is telling that in the early days of Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union—in late June 1941—Stalin ordered 200 camera operators into service: 200 media soldiers tasked with “writing” the history of the Second World War. They were to record, narrate, analyze, and even rewrite the war. This act of rewriting was a “genetic trait” of the Soviet Union.

Stalin knew particularly well the power of media; that’s why he cherished the legendary radio announcer Yuri Levitan more than his own generals—hiding him near the Kremlin for protection. That voice and that radio played a pivotal role in the Soviet victory—penetrating every Soviet home, suppressing the fear of death, and leading the country toward victory. This is why Hitler threatened that after taking Moscow, Levitan would be the first to die—to be hung by his tongue. The Soviet Union preserved its highly effective media influence techniques—the technologies of rewriting history and events that Putin now uses intensely and successfully.

Therefore, it is not only states that are capable of seizing and claiming; media too becomes a kind of weapon—no less dangerous than the weapons of war.

WAR AS A SHOW

In 1991, when the Second Gulf War escalated and the well-known “Desert Storm” operation was launched, CNN broadcasted live the first night of airstrikes on Iraq. That day, almost all leading global television networks used CNN’s footage, and its logo flickered in the corner of screens around the world. For the first time, people were watching a war unfold live. On that day, a new history was written — the so-called “CNN effect” was born. That’s why, in times of pivotal and dire crises, people still turn first to CNN or visit its website, knowing they will find the most up-to-date and objective information there. Since 1991, CNN has become a benchmark for objectivity.

This was a turning point for CNN. After the “Desert Storm” operation, its voice and image were awaited and listened to — not as a participant, but as an objective observer. From February 24, 2022, when Russia once again invaded Ukrainian territory, war and the battlefield became objects of long-term media observation and surveillance. A few days later, Ukrainian political technologist and journalist Mykhailo Podolyak wrote: “Some external observers are watching the war in Ukraine like a new Netflix series” (Podolyak, 2022, as cited in MediaChecker, n.d.).

Since February 24, 2022, media coverage of the battlefield has entered a new phase. Around the clock, various television channels broadcasted the epicenter of fighting — bombings, death, the agony of the wounded, and the joyful cries of survivors. Thanks to the media, the fear of death shifted from the battlefield to television and the internet, and war became a kind of spectacle where death and life were born and extinguished before our eyes. It was a shock — an unimaginable real-ontological illusion of co-presence, of being-there, that forced us to live in the daily reality of war. As a result, the sense of danger faded, and people from any corner of the world became online consumers of the war spectacle.

Today, media increasingly uses tools in war representation that the French cultural theorist Paul Virilio calls “optical prostheses” (Virilio, 1988). The war theater we observe through these “prostheses” inherently signifies a crisis of representation and a kind of visual dyslexia. In this sense, media is no longer a reliable source of authentic information. Objective reality is replaced by a vision machine — a machine that produces vision without human gaze, ultimately leading to the industrialization of “non-seeing” and an intensified form of blindness.

This kind of digital optics, as a tool of statistical intoxication and perceptual darkening, signals the totalization of digital power and renders war a virtual zone of videography, holography, and infographics. It is a postmodern logistics of perception, causing an aberration between the near and the far as topological operators. One fundamental feature of postmodernism is precisely this: the replacement of the real by the virtual and of the virtual by the real — ultimately heralding a crisis of reality. In this crisis, the words of English historian and sociologist Arnold Toynbee — that war is “a deadly disease of humanity” — become blurred. The media

“preserves” this “disease” and turns it into its discourse, influencing the processes of military conflict and offering its virtual reinterpretation. A totalitarian regime, in turn, uses the media as its primary “disease” — a force to be won even before the war itself.

The work *War and the Media* by French scholar Arnaud Mercier is undoubtedly of interest. The author argues that “the relationship between the military and journalists today is based on a kind of trickery — if the military allows journalists on the battlefield, it is for better control of their activities. Military command has become even more adept at managing journalists’ work — especially in areas of military operations. As a result of such supervision, journalists have gained relative freedom to write what they see fit”. Thus, this is a field of mutual surveillance — the military controls journalists, and journalists monitor the military. This voyeurism itself is an ultra-modern tool of war's spectacularization and, in turn, serves to commodify war as both spectacle and visual object.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary warfare constitutes one of the dominant visual and narrative discourses within modern mediology. War functions not only as a geopolitical phenomenon but also as a mode of media production, transforming the battlefield into spectacle and redefining the figure of *homo militaris*. At the same time, this process signals the gradual erasure of human presence from war narratives, replaced by images, simulations, and mediated abstractions.

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