



The Coverage and Reception of
the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict



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Subjectivities and storylines in the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in tabloids

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Outline



- **CORECON's** aims, special-purpose **corpus** and case studies;
- **Tabloid journalism**, professional practices of war coverage;
- **Transitivity analysis** and **social actor typology** for the study of subjectivities and storylines;
- Data, results, interpretations.



- CORECON: The coverage and reception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Polish, Romanian and English-language media: A **comparative critical discourse** study.
- **Cross-cultural** perspective – given the current geopolitical situation, evolving mediascapes, disinformation and fake news crisis.
- **Recommendations** for journalism training, critical media literacy and resilience.
- **Polish subcorpus** of 1.2 million words (Feb 2022-June 2024) from mainstream (80%) and social media (20%).
- **Case Study 2** Polish tabloids (Fakt, SuperExpress), 2 English-language reference tabloids (the Mirror, the New York Post).

Tabloid journalism

- **has controversial implications:** (1) entertainment, sensationalism, "bad" news, breeding confusion and cynicism **vs.** (2) access to democratic deliberation, national identification, upholding of morals (Bingham & Conboy, 2015);
- **offers a human-interest entry to the social world**, filtered through stereotypes, binary oppositions (us vs. them), pre-fabricated evaluations, simple narratives, conservative values (Johansson, 2007);
- **uses language** that is informal, relatable, repetitive, direct, evaluative (headline polarity or newsworthiness) (Molek-Kozakowska, 2012).

How is war covered by tabloids?



- How is the complex and alienating issue of international conflict (military, political, social, economic) **adapted to tabloid formats** (to inform the public and create engagement)?
 - How is social subject positioning and narrativity realized in tabloid war coverage (to lessen the cognitive burden and sense of alienation)?
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Subjectivities, storylines (1)



- **Clauses** represent how the world is experienced via the constellation of **participants** involved in **actions** in certain **circumstances**.
- This is represented in journalistic **narrative** sequences (Richardson, 2007):
 - WHO – WHAT – WHEN – WHERE – WHY – HOW (5W&H),
 - HINGE – PROBLEM – SOLUTION,
 - ORIENTATION – COMPLICATION – CRISIS – RESOLUTION.
- **Subject positioning** of participants depends on the **predicates**: verbs that may denote material, behavioral, verbal, mental, existential, or relational processes.

Subjectivities, storylines (2)



- Participants vary in the level of **agency and role**: Actors, Behavers, Sayers, Sensors **vs.** Recipients, Goals, Phenomena (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Subjectivity = control over action and circumstance.
 - In discourse, participants can be represented **as social actors** through linguistic choices and **operations**, such as e.g., genericization or specification, collectivization or individualization, functionalization or identification, etc (van Leeuwen, 2008).
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Social actor dimensions operational for **CORECON**

- **Russian actors** (collective and individual, e.g., Putin);
- **Ukrainian actors** (collective and individual, e.g., Zelensky);
- **Other collective** actors (e.g., nation-states, region/city inhabitants, professional groups, movements);
- **Other individual** actors (e.g., politicians, celebrities, war heroes);
- Political or corporate **organizations** (e.g., NATO)

(Wodak & Meyer, 2015 on reference and attribution)

Data



The Mirror	The New York Post	Fakt	SuperExpress
132 headlines+leads	136 headlines	150 headlines	150 headlines
Average headline 43 words	Average headline 12 words	Average headline 12,5 words	Average headline 11 words
Word size 5,536	Word size 1,547	Word size 1,899	Word size 1,703
132 subject positionings coded	133 subject positionings coded	149 subject positionings coded	143 subject positionings coded

Results EN tabloids (Mirror and New York Post)

- Overrepresentation of **Russian military** (soldiers, colonels, troops, conscripts, Wagner group) as destructive **actors**;
- Overlexicalization of **Ukrainians** (refugees, families, children, civilians), often positioned as **recipients** of attacks/aid, or defenders;
- **Putin** presented as (almost) **a sole actor** behind the aggression, also through relational processes (Putin's troops) (M);
- **Zelensky** presented in the **sayer** position (pleading, warning, encouraging) (M/NYP);
- Reference to **international** organizations and media watchdogs (M);
- Foregrounding of the **agency** of **British leaders** in negotiations, British celebrities and sportspeople in pro-Ukraine charity and conversation (M);
- Foregrounding of the **agency** of **American corporations** in sanctions (NYP);
- Reference to **collective** European actors and the aggregated West acting in (morally correct) **alliance** (NYP).

Examples

- (M) Zelensky WILL get fighter jets as **Western allies** (collective) agree to give planes to Ukraine.
- (M) **Rishi Sunak** (identified, sayer) urges world leaders to 'double down' on support for Ukraine.
- (M) **British traitors** (functional, relational) fighting for Vladimir Putin in Ukraine exposed and branded “an absolute disgrace”.
- (NYP) **Ukraine civilians** (generic) continue to die in Russian strikes as experts warn US aid is needed.
- (NYP) **Heineken, Shell, Carl's Jr.** (nominated) dubbed ‘wartime profiteers’ for still operating in Russia despite vowing to leave.
- (NYP) Ukraine accuses **Elon Musk** (identified, actor) of ‘committing evil’ by thwarting attack on Russian fleet.

Results PL tabloids (Fakt and SuperExpress)

- Overdetermination of **Putin** as the main destructive **actor**, attribution of morally repulsive traits (SE);
- Putin's **regime** presented as an **aggregate** of ruthless generals, corrupt officials and deranged propagandists (SE/F);
- Overlexicalization of **collective Ukrainians in Ukraine** and **in Poland** as vulnerable victims (refugees, children, civilians, inhabitants), but also having **agency** (as defenders, campaigners, attackers in collocations with drones, diversion) (SE/F)
- **Zelensky** presented in the aggressive **sayer** position (accusing, denouncing) (SE)
- **Agency** of **individual Poles** and **collective Polish communities** as participants in supporting, aiding and fighting for Ukraine (F)
- Reference to **functionally** delimited actors: **Polish business** in the context of rebuilding, **Polish artists** campaignig in solidarity with Ukraine (SE/F)

Examples



- (F) A secret mission of **Ukrainian soldiers** (collective) in Russia ended in a tragedy.
- (F) **Putin** (individual, actor) killed a child again. Many victims among adults. A rocket attack on a cultural center near Kyiv.
- (F) War in Ukraine. Children sheltered in a **Polish** hotel (identified, functional).
- (SE) **Russia** (generic) already has plans how to change names of Polish cities. Warszawa, Kraków, Wrocław top the list!
- (SE) **Putin** (nominated) may win in 2024? „The world on fire”.
- (SE) Is there another wave of **Ukrainian refugees** (collectivized) coming this year?

Global encounters: Tabloids and war

- **personalize** war coverage through references to actions of leaders Putin/Zelensky/Biden,
- **collectivize** the aggressor (Russians, troops, military) and represent Russians as beholden to regime (Putin's troops),
- **overlexicalize** Ukrainians as victims, survivors, defenders, attackers...,
- use **generic** children/families to focus attention on brutality,
- use **nomination** for heroes/actors with agency (Polish/British),
- identify political/corporate actors from own country (+ USA) (**assimilation**),
- focus on celebrities to draw attention (**functionalization**).



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