Meet the experts on the war in Ukraine

Discursive strategies of representing competent sources and their voices in opinion-making news outlets

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This study explores the selection and representation of expert voices in the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by mapping the linguistic and stylistic choices editors make when soliciting the opinions of academic, professional or independent sources. It uses a representative dataset of articles from a range of elite English-language opinion-making news outlets (the BBC, CNN, Euronews, the Independent, the Irish Times, the National Post, and Newsweek), sourced between February 2022 and June 2024. It identifies salient patterns of how (not so diverse) experts on the war in Ukraine are introduced as sources of credible information and newsworthy opinion. It illustrates how both credibility and newsworthiness (realized mainly through linguistic markers of eliteness) are discursively constructed through a range of strategies of naming and characterizing the sources and representing their speech directly or via editorializing. In the opinion-making news media, these linguistic patterns of source and voice representation have a bearing on the sense of validity of argumentation, the projection of neutrality, and the creation of audience engagement.

Keywords: credibility, eliteness, newsworthiness, reporting verbs, Russian-Ukrainian conflict, source representation

1. Introduction

Contemporary journalism might be seen as consisting in passing selected people's ideas to others by increasing the reach of their words, perhaps at the expense of other sources and voices. In crisis situations, such as the war in Ukraine that escalated in February 2022 with the Russian invasion of Ukraine's territory, the voices of political actors, experts and witnesses have been reported by journalists

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to account for the conflict better and to elaborate on the consequences of the war. The use of these sources likely framed the global audience's initial understanding of the crisis and has continued to shape their subsequent voting, investing and personal choices. Yet, war-related journalism is rarely only reporting and contextualizing critical events. Established news media outlets, such as the ones studied here, also provide a mix of analysis, opinion, polemic and expert insight that influences public perceptions and decisions. In consequence, studying war coverage calls for a re-examining of the paradox of journalistic neutrality, particularly the professional practices mustered for opining on events that have ethical and emotional dimensions (Mammadov 2024).

Due to the magnitude of recent crises, the role of scientists and experts in news reporting has been studied extensively, with multiple research studies tracing the consequences of informational overload, certain questionable journalistic practices (e.g. clickbait) and heavy politicization of the crisis coverage (Mellor 2015). Some point to corporate influence on media deregulation and a demise of editorial gatekeeping as drivers of lower trust in science experts (Calsamiglia & Ferrero Lopez 2003; Jensen 2012). Meanwhile, in authoritarian state-regulated media environments, expert sourcing strategies are used instrumentally to amplify propaganda, to obscure the issues of importance, and to keep audiences misinformed (Borissova Saleh 2024; Prior 2013). In cases of both deregulated and controlled media systems it is thus important to study the routinized patterns of selection and representation of expert voices, given the capacity of elite sources to dominate in the news reporting of crisis, including war (Richardson 2007). This is because some of these patterns are capable of skewing the coverage of conflicts (see Haarman & Lombardo 2009 on the Iraq war), often, unfortunately, by featuring an escalation-oriented perspective (Fröhlich 2018: 2).

Sourcing strategies in the conflict coverage tended to be studied in terms of selection of sources to reflect diversity (or uniformity) of opinions, source availability, and source credibility (Montgomery 2007; van Dijk 1988). It has been shown that, when following their professional routines in tense conflict-related circumstances, journalists mainly look for "authoritative" information or opinions from experts, which may lead to reifying existing power arrangements and legitimizing elitist ideological systems (Berkowitz 2019). This happens when journalists repeatedly rely on the same top-tier experts, either soliciting *ad hoc* comments or by following their social media accounts. As a result, individual elite informants are both relatively easily found (unlike witnesses, minority-group representatives) and considered credible (unlike citizens, activists, interest groups or vox pops), as well as more relatable than institutional reports, press releases or raw data sets.

In addition, as is the case with this study (and special issue), research focuses on the linguistic practices applied for introducing specialist voices into coverage (Nylund 2003), and the role of journalists in editorializing, or passing an implicit or explicit judgment on the reported content or expert opinion (Bednarek 2016). The rationale for undertaking such studies lies in acknowledging the tension between journalistic standards in the context of war reporting on the one hand (Allan & Zelizer 2004), and the market-driven pressures for newsworthiness, clickability and audience engagement on the other (Lanham 2006). For example, on the one hand, editors may allow emotional and alarmist headlines to be crafted in order to attract attention; on the other, however, they might bring in fact-based assessments sourced from competent sources for balance, reassurance and reduction of anxiety stirred up in the coverage (Bednarek & Caple 2017).

Hence, by acknowledging this dilemma in the context of war reporting, this study focuses on the prevalent linguistic resources and stylistic patterns of war-related expert source and voice representation, treating them as exponents of selected news values, particularly eliteness (Bednarek & Caple 2017). The news value of eliteness combines the potentials for enhancing credibility, factuality and believability with the factors that allow for revealing a source's stance and emotionality. In other words, this study aims to illustrate how eliteness helps align the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict with editorial lines and strategic narratives of conflict embraced by opinion-shaping news providers without compromising the semblance of neutrality (Pantti 2016).

Taking a representative dataset of articles from a range of English-language opinion-making news outlets (the BBC, CNN, Euronews, the Independent, the Irish Times, the National Post, and Newsweek), sourced between February 2022 and June 2024, the study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) how do certain sources get introduced as competent professionals (e.g. labelled as "analysts" or "specialists")?; (2) how do sources get presented as having opinions that are newsworthy and believable (e.g. referred to as "experts")?; (3) how diverse and varied are sources invited to opine about the war?; (4) how do journalists, in their choice of reporting verbs and contextualizing phrases, incorporate and interpret (or editorialize on) expert opinions?

2. Newsworthiness vs. neutrality in war coverage

In contemporary mediatized societies, economic capital is increasingly built on information, technology and knowledge (Thompson 1995). The notion of the "economics of attention" (Lanham 2006) is sometimes used to make the point that, in the context of informational competitiveness, saturation and occasional

overload, the ability to create audience engagement translates into economic advantage. Media outlets compete with one another to impress on the readers that they are the ones that will satisfy their intellectual, social and emotional needs not only by selecting the adequate contents and relevant themes (Ekstrom 2002), but also by deploying attractive styles of their representation (Fairclough 1995). To do so, opinion-making news organizations "select and organize the possible statements on a given subject" to make a "news item" out of "an event," according to the values inherent in the culture of the targeted audience (Richardson 2007: 76).

This study explores one particular value that informs opinion journalism in the English-speaking world, namely the high premium put on expertise, competence and knowledge, which are also the core ingredients of the classical rhetorical "ethos" applied in effective persuasion (Cockcroft 2004). As a result, referring to elite sources allows journalists to not only build their own argument more persuasively, but also to give meaning to critical events, and even to increase or reduce uncertainty and alienation when reporting on crisis situations, such as wars. The study resonates with research that spotlights how journalistic coverage related to crises and conflicts may be indicative of a larger process of departure from journalistic neutrality towards interpreting and editorializing, or framing of the information in line with elite ideological positions (Berkowitz 2019) that are gradually becoming normalized for audiences (Cap 2021).

Hence, according to Montgomery (2007), a realistic perspective on current journalism should take into account not only the journalistic norms of verification, neutrality of presentation, and accountability in referring to sources, but also editorial decisions made in relation to what is passed as newsworthy, based on a set of criteria or "news values" that are likely to attract audiences (see Bell & Garrett 1996; Brighton & Foy 2007; Galtung & Ruge 1965). Not incidentally, topics that are more likely to be covered extensively are (presented as) recent, intense, and wide in scope and scale. They often involve conflict or negativity, and concern elite persons and powerful organizations or countries. Additionally, news that attracts most interest should be (presented as) unexpected, and yet it should align with audience expectations and have both cultural relevance and consonance with standard schemas of coverage. Recent research indicates how configurations of news values determine the degree of "clickability" or "shareability" of particular stories (see Bednarek & Caple 2017 for an overview).

Given the capacity of language to construct events as more or less newsworthy, Richardson (2007: 86) argues that journalistic neutrality is in fact a textual practice that can be realized through specific linguistic and stylistic patterns, usually through the choice of impersonal constructions, attributions, nominalizations or technical jargon devoid of emotional lexicon. For example, in referring to sources of reporting, corpus studies confirm that neutral speech reporting verbs

such as "say" dominate over those that carry additional evaluative or emotional element, as in the case of "warn" or "criticize" (Bednarek 2006; Taboada 2025). Projected neutrality would also imply having sources representing various stances on the same (contentious) issue quoted in order to be confronted or evaluated by the audience (Jensen 2012).

The linguistic concept of evidentiality overlaps with textual manifestations of journalistic neutrality, as it includes a group of linguistic markers for the source of evidence one has for making factual claims (Mushin 2013), for example "seeing," "inferring," or "being told." However, given its focus on elite sources, this study looks mainly at the social functions of discursive (non-grammaticalized) evidential constructions as tools for emphasizing epistemic authority (expert knowledge coming from research and professional practice) and responsibility (reporting and editorializing derived from attested knowledge). There are many linguistic patterns that project evidentiality. For example, in a diachronic corpus study, Taylor (2010) finds that when introducing sources of evidence, objectivizing references to data or science, such as "the science behind," "the science of," "all the science," have been replacing references to authors and institutions responsible for data processing or results. Textually, evidentiality may be projected through the avoidance of hedging or modal verbs in the journalistic voice of the coverage, instead relegating such expressions to cited statements attributed to sources (Feez *et al.* 2008: 201).

As a result, the tensions between neutrality and newsworthiness are also relevant to the question of sourcing and the representation of expert voices, as taken up in this study. The developments in the war in Ukraine, for example, could technically be commented on by Russian, Ukrainian, Western and "independent" sources, and yet the voices, even if all were represented in one report, would not be given the same amount of space, relevance or credibility. For example, Verbytska (2024) has shown some salient distribution contrasts between Euronews and the Kyiv Post, where the former referenced a broader scope of political entities, organizations and governance experts, while the latter focused on the most elite sources and self-referenced Ukrainian entities. A news outlet's editorial line that subscribes to a given broadly defined political ideology would consistently underline the framing of the war. Additionally, the pressures resulting from propaganda infiltration and cost-cutting in commercial journalism, such as the use of raw agency or PR materials, may introduce biases (Watanabe 2017). At the same time, retaining a semblance of neutrality is desirable in order to prevent audiences from dismissing an outlet as partisan, despite the tendency of the media to construct strong identifications and legitimizations and to engage in polarization in war reporting (Arcimavičienė 2025).

2.1 Introducing elite sources and accommodating their voices

A news item's newsworthiness and credibility can be derived from its attribution to the competent elite source providing information or opinion, where eliteness is measured on a scale of socially validated authority or prestige (Allan 2004). In their operationalization of the news value of eliteness (also known as prominence), Bednarek and Caple (2017: 58–59) collapse the elitist nature of news actors (powerful politicians, famous celebrities, established organizations, acclaimed events, countries or nations) with the eliteness of sources, due to their significant overlaps and a difficulty in analyzing the respective discursive strategies of constructing eliteness separately. For the sake of this study, however, the dimensions of expert source eliteness must be distinguished as derived from institutional status, academic achievement, professional competence, recognition and authority (i.e. "ethos"), rather than from power, wealth or fame. Eliteness as news value is considered to be scalable, but only relative to the target audience's preferences and values. It is assumed in this study that eliteness can be specifically constructed, or emphasized, with labelling (e.g. referring to the source's titles, credentials or institutional status) or the attribution to other valuable characteristics, including geographical location, ethnicity or even gender that connotes higher prestige. Such linguistic emphasis on elite source "authoritativeness" is channeled to make the reporters' view and the editorial line appear as well-reasoned and credible, rather than politicized.

The potential to linguistically construct eliteness arises from terminology that indexes cultural status and position in a professional or organizational hierarchy (e.g. lawyer vs. attorney general, junior academic vs. distinguished professor), as well as from the prestige that accrues to a given sector (academia, the military, policy think tanks, media influencers). Eliteness may overlap with source legitimacy that rests on such parameters as the scope of one's experience in a professional area, a particular recent achievement or distinction, publicly recognized integrity or moral authority, or even the capacity to represent consensus or majority opinions well (see Haarman & Lombardo 2009; van Leeuwen 2007 on legitimization strategies). Eliteness and legitimacy can also be linguistically underlined with repetitive acknowledgement of expert positionality through professional titles, affiliations with a prominent organization or major location, and other linguistic indexes of respect (e.g. "Professor," "chief"). Fairclough (1995) notes that in reported discourse, weak claims can be indirectly given increased legitimacy by means of strategies of "extensive membershipping," which encompass textual processes of role attributions that make certain social participants or their practices recognized as more legitimate, desirable or sought after.

Reporting the voices of elite sources is necessary for journalists to provide reasoned assessment, context, intertextuality, as well as, occasionally, a clash of opinions that constructs newsworthiness in other ways than eliteness, for example through negativity or novelty. Patterns for reporting the speech (or rather discourse, see Vandelanotte 2009) of elite experts vary across languages, cultures and institutions, given the embeddedness of polyvocality in narrative structures of news coverage and the significance of commentary and assessment for the understanding of crisis situations (Bednarek 2016; Semino & Short 2004). According to Nylund (2003), quotes from sources serve multiple functions in the context of an outlet's need for increasing newsworthiness and audience engagement: they highlight that the claims in the text have validity and public relevance; they provide a space for voicing stance, including criticism and blame, which intensifies the narrative tension and conflict (which, in turn, may be resolved or suspended); they provide a cover for the semblance of neutrality by displacing emotional language from reporter's voice to source's voice; they give a sense of authenticity and "personal testimony" (see also Gibson & Zillmann 1993: 700).

While most individuals quoted in the news are politicians or officials, some competent sources — experts, specialists, commentators — are deliberately invited to offer an external perspective, to elaborate on the problem, or to introduce additional points (Bell & Garrett 1996; van Dijk 1988). While these expert voices may be privileged in providing high epistemic value and perspectivisation in an article's narrative structure, the journalist's editorializing techniques determine how the experts' words are ultimately represented in the text. This concerns specific compositional choices, such as the order of experts sourced and the sequencing of their discourse, together with linking words and discourse markers. In addition, journalists have a range of syntactic choices to make, such as whether to use direct or indirect speech, or (un)attributed or floating quotes (see Bednarek 2016; Taboada 2025) on top of the ways the experts themselves are introduced in the narrative. These editorializing techniques may turn sourcing into a powerful argumentative device that naturalizes ideological positions as endorsed by highly respectable elite experts, or as simply based on the technical knowledge and evidence-based insight of professionals (Berkowitz 2019; Fairclough 1995). On the other hand, by restricting the diversity of expert sources, or by drawing on sources that confirm or echo dominant political voices (Borissova Saleh 2024), editors may contribute to establishing a false sense of consensus and ultimately background or eliminate a number of perspectives that could be helpful in understanding the crisis covered.

The syntactic options for the integration of voices enable reporters to achieve various cognitive and emotional effects that may be related to increased perception of newsworthiness and engagement. According to Bednarek (2016: 33), the

main options include: (1) a clause with a direct quotation of source verbatim that is preceded/followed by a neutral reporting verb, often related to "speaking," "saying" or "telling," in order to give authentic, even testimonial quality to reporting; (2) a "slipping" reporting clause that partially incorporates a direct quote into a main clause, sometimes with a non-neutral reporting verb or a verb indicating a performative speech act (e.g. "revealing"), often to give the gist or indicate the expert's stance; (3) indirect speech/discourse with a reporting clause that requires changing the pronouns and deictics and (depending on the introductory reporting verb) tense back-shifting, often to build up a larger narrative structure that engages the audience; (4) free indirect discourse, sometimes without explicit signaling of the source of represented information. The last option may indirectly invoke expert authority (as in "according to recent reports/studies"), which may be less conducive to credibility and "warrantability" of attributed opinions, but can be used strategically to avoid editorial responsibility arising from projecting strong attitudes and politicized (over)interpretations or engaging in speculations (Taylor 2010).

The choices from (2) to (4) above furnish reporters with a repertoire of editorializing techniques, particularly useful for keeping a semblance of neutrality that accrues to sourcing. At the same time, reporters can foreground their own representations of the beliefs held by the source (as with the reporting verb "suspect"), their interpretations of the speech acts arguably performed by the source (e.g. "discover"), their assessments of the strength of the source's claim to evidentiality or consensus (e.g. "suggest," "confirm"), or the emotional entailments that may accompany certain expert opinions (e.g. "fear," "warn"). In terms of discursive evidentials, acknowledging the authoritative social functions of experts, professionals and specialists — and their implied "ethos" — usually suffices to warrant that their knowledge comes from research and practice, not from hearsay; hence, even if they opine on something in an emphatic or emotional way, it is still presumed to be based on competence, not personal preferences. In looking at how expert voices are woven into war coverage, this study attends to how the choice of reporting verbs to represent expert words may be seen as indicative of the journalistic practices that aim to reproduce the editorial lines of Western media outlets or increase the newsworthiness of the coverage (Bednarek & Caple 2017; Brighton & Foy 2007; Nylund 2003).

2.2 Data and methods

The corpus examined in this study is a large English-language sub-corpus of the multilingual corpus of English, Polish and Romanian media sources on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that was compiled within the international project

CORECON (The Coverage and Reception of Russian-Ukrainian Conflict, https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/corecon/). The sub-corpus consists of 30,413,973 tokens collected from 7 major outlets: the BBC, CNN, Euronews, the Independent, the Irish Times, the National Post, and Newsweek. These outlets were selected for this study on the grounds that they provide opinion-shaping multidimensional coverage of the political, economic, military and social (e.g. refugee-related) aspects of the war in Ukraine. Such outlets also compete for audience attention and loyalty by applying journalistic gatekeeping and striving for depth of coverage of highly contentious and critical situations. It is believed that the publishing policies, editorial oversight and resources that allow these outlets to reach out to experts on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict offer a good approximation of the way expert voices are represented and projected through the strategic application of linguistic resources and stylistic patterns.

The media outlets' articles that were included in the corpus used in the study were scraped with the use of WorldNewsAPI (World News API, n.d.) based on their customizable Python script, which was given the query "Ukraine" as the keyword to be found in the title and first paragraph (lead) of the article copy. The textual data were obtained from articles published from February 2022 until June 2024. The corpus was then filtered to exclude entries that were too short, duplicated or irrelevant (e.g. referred to sport or entertainment coverage). Commercial information and self-promotional items were also removed from the dataset as far as it was possible through automatic detection and manual cleaning.

To process the dataset, a Python script was built to extract 51-word long concordances of the lemmas of expressions: "expert," "specialist," and "analyst" from the corpus, comprising 25 words to the left and to the right of the keyword, thus producing 4768 concordance lines: 2115 for "expert," 499 for "specialist," and 2154 for "analyst" (see Table 1 for an overview of the concordance dataset). Then, named entity recognition (NER) analysis was conducted with a Python script employing spaCy (Honnibal *et al.* 2020) to extract the named entities present in the concordances. This analysis provides quantitative evidence for patterns related to proportions and distributions of references to geopolitical actors involved in war coverage (Wozniak, Liu & Lind 2024). In parallel, another spaCy-based script was used to find characteristics attributed to the "experts," "analysts," and "specialists" throughout the corpus to facilitate further language-based classifications. These concordance lines were manually and semi-automatically processed to find collocations and patterns (Scott 2024). For example, the keywords were cross-referenced with various modifiers and reporting verbs that enabled an explorative inductive analysis of stylistic patterns (verbs of speech representation, modal verbs, adjectives and adverbs, modifiers of proper names,

including surnames, institutions, locations and countries), of which selected results are presented below.

Table 1. Overview of the concordance lines (CLs) within the dataset used in this study (own source)

	"expert" $n=2115$	"specialist" $n=499$	"analyst" $n=2145$	Sum of CLs $n=4759$	Percentage of CLs
BBC (UK)	222	71	178	471	9.9
CNN (US)	5	1	14	20	0.4
Euronews (EUR)	144	46	169	359	7.5
Independent (UK)	673	209	704	1586	33.4
Irish Times (IRL)	162	79	135	376	7.9
National Post (CA)	96	10	74	180	3.8
Newsweek (US)	813	83	871	1767	37.1

3. Findings and discussion

3.1 References to professional sources

This section is devoted to analyzing the collocational patterns of two keywords, "analyst" and "specialist," in order to illustrate how certain sources get introduced as competent and credible professionals (as per research question (1) in the Introduction).

The noun "analyst" ($n=2154$) collocates with adjectives or nouns that designate war-related domains of expertise, sometimes narrowing down the field to express technical competence and specialization (e.g. "naval," "tank"), and sometimes to indicate that the analyst possesses a broader, possibly international, knowledge of the conflict (e.g. "economic," "military," "terrorism"). The most often mentioned domains in which the analysts referred to are proficient can be divided into three classes: (1) the economy (finance, equity, markets, investment, retail, risk, economic, commodities, aviation, energy, gas analysts), (2) the military (tank, security, defence, terrorism, counterterrorism, military, weapons, missiles, intelligence, naval analysts), and (3) research and policy (data, source, research, climate, legal, policy, political, strategy, global/international affairs, negotiations, media, imagery analysts).

One in four of the analysts have their geographical location or ethnicity indicated ("U.K.-educated," "Russian," "Dutch," "Kyiv-based"), which is useful

for inferring either if they are close to the conflict itself or if they are likely to represent a particular default geopolitical, cultural or ideological stance. This could include mentioning placenames that connote neutrality ("Swiss," "international"). Almost half of the analysts are introduced as being affiliated with an institute, a think tank, a financial organization, or a public body. While there are some instances where employees of well-known institutions are not named (e.g. "NATO analyst," "CIA analyst," "Middle East analyst," "Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) analyst"), a number of the articles refer to named individuals and explain their roles and areas of expertise in particular organizations (emphasis added to highlight the feature):

(1) Susannah Streeter, *senior markets analyst* at Hargreaves Lansdown (BBC)

(2) Julia Smirnova, a *senior analyst* at Institute for Strategic Dialogue focused on disinformation and online hate speech (BBC)

One in twenty concordance lines with the keyword "analyst" does not feature the name of the person whose work or opinion is represented, which is often the case with more sensitive military-related information. After all, reporters are obliged to protect the identity of their sources when requested to do so or when there is a chance of them being in some way compromised. The following examples illustrate how anonymous sources are introduced:

(3) a *senior technical analyst* who was part of the Ukrainian deployment team regarding cybersecurity (BBC)

(4) multiple-launch rocket systems that have been touted by a *leading analyst* as being capable of reshaping naval warfare (Newsweek)

As seen above, the descriptive and evaluative modifiers accompanying the word "analyst" include: "senior" ($n=116$), "former" ($n=88$), "lead(ing)" ($n=68$), "independent" ($n=48$), "chief" ($n=26$), "principal" ($n=9$), "veteran" ($n=8$), "chartered" ($n=6$), "prominent" ($n=5$), "executive" ($n=4$), "respected" ($n=3$), "regional" ($n=2$). While most introductions are fairly succinct and move on to the contents of the source's opinion (Example 5), others expand on the individual's biographical details (Example 6):

(5) *leading defense and security analyst* Professor Michael Clarke told Newsweek on Thursday that Leopard 2 tanks are often considered in the same breath as the U.K.'s Challenger tanks (Newsweek)

(6) *former* Whitehall editor of the Financial Times, he is now *director* of the think tank Onward and a *leading analyst* of British politics (Irish Times)

As in the Examples (1)–(6) so far, titles, academic affiliations, positions in organizations and explanatory phrases referring to the analyst's achievements in the introduction of the source are likely to boost the eliteness of their voice and make their opinions newsworthy. It can be inferred that the indication of seniority as well as the fact of being a "former" or "veteran analyst" is likely to connote not only long-accumulated knowledge and deeper insight, but also a relative independence from current official powers, governmental propaganda or party lines. The strategy of placing the source outside of the political mainstream is directly denoted, or reinforced, by such modifiers as "independent" and "chartered." Meanwhile, such adjectives as "lead(ing)," "prominent," or "respected" point to a high likelihood of the source representing a larger consensus of the professionals in the field, rather than just their own opinion. All of this functions as a kind of discursive evidential marking that indexes a stronger claim to objective knowledge in the quote attributed to such a source.

Given the multipurpose nature of the word "specialist" ($n=499$) in the dataset, I manually double-checked how many times the term is actually used with regard to specialized sources speaking about aspects of the Ukraine war, which turned out to be in about 55% of the cases ($n=272$) listed in concordance lines. The other uses of the word "specialist" pertain to this word's function as a modifier in the military context in reference to troops, equipment or training. The highest frequencies of collocations of the term "specialist" as a source of reported information include technology-related fields, security, economy and communications as well as (mental) health (Table 2).

The significant percentage of instances of "nuclear (policy/energy) specialist" (10%) is related to the high importance of the issue of the nuclear threat of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on the Western agenda (Wilk & Selejan 2026). This reflects the sense of threat invoked not only in the coverage regarding the Russian missile attacks that could compromise the safety of Ukrainian nuclear energy infrastructure, which is strategically used to bring back the memory of the Chernobyl disaster, but also as regards the threat of deployment of the nuclear arsenal by the Kremlin regime at some point during the invasion. Hence, numerous specialists are called upon to give their assessments of the probability of certain "nuclear scenarios":

(7) The most chilling comment came from *security specialist* Dr. Steve Fetter: "Worst of all, Russia's thinly veiled *threats to use nuclear weapons* remind the world about escalation" (Irish Times)

While the adjective "specialist" can be used to modify various nouns (e.g. personnel, tanks, officers, websites, surgeon, training, agency), the examples below indicate that it is also resorted to by reporters in order to reinforce the idea that

Table 2. Number of occurrences and percentage of domains representing professional areas of "specialists" referred to in the corpus (own source)

Domains of frequent collocates of "specialist"	No of occurrences	Percentage of total
security, defence, military, recon, weapons	52	19.0
IT, computers, systems	34	12.5
nuclear	29	10.0
international relations, policy, economics	28	10.0
intelligence, data	22	8.0
government	18	6.5
digital, media,	13	5.0
market, finance, investment	13	5.0
health, cancer, nutrition, kidney, eye, neonatal, rehab	13	5.0
aviation, maritime	7	2.5
logistics, acquisition	7	2.5
information, communication, education	6	2.0
recruiting, training	5	2.0
insurance	4	1.5
mental health, psychology, fitness	4	1.5
search, forensic	3	1.0
martial arts	3	1.0
brand, reputation management	3	1.0
other	8	4.0
total	**272**	**100.0**

the sources whose words or opinions are included in the coverage have unique qualifications and can identify and explain the complicated phenomena at hand in highly warranted and evidence-based manners (implied high evidentiality):

(8) Newsweek spoke to experts at the U.K.'s Cranfield University, a provider of *specialist defense education*, to get their take on the video [of ignition, explosions in the air]. Jacqueline Akhavan, Professor of Explosive Chemistry and Director of Education for Cranfield explained… (Newsweek)

(9) It managed to secure a five-year € 30 million debt facility from New York-based *specialist lender* HPS Investment Partners early last year, at a time of heightened restrictions… (Irish Times)

The noun "specialist," including the collocations with "senior" ($n=26$), "chief" ($n=10$), or "leading" ($n=8$), is found to be used in fairly similar ways to "analyst," often highlighting the professional profile, the elite status, and the affiliated entity of the source:

(10) Nan-Dirk Mulder, a *senior global specialist* with Dutch financial firm RaboBank's RaboResearch Food and Agribusiness division (Independent)

(11) Arseniy Dyadchenko, a *senior specialist* of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine (Euronews)

(12) Major General Tim Cross, a former British Army commander and a *leading logistics specialist*, said: "It is certainly the case that the Americans were saying the Abrams were not right for Ukraine" (Independent)

The proper names, geographical placenames and ethnicity-related adjectives that occur in concordance lines with "specialist" point to many regions on all continents, including capital cities and international institutions on the one hand, and specific names of military units, companies or national research organizations on the other. However, there are also several occurrences of references to less obvious types of specialist expertise or experience, often relating to earlier international conflict zones (Example 13) or to highly trained units managing them (Example 14):

(13) The human rights defender, who worked as a *gender specialist* for an NGO umbrella group, was told Taliban forces were closing in on *Kabul* and advised to go home (Irish Times)

(14) It comes as authorities in *Moldova* said that *specialist teams* had carried out "controlled detonations" of explosives discovered in rocket debris that was found in a northern village (Independent)

At the same time, most "specialists" are introduced by reporters as being authorities on issues related to specific aspects of the very conflict being reported (e.g. "on Russia," "on Eastern Europe," "on China-Russia relations," "on South Caucasus," "on Ukraine and Russia"), which makes their specialized opinions worthy of referring to in the coverage. Even if the sources are not fully certain about the implications of given military developments, the fact that they are represented as "specialists" may have a certain soothing effect (Example 15):

(15) "I don't view it as that significant," says James Acton, *nuclear policy specialist* at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "I don't know how much of an advantage Russia is getting from using hypersonic missiles." (BBC)

Such reassurances from competent sources might be used, for example, to counterbalance the more sensational tone of headlines and leads that tend to deliberately attract attention through exaggerated alarmism (Molek-Kozakowska 2013).

3.2 Constructing expertise

This section demonstrates how some sources are identified as having opinions that are highly newsworthy and believable, particularly, when they are constructed as "experts" (as per research question (2) in the Introduction).

The noun "expert" appears in 2115 cases, 90% of which include statements that index or represent a source of an opinion, news or assessment. The remaining 10% include veiled references to expertise and credibility of the material that is reported (e.g. "expert opinion," "expert insight," "expert group," "expert panel," "expert guest," "expert witnesses"). The experts whose voices are reported in the sampled coverage come from a vast array of fields, which can be roughly divided into: (1) military experts (defense, war crimes, military, chemical weapons, security (services), intelligence, military strategy and weapons systems, aviation, land warfare, firearms, army explosives, drone), (2) politics, law and policy experts (foreign policy, nuclear policy, human rights, constitutional law, regulation, cyber security, forensics, financial crime, polling, geopolitics, communications); (3) economics and research experts (energy, industry, pipeline safety, financial, pharmacology, supply chain, economics, trade, retail, agriculture, computer, air quality, computational analysis, developmental geography, civil and environmental engineering, climate); and (4) social issues experts (public relations, media, nationalism, migration and border, crime, language, deepfakes, vodka, organizations and unions, medical, facial recognition, religious studies, forest, sustainability, history). In most cases the expert source is characterized with both factual and evaluative modifiers, such as "senior" ($n = 65$), that allow journalists to highlight their competence and elevate their eliteness:

(16) a former *senior* British army explosives *expert* (BBC)

(17) a *senior* U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) planner who is an *expert* on Russian forces (Newsweek)

(18) Emma Ashford, a *senior fellow* at the Washington, D.C.-based Stimson Center and an *expert* on security and energy (Independent)

In some cases there tends to be a slight, perhaps strategic, vagueness in the collocations of the word "expert" with geographical placenames, and adjectives or phrases derived from them or related to them, as in "Russia experts," "Iran experts," "expert on Russia-China relations," "North Korea expert," "Russian polit-

ical expert," of which some are disambiguated in the course of the reporting. This way of introducing experts may be designed to attract attention, allowing readers or viewers of war reporting to assess for themselves how credible or neutral the source may be in presenting the opinion they are called upon by the outlet to share. Alternatively, the news consumer can be left wondering whether the expert's ethnicity or affiliation is likely to involve a somewhat biased point of view. After all, any reports on the Ukraine war may reproduce a conflictual frame of clashing expert opinions, especially after the traditional political frames of "us" vs. "them," or "defenders" vs. "invaders" exploited by the editorial line are no longer generating that much attention. This is evident in a provocative example from a Euronews interview question posed to Karim Khan, the chief prosecutor at the International Criminal Court in The Hague on the subject of "evidence of appalling war crimes in Ukraine":

(19) And just one final question: as a *legal expert*, we saw the Kerch Bridge being bombed in occupied Crimea. Is that a legitimate military target, *in your opinion*, given that we are in the middle of a war and this is occupied territory? (Euronews)

The variety of experts' geopolitical groundings and institutional backgrounds is often relevant for the coverage of the war to be nuanced and representative of the complexity of the issue (e.g. "Singapore-based," "French," "Azerbaijani," "Taiwanese," "Polish," "WHO," "FBI," "Ukrainian," "U.K. Royal Navy," "U.S. Council of Foreign Relations"). The variety of expert provenances can be indicated overtly with references to places (Example 20), and nationalities or origins (Example 21), or indirectly with culturally distinctive terminology (e.g. someone who is a baroness and a barrister is likely to be British, Example 22):

(20) Fyodor Tertitskiy, a senior research fellow at *Kookmin University (Seoul)* (Euronews)

(21) Rob Lee, a *Russian military* expert and a senior fellow with the Foreign Policy Research Institute (National Post)

(22) *Baroness* Helena Kennedy, a senior *barrister* and expert in human rights law (BBC)

The most common collocate — "senior" ($n = 65$) — together with such modifiers as "independent" ($n = 61$), "former" ($n = 52$), "special" ($n = 24$), might be used in reference to individuals who have higher academic credentials (e.g. senior research fellow):

(23) U.S. Army *veteran expert* who is *senior fellow* at the Atlantic Council and an *adjunct professor* at Syracuse University (Newsweek)

(24) Cohen, now a *senior expert* at the Argonne National Laboratory as well as an *adjunct professor* at Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies (Newsweek)

or who take high positions at renowned institutes or think tanks that, not incidentally, are likely to be located in important capital cities (other exponents of eliteness).

(25) Simone Tagliapietra, an *energy expert and senior fellow* at the Bruegel think tank in Brussels (Independent)

(26) Emily Rees, a *senior fellow* at the European Centre for International Political Economy (ECIPE) [located in Brussels] (Euronews)

(27) Keir Giles, a *Russia expert and a senior consulting fellow* at the Chatham House think tank [located in London] (Newsweek)

The pervasive use of academic sources from research-intensive institutions as experts is likely to reflect the need to explore the complex nature of this international conflict and its profound consequences in various areas of public life. The expert voices brought into the coverage seem to confirm that the full-scale war in Ukraine is a significant and unprecedented development in the recent history of Europe, which should be systematically studied to be better understood and fairly resolved. That is why, on many occasions, experts are introduced as having been in senior positions in public or governmental institutions, or as representing independent long-standing organizations, associations, corporations or unions, and thus offering a unique, albeit elite, perspective:

(28) Dalma Dojcsak, *senior strategy expert* at the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (Euronews)

(29) Emerson Brooking, *a senior fellow* at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab and expert on social media and disinformation (Independent)

(30) Bruce Bennett, *a senior security expert* at the California-based Rand Corporation (Independent)

The sources are sometimes represented as being able to offer different angles or new recommendations when opining about a current development, which is often underlined by the reporters introducing them through their previous positions or actions:

(31) John Sipher, a *former senior CIA official and expert on Russia*, said while the leak of classified information is "despicable," he doesn't think it really hurts Ukraine's war effort (Independent)

(32) Glen Grant, a *senior defense expert* at the Baltic Security Foundation think tank who advised Ukraine on its military reform (Newsweek)

As illustrated in the examples above, many of the data-based insights, informed opinions or reassuring recommendations that are sourced from research organizations help news providers shape the coverage in such a way that may reduce the sense of risk and unpredictability and diminish the alienation and anxiety that results from the overwhelming negativity of war-related coverage.

3.3 Diversity of expert voices in sourcing

This section investigates how diverse and varied the sources invited to opine about the various political, economic, military and social dimensions pertinent to war coverage are (as per research question (3) in the Introduction).

Using the script for named entity recognition (NER) within concordance lines that feature the keywords "analyst," "expert," or "specialist" allows one to calculate the ratio of female and male experts as well as to identify the percentage of names of experts whose surnames are spelt in ways that are characteristic of Germanic (e.g. English), Slavic, Asian or Middle-Eastern languages. Based on NER, the concordance context can be examined and an online search can be further used for disambiguation purposes. In a downsized sample of one quarter of concordance lines with the keyword "expert" ($n = 535$; 25% of 2115), it was possible to identify 282 surnames of expert sources (the number reflects the fact that some lines introduced only anonymous experts or named a political figure — not an expert). In several instances one person was referred to several times, in which case all references were counted independently.

After the necessary disambiguation, the percentage of female experts identified in that sample amounted to approximately 5% of occurrences, but the numbers varied across the outlets, with the BBC being the most likely to call on women as experts. For example, in a sample of the BBC's 100 first concordance lines with "expert," male names occurred 49 times, no names were mentioned 42 times, and female names were given 9 times, mainly referring to female human rights law practitioners, experts monitoring the refugee flows, and media and linguistics scholars. The numbers indicate a tendency, which may be explained by the assumption that military and security expertise is largely seen as a male domain of expertise and interest and that referencing women experts in this context would not give the outlet the same level of credibility and warrantability.

The data also show that over 60% of sources referenced in the context of expert opinion on the war in Ukraine were Western-centric, predominantly Anglo-American and/or European (Table 3), which is expectable in Western, English-language outlets selected here.

Table 3. Number of occurrences and percentage of expert surnames that indexed a specific linguistic (geographical) positionality (own source)

Surname that sounded:	No of occurrences	Percentage
Germanic (English, German, other Germanic)	152	54.0
Slavic (Russian, Ukrainian, other Slavic)	65	22.5
Asian (Indian, Chinese, Singaporean, other Asian)	29	10.0
French, Italian, Scandinavian, Spanish	19	6.5
Middle Eastern (Turkish, Saudi, other Arabic)	17	6.0
total	**282**	**100.0**

Additionally, it was found that the Russian expert sources outnumbered the Ukrainian expert sources 4 to 1. This can be explained in several ways, namely with (1) the number of ethnic Russian experts on Russia in Western academia that were approached for comments (which can be seen on multiple occasions in the dataset when an expert, whose name is Russian-sounding or whose Russian ethnicity is mentioned, is also introduced as affiliated with a Western institution); (2) the willingness to give a voice to (elite and trustworthy) Russian expats, dissidents and independent voices with their unique perspective on Russian politics; (3) the interest of the editors and readers in the pressing questions of the capacity of Russian military/state to sustain the invasion, of the political decisions and social issues that enabled the invasion, and of the understanding of the situation in Russia that is impossible to get due to restricted access and propagandistic messaging of Russian state media (Borissova Saleh 2024).

3.4 Framing expert discourse through reporting verbs

This section focuses on how journalists tend to incorporate and interpret expert opinions and frame their voices by the use of reporting verbs and other syntactic and stylistic choices they apply to represent them in the process of editorializing (as per research question (4) in the Introduction).

With respect to salient patterns of reporting in the case of the "expert" sources (in 2115 concordance lines), it was observed that the majority of verbs that introduce either direct or indirect discourse indicated this in the neutral "enunciating" sense of experts uttering something or writing something in public statements, or sharing their opinion through a formal statement, comment or reply (Table 4).

The remaining examples of verbs identified in the corpus were applied to indicate the journalistic understanding of epistemic or emotional positionalities or performative capacities, i.e. speech acts with a certain illocutionary force

Table 4. Number of occurrences and percentage of reporting verbs or phrases incorporating sources' voices in a relatively neutral sense of enunciation or expression (own source)

Reporting verb/phrase (enunciating sense)	No of occurrences	Percentage
say	1348	45.8
tell (the outlet)	849	28.8
according to	274	9.3
speak	101	3.4
tweet/post	86	2.9
give opinion/statement	59	2.1
write	46	1.6
talk	45	1.5
explain	43	1.5
comment	30	1.0
answer	30	1.0
others	31	1.1
total	**2942**	**100.0**

(Table 5). While these types of editorializing techniques were used occasionally, the instances evidenced in concordance lines show the attempts at framing of expert voices as newsworthy not only through eliteness, but also through impact (Bednarek & Caple 2017) and negativity/positivity (a close analysis of which is beyond the scope of this study and without qualitative analysis may yield distorted results; see Bednarek & Taboada 2025).

While numerically the ratios of reporting verbs (representing the most prototypical ways of integrating the voices of the sources into the coverage) do not fall far from previous studies on political mainstream journalism (Bednarek 2006, 2016; Taboada 2025), it is important to note that expert and professional sources are occasionally presented as having emotional reactions or as engaging in opinionated representation of war developments (e.g. "chilling comment" in Example 7 in Section 3.1 above). Understandably, war coverage abounds in highly politicized and ideologically charged topics, such as (the lack of) security, stability and prosperity, which the experts are entitled to point out.

Turning to the 499 concordance lines with the term "specialist," it was possible to observe that the most frequent reporting verbs introducing the opinions of the specialists include those that simply refer to speech: "say" ($n=147$), "tell" ($n=60$), "speak" ($n=17$), "announce" ($n=14$), "comment/post" ($n=14$) and

Table 5. Examples of identified reporting verbs or phrases incorporating sources' voices through modifications of epistemic stance, performative capacity or emotional expression (ten per type)

Reporting verbs that modify (hedge) the source's commitment to objectivity	Reporting verbs that indicate the source's action behind the speech act	Reporting verbs with stance, evaluation or emotional expression
acknowledge	advise	bring attention to
agree	assess	condemn
argue	call on (sb)	criticize
believe	endorse	double down
cast doubt	examine	(be) stunned
confirm	monitor	(be) unsure
describe	reconsider	(be) worried
highlight	point to/out	praise
reckon	tout	reassure
suggest	warn	urge caution

"report" ($n=6$). There are several cases of reporting verbs used occasionally that index various factual or epistemic positionalities ("describe," "explain," "suggest," "believe," "claim," "confirm," "note," "offer," "determine") or even emotional or attitudinal stances ("warn," "call for," "be against," "reject," "regret," "be delighted," "praise," "defend/echo [a view]"). Apart from reporting verbs, sometimes "specialists" are indicated to be involved in some kind of action that aligns with their expert status ("assist," "examine," "encounter," "follow," "join," "look into," "meet," "show"):

(33) Military and strategic studies specialist Allan Orr *believes* some western assessments of the progress of Ukraine's offensives have been overly optimistic (Newsweek)

(34) He talks to the behavioural specialist Brian McDonald, who recently *started to encounter unexplained obstacles* with his everyday financial transactions (Irish Times)

(35) "for now we *only* have eight people in our department and the workload's *enormous*," Viktoria Ionova *explains*. She's a specialist at the laboratory trying to establish genetic profiles of the dead and of those searching for them. (BBC)

Given the range of war-related issues in the coverage, the tense and variability of predicates (Example 34), the use of hedging or emphasizing words (Example 35),

and mental processes invoking non-neutral stances (Example 33) is expectable. However, it is important to highlight the implications of routine linguistic practices of editorializing in the representation of specialist knowledge and agency.

4. Conclusion

This study reported on salient patterns of uses and distributions of the keywords "analyst" (2154), "specialist" ($n=499$) and "expert" ($n=2115$) in a sample of Ukraine war coverage by a range of English-language opinion-making outlets. Altogether, the 4768 concordance lines were analyzed semi-automatically by cross-referencing with key terms deemed significant for representing voices and introducing sources (e.g. "senior," "say," "security," etc.). Salient collocations were then analyzed manually on a downsized sample (e.g. every fourth concordance line for ethnic-linguistic and gender parameters of sourcing). The "named entity recognition" tool was helpful for the identification of characteristic introductory patterns and speech reporting phrases that have a bearing on the perception of authoritativeness ("ethos") of the source and the resulting credibility of reporting. The inductive mapping of those patterns helped identify the main journalistic practices of constructing eliteness (news value) through sourcing in war coverage.

The construction of professional competence and expert positionality, as per research questions (1) and (2), was achieved through references to academic titles, institutional affiliations, achievement in areas of competence, recognized standing in the academic or professional community, consultancy to elite organizations, international agencies or governments. Certain geographical and cultural variables (capital cities, respected and highly ranked research-intensive organizations), high status role labels (senior, chief, head, advisor) and descriptors of long-term experience and independence (indexed by time adverbials or modifiers) were often used in order to emphasize warrantability and trustworthiness of reported opinions. This large repertoire of traditional linguistic markers of eliteness (Bednarek & Caple 2017) in expert sourcing strategies helps journalists to legitimize (and normalize) certain editorial representations of conflict under the guise of neutrality and reliability and, at the same time, to increase newsworthiness of the prolonged and relatively alienating coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (Molek-Kozakowska 2025; Pantti 2016).

By identifying the gender and ethnicity/nationality of the source (indexed by the language of the surname), the study also demonstrated the limited gender diversity and a relatively restricted ethnic variation of sources, as per research question (3), which, even if unfortunate, is characteristic of hard news coverage of politics (Taboada 2025). Apparently, for these English-language outlets, referring

to Western-centric and male sources aligns with the news value requirement of eliteness and credibility on issues demanding expertise in such areas as military equipment and strategy, security and defense, as well as economic, financial and political consequences of conflict (Thompson 1995). A broader study would be needed to assess to what extent the privileging of these voices simultaneously leads to marginalization of important ideological positions to the degree that can be labelled as epistemic injustice or even erasure (Mammadov 2024).

While much of the reporting of expert voices was "faithful" to the wording of their original statements, as per research question (4), some editorializing techniques were also identified. On the one hand, to achieve a sense of neutrality, editors project opinions sourced from experts as founded on data, knowledge, and competent assessment, rather than on subjective or personal insight or speculation. They draw on the "ethos" of an academic or a professional specialist or analyst, by foregrounding their standing, status, record or academic credentials that testify to their competence (Cockcroft 2004). On the other hand, as avoiding experts' jargon, excessive complexity or nuance is preferable, at times reporters tend to choose emotionally charged reporting verbs or free indirect discourse for a desirable attentional response. In this respect, they project a stance that aligns with the editorial line, even if the sources are largely projected as able to speak for themselves, which is routine practice in English-language war reporting (Piazza 2008). It may thus be noted that these professional and linguistic practices of conflict reporting function as stabilizing mechanisms anchoring the coverage in well-established Western-centric narratives and formats (Molek-Kozakowska 2025).

Opinion-shaping news media strategically prioritize the fact that the linguistic patterning of source representation reinforces the perception of validity of argumentation, projects the semblance of neutrality, and ensures audience engagement and loyalty. For future responsible war reporting, with recognized professional standards in a deregulated media environment, it is important to periodically revisit the ways expert voices are selected and represented through both qualitative and quantitative studies. Attention needs to be paid to how the experts selected to opine on various dimensions of conflict are framed as credible and quoted, how diverse and varied the selection of expert voices is, and to what extent editorial lines color the subsequent editorializing of the expert opinions. Such research also requires considering the ongoing propaganda and info-war tactics of belligerent states engaged in conflict, and how they could be neutralized by editorial practices (cf. Molek-Kozakowska & Dragomir 2025), or the profit-orientation of most of the established opinion-shaping media outlets. While acknowledging the need for media systems' stability, research should not avoid problematizing the conventional, or naturalized, journalistic practices of sourcing in order to enable critical reflection and improve resilience.

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