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ORIGINAL

The international press as a tool of hybrid warfare in the russia-ukraine conflicto

La prensa internacional como herramienta de guerra híbrida en el conflicto entre rusia y ucrania

Talya İşcan[1]

[1] Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales. México.

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Corresponding Author: Talya İşcan

ABSTRACT

The role of the international press as an instrument of hybrid warfare is addressed in the context of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, with an emphasis on the coverage by CNN and Russia Today (RT) during the escalation of the confrontation in the Donbas between 2022 and 2023. Based on the theoretical frameworks of framing, agenda setting, and propaganda, we examine how both media outlets construct narratives aligned with the geopolitical interests of their respective states. While CNN privileges democratic values and consolidates a narrative centered on Russian aggression, RT orients its coverage toward legitimizing Moscow's intervention and criticizing the West. Information is configured as a central strategic dimension of contemporary conflicts, where media coverage operates as symbolic devices designed to shape perceptions, justify military actions, and polarize audiences. The analysis incorporates comparative references to the cases of Syria, Korea, and Latin America, as well as the role of opinion makers and social media, problematizing the transformation of journalism into a tool of geopolitical confrontation and its implications for media ethics and international stability.

Keywords: hybrid warfare; propaganda; framing; international media; geopolitical conflict.

RESUMEN

El papel de la prensa internacional como instrumento de guerra híbrida es abordado en el contexto del conflicto entre Rusia y Ucrania, con énfasis en la cobertura de CNN y Russia Today (RT) durante la escalada del enfrentamiento en el Donbás entre 2022 y 2023. A partir de los marcos teóricos del framing, la agenda setting y la propaganda, se examina cómo ambos medios construyen narrativas alineadas con los intereses geopolíticos de sus respectivos Estados. Mientras CNN privilegia valores democráticos y consolida un relato centrado en la agresión rusa, RT orienta su cobertura hacia la legitimación de la intervención de Moscú y la crítica a Occidente. La información se configura como una dimensión estratégica central de los conflictos contemporáneos, donde las coberturas mediáticas operan como dispositivos simbólicos destinados a moldear percepciones, justificar acciones bélicas y polarizar audiencias. El análisis incorpora referencias comparativas a los casos de Siria, Corea y América Latina, así como al rol de opinólogos y redes sociales, problematizando la transformación del periodismo en una herramienta de confrontación geopolítica y sus implicancias para la ética informativa y la estabilidad internacional.

Palabras clave: guerra híbrida; propaganda; framing; medios internacionales; conflicto geopolítico.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of contemporary transformations in conflict, where information assumes a strategic dimension comparable to that of conventional weapons, this study aims to analyze the role of international media as instruments of hybrid warfare. The specific case of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine—and in particular, the Donbas region—provides a privileged laboratory for observing how geopolitical narratives are constructed, framed, and projected by media outlets such as CNN and Russia Today (RT), based on state interests, ideological disputes, and strategic objectives (Hale, Shevel, & Onuch, 2018).

This research lies at the intersection of international political communication, propaganda studies, and framing and agenda-setting theories, proposing a critical reading of media coverage as part of the infrastructure of hybrid warfare. Far from being mere vehicles of information, the media act as active agents in the battle for symbolic hegemony. CNN, from a liberal Western perspective, reproduces discursive frameworks that extol the defense of democracy. At the same time, RT, as the mouthpiece of the Russian state, disseminates narratives focused on the self-determination of Donbas and the victimization of Russia in the face of Western expansion. In both cases, the coverage does not respond to journalistic principles of objectivity, but rather to propagandistic logics that polarize global public opinion.

The specificity of this work lies in its comparative approach, methodologically anchored in critical discourse analysis and communication theories. The conflict in Donbas is addressed not only as a military or diplomatic event, but also as a narrative dispute in which the international media play a decisive role in constructing identities, enemies, and legitimacy. Through a content analysis of narratives promoted by CNN and RT in 2022, the thesis examines strategies of informational framing, the instrumentalization of media experts, and the role of social media in amplifying polarizing discourses (Hoffman, 2007).

From an academic perspective, the thesis contributes to understanding the media as strategic actors in public diplomacy and contemporary propaganda, allowing a reassessment of traditional categories in communication theory and proposing a conceptual framework adapted to the hybrid dynamics of current conflicts. The study also contributes to debates on journalistic ethics in war scenarios, media responsibility amid information manipulation, and the urgent need for critical media literacy (Ibitowa, 2022).

In short, this research not only sheds light on the mechanisms by which narratives of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict are constructed and projected, but also offers interpretive keys for other geopolitical contexts where information has ceased to be a public good and has become a decisive battlefield. In a world where the media shapes perceptions of reality, studying its role in hybrid wars is not only a theoretical question but also a political and ethical necessity (Galeotti, 2016).

Coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian War and the Media on CNN and Russia Today (RT)

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine intensified in 2022 with Russia's large-scale invasion as a result of a set of historical, geopolitical, and cultural tensions that have deep roots.

Since its independence in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has become a sovereign country. However, it has faced constant challenges between its national identity and external influences, especially from Russia. Ukrainian independence was a decisive step in its self-determination. However, the country remained at the center of geopolitical interests and tensions due to its strategic position and the presence of diverse ethnic communities, such as the Russian-speaking population in the east, which has often been a source of friction (Katerynych, 2023).

An important moment in Ukraine's modern history was the Orange Revolution in 2004. This series of mass protests arose in response to electoral fraud in the presidential elections, which favored the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych. Ukrainian citizens mobilized in favor of a pro-Western political orientation, demanding transparency and democratic reforms. The revolution succeeded in overturning the results, and after a new vote, pro-European candidate Viktor Yushchenko was elected, marking a substantial shift toward the West and away from Russian influence.

Another significant milestone was the Euromaidan movement in 2014, when Ukrainian citizens protested again, this time against the decision of Yanukovych, who, now president, rejected an association agreement with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Russia. These protests culminated in the overthrow of Yanukovych and the election of a new pro-European government. This change in political direction prompted an immediate response from Russia, which took advantage of the instability to intervene in Crimea and support pro-Russian separatists in Donbas. Since then, Donbas, comprising the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, has become a conflict zone,

as the separatists, with Moscow's support, declared the independence of these areas, leading to an armed conflict with the Ukrainian government that has intensified until the Russian invasion of 2022. CNN, a US media outlet, and Russia Today (RT), a Russian state-owned media outlet, have been key players in how information about this conflict has been disseminated, each from its own perspective and with specific interests (Dharmaputra, 2023).

CNN con la narrativa occidental sobre la defensa de "la democracia", uno de los principales medios de noticias de Estados Unidos, ha tenido un interés particular en el conflicto ruso-ucraniano desde la Revolución Naranja de 2004. CNN, al igual que otros medios occidentales, comenzó a cubrir el conflicto desde la perspectiva de la lucha de Ucrania por acercarse a Europa y alejarse de la influencia rusa. La narrativa presentada por CNN a menudo ha resaltado la búsqueda de valores democráticos por parte de Ucrania y su deseo de ser parte de la Unión Europea y de la OTAN, subrayando la oposición de Rusia a estos movimientos como un intento de frenar la expansión occidental (Fridrichová, 2023).

CNN's coverage intensified during the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution, maintaining a focus on Ukrainian sovereignty and Russian aggression, framing the conflict in terms of a clash between democracy and authoritarianism. In this regard, CNN's narrative tends to highlight the legitimacy of the Ukrainian struggle and Western support as an effort to defend European stability in the face of Russian expansion, emphasizing the atrocities committed by Russian forces and the suffering of the civilian population (Dudka, 2023).

The use of vague terms such as "democracy" allows CNN to maintain a flexible approach that can be adapted to different situations without going into specific details. This facilitates broader and less critical coverage of the actions of the United States and its allies, avoiding discussions of economic or geopolitical interests that could complicate its narrative, as well as omitting aspects such as NATO's role in the conflict and the possible economic implications of Western expansion towards the east, presenting a narrative that favors the policies of the United States and its allies.

Russia Today (RT), a state television channel, is a Russian state-owned media outlet founded in 2005 to present Russia's perspective to a global audience. Since its inception, RT has been a tool for promoting the Kremlin, designed to counter Western media influence and spread the Russian view of international events. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, RT has been a key player in promoting Moscow's official narrative, presenting the 2022 invasion as a special military operation for the "denazification" of Ukraine and the protection of Russian-speaking communities in Donbas (Biswas, Niven, & Lin, 2023).

RT has used its platform to spread the idea that the Ukrainian government is influenced by ultra-nationalist elements that threaten the Russian population in the east of the country. Along the same lines, RT has portrayed the pro-Russian separatists in Donbas as legitimate resistance movements against a Ukrainian government that, according to them, pursues a nationalist and anti-Russian agenda.

During the 2022 invasion, RT has served to justify Russia's military actions, presenting them as a necessary response to the threat of NATO expansion and alleged Ukrainian aggression in Donbas. At the same time, RT has downplayed or denied allegations of war crimes and atrocities committed by Russian troops, choosing instead to divert attention to alleged Ukrainian provocations and highlighting Russian humanitarian aid to the occupied areas. This form of coverage has led to RT being blocked in several countries in Europe and North America, which accuse it of being a propaganda outlet that contributes to misinformation and polarization of global audiences (Alyukov, Kunilovskaya, & Semenov, 2023).

Understanding these differing perspectives is crucial for a balanced analysis of the conflict. While CNN can be accused of ignoring the implications of NATO expansion and US geopolitical interests, RT tends to obscure the reality of Russian military aggression and the humanitarian consequences of its invasion. Rather than neutral sources of information, both media outlets function as propaganda tools that reinforce their respective governments' positions and contribute to the polarization of global public opinion (Edenborg, 2017).

Both CNN and RT have played an active role in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, each promoting narratives that reflect the interests and priorities of the countries they represent. The particularity of this war, in which information becomes a battlefield as important as the military one, underscores the need for a critical analysis of how the media shapes perceptions of events and contributes to the information war waged in parallel with the fighting on the ground. Thus, while the media is expected to report objectively, in this context, it is used to manipulate narratives and perpetuate the conflict. This challenges the ethical and professional principles of journalism and communication.

This pattern of differentiated coverage on both sides reflects a common trend in international conflicts: the media, influenced by geopolitical and economic interests, tend to align their narrative

with the political actors they represent (Alyukov, 2022).

The problem addressed by the research is therefore the direct influence of the media on the construction of perceptions of conflicts. By studying how the media manipulates narratives in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, especially in the context of Donbas, the research aims to unravel the underlying dynamics that allow the media to become instruments of war rather than peace (Katerynych, 2023).

The paradox also lies in the fact that the media, designed to inform, educate, and foster dialogue, have evolved into tools of manipulation that directly impact regional and global stability. Rather than mere instruments of communication, the media actively shape narratives that mold public perception, legitimize political actions, and support strategic interests in conflict contexts (Altam & Kokane, 2023).

What is hybrid warfare?

Hybrid warfare and propaganda in contemporary conflicts

This section explores the concept of hybrid warfare and its articulation with theories of propaganda, focusing on the active role international media play as strategic actors in the production of meaning during conflicts. Based on a multidisciplinary theoretical review—which includes classical and contemporary authors such as Clausewitz, Hoffman, Kaldor, Chomsky, and Cull—the symbolic, discursive, and technological dimensions of war in the 21st century are analyzed. It argues that hybrid warfare, far from being limited to military confrontations, involves a semiotic war, where the dispute over control of the narrative is as decisive as territorial occupation. The text concludes with a critical reflection on the ethical limits of propaganda and the ideological function of global media (Entman, 1993).

Evolution of an ambiguous concept

The term “hybrid warfare” has become a central category for analyzing transformations in contemporary modes of conflict. However, its definition is not unambiguous and is subject to multiple interpretations, which has generated intense debate in the fields of international relations, security, and communication.

Frank Hoffman (2007, 2009) was one of the first to systematize the concept. From a US security perspective, he defined hybrid warfare as a strategy that combines state and non-state actors, conventional and irregular tactics, psychological operations, cyberattacks, and organized crime. This combination seeks to exploit the enemy’s vulnerabilities in a multidimensional and simultaneous manner. Hoffman observes that these wars are characterized by their legal ambiguity, high adaptability, and ability to overwhelm traditional military structures. In this sense, he proposes a redefinition of the concept of threat, since hybrid wars are not formally declared and do not always include the direct use of military force (Alrababa’h, Myrick, & Webb, 2020).

However, not all theorists agree with this conceptualization. Mary Kaldor (1999, 2012), from a more sociopolitical and humanistic perspective, argues that contemporary conflicts should be understood as “new wars.” These are distinguished by their diffuse nature, the participation of non-state actors, and their strong communicational and symbolic components. New wars are waged not only with weapons, but also with images, discourses, and legitimation strategies. For Kaldor, violence is no longer exercised exclusively between sovereign states, but between transnational networks with economic, religious, or ideological interests. This reading highlights the weakening of the nation-state and the emergence of fragmented sovereignty (Cull, Culbert, & Welch, 2003).

Andrew Mumford (2012) takes a critical look at the excessive use of the term “hybrid,” warning that it has become too broad a category and risks losing its analytical precision. In his work on proxy warfare, he argues that while current conflicts combine tactical and strategic elements, it is essential to distinguish between hybrid warfare as a military strategy and as a narrative or political category. In many cases, the use of the term serves more to justify defense or geopolitical expansion actions than to accurately describe empirical phenomena (Abdel Tawwab Sharaf Eldin, 2023).

Mark Galeotti (2016) also agrees with this criticism, especially in the Russian context. He argues that the term “hybrid warfare” has been instrumentalized by NATO and Western states to create a narrative of imminent threat in response to Russia’s actions in Ukraine, Georgia, or Syria. Galeotti points out that, although Russia does indeed employ strategies that combine military, informational, and cyber elements, there is no formalized doctrinal model of hybrid warfare in its military structure. Instead, what we see is a series of practical adaptations to changing scenarios, with a strong opportunistic and tactical component.

Consequently, hybrid warfare can be understood as a multi-layered concept:

1. As a specific form of warfare, characterized by the synergy between different methods of coercion.

2. As a theoretical framework for analyzing contemporary conflicts that go beyond classic models of interstate warfare.

3. As a discursive tool used by state actors to justify interventions, military budgets, or strategic alliances (Claessen, 2021).

The transformation of armed conflicts in the 21st century has called into question the traditional distinctions between war and peace, between civil and military, and between truth and information. In this new landscape, the concept of hybrid warfare stands as a central category for understanding contemporary forms of violence, in which the military is intertwined with the informational, the symbolic with the technological, and the visible with the hidden. This form of warfare is not limited to physical battlefields, but unfolds in the media, psychological, digital, and discursive spheres. In this context, the international media are not mere narrators of events, but key players in the construction and legitimization of conflicts.

What role do the international media play in the symbolic configuration of hybrid warfare?

One distinctive element of hybrid warfare is the centrality of the symbolic battle. In this new type of conflict, the struggle is no longer limited to physical battlefields. However, it extends to spaces of meaning production: the media, social networks, digital platforms, and international public opinion forums. In this context, the international media play a fundamental role, not only as narrators of events but also as active agents in shaping collective perceptions and legitimizing military actions (Kazarian, 2023).

The theory of framing, proposed by Robert Entman (1993), is essential to understanding this phenomenon. According to Entman, the media construct interpretive "frames" that select certain aspects of reality and present them as more relevant than others. This selection influences how the public perceives conflicts, who is considered a victim or an aggressor, which causes are seen as legitimate, and which solutions are proposed. In a hybrid war, where ambiguity and confusion are tactical weapons, control of framing becomes a key strategic tool (Boyd Barrett, 2017).

On the other hand, Agenda Setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) shows how the media not only frames events, but also determines which issues deserve public attention. In this sense, media visibility is a resource of power: what does not appear in the media does not exist for global public opinion. This function is particularly relevant in hybrid wars, where manipulation of the news agenda can conceal operations, exaggerate threats, or divert attention to convenient narratives.

The conflict in Ukraine since 2014 is a paradigmatic case. Several studies (Renz, 2016; Pomerantsev, 2014; Kragh & Åsberg, 2017) have documented how the international media has become a discursive battlefield between the West and Russia. CNN and other Western media frame the conflict as unilateral Russian aggression, emphasizing the illegality of the annexation of Crimea and support for the Donbas separatists. In contrast, RT (Russia Today) presents the conflict as a defense of Russian-speaking populations against a Western-backed coup in Kiev (Chouliaraki, 2006).

These narratives are not simply alternative versions: they constitute forms of symbolic intervention with concrete political effects. For example, they can influence the decisions of multilateral organizations, economic sanctions, the mobilization of public opinion, or the perception of legitimacy of the actors involved. In addition, the rise of social media has fueled the information war, allowing the circulation of fake news, conspiracy theories, political memes, and astroturfing campaigns that amplify polarization (Butler, 2009).

It should be noted that the international media not only report on the war but also participate in it. CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, RT, France 24, among others, are part of the public diplomacy strategies of their respective states. This participation challenges the liberal idea of a free and objective press and demands a critical view from the perspective of critical communication theory.

In this sense, Chomsky and Herman (1988) argue, in their theory of propaganda, that the media operate within a system of ideological filters that prioritize the interests of political and economic elites. The notion of "manufacturing consent" becomes especially relevant in contexts of hybrid warfare, where the construction of the enemy and the justification of violence are mediated by journalistic discourse.

In short, the international media are key players in the architecture of hybrid wars. They not only represent conflict: they shape it, amplify it, and frame it.

Its role is inseparable from geopolitical games and contemporary strategies of domination. The struggle for narrative is, today more than ever, a strategic dimension of global conflict (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). Does hybrid warfare redefine the boundaries between war and peace, between

civilian and military?

One of the most disruptive elements of hybrid warfare is its ability to dissolve the traditional boundaries that separate war from peace and the military from the civilian. This phenomenon has profound implications not only in the military and legal spheres but also in the symbolic, ethical, and communicational spheres. In hybrid warfare, the conventional categories of strategic thinking are blurred, and with them, the normative frameworks that regulate the use of legitimate violence.

Mary Kaldor (1999; 2012) is one of the most relevant authors in this field. In her theory of "new wars," she argues that contemporary armed conflicts are no longer fought solely between regular states, nor under the formal rules of international humanitarian law. Instead, what predominates are prolonged, low-intensity confrontations involving multiple actors (states, insurgents, militias, private companies, etc.), where the objective is not necessarily military victory, but rather the destabilization of the adversary, the symbolic occupation of territory, or the manipulation of public opinion. In this type of warfare, the media, digital platforms, and social networks are as decisive as tanks or drones (Chen et al., 2022).

This transformation requires a rethinking of traditional concepts. For example, when does a hybrid war begin? Is a formal declaration necessary?

Who is the enemy when threats come from unidentified actors, automated bots, or fake news platforms? These questions challenge the normative foundations of the modern international system and throw the frameworks of political and legal responsibility into crisis. Judith Butler (2009), from a critical and ethical perspective, analyzes how war frameworks construct the enemy and determine which lives are grievable.

Her reflection is key to understanding how hybrid warfare is also ontological warfare, in which there is a dispute over who has the right to exist, to be represented, and to be a victim. In this context, the media play a fundamental role by producing and reproducing images, discourses, and emotions that legitimize certain forms of violence and conceal others (Kornieiev, Ryabichev, & Glushkova, 2023).

For her part, Chantal Mouffe (2005) has insisted that democratic politics is based on the construction of symbolic antagonism. In hybrid wars, this antagonism becomes radicalized, blurred into everyday life, and transforms the public sphere into a permanent ideological battlefield. The enemy is no longer a clearly identified external target but a latent threat that may infiltrate the social fabric, networks, and public opinion. This produces a permanent state of emergency that affects civilian life, justifying surveillance, censorship, and control measures that erode democratic freedoms.

Furthermore, the commodification of war and the involvement of private actors—such as security companies, strategic communication agencies, and military contractors—further hybridizes conflict. These entities operate in gray areas of international law, and their actions escape public scrutiny. In this way, war is privatized, fragmented, and hidden behind the veil of technocracy or consulting.

In short, hybrid warfare not only reconfigures the methods of warfare but also its epistemic, legal, and moral frameworks. It forces us to question the very notion of peace, since even in officially peaceful contexts, informational, psychological, and cultural wars may be underway. This surreptitious dimension is what makes hybrid warfare particularly dangerous: it has no clear beginning or end, it does not distinguish between soldiers and civilians, and it turns language itself into a battlefield (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that in contemporary conflicts, information not only reflects the facts but also operates as a strategic weapon. The coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by international media outlets such as CNN and RT does not meet journalistic standards of objectivity. Instead, it functions as a propaganda device that contributes to the symbolic legitimization of the actors involved, the polarization of audiences, and the ideological configuration of hybrid warfare. Through framing, source selection, and narrative construction, the media shape perceptions, create enemies, and justify military or diplomatic actions.

Hybrid warfare, far from being limited to the military arena, unfolds on symbolic battlefields: the media, social networks, opinion-makers' discourses, and digital spaces. In this sense, the international media are not neutral observers, but geopolitical actors who actively participate in the production of meaning and the management of conflict. The hybridization of the military with the communicational and the civil questions the boundaries between war and peace, truth and manipulation, and raises new ethical, legal, and epistemological challenges.

This work invites us to rethink the role of the press in situations of confrontation and to strengthen critical analytical frameworks that enable us to detect and dismantle disinformation and propaganda strategies. Understanding these dynamics is urgent not only for the academic study of conflict but also for the defense of a democratic public sphere grounded in transparency, ethical reporting, and the right of audiences to non-instrumentalized communication.

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Research: Talya İşcan
Methodology: Talya İşcan
Project management: Talya İşcan
Software: Talya İşcan
Supervision: Talya İşcan
Validation: Talya İşcan
Visualization: Talya İşcan
Writing – original draft: Talya İşcan
Writing – review and editing: Talya İşcan