Journal of Law, Society & Authority **ISNN 2253-0266**

Volume (15), Issue (2), September 2026; pp. 149 - 165 **e-ISSN 2600-6219**

The Role of Media Discourse in Managing the Russian Ukrainian War

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Submission date: 18-11-2025 **Acceptance date: 11-09-2026** **Publication date: 20-09-2026**

Abstract:

The Russian-Ukrainian war has underscored the instrumental role of media discourse in shaping public perceptions and managing narratives at both the domestic and international levels. As the conflict escalated following Russia's military intervention in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, media outlets became central actors in framing the war through competing discursive strategies: Russia's securitized narrative versus Ukraine's humanized portrayal of the conflict. This study aims to analyze the function of media discourse in managing the Russian-Ukrainian war by evaluating the discursive features employed by both Russian and Ukrainian (and Western) media in influencing public opinion, legitimizing military actions, and mobilizing support. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach combined with comparative analysis, focusing on primary media content disseminated by both sides. A statistical lens was also applied to assess propaganda techniques, particularly image use, emotional appeals, and disinformation tactics.

The findings demonstrate that media discourse has not only shaped the informational environment but also served as a strategic tool for psychological warfare and international influence. Russian media primarily focused on securitizing the conflict through terms such as "existential threat," "Nazism," and "defense of national sovereignty," while Ukrainian media framed the war as a humanitarian crisis, emphasizing civilian suffering, refugee displacement, and violations of international law. The study concludes that both sides employed propaganda mechanisms—ranging from obfuscation and information suppression to emotional storytelling—to sustain domestic morale and sway global narratives. Theoretical implications touch upon the power of discourse in conflict escalation and perception management, while practical recommendations highlight the need for critical media literacy and enhanced regulatory frameworks to combat misinformation in times of war.

Keywords: *Russian Ukrainian war; Media discourse; Securitization; Humanization; Propaganda.*

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Introduction:

The relationship between Russia and Ukraine has long been marked by escalating tensions, particularly following Ukraine's announcement of its intent to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This development triggered a significant geopolitical response, culminating in Russia's declaration of a "special military operation" in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, justified on the grounds of legitimate self-defense against perceived Western-Ukrainian rapprochement. In contrast, Ukraine—backed by Western allies—condemned the operation as an illegitimate invasion, framing it as an act of aggression requiring both resistance and international denunciation.

Within this polarized context, both parties to the conflict employed media as a strategic instrument in managing the ongoing war. Media platforms were utilized to construct persuasive communicative environments at the national and international levels, with the aim of achieving a range of military, political, and psychological objectives. As the conflict unfolded, media coverage bifurcated into two dominant trajectories: one that supported the Russian narrative and another that endorsed Ukraine's counter-narrative.

Media discourse during the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war stood out through its role in directing local and international public opinion towards the events unfolding in Ukraine, between the securitisation of Russian media discourse and the humanisation of Ukrainian media discourse.

The relevance of this study stems from its focus on one of the most pressing issues in contemporary international relations—namely, the role of traditional and digital media in the management of wars and crises. Given the increasing centrality of information warfare in modern conflicts, understanding how media discourse functions as a tool of influence and persuasion are both timely and essential.

This article aims to examine the role of media discourse in managing the Russian-Ukrainian war, with particular attention to the discursive features that shaped public opinion domestically and globally. In light of this, the central research question is articulated as follows:

How has media discourse influenced the management of the Russian-Ukrainian war?

Based on this, the following two hypotheses were formulated:

The more Russia attempts to legitimise its military operations in Ukraine, the more it invokes national security and the right to self-defence in its media discourse.

The more Ukraine seeks to condemn Russia's invasion of its territory, the more it adopts the concept of human security and Russian violations in its media discourse.

To address this question, the study adopts a case study approach centered on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, supplemented by comparative analysis to identify points of convergence and divergence between Russian and Ukrainian media narratives. In addition, a statistical framework is employed to evaluate the propaganda techniques used by both sides throughout the conflict.

I. Media Coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian War

The media coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war emerged as a decisive element from the very outset of the Russian military operation announced by President Vladimir Putin on February 24, 2022. Both Russia and Ukraine—supported by the West—mobilized a wide spectrum of traditional and modern media platforms to document and frame the evolving dynamics of the conflict. This section focuses on the duality of media coverage, examining both the Russian perspective and that of the Ukrainian-Western alliance.

a) Russian Media Coverage

The Russian government heavily relies on *Russia Today (RT)*—a state-funded media network that comprises nine TV channels, documentary platforms, and multilingual digital news portals accessible in 47 countries. RT has emerged as Russia’s principal tool for external media influence and counter-narrative projection. It challenges Western media narratives by portraying Russia as a global power standing firm against Western conspiracies that allegedly threaten its national security

and internal stability. President Vladimir Putin himself emphasized this strategic intent, stating:

"When we launched the RT project in 2005, we aimed to introduce another strong player to the global media scene—one that would break the monopoly on the global flow of information"[1].

Russian media have consistently defended the military operation by invoking the rhetoric of existential defense[2]. In his February 24th, 2022 speech, Putin described the operation as a "special military mission" aimed at demilitarizing Ukraine and protecting the Donbas region from alleged acts of genocide committed against Russian-speaking minorities[3]. The Russian media further engaged in efforts to discredit Western states by depicting them as aggressive and weak, frequently employing manipulated or fabricated images and videos to support this framing[4].

Moreover, the Russian media administration imposed strict editorial controls, banning the use of certain terminologies and prohibiting the broadcast of media content that contradicted the state-sanctioned narrative[5]. The Russian State Duma introduced legislation penalizing the dissemination of information deemed false or harmful to the Russian Armed Forces. In response to restrictions imposed by Facebook on Russian content, the Russian authorities limited access to the platform within the country.

Visual imagery played a central role in shaping public perception. Russian media harnessed the semiotics of imagery by incorporating sophisticated visual technologies and cinematic techniques to enhance the symbolic weight of media content. RT's coverage emphasized visual

[1]Mayada Mohamed Arafa Sayed Ahmed, "A Semiotic Analysis of Photographic Images Used in Political Propaganda during the Russian-Ukrainian War", *Egyptian Journal for Research*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Egypt 2023), p. 605.
[2]Taleb Yassine, "Dynamics and Challenges of Media Coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian Armed Conflict: A Comparative Analysis Between Traditional and Digital Media", *Alif: Language, Media and Society*, vol. 11, (Algeria 2024), p. 305.
[3]Amina Fayid, "How the Russian-Ukrainian War Expanded into the Virtual World", Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, July 13, 2025 (https://urlz.fr/uI6s), accessed July 16, 2025.
[4]Shaimaa Khaled Abdelkader Suleiman Nail, "Cultural Dimensions in Russian Foreign Policy toward Ukraine (2014–2023)", Arab Democratic Center, June 22, 2023 (https://urlz.fr/uI6H), accessed July 15, 2025.
[5]Taleb Yassine, op. cit., p. 305.

representations of strength, dominance, and national pride, particularly through staged images of President Putin using assertive body language. Other visuals focused on glorifying the Russian military, boosting morale, and intimidating Ukrainian forces through implied threats of retaliation and destruction.

b) Ukrainian and Western Media Coverage

In contrast, Ukrainian media leveraged social media platforms and digital communication channels as primary tools for mobilizing both domestic and international audiences. By maintaining global visibility of the conflict, Ukrainian media framed the narrative to emphasize Russian violations and Ukrainian resistance. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy frequently used social media to disseminate images and videos depicting the devastation inflicted by Russian forces, alongside heroic portrayals of the Ukrainian army[1]. These efforts successfully galvanized Western public opinion and pressured Western governments to intensify military and humanitarian support for Ukraine.

Western media coverage largely aligned with the Ukrainian perspective, often casting doubt on the legitimacy of Russian claims. Leading outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, and *The Financial Times* employed terminologies such as "Russian invasion," "occupation," "volunteer fighters," and "resistance forces" to reinforce this framing.

Western support for Ukraine also extended into the media economy. Official Russian media were denied access to revenue-generating features on social media platforms, while Ukrainian content—including battlefield updates, civilian impact, and footage of Russian losses—was promoted across various channels.

Additionally, Western media heavily digitalized the war's coverage by deploying tools of digital journalism such as interactive maps, satellite imagery, infographics, and short-form news videos. *The New York Times*, for example, launched a continuously updated page titled "Tracking the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," while *The Guardian* developed an integrated media section titled "The Russian-Ukrainian War: A

[1]Benghazi Branch, "Media as a Tool in the Russian-Ukrainian War", Libyan Center for Strategic Studies, August 26, 2024 (https://urlz.fr/uI6M), accessed July 15, 2025.

Comprehensive Guide with Maps, Videos, and Images." These tools enabled continuous monitoring and audience engagement, keeping international publics informed in real-time[1].

European governments further banned the broadcast of *RT* and *Sputnik* within their territories and collaborated with major digital platforms to launch economic media warfare against Russia. Measures included demonetizing Russian content and providing support for pro-Ukrainian user engagement. Tech giants such as Facebook and Twitter allowed users to openly express opposition to the Russian invasion, amplifying pro-Ukrainian sentiments across the digital landscape[2].

In sum, the media confrontation between Russia and Ukraine—backed by Western alliances—has evolved into an extension of the battlefield itself. Each party strategically mobilized both traditional and digital media ecosystems to shape narratives, influence perceptions, and generate political capital. This information war is characterized by a continuous contest over truth, legitimacy, and global sympathy.

II. Features of Media Discourse

Throughout the Russian-Ukrainian war, media discourse crystallized into two dominant and ideologically opposed paradigms: a securitized discourse, largely adopted and disseminated by Russian media, and a humanized discourse promoted by Ukraine[3]. This strategy aimed to keep the conflict in the global spotlight by broadcasting the progression of events through a distinctly Ukrainian narrative. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy played a prominent role in this process by disseminating images and videos on social media depicting Russian violations on Ukrainian soil. Simultaneously, he promoted the heroism of the Ukrainian armed forces in resisting Russian aggression[4]. This approach effectively contributed to rallying Western support for Ukraine by applying pressure on governments to increase military and humanitarian assistance[5].

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[1]Mayada Mohamed Arafa Sayed Ahmed, op. cit., p. 585.
[2]Ibid., p. 626.
[3] "Strategic Communication: How Does Ukraine Manage Its Public Relations Campaign?", Center for Future Studies, August 21, 2024 (https://urlz.fr/uI6P), accessed July 7, 2025.
[4]Benghazi Branch, op. cit.
[5] "Western Media Coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian War: A Critical Perspective", Decision Center for Media Studies, March 6, 2022 (https://urlz.fr/uI6S),

Conversely, Western media coverage overwhelmingly aligned itself with the Ukrainian perspective while casting doubt on the Russian version of events. Prominent outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, and *The Financial Times* adopted terminology including "Russian invasion," "Russian occupation," "volunteer fighters," and "resistance forces"[1]. These lexical choices reinforced a narrative structure that delegitimized the Russian military operation and amplified sympathy toward the Ukrainian cause[2].This section examines the core characteristics of both approaches, highlighting the rhetorical devices and propaganda strategies employed by the media in each context[3].

a) Securitization of Russian Media Discourse

The process of securitizing media discourse in the Russian context followed a structured progression, grounded in national security concerns and identity preservation:

1. Referential Object:

The referential object of Russian media discourse was national security. The perceived threat was the growing Ukrainian-Western rapprochement, especially following Ukraine's announcement of its intent to join NATO. This geopolitical realignment was framed as a direct challenge to Russian influence in the Black Sea region and Crimea.

2. Existential Threat:

Russian media portrayed the NATO-Ukrainian alliance as an existential threat to the Russian Federation. The narrative emphasized Russia's right to invoke "legitimate self-defense" by initiating military intervention in Ukraine. The justification included the protection of Russian-speaking minorities in the Donbas region and combating what the Kremlin termed as "neo-Nazi elements."

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accessed July 7, 2025.
[1]Benghazi Branch, op. cit.
[2]Soumaya El Yaakoubi, "The War in Ukraine... Tools of Censorship and Influence in News Production", Al Jazeera Media Institute, October 3, 2022 (https://urlz.fr/uI6U), accessed July 8, 2025.
[3]Benghazi Branch, op. cit.

3. Securitizing Actor:

State-controlled Russian media served as the securitizing actor by characterizing Ukraine's NATO ambitions as a clear and immediate danger. The so-called "special military operation" was framed not as aggression but as a necessity to preserve national survival.

4. Discursive Action:

Russian discourse employed a range of lexical and semantic strategies to shape public perception. Key terms included "special military operation," "Western weakness and aggression," "Russian minorities," "terrorist Nazism," and "extremist nationalists." These choices constructed an image of Russia as a great power, justified in asserting its dominance and defending its sovereign interests.

5. Target Audience:

The Russian media discourse targeted both domestic and international audiences. Internally, it sought to mobilize public support for the war, foster national unity, and elevate military morale. Internationally, the discourse aimed to minimize global condemnation by portraying Russian actions as legally and morally defensible.

In summary, Russian securitized discourse leveraged survivalist themes and cast Western presence in Ukraine as a fundamental threat to national sovereignty. It relied heavily on emotionally charged language and symbolic imagery to legitimize the war, invoking terms like "Nazism," "protection of minorities," "Russian greatness," and "existence and security." These rhetorical elements functioned as tools of justification, framing the war as a lawful and necessary defense against Western encroachment.

b) Humanization of Ukrainian Media Discourse

Conversely, Ukraine adopted a humanization strategy in its media discourse, which followed a distinct structure centered on humanitarian appeals and the moral condemnation of Russian aggression:

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1. Referential Object:

The referential object in Ukrainian media was human security. The core of the narrative emphasized the suffering of civilians and violations of human rights caused by the Russian invasion.

2. Humanitarian Threat:

Ukrainian media framed the Russian military intervention as a direct attack on the Ukrainian people, depicting Russia as a perpetrator of war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law. The narrative focused on civilian casualties, destruction of infrastructure, and the resulting refugee crisis.

3. Humanizing Actor:

Ukrainian media outlets positioned themselves as protectors of civilian lives, portraying the war as an unjustifiable assault on human dignity. The humanization of the conflict aimed to evoke global empathy and moral outrage.

4. Humanitarian Discourse:

The discourse adopted by Ukrainian media included terms such as "resistance," "invasion," "aggression," "Ukrainian people," "targeting of civilians," "crimes," "violations," "refugees," and "humanitarian crisis." These lexical choices were instrumental in generating global solidarity with Ukraine and increasing Western political and military support.

5. Public Opinion:

Ukrainian media discourse primarily targeted international public opinion, with the objective of securing condemnation of Russian aggression and mobilizing international responses. Domestically, the discourse aimed to boost national morale and unify the population behind the military and government.

In essence, Ukrainian humanized discourse constructed the war as a moral and legal aberration requiring immediate international action. It emphasized the existential threat to human security and civilian life posed by the Russian military campaign. By linking Russian actions to

violations of international humanitarian law, Ukrainian media sought to reframe the war not merely as a geopolitical struggle but as a humanitarian emergency demanding global intervention.

III. Propaganda Techniques Employed by Both Parties in the Conflict

Throughout the Russian-Ukrainian war, media outlets played a crucial role in constructing a propagandistic communicative environment aimed at influencing public opinion domestically and internationally[1]. Both conflicting sides strategically employed a wide array of propaganda techniques to support their respective narratives and advance specific political and psychological objectives[2]. This section highlights the primary propaganda strategies adopted by Russian and Ukrainian media[3].

1. Promotion of Official Narratives:

Russian propaganda consistently framed Russia as a liberator combating Nazism in Ukraine. The Kremlin-aligned media drew upon conspiracy theories about Western manipulation and framed NATO-supported Ukrainian forces as "terrorist neo-Nazis"[4].These narratives aimed to legitimize Russia's "special military operation" by emphasizing its goal of defending Russian minorities in eastern Ukraine from human rights abuses[5].

Russian discourse also invoked historical and cultural references, such as the Principality of Kyivan Rus and its baptism, portraying Ukraine as the spiritual and historical cradle of the Russian nation and identity. Key terms repeatedly used in Russian propaganda included:

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[1]Hussein Murad Kazem Al-Sultani, "The Use of Propaganda Techniques in the Russian-Ukrainian War via Telegram", *Wasit Journal of Human Sciences*, vol. 21, no. 2 (Iraq 2025), p. 859.
[2]Khalil Azayma, "Trajectories of the Russian War on Ukraine", Abaad Center for Strategic Studies, July 2022 (https://urlz.fr/uI6w), accessed July 9, 2025.
[3]Mohamed El-Amin Moussa, "Russian Propaganda Narratives during the War on Ukraine and Convergence with Digital Media", Al Jazeera Center for Studies, April 14, 2022 (https://urlz.fr/uI6u), accessed July 8, 2025.
[4]Fatima Safrawi & Massoudi Fatima Zahra, "Media as a Weapon in the Russian-Ukrainian War: The Battle of Contradictory Narratives", JSM Center for Research and Studies, October 3, 2022 (https://urlz.fr/uI73), accessed July 26, 2025.
[5]Taleb Yassine, op. cit., p. 305.

- "Special military operation"
- "New Nazism" (referring to Ukraine's leadership)
- "Security and existence" (emphasizing the need to eliminate the Nazi threat to preserve national identity)
- "Radical nationalists" (used to label any resistance to Russian intervention)

Conversely, Ukrainian propaganda focused on defending national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Ukrainian media highlighted Russian war crimes against civilians, emphasized national unity in the face of aggression, and sought to mobilize international—particularly Western—support. While Ukraine also imposed certain restrictions on press freedom under the pretext of national security, it nonetheless maintained a more pluralistic media space than Russia.

2. Obfuscation and Censorship:

Russian media adopted counter-propaganda techniques, notably the deliberate concealment of information concerning Russian military losses. Russian outlets routinely dismissed reports published by pro-Ukrainian sources regarding economic and military setbacks, and instead portrayed the Russian army as targeting only military infrastructure. Civilian casualties were denied or framed as the result of necessary evacuations[1].Furthermore, Russian media disseminated footage alleging Ukrainian war crimes, such as the execution of 12 captured Russian soldiers by Ukrainian forces. This tactic aimed to portray Ukraine as a violator of the Geneva Conventions and to shift moral responsibility for the war's humanitarian toll onto the Ukrainian government.

3. Disinformation and Lack of Credibility:

For instance, on March 4, 2022, Russian media circulated a video allegedly showing Russian soldiers celebrating before deployment to Ukraine, which was later verified as a 2018 video of Uzbek soldiers[2]. Similarly, Ukrainian media popularized the tale of the "Ghost of Kyiv"—a heroic fighter pilot who allegedly shot down six Russian planes alone—

[1]Mayada Mohamed Arafa Sayed Ahmed, op. cit., p. 625.
[2]Amina Fayid, op. cit.

though the story was later debunked[1].Each side exploited digital platforms to disseminate false or misleading content, including the use of video games, fictional narratives, and edited scenes from films and television. Influencers on TikTok played a notable role in spreading fake videos, such as allegations of Ukrainian-perpetrated genocide in Donbas—used to justify the Russian invasion[2].At the same time, Western-aligned media launched their own digital offensive against Russia[3]. Social media platforms were flooded with fabricated videos and articles aimed at vilifying the Russian state and garnering global sympathy for Ukraine[4].

4. Ridicule and the Spread of Doubt:

Russian media platforms employed sarcasm and ridicule as a tool to undermine the credibility of Ukrainian leadership[5]. By casting doubt on President Zelenskyy's political and military competence, Russian propaganda attempted to erode public trust and demoralize the Ukrainian population, increasing their vulnerability to defeatism and surrender[6].

5. Emotional Appeal and Victim Narratives:

Ukrainian media, on the other hand, capitalized on emotional appeal by publicizing humanitarian stories, especially those involving women, children, and the elderly affected by displacement and Russian shelling[7]. The refugee crisis generated substantial media attention. According to the UNHCR's 2025 report, approximately 6.8 million Ukrainians had fled the country, with an additional 3.6 million internally displaced, and 12.7 million people in urgent need of humanitarian

[1]Studies and Reports Unit, "File: Ukraine Crisis – Foreign Fighters, Refugees, Media Disinformation, and Implications for Europe", European Center for Counterterrorism and Intelligence Studies, March 20, 2022 (https://urlz.fr/uI76), accessed July 17, 2025.
[2]Bousserdja Lilia & Boudarbala Abdelkader, "The Use of Social Media Platforms in Modern Wars: Wartok Russian War as a Model", *Al-Risala Journal for Humanities and Research*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Algeria 2023), p. 481.
[3]Shaimaa Khaled Abdelkader Suleiman Nail, op. cit.
[4]Bousserdja Lilia & Boudarbala Abdelkader, op. cit., p. 481.
[5]Amina Fayid, op. cit.
[6]Ibid.
[7]UNHCR, "Emergency Appeal: Ukraine Emergency", UNHCR, February 2025 (https://urlz.fr/uI7c), accessed July 30, 2025.

assistance[1]. UNICEF reported in March 2022 that two million children had been displaced[2].

Figure 1: Key Russian Propaganda Techniques

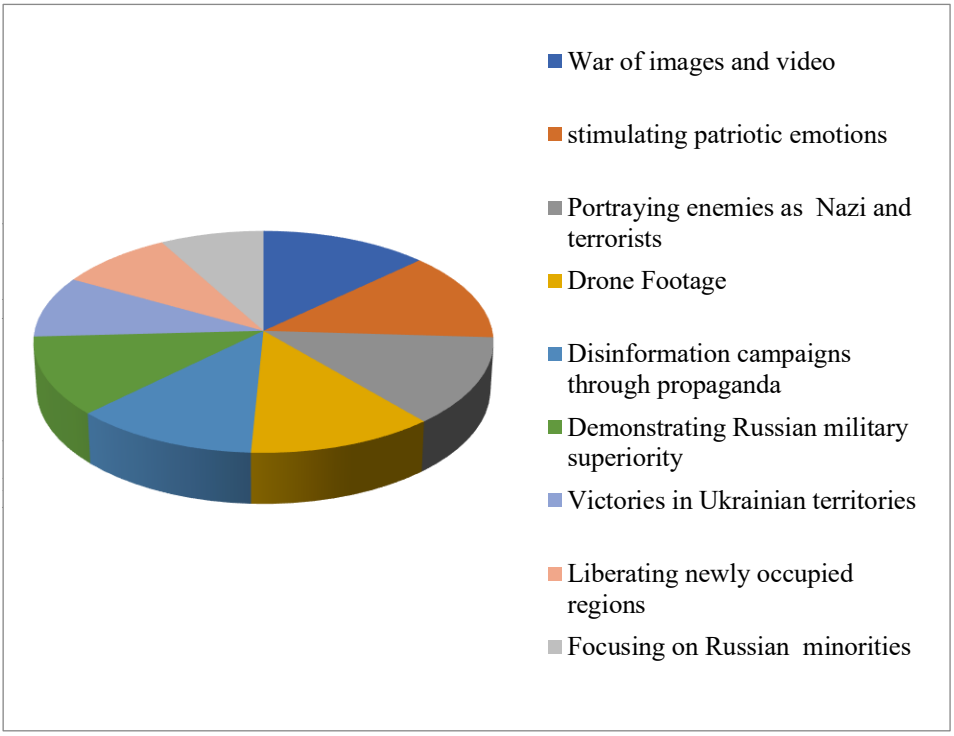
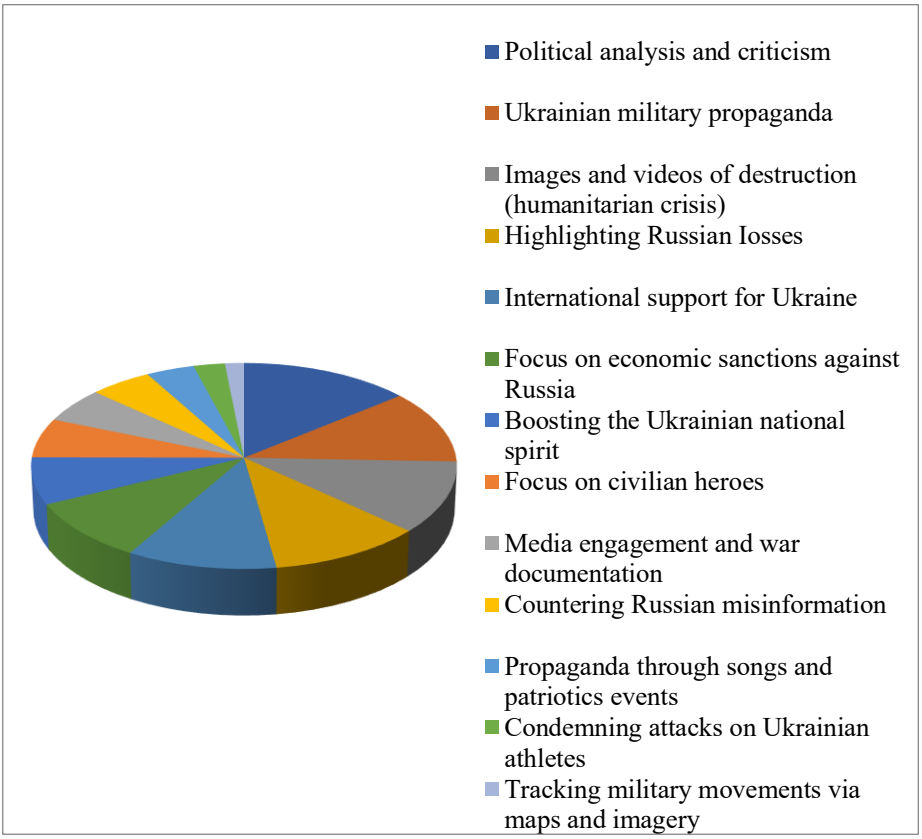


Figure 2: Key Ukrainiens Propaganda Techniques

[1]UNHCR, "Ukraine Emergency", UNHCR, June 12, 2025 (https://urlz.fr/uI7a), accessed July 30, 2025.
[2]UNICEF, "Two Million Refugee Children Flee War in Ukraine in Search of Safety Across Borders", UNICEF, March 30, 2022 (https://urlz.fr/uI7n), accessed August 5, 2025.



Source: Compiled by the author based on Hussein Murad Kazem Al-Sultani, op. cit. pp. 872–873.

This figure reveals the leading propaganda techniques used by Ukrainian media. Political analysis and critique ranked highest (12.35%), followed by military-focused propaganda (10.18%), destructive imagery from Ukraine (9.91%), and depictions of Russian losses (9.59%). Other methods ranged from 1.37% to 9.33%.

Ukrainian media effectively mobilized these techniques to counter Russian disinformation, promote the official Ukrainian narrative, and wage psychological warfare aimed at strengthening national resistance and increasing global solidarity—especially from Western allies.

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Conclusion:

The Russian-Ukrainian war has highlighted the critical role played by media discourse in influencing public opinion regarding the unfolding events in Ukraine. This influence materialized in two distinct and competing narrative streams: the securitized discourse aligned with the Russian Federation, and the humanized discourse aligned with Ukraine.

This article has arrived at several key conclusions:

- Both parties to the conflict—Russia and Ukraine—actively employed traditional and digital media as strategic tools for managing the war, with each side crafting media narratives to serve its political, military, and ideological objectives. At the domestic level, media discourse was leveraged to bolster national unity and morale. Internationally, it aimed to mobilize global support and legitimacy. However, both narratives were marked by significant bias, including the use of disinformation, information suppression, manipulated facts, and fabricated news content.
- Russian securitized discourse centered on existential threats, portraying the war as a justified act of national self-defense. The media adopted a survivalist rhetoric and emphasized narratives involving terrorism, Nazism, and civilian harm to frame the military operation as a legitimate response to Western encroachment and NATO expansionism. This discourse relied heavily on emotionally charged terminology to gain both domestic and international approval.
- In contrast, Ukrainian media discourse was rooted in a human security framework, emphasizing individual rights and humanitarian concerns. Terms such as "aggression," "violations," "war crimes," "humanitarian crisis," "human rights," "international law," "targeting of civilians," and "refugees" were prominently employed to depict the Russian invasion as a gross violation of international norms. This strategy aimed to generate international condemnation and increase Western support by highlighting both the legal and humanitarian dimensions of the crisis.

Recommendations:

In light of these findings, the article proposes the following recommendations:

- States must invest in strengthening their media systems, particularly in crisis contexts, recognizing the media as a powerful and strategic tool in conflict management. A resilient and ethically grounded media apparatus can play a vital role in shaping public attitudes and countering hostile propaganda.
- It is essential to enhance public awareness about the responsible use of social media platforms, encouraging individuals to critically evaluate information sources and avoid the spread of fabricated or manipulated content—especially that which originates from partisan or state-controlled outlets engaged in the conflict.

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