



*Routledge Studies in Media, Communication, and Politics*

# **MEDIA, DISSIDENCE AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE**

Edited by  
Tabe Bergman and Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman



# Media, Dissidence and the War in Ukraine

This volume examines the global media coverage of the armed conflict in Ukraine, focusing on the marginalization of dissident perspectives in the West and the information quality and diversity on social media.

Along with presenting original, empirical studies on how mainstream media in countries as diverse as Israel, the Czech Republic, Ghana, and the Netherlands have covered the conflict between NATO and Russia since 2022, this book sheds light on the role of the state and the media in policing the boundaries of permissible thought on the conflict in the West, as well as in Russia and Ukraine. It also delves into the war's representation on prominent social media platforms.

Written by a diverse group of international researchers, this multifaceted volume offers new perspectives and insights on the reporting of the ongoing conflict. It will interest scholars of international communication and media, foreign policy and international politics, war and conflict, content analysis, and journalism.

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# Media, Dissidence and the War in Ukraine

Edited by Tabe Bergman and  
Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman

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# Foreword

The Constitution of the UN Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) states:

since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed; the peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind. For these reasons, the States Parties to this Constitution, are agreed and determined to develop and to increase the means of communication between their peoples and to employ these means for the purposes of mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other's lives.

In this book on the media and the war in Ukraine, the reader is – once again – confronted with the massive gap between the UNESCO idealism and the reality of national and global communication. The expectation in 1945 was that media of communication would contribute through free and non-partisan information to human solidarity and mutual understanding. The reality, as it has been documented in many studies, shows that the dominant information channels were cannibalized by corporate and political interests and contributed in belligerent and divisive ways to the escalation of conflicts, often lethal. The book you are about to read reminds us – through different and insightful voices – how the mediatization of conflicts manages our minds to accept narratives that favour system maintenance and exclude the deviant voices.

Being part of the critical school in communication and media research I am delighted to see that non-conformist analysis in our discipline did not wither away as a result of the neoliberalization of academic research. The history of media research is largely characterized by epistemological conservatism, instrumental to industrial interests, and by lack of systemic criticism. However, there was always a dissident voice in the works of, amongst others, Herbert Schiller, Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, Peter Golding, Armand Mattelart, and Graham Murdock. With their contributions on manipulation,

distortion, and exclusion in mainstream media and on social platforms, the editors and authors of this book demonstrate that critical analysis is still alive.

Whatever political, ideological, or legal perspectives one may hold on the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, it seems clear that for an expanding “killing field” in Europe to be exchanged for peace, “the defences of peace must be constructed” in people’s minds. Media, both mainstream and social, bear a great responsibility for defending peace. The studies on the following pages testify how the media’s lack of “intellectual and moral solidarity” leads us into a possibly fatal endgame. However depressing, we must read these pages, reflect on them, and learn how to build better defences of peace.

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# Introduction

## The war in Ukraine and foreign news reporting

*Tabe Bergman and Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman*

### CBS News retracts rare act of journalism

In early August 2022, CBS News announced the airing of the documentary *Arming Ukraine*, and released a teaser to drum up public interest. The teaser contained assertions that much of the military aid sent by the US government had gone unaccounted for once it arrived in Ukraine. For example, Jonas Ohman, the founder of an NGO active in the country, estimated that only “like 30%” of aid reached the front. The catchy quote was part of a promotional tweet for the documentary, which contained a link to the trailer. Within days though, CBS News removed the tweet and added the following editor’s note to the online article that accompanied the announcement of the documentary:

This article has been updated to reflect changes since the CBS Reports documentary “Arming Ukraine” was filmed, and the documentary is also being updated.<sup>1</sup> Jonas Ohman says the delivery has significantly improved since filming with CBS in late April. The government of Ukraine notes that U.S. defense attaché Brigadier General Garrick M. Harmon arrived in Kyiv in August 2022 for arms control and monitoring.

(Yamaguchi and Pena 2022)

What had happened? Simply put, CBS News had buckled to the fierce backlash, aggressively initiated by the Ukrainian government. As Michael Tracey (2022), an independent journalist who reported from Ukraine, put it, CBS News decided to “update” the documentary after a “giant tsunami of trolling from those who were upset at the information being reported.” CBS News’s swift retraction did not suffice for the government of Ukraine. Its minister of foreign affairs, Dmytro Kuleba (2022), tweeted that CBS News had “misled a huge audience by sharing unsubstantiated claims and damaging trust in supplies of vital military aid to a nation resisting aggression and genocide. There should be an internal investigation into who enabled this and why.”

Alternative media had a field day with the story. Breaking Points’ anchor Saagar Enjeti defended CBS News, saying it had merely “committed an act



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of journalism.” He called the journalist who made the documentary “brave,” adding that “it takes an extraordinary amount of courage, knowing how much pushback you are going to get in the current environment, but at the end of the day [CBS News] went ahead and folded.” Enjeti noted the concerning lack of mainstream media attention and public outrage: “This is a legitimate act of journalism, which the government and our military and their military pushed back so hard [on], that [CBS News has]... disappeared the entire thing” (Breaking Points 2022).

The documentary was quickly available on YouTube, garnering about 20 thousand views in its first week (“Arming Ukraine...” 2022). Anyone who watches the entire documentary cannot but conclude that, per the journalistic tradition, the trailer highlighted the controversial bits. Overall, the documentary supports the war, seems to condone – or at least does not speak out against – the by-any-means approach to winning the war militarily, as verbalized by some of the interviewees. The issue about weapons and other aid not arriving at the front feels secondary to the viewer. In the opinion of the editors of this volume, then, the most remarkable aspect of the small but sordid episode in American journalism is that the criticisms voiced in the documentary were merely procedural: they concerned the *execution* of a policy, not the policy of delivering the weapons itself. Yet, in this case, even procedural criticism was not allowed and the documentary was pulled.

As scholars have noted, procedural criticism can frequently be found in the US media, giving them a veneer of critical resistance towards the powers that be. Criticism of the aims or an honest examination of the motivations of Western governments have traditionally been off limits. For instance, at the end of the war in Vietnam, *New York Times*-commentator Anthony Lewis could lament the US’s “bungling efforts to do good” and call US involvement in Vietnam a “mistake,” as long as he did not question the morality of Washington’s motives (Chomsky cited in Becker 2008). CBS News’s self-censorship affair seems to indicate however that, more and more, journalists do not even allow themselves the freedom anymore to present procedural criticism embedded in a pro-war narrative.

Another remarkable aspect is that the CBS News story of disappearing weapons in Ukraine, though originally researched, was barely news. In May, the French news agency AFP (2022) reported: “Experts warn that arms for Ukraine could end up in wrong hands.” The *New York Times* reported that, according to US officials, the US government knew little about how the Ukrainians were conducting the war, including how they used the weapons they received. In fact, the officials said, the US had “no idea” (Barnes 2022; also Bo Lillis et al. 2022). Moreover, the CBS News story was not about something new, but rather an expected repeat of history. As Professor Trita Parsi of Georgetown University reminded viewers on the show *Rising* (2022), American weapons ending up in the wrong hands happens “all the time.” In Syria, Al Qaeda used US weapons against the United States, with the “same

thing” taking place in Yemen and Libya, for instance. Parsi (*ibid.*) made a rational appeal:

We should be, again, investigating and we should put a stop to those [weapons’] diversions rather than shutting down the story and putting in some sort of a media censorship. So, this is extremely concerning and again if you truly want to support the Ukrainians you should be very worried about this story rather than seeking to ignore it.

Indeed. Though ultimately unknowable, it is interesting to speculate why the previous reports as to arms ending up in the wrong hands in Ukraine did not spark the same pushback as the CBS News story. Likely, the status of CBS News and the fact that the accusations were part of a documentary instead of an article played a part. What we do know is that a journalism divorced from history cannot be much better than stenography. Important reasons for embarking on an edited volume on the war in Ukraine and its media coverage, then, are to reassert the historical context of the conflict and to resist what could be increasing pressures in Western countries to self-censor, not just on professional journalists, but on anyone active on social media. We now turn to additional reasons for examining the conflict in Ukraine and its media representations.

### **The importance of (examining) the war in Ukraine**

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine could well mark a sharp turning point in global history as the West moves to isolate Russia, which appears to align itself more closely with non-Western powers, for instance China. The long-term consequences of the conflict cannot yet be fully understood, but many observers have noted that the world is going through one of the most dangerous phases in its history, with conflict between nuclear-armed states a real possibility.

The present moment calls for academics, journalists, and other experts to engage with the “first rough draft” of history that is being produced and disseminated by the media. There exists an urgent need to explore the information on the war from all sides with the aim to understand the media’s role in the war and, hopefully, peace. Specifically, academics and other experts can play a part in resisting the observed tendency of national and global media, especially during war, to silo themselves off by excluding voices that run counter to state narratives. The world’s chances to resolve such crises will improve when global citizens have ready access to the relevant perspectives and arguments from all major sides, and when they can avail themselves of informed critiques of the coverage by national media systems and global media outlets. Global citizens can benefit from insightful contextualization of the media, including the commercial and political interests they might serve.

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The invasion and following crack-down on Russian media by the Russian state, the broader consequences for Russia's national media landscape, and Russia's propaganda output, to give but a few examples, are worthy areas of investigation. The editors of this volume, though, chose to focus on the Western media's coverage of the conflict. There are salient reasons for this focus. Western media remain world-leading in their opinion-shaping power, and the opinions of citizens in Western countries carry proportionally a lot of weight, given the formal democratic structures in these societies, and the outsized influence Western governments retain on the world stage.

There are scholarly reasons as well for this focus. Much convincing research, especially since the rise of the internet, has argued that foreign news reporting, despite much internet-optimism, has stayed closely within Western political parameters. Hearn-Branaman and Bergman (2022) recently observed through an analysis of the literature and a number of case studies of the coverage by US and UK media of "official enemies" of the West that the main conclusions drawn by scholars of foreign news (e.g., Herman, Chomsky, Bennett, and Entman) remain valid up to this day.

The escalation of the Ukraine crisis provides the opportunity to test the possibility that, as argued by several experts, the pressures to conform to dominant pro-Western narratives, both in Western mainstream media and on social media, have *increased*. Such was the opinion, for instance, of the late Russia expert Stephen Cohen, who said that during the Cold War "the media were open – the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* – to debate," but that these days "they no longer are. It's one hand clapping in [America's] major newspapers and in our broadcast networks" (cited in Boyd-Barrett 2017a, 2). Noam Chomsky agrees, telling the comedian Russell Brand on his YouTube channel:

The United States is living under a kind of totalitarian culture, which has never existed in my lifetime. And it's much worse in many ways than the Soviet Union before Gorbachev. Go back to the 1970s. The people in Soviet Russia could access BBC, Voice of America, and German television if they wanted to find out the news. If today in the United States, you want to find out what [Foreign Minister] of Russia Lavrov is saying [...] you can't do it. It's worrying [...] Anyone who dares to break the party line on the dominant issue of today, Ukraine, is simply demonized, vilified, and can be sent to Gulag. It's a free country still but you can barely talk. And that has very dangerous implications for the current situation and beyond.  
(cited in Brand 2022)

Joe Lauria, editor-in-chief of the investigative site *Consortium News*, says that US authorities are making concerted efforts to stifle independent media because of their critical coverage of the Ukraine crisis, including, as John Mearsheimer (2014) has argued, Washington's partial but substantial responsibility in the matter. According to Lauria:

They are trying to crush the smallest spark of dissent [...] So we are in a situation now where, because we report these causes [of the Ukraine crisis], we are being smeared and attacked and deplatformed, and PayPal won't let us raise money through them. But as I said, we are doing quite well without them, thank you very much.

(cited in Democracy Now! 2022b)

Last but not least, Katrina Vanden Heuvel, Russia expert and editor-in-chief of *The Nation* magazine, observed that what we see:

over the last couple of years is that the corporate media has a one-sided debate. You don't hear from informed, analytical scholars or writers who are not there to justify but to provide history and context about what we are witnessing today in the proxy war [unintelligible], the war between Ukraine and Russia. There is a marginalization of those voices and a preference for voices which are about how to escalate the war, how to cover the military, not cover the history. And I think the venerable journalist Walter Lippmann once said: "When all think alike no one thinks very much." And that seems to be the framework [for] what we are witnessing. And I think it is very important that there is not an intellectual no-fly zone, even while understanding how barbaric, how illegal, the Russian war against Ukraine is. But this war is going to end, and how it ends is a matter of discussion that isn't being shown in any real way on our screens, in corporate media.

(cited in Democracy Now! 2022a)

These expert testimonies support the position that the uniformity in the Western media has increased over the last few years, possibly for reasons related to the presidency of Donald Trump, the hoax called Russia-gate, and "woke culture." If indeed the case, then we are witnessing an extremely worrying development that undermines the liberal model of societies and their media, in which freedom of speech and debate are required to generate and push for policy solutions to issues that concern all. For sure, the question of war, not to mention global war, falls into that category.

This edited volume then explores mainstream and social media coverage of the war and the marginalization of voices and perspectives. Another reason for this edited volume concerns the timeliness of the conflict: the importance of producing work that assesses ongoing issues so they can be presented and discussed as they unfold, directly connecting to the media experiences of students and citizens.

A final reason why an edited volume on the war in Ukraine is relevant and important relates to the existing literature on the conflict in Ukraine. The Russian invasion is recent and therefore academic research is sparse. Quite some work has been done already on Russian propaganda and media repression, and we would like to reiterate that this is valuable work. Less

work has been done on the Western coverage of the conflict, and much of that work has been presented in academic journals that lack the reach and appeal of a book published by a well-known publisher. Given the power disparity between Russia and the West, such research might be of more importance than examinations of Russian propaganda and media control. Before we address the existing literature on the war in Ukraine in some detail, we provide historical notes on the broader topic of war and media.

### Notes on war reporting history

During war, press control is viewed by governments as necessary in order to conceal sensitive information, secure public support, enhance public morale and the spirit of combatants, and to cover up failures (Taylor 2002). The amount of control that governments exercise largely depends on two elements: the political and public support for the war and the ease of access to the war areas by journalists.

Conboy (2010) argues that the first true “media war” was the Crimean War of 1854, given how the *Times* of London covered it. The newspaper employed an extensive communication network between Crimea and the United Kingdom and could bring back information quicker than the government. Journalists like W.H. Russell provided “regular, colourful, eyewitness accounts of foreign wars to readers’ breakfast tables for the first time” (Conboy 2010, 84). The UK government had a hard time controlling the flow of information, and negative reports about how the war was run spread widely, leading to massive public dissatisfaction. This arguably was the first shot in a long-term “war within a war” between journalists looking to report and governments wanting to stop them in order to control the narrative.

During the Korean War in the early 1950s, it was difficult for American journalists to travel independently to the conflict zones due to the distance and lack of transportation infrastructure. Once there, communicating messages back to the United States was difficult, so journalists relied heavily on military assistance for both delivering their reports and travel arrangements. In this case the amount of control the government could exert on where journalists went and the content of their reports was quite high, with the military issuing an “official censorship code” for the war correspondents (Graber 2003, 30–1). By contrast, in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s journalists could independently travel to the war zones via Thailand and Cambodia. Due to advances in communication technology, they did not rely on the military to transmit their reports, photos, and film back to their editors and producers. This led to the military changing strategies, focusing on keeping journalists in the dark about events by withholding information, supplying journalists with positive stories which overstated the military’s success, and directly contorting negative reporting (Graber 2003, 31–2).

The US government learned lessons from Vietnam and changed strategy for the subsequent major conflicts. In the Persian Gulf War, similar to the