

Propaganda and U.S. Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Neo-Nazism in Ukraine

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A point of contention between Russia and the United States is whether Ukraine's white nationalist groups are a cause for concern. Since the beginning of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2014, United States media outlets have sporadically reported on the neo-Nazi militias and their role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, such as the Azov Battalion, a far-right nationalist network of military, paramilitary, and political organizations based in Ukraine (CISAC, 2022). However, as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine intensified, so did the media's criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In his public address on February 24, 2022, Putin stated that part of his offensive aim was to "denazify" Ukraine (Berger, 2022). The statement was met with stark opposition from many influential news outlets in the United States. Several acknowledged the statement as "Putin's false claim" and often pointed to the Jewish heritage of Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky. However, this explanation does little to counteract the claim regarding white nationalism in Ukraine (Karatnycky, 2018).

Using van Dijk's schemata analysis (1991) coupled with Black's propaganda typology (2001), this study critically examines the news coverage of neo-Nazi militias in Ukraine from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* following three time periods of the Russia-Ukraine conflict that warrant discussion of Ukraine's neo-Nazi militia involvement. The study begins by presenting important insights on journalism and propaganda before introducing the historical context, followed by the findings and a discussion.

As someone whose earliest memories occur during the post-9/11 era - even as a passive consumer of the news - my understanding of terrorism was shaped by the media's portrayal of al-Qaeda. This understanding prevailed despite the last 16 years when American white

supremacist groups committed more than 60 terrorist attacks in the United States (Shuster & Perrigo, 2021). Furthermore, the rise in extremist ideologies is not isolated to Ukraine and the United States. As I write this, two openly far-right Prime Ministers in Sweden and Italy have claimed victory within a month of each other (Cursino, 2022; Kirby, 2022).

The global rise of anti-Semitism is once again being expressed publicly and violently, making the dominant stance in the media, which often acknowledges the statement as “Putin’s false claim,” worthy of examination. Now has proven to be a critical time in reporting as tension worldwide escalates, warranting a deeper consideration of the media's autonomy in an increasingly complex and polarized world.

Literature Review

Journalism

Ben Bagdikian (2000) describes the mass media as “The authority at any given moment for what is true and what is false, what is reality and what is fantasy, what is important and what is trivial. There is no greater force in shaping the public mind” (p. 54). Beyond that, it could be said that journalism was born to satisfy this inherent need for connection that humans have exhibited since the dawn of time. According to journalists Kovach & Rosenstiel (2014), people have an intrinsic need to know what is occurring beyond their own experience. In that way, journalism can be understood as the system societies generate to supply information about what is happening and what is to come.

The American Press Association states, “The central purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information they need to function in a free society.” A shared professional standard in the United States was created to meet that need. While the history of

professional journalism began almost a century ago, its principles were updated in hopes of solving its prevailing problems. The following principles were put forth by The Committee of Concerned Journalists in 1997 and remain in effect more than 20 years later:

Journalism's first obligation is to the truth

Its first loyalty is to citizens

Its essence is a discipline of verification

Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover

It must serve as an independent monitor of power

It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise

It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant

It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional

Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience

Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news

As part of this committee, Kovach & Rosenstiel (2014) note that they were not concerned with creating new journalism but reviving the dying practice that seemingly lost sight of its core values to meet a bottom line.

The overarching theme within the ten elements could be identified with the value of independence. Maintaining independence is viewed as the key to producing fair and accurate journalism. As such, journalists tend to pride themselves on shedding their personal biases. However, neutrality was not always an integral part of the practice, but it would prove detrimental in curbing commercialization's effects. McChesney (2008) points out that during the first two or three generations of the Republic, nonpartisan journalism would have been viewed as "nonsensical," arguing that "A partisan press has much to offer a democratic society, as long as

there are numerous, well-subsidized media providing a broad range of opinions” (p. 26).

However, this changed over time as the industry became more profitable from advertising (McChesney, 2008).

The commercialization of news paved the way for the consolidation of media outlets into larger, mainstream camps. McChesney (2008) argues that this commercialization fostered corruption, as newspapers turned to sensationalism and outright lying to generate sales, or what is commonly understood as “click bait” today. Soon after, the cost of doing business increased and edged out smaller publications while media conglomerates grew. During that time, it became apparent to many that the economic side of news negatively influenced politics. This spurred on what is known as the Progressive Era, where individuals and groups assembled to curb big businesses through government regulation.

Although Progressivists were frustrated by the unfair advantages of the elite, they rarely advocated for structural change. According to Aucoin (2017), Progressivists' “acceptance of the basic American political and economic system limited the extent and nature of change that they envisioned, but it also made them more effective” (p. 325). Meanwhile, amidst all the “muck rack,” Upton Sinclair published *The Brass Check* in 1919, which outlined the limitations of capitalist journalism in a democratic society. However, by 1920 much of the dust settled as reform in journalism was well underway, and professional standards were developed in response to the unfavorable view of the press (Aucoin, 2017).

For better or worse, the recent emergence of new technologies and cultural demands has led to drastic developments in the industry. With digital platforms rising, Pew Research (Shearer, 2021) reports that over half of Americans get their news from digital devices. While the digital industry has seen a boom in employment, it has not been enough to offset the number of layoffs

the print industry has endured (Williams, 2016). In the current forecast, journalism jobs are expected to decline by 9% over the next decade, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. With fewer journalists working today, investigative journalism and local statehouse reporting is declining (Williams, 2016). Moreover, politics continue to suffer; and as a result, distrust in journalism is now at an all-time high. A survey from Gallup in 2022 shows that this is the first time the percentage of Americans with *no trust at all in the media* is higher than the percentage with *a great deal* or *a fair amount* combined (Brenan, 2022).

It may not come as a surprise that media concentration continues to grow as a worldwide phenomenon, shrinking newsrooms and narrowing the range of opinions expressed, with just five corporations controlling most American media: Comcast, Disney, News Corporation, AT&T, and National Amusements (MacLeod, 2019). With that in mind, it is fair to say that journalists are not the sole producers of news. Fairclough (1989; as cited in Ghazlen, 2016) argues that much more comprehensive and sophisticated institutions represent journalists with power holders who determine the angle from which different stories and events will be reported.

From a political-economic perspective, which grapples with the inextricable link between politics and economics, McQuail and Deuze (2020) describe for-profit media institutions as “Part of the economic system with close links to the political system” (p. 125). Journalism’s efficacy is scrutinized under this perspective due to the inherent limitations of its reliance on big business. For example, stories questioning corporate power, capitalism, and consumerism are systematically discouraged, while entertainment is prioritized to draw in consumers (MacLeod, 2020). Kovach & Rosenstiel (2014) note that *Time* and *Newsweek* are about seven times more likely to run the same cover story as *People* than they were about 20 years ago. In that way, democracy is compromised. According to McChesney (2008), democratic theory “generally

posits that society needs a journalism that is a rigorous watchdog of those in power and who want to be in power, can ferret out truth from lies, and can present a wide range of informed positions on important issues of the day” (p. 25). Thus, the prioritization of entertainment over politics directly inhibits journalism’s ability to keep power in check.

After all, journalists cannot bite the hand that feeds them (MacLeod, 2020). Although privately owned institutions are not subject to government regulation, they answer to their wealthy beneficiaries or what many refer to as “elites” (Entman, 2007; Herman & Chomsky, 1994; Wen, 2021). Media owners like Rupert Murdoch, one of the world’s wealthiest and most influential media tycoons, are known for demanding that their outlets follow their political outlooks. For example, Murdoch’s media outlets have been accused of disseminating misinformation about the ongoing climate-change discussion despite overwhelming scientific evidence favoring the urgent need to address climate change (Waterson, 2020; Wen, 2021). This is not necessarily achieved through direct intervention or complete submission on behalf of journalists but instead starts as a cultural phenomenon in the classroom and is financially reinforced by the institution (Herman & Chomsky, 1994; Kennard, 2019; McChesney, 2008). According to Kennard (2019), powerful institutions “Root out ideas that are a danger to it and promote those that reinforce it” (p. 156).

The professional code’s notion of neutrality has many implications in the eyes of political economists. For example, the belief that following the professional code will ensure complete objectivity can be misleading. McChesney (2008) argues that journalists cannot be neutral or objective without acknowledging the values that frame news stories, “Decision-making is an inescapable part of the journalism process, and some values have to be promoted when deciding why one story rates front page treatment while another is ignored” (p. 30).

Kennard (2019) further criticizes the notion of neutrality by pointing out that journalists allowing corporate powers to have a say in news production is problematic because it can lead to default support for their underlying interests.

Furthermore, as impartial news disseminators, journalists rely on official sources to present the facts. This is also problematic in political economists' eyes because official sources like politicians, think tanks, and PR companies often have the most at stake in the matter (McChesney, 2008). In that way, they can promote an understanding that aligns with our schema systems (MacLeod, 2020; Entman, 2007; Herman & Chomsky, 1994). As a result, journalists may be largely unaware of the subtle ways in which they relinquish their autonomy and provide opportunities for manipulation.

While the Progressive Era pushed journalism to the left, there have been many movements since to undo what was viewed unfavorably as “liberal bias.” Opposite to the political-economic critique of journalism is the conservative critique. Instead of viewing journalists as unwitting agents of the elite, the conservative argument accuses the media of wielding its power to advance the interests of the left (McChesney, 2008). This sentiment has remained alive and well since journalism’s professionalization and is observable throughout history. For instance, the Hutchins Commission of the mid-to-late 1940s proposed a journalistic reform that included publishing more diverse points of view and a private agency to monitor the performance of the press and issue annual reports. However, this was sharply opposed and even sparked accusations of its members being “Reds” (Blevins, 1997). In that way, opposition to the Hutchins Commission reflects a long-running prejudice where ideas challenging the existing power structures held by the United States were smeared as Communist.

Interestingly, much of the opposition to the liberal nature of the profession aligns with the anti-Communist sentiment, which has been prominent in the United States for more than a century. Starting with the Russian Revolution of 1917, when a socialist government came into power, reports from the *New York Times* show statements from unidentified official sources predicting the regime's collapse more than 91 times (Herman, 2017). This negative perception of Russia reached new heights during the Cold War when Americans feared a Communist takeover that would threaten their livelihood. The concern led to a socially enforced purge of leftist ideas known as McCarthyism. Herman & Chomsky (1994; as cited in MacLeod, 2019) describe McCarthyism as a highly effective “mechanism of control” since those not sufficiently loyal to state and business power could be tarred as Communists and possibly end their careers (p. 29).

The latter could be observed in the present, following what is known as Russiagate, when reports of the Kremlin’s interference with the United States 2016 presidential election took over the media after Donald Trump’s victory against Hilary Clinton. However, instead of forcing politics to the right, they were forced to the corporate center (MacLeod, 2019). Given the concern about fake Russian news, large organizations like Google, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter changed their algorithms to favor more recognizable, mainstream sources (MacLeod, 2019). This led to the demonetization of progressive news that challenged the dominant paradigm on sensitive political topics, thereby reestablished corporate control over the media in the digital age.

The conservative critique has been well accepted over time, given journalists' natural opposition to the interests of power. Moreover, McChesney (2008) points out that the conservative campaign against journalism meshes comfortably with media corporations' commercial and political aspirations. In that way, liberalism at the corporate level might only be

accepted if it does not infringe upon existing power structures. Nevertheless, liberalism is recognizably necessary to maintain the credibility of journalists. After all, this very need shaped the professional standards still used today.

Propaganda

Identifying propaganda is highly contingent on the definition that is applied. As such, Jowett & O'Donnell (2015) note, "Although propaganda takes many forms, it is almost always in some form of activated ideology" (p. 27). This vastly broadens the range of what most people consider propaganda since it is often associated with a foreign threat and identified through conflict-related language (Chernobrov & Briant, 2020). Past research provides several tactically formalized lenses to identify propaganda and all its nuances.

In one example, Jowett & O'Donnell (2015) prescribe different colors to propaganda based on its acknowledgment of the source and the accuracy of the information, a distinction that comes from the Psychological Warfare Division (PWD) of the Allied Forces in 1944 (Sproule, 1997; as cited in Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015). To illustrate, *white* propaganda comes from a source identified correctly, and the information tends to be accurate. In contrast, *black* propaganda happens when the source is concealed or credited to false authority and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions. *Gray* propaganda is between *white* and *black* propaganda in that the source may or may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy of the information is uncertain. Along with the recent phenomenon of fake news and our acute awareness of extremist groups, *black* propaganda (justifiably) dominates the propaganda research field. However, understanding the nuances of propaganda can help broaden the discussion past *black* propaganda and into less understood territory that is also in dire need of attention.

Pratkanis & Aronson (1992; as cited in Black, 2001), like many others, emphasize the intent of the propagandist to describe it, “Unlike traditional journalism whose goal is to provide the audience with accurate and reliable information to aid decision-making (American Press Association), the goal of propagandist communication is to manipulate its targets into accepting a one-sided appeal as though it were their own point of view” (p. 127). While Doob (1948; as cited in Black, 2001) describes propaganda in a more neutral sense, “The influence of one person upon other persons when scientific knowledge and survival values are uncertain” (p. 123). Although neither is considered wrong, the former definition supports the idea of *black* propaganda, while the latter supports the idea of a more nuanced, *gray* or *white* version.

Doob’s (1948) interpretation aligns with the notion of “sociological” and “integration” propaganda, proposed by Ellul in 1965 (as cited in Black, 2001), which produces “a progressive adaptation to a certain order of things, a certain concept of human relations, which unconsciously molds individuals and makes them conform to society” (p. 125). As a result, it is significant to point out that those who produce this nuanced version of propaganda may not be doing it deliberately. Therefore, one would find it inappropriate to assign malice to what very well may be ignorance. Besides, as Black (2001) points out, “If one is an unintentional ‘integration’ propagandist merely seeking to maintain the status quo, one’s efforts would seem to be *prima facie* praiseworthy and educational” (p. 126). Thus, removing the pejorative association of propaganda, with consideration of its many forms, can lead to a more critical perspective on the press that is separate from the intent of journalists and provides an understanding that will prove itself vital in the following section.

Propaganda and News Media

While the term propaganda has taken on different meanings at different times, some neutral and some pejorative, the following studies make it apparent that when used as an instrument of mass media, propaganda can diminish the agency of audiences and promote the censorship of competing ideas, instead of encouraging outside perspectives that would enhance civil society, transparency, and enable free speech (Chernobrov & Briant, 2022; Black, 2001).

Herman & Chomsky (1994) note that a propaganda system will consistently portray people abused in an enemy state as worthy victims of news coverage. In contrast, those treated equally or more severely by their government or its allies are unworthy of news coverage. This is supported in a study that compares the mass media's treatment of Jerry Popieluzskco, a Polish priest murdered by the Polish police in October 1984 under a Communist state, to the media's coverage of priests murdered within the United States sphere of influence during 18 months. The study found that United States media coverage of Popieluzskco's murder dwarfed that of 72 other religious victims in Latin America. This suggests that the treatment stories receive is influenced by the government's allegiances instead of the journalists' discretion.

As a journalist with more than 40 years of experience, Somerville (2017) supports the latter notion in a study that analyzes the effects of framing in conflict reporting, noting that news people's core values "crucially affect the selection of stories to be covered, depth and angle of coverage and representation of those involved" (para. 6). Using the Cold War in his example, Somerville explains how Western opposition to the Soviet Union (a core value) unintentionally advanced global and military strategy and the political and self-interested aims of those in power toward the economic support of apartheid South Africa.

Similarly, in a study about The War on Terror, Reese & Lewis (2009) found that the media's use of the frame *War on Terror* was misused to describe "what erupted on 9/11." This paved the way for the underlying policies' unanimous support. In line with Sommerville (2017), the study concluded that the label's continued transmission, reification, and naturalization in the media ultimately served the interests of power and, as a result, helped lay the groundwork for the post-9/11 wars, which are responsible for more than 385,000 civilian deaths according to the Council on Foreign Relations.

Boyd-Barrett (2017) conducted close readings of print media from mainstream and alternative sources in Western democracies to those in Russia during the Ukraine crisis from 2013 to 2015. The study identified ten critical narratives conveyed by Western mainstream media and determined the principal arguments, presumptions, and intentions of propaganda that reflected the interests of Western powers. Ultimately, Boyd-Barrett attributes this oversight to the business models of most mainstream organizations and recommends that consumers favor viewpoints outside of those espoused by mainstream media.

More recently, the media's governmental support was observed during the Coronavirus pandemic after several studies concluded it was politicized mainly in the media (Abbas, 2020; Orts & Vargas-Sierra, 2022; Dezhkameh et al., 2021). Looking at reports from *The New York Times* and *Global Times* (an outlet in China), Abbas (2020) pointed out that negative stories often criticized each other's governments were most prominent. A different study from Dezhkameh et al. (2021) with a different dataset reached similar conclusions, noting that, "It seems that the main forces driving the writing of Covid-19-related news reports are not geared to saving people's lives but, instead, are tailored to backing a particular government or political party in national and international political feuds and rivalries" (p. 242).

A study of the Flint water crisis also drew similar conclusions. Analyzing almost 2000 news reports about the Flint water crisis from 2014 to 2018, Kong (2022) found that local and national news coverage favored government activity and politics over public health concerns. Furthermore, Kong reported that the national coverage contained multiple racial cues in describing the city of Flint and its water crisis while comparing it to other social problems such as Zika and gun violence, noting how this could “Strengthen negative conceptions of the Flint community and distort the public’s perceptions of the nature of the Flint crisis as a human-made disaster” (p. 462).

Moving forward, while the sections above represent different topics, they are all central to the argument that we, as citizens, lack the accurate and reliable information we need to function in a free society. This study aims to contribute to the effort to improve the quality of media that this country so dearly depends on by engaging with it critically and challenging popular belief. I have combined frameworks from critical discourse analysis and propaganda research to meet this objective. Critical discourse analysis allows me to place my arguments in the broadest possible context, while the propaganda framework allows me to make assertions that challenge preconceived notions surrounding propaganda, especially in mainstream media.

As such, the current study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the propagandist features of the news reports that pertain to neo-Nazi militias in Ukraine?

RQ2: Do the reports following Putin’s claim differ from the source’s earlier publications?

Methods and Materials

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an approach applied to various discourses to investigate the relationship among discourse, ideology, and power in sociocultural contexts (Fairclough, 1993)—the specific discourse at hand, news reports, claims to adhere to the objectivity of news. However, on numerous occasions have conveyed ideologies of a particular social group. CDA works off the assumption that ideology is inextricably linked to language, whether it be through grammatical or lexical expression (Amerian & Esmaili, 2015). While the tendency for ideologies to be constructed by language and linguistic patterns might be subtle, Kong (2022) notes that they become significant when viewed as part of a broader discourse. As a result, CDA is commonly used to investigate the relationship between media and language choice considering a broad range of factors (Fairclough, 1993). In other words, most approaches under CDA require framing the event within the social, political, cultural, economic, and ideological context that it occurred (Shojaei et al., 2013).

Analytical Framework

When applying van Dijk's schemata analysis, ideology plays a crucial role. The notion of schemata, which dates back to Bartlett (1932; as cited in Hirst, 2022), is "constructed in the present, out of situational factors, current attitudes, and the accumulated knowledge formed from past experience" (p. 320). In that way, schemata analysis is inextricably linked to ideology (van Dijk, 1991). Ideological frames are continually reshaped to absorb challenges to their status as the dominant way to think about the world (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Therefore, when it comes

to news discourse, the chosen material is always presented regarding the social, political, and historical context it resides. van Dijk (1991) analyzes schemata by breaking them into three discourse structures: macrostructures, superstructures, and microstructures. This comprehensive approach, outlined below, helps identify the schema systems in the news, their construction, and potential ideological implications.

The macrostructure of discourse is derived from the overall meaning of the text. In other words, the macrostructure is concerned with the topic that the whole story is based on (Abbas, 2020). This is often expressed in the headline and the lead paragraph, where the most important or relevant information is stored. Therefore, analyzing the macrostructure can provide insight into the underlying beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies that shape the news.

The superstructure, or textual “schemata,” is concerned with the overall organization of the text (van Dijk, 1991). Since the news always presents information by order of importance, determining the superstructure can capture the underlying beliefs of the newsmaker(s) involved. Beyond the obligatory summary and main event, the superstructure identifies different schema categories that contextualize the report and are often made at the journalist's or organization's discretion. Such choices can manipulate the topical organization in news reports and may have ideological implications.

The microstructure evaluates a text's semantic, syntactic, stylistic, and rhetorical aspects by focusing on words and sentences that ultimately give a story meaning. van Dijk (1991) defines these different aspects of importance as *presuppositions*, *implications*, *inferences*, *concealments*, *euphemisms*, *disclaiming denials*, *blaming the victim*, *negativization*, and generally, *the combined strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation* (p. 177).

Furthermore, Black's propaganda typology will be used in conjunction with van Dijk's schemata analysis in the discussion section of this study. Black's (2001) propaganda typology is formed from the insights of propaganda analysts, media critics, social psychologists, and semanticists. The two frameworks will work together to unravel self-interested claims and then place them within the context of propaganda. As follows, Black's (2001) propaganda typology has six categories:

- Reduction of complex situations into simplistic cause and effect relations,
- Use of abstract language and physical representations,
- A heavy reliance on authority figures or spokespersons,
- A finalistic or fixed view of in-groups (friends) and out-groups (enemies),
- A time focus with an under or overemphasis on the past, present, or future,
- A greater emphasis on conflict rather than on cooperation. (p. 133-134)

Data Collection and Dataset

Articles from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* were collected from three different periods of the Russia-Ukraine conflict using the ProQuest database. This study focuses on a total of six articles, with one for each publication following the Euromaidan protests, Putin's "denazification" statement, and the prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine.

Historical Context

On February 24, 2022, Russian leader Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” to “demilitarize and denazify” Ukraine: "To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation" (as cited in Berger, 2022). The statement was met with stark opposition from the press. Many media organizations now refer to it as “Putin’s false claim” and often point to the Jewish heritage of Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky. However, this explanation does little to counteract the claim, which also concerns the growing far-right in Ukraine (Karatnycky, 2018).

Operating in Ukraine are several nationalist paramilitary groups, such as the “Azov Movement,” comprising three separate groups from the Azov Regiment, the National Corps, and the National Militia (CISAC, 2022). Despite each organization having its chain of command, they promote white nationalist beliefs and often work together operationally (CISAC, 2022). Although radical groups like those mentioned above have existed around the world long before the conflict, the change of power in Ukraine during Euromaidan contributed to their rapid growth and official recognition by the Ukrainian government (van Zeller, 2022). Considering Ukrainian’s military weakness and rising Russian aggression van Zeller (2022) says: “The Ukrainian government decided to arm, compensate and ultimately legitimize the Azov Battalion as part of the National Guard.”

The Azov Movement’s role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict has not gone unnoticed by the media. Documentation of the organization's far-right, white nationalist ideology during Euromaidan might explain why the Azov Regiment was quickly removed from the frontlines until 2020 (CISAC, 2022). However, during this time, it continued to train with other Ukrainian

units and recruit foreign fighters. The Soufan Center reported that between 2014-2019 approximately 17,000 people from 50 countries – including the United States – traveled to fight in Ukraine (2022). Although it's difficult to estimate how many were explicitly motivated by a far-right ideology, it's becoming evident that their influence is not isolated to Ukraine. In the United States, an ideological and digital link has been discovered between what are referred to as "lone wolf" killers by the press after racially motivated shootings and the previously mentioned militias operating in Ukraine. According to van Zeller (2022), white supremacists “Share tools and information online, inspire one another to commit atrocities, and in some cases, even provide military training” In the last two years, the Azov Movement has played a lead role in the defense of Mariupol. Its surrender led to the imprisonment of Azov members in Moscow. And their release made headlines worldwide as the most prominent prisoner exchange since Russia's invasion, which included more than 100 soldiers from the Azov Regiment (Timsit et al., 2022) Thus, reviving the discussion of their controversial status in the news.

The global rise of anti-Semitism is once again being expressed publicly and violently, making the dominant stance in the media, which often acknowledges the statement as “Putin's false claim,” worthy of examination. That being said, the following analysis is not concerned with questions that only time could answer. Instead, it seeks to understand how stories are told when the facts are not always present, emphasizing the level of transparency through which it's conveyed.

Findings

This section is concerned with the analysis of the selected news reports which are taken from the two newspapers: the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* from three selected time periods. The news reports are analyzed according to van Dijk's news schemata analysis of the three discourse structures: the macrostructure, the superstructure, and the microstructure. It's worth noting that some examples are used more than once in different sections of the analysis, especially the lead sentence, which is given special attention due to its ability to set the tone for the rest of the report. Furthermore, quotes and headlines from the text are copied directly from the publication and therefore, use the same punctuation and title case.

Euromaidan

The following analysis begins with an article for the *Washington Post* on February 25, 2014, followed by the *New York Times* on February 23, 2014. Both articles discuss the opposition that transpired following the ouster of President Yanukovych during Euromaidan and end with a look toward the future of Ukraine, given the polarization of Ukrainian politics.

Macrostructure

The *Washington Post* headline *Russia decries shift in Ukraine*, while vague, is nonetheless ridden with underlying implications. According to van Dijk (1991), "Headline information is used to activate the relevant knowledge in memory the reader needs to understand the news report" (p. 50). So, in this case, there is already a negative perception of Russia at work from the headline alone.

First, the adverb "decries" has negative connotations, which suggests this "shift" triggered an emotional response. Implicitly, this may signal to the reader that Russia's decree

does not come from a logical place, but a state of anger that could impact its credibility without the need for further evidence. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the word “shift” does not accurately represent the situation as a change in leadership obtained by violent methods.

Alternatively, the headline could’ve been something along the lines of *Russia questions the legitimacy of new leadership in Ukraine*, which is mentioned later in the text. However, the chosen headline instead proposes that Russia is angry with Ukraine changing in general. The text further supports this by positioning Yanukovich, Russia and other opposition as members of the same group. This aligns with van Dijk’s (2011) notion of ingroups and outgroups, in which “group members will tend to speak or write positively about their own group, and negatively about those out-groups they define as opponents, competitors or enemies” (p. 397).

In other words, the underlying beliefs and attitudes of the newsmakers can result in various forms of biased representation. As such, reactions from opposition members are often negated in the article due to its association with Yanukovich and other negative descriptions of the outgroup rather than empirical evidence.

The *Washington Post* lead introduces a subtopic about the search for the ousted president, Viktor Yanukovich:

KIEV, Ukraine - Russian leaders expressed their distrust and dislike of Ukraine's new government on Monday, saying it came to power through "armed mutiny," just hours after the authorities here announced a nationwide manhunt for ousted president Viktor Yanukovich on charges of "mass murder of peaceful civilians.

In this context, it could be assumed that there’s a causal relationship between the two events since Yanukovich’s ouster led to such a shift in Ukraine. However, the subtopic’s

positioning and framing may also promote an underlying ideological response in readers due to its negative portrayal of Yanukovych, which may simultaneously justify the “shift” as necessary. As van Dijk (1991) puts it, “It is not the chronology of the events, but rather their importance, relevance, or newsworthiness that organize news reports” (p. 72). Therefore, incorporating this subtopic in the lead may allow the reader to make inferences about whose side Russia is on with little room for nuance. As a result, all criticisms on behalf of the opposition could be reduced to self-interested appeals by the reader from the macrostructure alone.

Headlines from both articles are remarkably similar, and therefore, have similar implications. The *New York Times* headline *Power Shift Inspires Joy in Kiev, Fury in East* also describes the situation as a shift in power but contrasts with those in Kiev. While each article portrays different actors, it’s evident that negative attributes are assigned to those in opposition to Ukraine’s interim government with words such as “decree” and “fury.”

In sum, the propositions from both headlines suggest that the “shift” is opposed by eastern Ukrainians and Russia because they are in favor of the previous leadership. This undermines their concerns to a certain extent due to Yanukovych’s unfavorable image in both articles, while simultaneously stimulating support for the interim government’s future endeavors.

The *New York Times* lead begins by contrasting the different displays of national pride: DONETSK, Ukraine — Red Communist flags flew on Sunday in front of a massive bust of Lenin in this hardscrabble coal-mining city, a stronghold of pro-Russia sentiment in Ukraine. About 500 yards away, a few hundred pro-democracy activists, harangued by hundreds of counterdemonstrators, laid wreaths for the victims of last week’s bedlam in

Kiev at a memorial to one of Ukraine's most revered figures, the 19th-century poet Taras Shevchenko.

Here, the stance taken by the *New York Times* is made apparent through its negative "other" representation of anti-Maidan protesters "haranguing" those mourning the lives lost during the Maidan demonstration in Kiev from the previous week. It's worth noting that the memorial of Taras Shevchenko is symbolic of the struggles of anti-Maidan protesters since he is considered the father of Ukraine's language. To gather at this monument could even be considered antagonistic on behalf of pro-Maidan protesters since eastern Ukrainians are fighting for the status of the Russian language, which had been downgraded by the interim government just days prior. While this context isn't made clear from the lead, it does vaguely introduce this idea as a subtopic to be discussed further in the article. However, the absence of that important detail shapes the reader's outlook on the counter demonstrators as cruel without the opportunity to see it from both perspectives.

Superstructure

When looking at the topical organization of the *Washington Post* article, the overall schema promotes the idea that although Russia is upset, everything in Ukraine is fine. The main topics of the article are as follows: the polarization of Russia's claim, Yanukovich's disappearance, changes in Ukrainian politics and the likelihood of Russian retaliation in the future. This is illustrated through a series of Verbal Reactions from both anti-Maidan and pro-Maidan actors, which are structured in a way that repeatedly undermines the former's credibility. As such, there's minimal engagement with accusations of fascism and armed mutiny that alludes to the far-right actor's role in Euromaidan protests.

The topical organization of the *New York Times* article functions similarly to *Washington Post* by its positive representation of pro-Maidan Ukrainians and subsequent negativization of anti-Maidan Ukrainians. While subtle, this reveals the underlying schema of the reporter, who wants to separate the pro-Maidan Ukrainians in Donetsk from those who played a role in the violent protests in Kiev.

The article begins by describing the scene in Donetsk through symbolic, ideological descriptions of “Red Communist flags” in contrast to nearby mourners who “laid wreaths” at the Shevchenko memorial. This is followed by a summary of the context from which these two gatherings arose, which introduces the ouster of President Yanukovych and the subsequent shift as contentious. Like the previous article, Yanukovych is discussed for a large portion of this article with background information, his possible whereabouts, and his waning support following the Euromaidan demonstrations.

This leads back to a continued discussion of the gatherings in Donetsk, where different actors are shown with respect to their political stances. This portrayal is largely schematic. While the accuracy of the descriptions isn’t in question, the prominence of these details impacts the amount of credibility they are given, and as a result, reveals the values of the newsmakers and their implicit aims.

From here, the article circles back to what was alluded to in the lead with a discussion of the bill that was passed by the interim government denouncing the status of the Russian language in Ukraine, which the report does not condone. However, its placement in the article favors the negative actions of anti-Maidan demonstrators before providing the context for their actions. As mentioned in the lead’s macrostructure, this would undoubtedly change the tone of the article, since the Shevchenko memorial honors the poet credited for the Ukrainian language. Therefore,

considering current events, the decision to gather there - in a Russian-speaking region, no less - is in many respects antagonistic. The absence of that information further shapes the schema of the article. The report ends with the Verbal Reactions of pro-Maidan demonstrators, who are - once again - characterized by details that emphasize their positive social status, to counter the concern for fascism in Ukraine.

Microstructure

In terms of semantics, *The Washington Post* uses implicitness, presuppositions, inferences, hyperbolic expressions and irrelevant details in matters that distinguish ingroups from outgroups, challenge their credibility and promote a perspective that favors the Western stance. After the lead, there is another summary of Russia's claim formatted in a way that could be described as ridicule, "Russia questioned the legitimacy of Ukraine's interim leadership, charging that it used a peace deal brokered by Europe to make a power grab and to suppress dissent in Russian-speaking regions through 'terrorist methods.'" Through contrast, the enactment of a peace deal leading to "terrorist" behavior implicitly ridicules the claim without direct interaction. Irrelevant information is used against Yanukovich when describing what was found in his "mansion" after he left. This is made in conjunction with seemingly random descriptions of a "sunny and peaceful" Kiev following his ouster and implementation of the new government. Furthermore, the reporter inserts commentary that presupposes borrowing money is the "most important" next step for Ukraine without explaining why. This signals support for the interim government and perhaps future relations with the West.

Dissent towards the new government is carefully characterized as coming from people from Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine, such as Governor Mikhail Dobkin, whose claim is described as "hostile" before it's even mentioned. As a member of the outgroup, Dobkin faces

more scrutiny through implicit means when his announcement to run for president in the upcoming election is evaluated as “a sign” he is willing to “play by the rules.” Thus, it is inferred that members of this outgroup would not typically “play by the rules.”

Semantically, the *New York Times* report relies on a series of details that differentiate ingroups from outgroups, and often through contrast, members of outgroups are implicitly ridiculed at times. The tone is first set in the lead, which shows anti-Maidan Ukrainians “haranguing” the pro-Maidan Ukrainians while mourning the lives lost during the violent Euromaidan protests in Kiev. Through contrast, there is an implicit ridicule of their actions, and thus, ingroups are distinguished from outgroups:

DONETSK, Ukraine — Red Communist flags flew on Sunday in front of a massive bust of Lenin in this hardscrabble coal-mining city, a stronghold of pro-Russia sentiment in Ukraine. About 500 yards away, a few hundred pro-democracy activists, harangued by hundreds of counterdemonstrators, laid wreaths for the victims of last week’s bedlam in Kiev at a memorial to one of Ukraine’s most revered figures, the 19th-century poet Taras Shevchenko.

This is further reinforced by the negative portrayal of the recently ousted President Yanukovich, where details of his past shape the reader’s perception, “Mr. Yanukovich hails from the mean streets of Donetsk, where in his youth he was twice imprisoned for assault.” This introduction of Yanukovich has underlying implications, not just for Yanukovich himself, but also plays into the reader’s perception of people from “the mean streets of Donetsk” that are also portrayed as violent later in the article.

This also comes to fruition while introducing Donetsk's mayor, whose claims against the Euromaidan protesters are prefaced by his association Yanukovich. Thus, undermining his credibility, "... while Donetsk's mayor, an ally of Mr. Yanukovich who had railed against what he called 'fascists' and even 'Nazis' battling the riot police in Kiev's Independence Square, put on his own, very Eastern European display of strength."

Shortly after, an inference is made by the report about the motivations of Donetsk's mayor:

Mayor Alexander Lukyanchenko, trying to portray himself as a benign city father, plunged into the crowd at the memorial to shake hands, reassuring a man who had been waiting years for a new apartment that the country's problems would be solved and warning against a breakup of Ukraine in the pattern of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Although his actions suggest that he is trying to soothe the situation, it is reduced to a self-interested appeal by the reporter as a grab for power. Thus, reinforcing his status as a member of the outgroup. All the above promote hostility towards the outgroup through a series of propositions that work together in the negativization of anti-Maidan actors. In other words, it denounces the anti-Maidan denunciations.

In terms of syntax, throughout the text, the *Washington Post* uses quotes around negative accusations made by the opposition. This creates distance between the claims, which works to soften or deny the declarations (van Dijk, 1991). Furthermore, as mentioned in the semantics section, the presentation of statements was almost always prefaced with a description from the reporter. While this can provide helpful context for the reader, it can alter their perception of the quote and impact the level of credence it is given without concrete evidence.

Similar meanings can be made implicitly through the sequencing of sentences. As mentioned in the macrostructure section, the lead sentence of the report connects Russia's concern to the wrongdoings of the former president. Instead of directly engaging with what Russia described as "armed mutiny," it's implicitly justified by the negative portrayal of Yanukovich, who is being investigated by authorities for the "mass murder of peaceful civilians." One example where all the latter elements collide is when Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev is cited as "heaping scorn" on the West before disclosing the quote:

Catherine Ashton, the European Union's top diplomat, arrived in Kiev on Monday, and U.S. Treasury Secretary Jack Lew held a phone conversation with Arseniy Yatsenyuk, a leader of the protests. But Medvedev, the Russian premier, heaped scorn on the West for what he called its "aberration of consciousness" for endorsing the toppling of Yanukovich's democratically elected government.

This hyperbolic expression portrays the West as a victim of Russian aggression by linking their positive actions to the adverse reactions of the outgroup to suggest it is unwarranted.

The reinforcement of ingroups from outgroups could also be observed syntactically in the *New York Times* article. In one example, a claim from a Ukrainian news agency is structured as a declarative sentence:

Earlier, activists at the wreath-laying ceremony emphasized in a statement that they would neither storm administrative offices, as protesters did in Kiev, nor tear down memorials, as protesters have done with 16 statues of Lenin across the central and eastern parts of the country in recent days, according to the Ukrainian news media.

According to van Dijk, by placing the main clause at the end of a sentence, the contents of the allegation are more likely to be seen as factual (1991). Not only is this the case here, with the attribution of the organization placed at the end of the sentence, but there is also a temporal coherence made in the paragraph that follows:

Just an hour later, the second scene unfolded. Hundreds of loud citizens — mostly young men, many of them masked and carrying wooden or metal clubs — gathered on a sidewalk, separated from the memorial crowd by various police units, including black-clad riot units and militia in navy uniforms. The crowd chanted “glory,” not to honor the protesters in Kiev but to praise the Berkut, the elite police units widely held responsible for the violence against the demonstrators.

Here, the peaceful portrayal of pro-Maidan protesters is immediately followed by the negativization of anti-Maidan protesters. Thus, the syntactic order of these propositions further criticizes anti-Maidan protesters' actions beyond what is stated in the text.

In terms of stylistics, the word “harsh” is used in the *Washington Post* article to preface a quote from Medvedev. Interestingly, this suggests that there is truth to his reservations about the interim government. It simultaneously signals to the reader that making inferences about their legitimacy is unfair or cruel. As such, the content of the quote, which calls the government “Kalashnikov-toting people in black masks who are roaming Kiev,” is dismissed but not denied. Briefly mentioned in the semantics section was the word “mansion” used to describe Yanukovich’s home. While that is likely accurate given his role as the president, in this context, it was probably chosen deliberately to portray Yanukovich as corrupt and greedy. Furthermore, Donetsk is described as “industrial” when introducing Tetiana Maliarenko, a professor at the

Donetsk State University of Management. This word choice, while subtle, undoubtedly has implications on how the reader will perceive those in the pro-Russian territory concerning social status.

Stylistically, the choice of words in the *New York Times* article reveals its perception of members from different groups. As van Dijk (1991) notes, “The broader social context and culture may impinge on the choice of words” (p. 211). Thus, these word choices aren’t likely coincidental but strategic to emphasize or undermine the credibility of ingroups and outgroups. For instance, their negative perception of Donetsk is repeatedly enforced by word choices such as “this hard-scrabble coal mining city” or “the mean streets of Donetsk.” In contrast, members of the ingroup are described as “well dressed” and are often noted for their status as respected members of society by mentioning their roles as doctors, nurses and teachers.

Repetition and understatement are used for rhetorical purposes in the *Washington Post* article. First, the headline describing Russia’s objection to the new government as a “decree” is repeated with words such as “denunciations” and other negatively connotated words. Second, the validity of Russia’s concern is also understated on numerous occasions. For instance, when providing direct examples of oppressive actions taken on behalf of the interim government, it is still denied by the reporter, who adds, “but Russia did not provide evidence to support its other charges.”

Similarly, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is reduced to the euphemism “having a spat.” Such phrasing suggests that actions taken on behalf of Russia’s sanitary service are not valid but are seen as petty punishment.

Rhetorically, metaphor is used to liken the conflict in Donetsk to a play in the *New York Times* article, “It was the final act in an elaborate, two-hour drama carefully managed by the police.” While this dramatization of the conflict can be justified purely for entertainment value, it can also – less innocently – stimulate support or opposition for actors on different sides of the conflict (Entman, 2003). In this context, framing the conflict as a story often promotes an interpretation that distinguishes the “heroes” from “villains.” Thus, in this situation, one might infer that the police are heroes who have come to protect the anti-Maidan protesters from the villainous, anti-Maidan aggressors wearing masks and carrying wooden or metal clubs.

Putin’s “de-Nazification” Statement

The following *Washington Post* and *New York Times* articles are written in response to Vladimir Putin’s “denazification” statement on February 24, 2022, at the official start of the Russia-Ukraine war. It’s worth noting that articles were selected for subject matter instead of timeliness. This is because the *New York Times* did not acknowledge Putin’s Nazi accusation until March 17, 2022. Furthermore, the format of the microstructure section changes to allow one area of the *New York Times* report to be analyzed for all its semantic, syntactic and stylistic qualities. Despite their time difference, the following articles function similarly in that both relate Putin’s “denazification” statement to his opposition to the Western aim and use historical context from WWII to shape the Russian perspective.

Macrostructure

In the *Washington Post* headline, *Putin says he will ‘denazify’ Ukraine. Here’s the history behind that claim*, it is suggested that the claim is historically inaccurate through several implicit

means. First, quotes around the word “de-Nazify” signal to the reader a level of disbelief or skepticism. Additionally, the second sentence provides a contrast from the former. “History,” which has many interpretations, is used to garner authority. Thus, the *Washington Post* intends to set the record straight by refuting the claim with historical evidence. Whether or not that is achieved is to be discussed further in the analysis.

The *Washington Post* lead is presented in two parts:

Russian President Vladimir Putin invoked the Nazis on Thursday when he announced his decision to launch a large-scale military operation in Ukraine.

The Russian leader said that one of the goals of the offensive was to "denazify" the country, part of a long-running effort by Putin to delegitimize Ukrainian nationalism and sell the incursion to his constituency at home.

Starting with the word choice, “invoked,” which means “to cite or appeal to (someone or something) as an authority for an action or in support of an argument,” (Oxford Languages) there is an implicit form of doubt, suggesting that this is not a real issue but a strategic effort. This becomes more explicit in the second part of the lead, denouncing it as “a long-running effort by Putin to delegitimize Ukrainian nationalism and sell the incursion to his constituency at home.” By doing so, it is evident that Ukrainians are seen as the victims of this accusation, which adds another element of ridicule due to Putin’s suggested demonization of national pride.

The headline, *Why Vladimir Putin Invokes Nazis to Justify His Invasion of Ukraine*, reveals the stance the *New York Times* took at the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. First, the words “invoke” and “justify” signal that “Nazis” are being used to persuade, which implicitly cultivates the need for skepticism. Furthermore, the “why” elicits that Putin has ulterior motives

beyond putting a stop to the cruelty that neo-Nazism entails. In other words, if neo-Nazism in Ukraine were accepted as fact, then there wouldn't be a need to explain why military intervention is necessary - it would be inferred. Thus, the headline alone shows that the *New York Times* believes this is untrue.

The *New York Times* lead presupposes that Putin's claim insinuates confusion because Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, is Jewish: "The language of Russia's invasion has been dominated by the word 'Nazi' — a puzzling assertion about a country whose leader is Jewish." On its face, this justifiably incurs doubt. However, emphasizing the inherited ethnicity of a person instead of their actions - to counter an argument where the latter is conceivable - warrants future discussion.

Superstructure

The superstructure of the *Washington Post* article promotes that Putin is falsely accusing Ukraine of neo-Nazism to justify the need for war and delegitimize Ukrainian nationalism. Furthermore, the report suggests we should be more concerned about Putin than neo-Nazis in Ukraine because he might be a neo-Nazi.

The article begins by summarizing the claim before introducing what is speculated to be the context of this accusation. Here, it is implied that it is not instances of neo-Nazism in Ukraine but his alleged disdain of Ukrainian nationalism and its push to join forces with NATO. However, the absence of neo-Nazism from this discussion suggests that there is none when that is untrue. The article uses various historical references and Verbal Reactions that reverse the blame onto Putin to say that, if anyone, he is more closely related to neo-Nazis by using similar

wartime strategies as the Germans did in WWII. Additionally, the Jewish heritage of Ukraine's president, Zelensky, was given prominence to falsify Putin's claim.

The discussion of neo-Nazi militias in Ukraine and their official status doesn't happen until the lower half of the article, which has ideological implications to be discussed later in the analysis. Putin's "moves to label Ukraine's government as fascist" are addressed at the end of the article, where speculations from an outside source indicate that fascism is a common ploy in "Russian propaganda" that's used to describe people who are anti-Russian. The final line describes a cartoon picture of a tiny Putin caressed by a much taller Adolf, which the Ukrainian government tweeted. Its caption is provided, "This is not a 'meme', but our and your reality right now." This relates to the previous topic of Putin's alleged hypocrisy, which is to say that he is the neo-Nazi we should be worried about.

The superstructure of the *New York Times* article promotes that Putin is falsely accusing Ukraine of neo-Nazism to justify the need for war and deter Western support of Ukraine. Simultaneously, it's believed that Putin is recklessly invoking WWII to persuade his constituencies in Russia. The claim is summarized by showcasing Russia's contempt for the West, which it considers responsible for the neo-Nazification of Ukraine. The lead is repeated to emphasize its absurdity and tie in the recent law combating anti-Semitism that Zelensky signed. Putin's opposition to Euromaidan is referenced as the origin of his claim, although it is referred to as "Ukraine's pro-Western revolution of 2014." Both articles are positioned to showcase Putin's suspected opposition to Western values of freedom and independence in Ukraine. The claim is discussed further with its relation to WWII to show how Putin uses it to manipulate support. Verbal Reactions from the opposition promote further hostility before the article likens

Putin to a dictator. This continues for multiple paragraphs before the discussion of neo-Nazism in Ukraine is introduced.

Microstructure

Semantically, the *Washington Post* uses presuppositions, omissions of relevant details and blame-reversing strategies to deny Putin's claim. One source in the article cites Euromaidan as an explanation for how the claim arose:

Putin, he said, 'is pulling on that thread from history to say that what you had was a neo-Nazi usurpation of power [in Ukraine] in 2014,' when Ukrainian protesters ousted the Russian-backed leader and the new government pushed to join NATO.

However, the involvement of neo-Nazi militias was not included in that discussion. Instead, they are grouped with all Ukrainian protesters. The militias are, however, given mention later in the article as a pretext to the comment, "Now Putin is trying to paint Zelensky's government as 'Nazis supported by NATO,'..." to make the point that their presence is not substantial enough for the assertion:

Operating in Ukraine are several nationalist paramilitary groups, such as the Azov movement and Right Sector, that espouse neo-Nazi ideology. While high-profile, they appear to have little public support. Only one far-right party, Svoboda, is represented in Ukraine's parliament, and it only holds one seat.

This example presupposes that the white nationalist groups' official status in Ukraine is unworthy of concern. However, this is unfairly assumed, especially considering the billions of dollars spent in the United States to compensate and arm the Ukrainian military they are a part of (Masters and Merrow, 2023).

Furthermore, the syntactic structure of the latter example places this event at a lower level of the article while using Putin's opposition towards NATO to suggest that this is the basis of his dissent. This may be part of a strategic effort to frame the accusation as ideologically motivated before providing context that supports his claim.

Stylistically, Ukrainian nationalists are framed as the target of the neo-Nazi claim. This word choice aligns with the schema of the article, which elicits that Ukrainian nationalism goes hand in hand with the effort to join NATO. Thus, it's suggested that Putin's opposition to NATO has shaped his negative perception of Ukrainian nationalism. However, this may be a false equivalency since it is not the pride for one's country but the official status of neo-Nazi groups in Ukraine that shape the claim.

Rhetorically, the *Washington Post's* interpretation of the Babyn Yar conceals the anti-Semitic attitudes among Ukrainian citizens and their collaboration with Nazi Germany during WWII. The massacre of Jews that took place at Babyn Yar during WWII in Ukraine is used to deny the claim that Ukraine is a neo-Nazi state, "One of World War II's worst massacres took place near the Ukrainian capital in 1941, when German-led forces killed tens of thousands of Jews in the ravine of Babyn Yar." In this context, Ukrainians are perceived as the victims of the atrocity. This is problematic, however, because it excludes the role Ukrainian nationalists played in WWII and their assistance to the Nazis in the Babyn Yar massacre (Rogoza, 2021). Thus, by likening Putin to the WWII Nazis, this highly selective description of Babyn Yar emphasizes their wrongdoings while downplaying Ukraine's role in the atrocity.

The microstructure of the *New York Times* article will mainly focus on one specific section where many different semantic, syntactic and stylistic elements collide:

Like many lies, Mr. Putin's claim about a Nazi-controlled Ukraine has a hall-of-mirrors connection to reality. Jewish groups and others have, in fact, criticized Ukraine since its pro-Western revolution in 2014 for allowing Ukrainian independence fighters who at one point sided with Nazi Germany to be venerated as national heroes.

The first proposition in the section begins by prefacing the claim as an outright lie. Not only is this assertion presented as fact, but it also serves as an expression of the underlying ideology of the newsmakers, who believe the claim is illusive and should be discarded. Furthermore, it's made in contrast to what the article calls "reality." By making such comparisons, it is inferred that they are the authority on what is true and what is false. This doesn't permit readers to create their own meaning, but what is said should be accepted as fact.

Unsurprisingly, the latter assertion is used to preface dissent towards Ukraine following Euromaidan. Syntactically, this accentuates the alleged falsity of Putin's claim before introducing a contradictory perspective. As a result, it reduces the effect of what follows: "Jewish groups and others have, in fact, criticized Ukraine since its pro-Western revolution in 2014 for allowing Ukrainian independence fighters who at one point sided with Nazi Germany to be venerated as national heroes." Intentional or not, this syntactic structure means that an uncritical reader may not see an issue with Ukraine's indifference to neo-Nazis nor their positive recognition following Euromaidan.

Regarding stylistics, the choice of words used in this section may also be inhibiting the reader's judgment. Referencing what happened during Euromaidan, it is described as the "pro-Western revolution in 2014." While that does not necessarily qualify as a misrepresentation, it does cultivate an understanding that aligns with the average American's norms, values and group membership. More concerning, however, is the article's portrayal of neo-Nazi, where in this case, they're referred to as "Ukrainian independence fighters who at one point sided with Nazi Germany." This gross mischaracterization emphasizes their positive traits while de-emphasizing their negative ones. At the same time, the watered down interpretation of the neo-Nazi uprising during Euromaidan signals reluctance on behalf of the *New York Times* to describe the white nationalists in a way that might give the outgroup credence. In a sense, support for them is implicit.

Furthermore, the article uses the ambiguous time perspective "who at one point" to imply that their neo-Nazi ideology is *probably* a thing of the past. It is hard to say whether this information was accessible or conveniently ignored. On the one hand, this confirms that the anti-Semitic attitudes of these "Ukrainian independence fighters" are hard to deny. On the other hand, we can see that this doesn't mean newsmakers will not engage in other, more subtle forms of deception.

Rhetorically, the *New York Times* article uses hyperbolic expressions and comparisons to reverse the blame by attributing it to Putin instead:

Ukrainians say that the horrors of Russia's invasion show that if any country needs to be denazified, it is Russia. Its war has brought devastation to Russian-speaking cities like Kharkiv and Mariupol and widespread suffering to Kyiv.

This claim is made in light of Russian aggression against Ukrainians rather than specific instances of Nazi-related acts. In that way, it presupposes that “denazification” can apply to any act of cruelty. Ironically, it’s been repeatedly stated later in the article that Ukrainians were given this label not because Russia believes they are anti-Semitic but because they are anti-Russian: “In Russia’s increasingly convoluted propaganda narrative, reprised by Mr. Putin in his speech Wednesday, the West is backing Ukraine’s ‘Nazis’ as a way to degrade Ukraine’s Russian heritage and use the country as a platform to destroy Russia.” Now it has been used for the same purposes that it condemned. Furthermore, the article continually instills that this is Russia’s war. Therefore, as implied in this example, it can be held accountable for every adverse event and used to say that it’s ruthlessly attacking its people. Thus, the blame is reversed onto the opponent.

The Prisoner Swap

The following analysis uses articles from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* on September 22, 2022, and September 21, 2022. Both reports were made in response to the prisoner swap between Ukraine and Russia and discussed who was released in-depth, although favoring the Ukrainian side. As such, Putin’s friend, Viktor Medvedchuk, is the only pro-Russian prisoner made significant in both articles.

Macrostructure

The *Washington Post* headline *Prisoner swap freed Putin’s friend, Azov commanders and U.K. fighters* prioritized Viktor Medvedchuk’s release from Ukraine. As the article mentioned, of his status as a well-known pro-Kremlin politician, Medvedchuk “appears to be the

highest-profile prisoner secured by the Russian side.” However, the headline suggests that his relationship with Putin has the greatest significance. Therefore, his release elicits an understanding that Putin was willing to compromise to save his friend. Furthermore, given Putin’s reputation in the US as a ruthless, authoritarian leader, it could be implied that he cares more about his friend than his Russian soldiers. At the same time, this also suggests that Ukraine was in a position of power over Putin. For the most part, this seems like a straightforward interpretation of the event. However, with a closer look, multiple underlying meanings can favor the Ukrainian side.

The *Washington Post* lead summarizes the prisoner swap in greater detail:

The hundreds of prisoners of war released Wednesday in a surprise deal between Moscow and Kyiv included 10 foreign nationals captured in Ukraine, a close friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s, and commanders and fighters of the Azov Regiment, a Ukrainian far-right paramilitary group.

Here, Medvedchuk comes second to the foreign fighters taken by the Russian side. Undoubtedly, fighting for the freedom of Ukrainians is a selfless and noble act that warrants special recognition. At the same time, we can see that members of the Azov Regiment are mentioned last. Syntactically, this may be the most logical representation since they are provided with additional context. However, this order can also suggest a lower level of significance. At this point in the analysis, it goes without saying that Russia and its sympathizers are members of the outgroup. In that way, as an ideological opponent to the outgroup, the negative attributes of the ingroups are often concealed. Therefore, the explicit mention of Azov's far-right status in the lead signals an embrace of this indisputable title.

In contrast to the *Washington Post's* headline, the *New York Times* headline is formulated only concerning the number of Ukrainian prisoners released by Russia: *Russia releases 215 fighters, including Mariupol commanders, in a prisoner exchange*. This prioritization may be schematic since they are members of the ingroup and victims of outgroup aggression in this context. Not to mention, their release is a newsworthy victory for Ukraine in and of itself.

It becomes clear after the lead that “Mariupol commanders” is describing the commanders of the Azov Regiment. This vague attribution may have been chosen to conceal the negative association the Azov Regiment has incurred over time. However, it was still singled out in the headline for a reason the newsmakers considered significant.

The *New York Times'* lead summarizes the event, “The exchange, the war’s largest, included Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian oligarch and close friend of the Russian president,” by starting with the magnitude of the swap followed by the release of Putin’s friend, Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian oligarch. Thus, from the headline and the lead, we know these two opposing group members are considered the most significant. This is also apparent in the *Washington Post* macrostructure. However, the *New York Times* has chosen to single out these two groups on separate occasions - perhaps for added emphasis.

Furthermore, as mentioned, the Azov Regiment commanders are given an implicit attribution that conceals their identity. At the same time, Medvedchuk is framed with details that distinguish him as a member of the outgroup. This de-emphasizes the ingroup's negative traits while emphasizing the outgroup's negative traits.

Superstructure

The *Washington Post's* superstructure begins with a detailed summary of the event. It describes who was released, when it happened and the total number of people on both sides. The schema is organized as a straightforward analysis of the prisoner swap concerning the freed captives. More subtly, however, it becomes clear that this is a celebration for Ukrainians who've courageously defended Ukraine despite months of Russian aggression. In that way, the Ukrainian side is given prominence while the Russian side is only discussed concerning its negative attributes. Schematically, this signals an allegiance to the Ukrainian aim.

Verbal Reactions follow the summary of the swap, where criticism for Putin from Russian "pro-war nationalists" is mentioned first. This is followed by praise from the governments of the freed foreigners that Russian soldiers imprisoned. The format then splits into five sections distinguished by the names of the released prisoners in each heading featured in the discussion. This is also organized concerning the group membership of the captives. It begins with Viktor Medvedchuk, followed by two sets of foreign fighters distinguished by their home country: two U.S. military veterans and five British nationals. Then it ends with two Ukrainian commanders from different branches: Denys Prokopenko of the Azov Regiment and Sergey Volynsky of the 36th Brigade. It is worth noting that among the five British nationals, one Moroccan national is mentioned at the end of the section.

Putin's friend and the two Ukrainian commanders are discussed most thoroughly. Medvedchuk is treated concerning his outgroup status and is characterized negatively for most of this discussion. In comparison, the Ukrainian commanders are given extensive positive

attribution and praise for their bravery against Russian forces. Sergey Volynsky is quoted at the end thanking the defenders of Azovstal.

The topical organization of the *New York Times* article describes the prisoner swap as a victory for Ukraine. The report begins with a summary of the prisoner swap. Although it's seen as a victory for Ukraine in several respects, the release of Azov commanders takes prominence throughout the discussion. According to the *New York Times*, this is because they are celebrities in the eyes of the Ukrainian people. There is no mention of their neo-Nazi affiliation until later in the article. Instead, the significance of their capture is made concerning their favorable public image.

Furthermore, Ukraine's decision to free Medvedchuk is portrayed as a noble sacrifice and further reinforces the value of Azov fighters in Ukraine. Zelensky is credited for the prisoner's release and given praise in a quote. The article describes the struggle in Mariupol to single out Russian brutality while simultaneously highlighting Azov's perseverance. The report concludes with a look to the future with Zelensky's mission to free more Ukrainian soldiers.

Microstructure

How the *Washington Post* describes Medvedchuk's release will be analyzed for its semantic qualities:

On Thursday, the Russian Defense Ministry acknowledged that 55 Russian soldiers had returned home but did not reveal any details of the deal. Further confirmation instead came from the Moscow-backed separatist leader of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Denis Pushilin, who claimed credit for the prisoner exchange and argued that it

was important to release Medvedchuk because of his past role as a negotiator throughout years of fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists.

First, Denis Pushilin is introduced with heavy description to preface his statement. Semantically, these details have implicit meanings that impact his credibility in the eyes of the newsmakers by pointing to his outgroup status. Starting with his group membership signals that his relationship with Russia is the most crucial detail. His leadership role is given second. However, his authority is undermined concerning its context, given that it is sandwiched between the two negative qualifiers “Moscow-backed” and “self-proclaimed.”

Semantically, the *New York Times* conceals the Azov Regiment’s controversial status in favor of a more positive ingroup representation:

Ukrainian authorities have secured the release of the commanders of the Azov Battalion, whose defense of Mariupol from within a sprawling steel plant turned them into celebrities throughout Ukraine and made them a valuable prize for the Kremlin when they surrendered to Russian forces in May after an 80-day siege.

This interpretation of the event presupposes that the Kremlin’s capture of Azov forces was an effort to spite Ukrainians. Not only does this garner hostility toward the Kremlin as the aggressor and Azov forces as the victim, but it also ignores multiple casualties to do so. This example shows how the biases of the ingroup can distort situations for their own means and create meanings for others to internalize passively.

Syntactically, the *Washington Post* discusses Medvedchuk before Ukrainian prisoners. As such, Medvedchuk’s relationship with Putin, his criminal record and his “mercurial” role in

working for both sides of the conflict garners hostility toward the only pro-Russian prisoner named in the article. Interestingly, the last proposition, which has potentially positive implications, is downplayed in the syntactic structure. In contrast, the Azov commander is recognized for his achievements and Azov's controversial status is concealed except for the last line, "Russia's parliament has taken steps to formally classify Azov as a terrorist organization." In that way, the article prioritizes Medvedchuk's "bad" traits at the start of the discussion, while downplaying what might be perceived as his "good" traits, whereas the opposite is true for the Azov commander. This topical organization indirectly reinforces ingroups from outgroups.

Syntactically, the *New York Times* structures quote from the ingroup in a way that enhances the credibility of the statement and simultaneously reveals its ideological stance:

President Volodymyr Zelensky gave a clear order to return our heroes. The result: our heroes are free," Mr. Yermak said in a statement Wednesday evening. "We exchanged 200 of our heroes for Medvechuk, who had already given all the testimony he could.

This quote's prominence and declarative structure, which refers to the released Ukrainian prisoners as "heroes," signals that this statement is a part of the popular stance. Controversial quotes are often negated through implicit means by the negativization of the speaker or being downgraded in the text, but this syntactic structure signals an ideological alignment with the statement.

Stylistically, Pushilin's direct quote is followed by commentary from the *Washington Post* that implicitly downplays Medvedchuk's positive portrayal as a peacemaker in Ukraine:

‘With my own eyes I’ve seen how during the Minsk process and outside of it, more than a 1,000 of our guys have been freed with Viktor Medvedchuk’s help who wouldn’t have survived otherwise,’ Pushilin said in a video posted by Russian state news outlet RIA Novosti. In an indication of Medvedchuk’s mercurial role, he was working for Kyiv during those previous prisoner-exchange negotiations.

The word “mercurial” in this context, has negative connotations that signal the newsmakers’ feelings. It suggests that Medvedchuk is unpredictable and perhaps insufficiently loyal since he has worked with both sides of the conflict at different times. In contrast, others might perceive Medvedchuk’s actions as a sign of maturity. However, given the prior negativization of Medvedchuk, the word “mercurial” works against him by downplaying what might be perceived positively.

Stylistically, the *New York Times* uses words and attributions that deny Azov’s neo-Nazi affiliation, “Also freed were 108 members of the Azov Battalion, a unit within the Ukrainian armed forces that Russian propaganda has attempted to paint as neo-Nazis as part of the Kremlin’s justification for war.” When an unpopular stance is acknowledged, word choices such as “attempted” create a sense of doubt (van Dijk, 1991). Furthermore, the claim is attributed to Russian propaganda, which presupposes it is false. This is misleading because several United States organizations, such as Stanford’s Center for International Security and Cooperation and the SITE Intelligence Group, have concluded otherwise (CISAC, 2022; SITE, 2022). Thus, the choice of words presupposes that the Kremlin’s portrayal of Azov fighters is unequivocally false by attributing it to outgroup propaganda.

Rhetorically, the *Washington Post* uses the metonymy “hard-liners” is used to describe the political affiliation of Russian dissent:

The swap has already faced criticism from Russian hard-liners who say Russia gave up more than it got in the negotiations with Kyiv and are critical of the Kremlin's decision to release members of the Azov Regiment, whom they view as a neo-Nazi threat that should be eliminated.

The rhetorical expression “hard-liner” is most often used to describe an outgroup with extreme demands and unwillingness to compromise on them (Collins English Dictionary). The latter example is no exception. This has implicit meanings in the text, which cultivates a negative perception of the outgroup to say that they’re unreasonable. This is a presupposition on behalf of the newsmakers that are written rather than opinion. At the same time, this could be perceived as a victory for the Ukrainian side because the “extremists” are unhappy. However, the freeing of members that belong to a known neo-Nazi organization would undoubtedly upset most people if that was believed to be the case. Thus, the use of the metonymy “hard-liner” in this context is hyperbolic and works in favor of the ingroup to suggest that the freeing of Azov members is a non-issue.

Rhetorically, the Azov commanders and Putin’s friend are referred to as “prizes” at different points in the *New York Times* article:

Ukrainian authorities have secured the release of the commanders of the Azov Battalion, whose defense of Mariupol from within a sprawling steel plant turned them into celebrities throughout Ukraine and made them a valuable prize for the Kremlin when they surrendered to Russian forces in May after an 80-day siege.

[...] To free them, the Ukrainians gave up their own valuable prize: Viktor Medvechuk, a Ukrainian businessman and politician, who is a close friend of Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin. Mr. Medvechuk had been arrested after going into hiding while awaiting trial at the start of the war and charged with treason, according to Ukrainian officials.

This metaphor compares the conflict to a game where people are used as trophies. This playful interpretation can understate the situation and cultivate an understanding of where human lives lose meaning. Furthermore, the first example implies that Azov's celebrity status in Ukraine made them a desirable capture for the Kremlin. While that bares truth, it also ignores their controversial status as a neo-Nazi militia and how that plays into Putin's "de-Nazification" aim. At the same time, the return of Victor Medvechuk is portrayed as a noble sacrifice to negotiate the return of Ukrainian prisoners. Undoubtedly, this interpretation distinguishes the "heroes" from the "villains" through implicit means.

Discussion

The findings from this study corroborate the prevalence of subjectivity in the news, which also lends itself to the propaganda features identified in Black's propaganda typology outlined below.

The Washington Post

The *Washington Post* most prominently uses the division between ingroups (friends) and outgroups (enemies). In the first analysis, Yanukovych and his allies receive the outgroup treatment. In that way, almost all sources quoted in the report are identified by their relationship with Yanukovych, Ukraine's former pro-Russian president. However, in the second analysis, this changes to Putin and Viktor Medvedchuk in the final report. In that way, the common denominator appears to be Russia, which leads to the second most used form of propaganda, *a greater emphasis on conflict than on cooperation among people, institutions, and situations.*

In the first article, the *Washington Post* enhances conflict by implicitly denying Russia's concern for Ukraine's new leadership:

The tone was much harsher than any previous Russian response to the events of the past few days. 'If you consider Kalashnikov-toting people in black masks who are roaming Kiev to be a government, then it will be hard for us to work with that government,' Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said Monday.

Ukrainian lawmakers, now largely foes of Yanukovych, were defiant. Asked about Russia's displeasure, parliament member Yuriy Derevyanko said: 'They can take it or leave it. It's not their business.'

Here, it is suggested that Russia is blowing things out of proportion, and by sheer absurdity, the claim is dismissed.

The second *Washington Post* article reverses the blame to negate Putin's "denazification" claim:

Ukraine's state-run Twitter account on Thursday posted an image of what appeared to be a tall Adolf Hitler caressing the face of a smaller Putin.

'This is not a 'meme', but our and your reality right now,' the caption read.

Moreover, finally, an example from the third article illustrates how the *Washington Post* downplays the significance of Medvedchuk's ability to negotiate with both sides and facilitate compromise:

'With my own eyes I've seen how during the Minsk process and outside of it, more than a 1,000 of our guys have been freed with Viktor Medvedchuk's help who wouldn't have survived otherwise,' Pushilin said in a video posted by Russian state news outlet RIA Novosti. In an indication of Medvedchuk's mercurial role, he was working for Kyiv during those previous prisoner-exchange negotiations.

Also described in-depth in the findings, we see that Medvedchuk's role as a mediator is not only syntactically downplayed in the discussion of his release but framed by the negatively connotated word "mercurial" to suggest that he is insufficiently loyal to either side of the conflict.

All of the above uses quotes from outside sources to convey hostility toward outgroup members in concluding arguments. This also hints toward a third element of propaganda, *a heavy or undue reliance on authority figures and spokespersons, rather than empirical validation, to*

establish its truths, conclusions, or impressions, which the *Washington Post* uses generously. Although the presentation of outside voices is routine in the news-gathering process (van Dijk, 1991), we can also see how these voices are presented have underlying implications. In this case, quotes are used to conclude arguments and support future conflict instead of compromise.

The New York Times

While the *New York Times* also explicitly distinguishes ingroups and outgroups concerning Russia, its rhetorical language is unique to this publication. The *New York Times* uses vivid descriptions and embellishments in each article to create meaning. Simultaneously, conflict is driven by this style.

In the first analysis, the clash between pro and anti-Maidan demonstrators is likened to a play: “It was the final act in an elaborate, two-hour drama carefully managed by the police.” As mentioned in the findings section, this dramatization of events drives conflict by distinguishing ingroups from outgroups - protagonists from antagonists - and stimulates support or opposition for actors on different sides of the conflict.

Ironically, the second report implicitly ridicules Putin for allegedly using the same strategy:

Many believe that Mr. Putin’s stated determination to ‘denazify’ Ukraine is code for his aim to topple the government and repress pro-Western activists and groups. It is an echo of how he has used Russian remembrance of the nation’s suffering and victory in World War II to militarize Russian society and justify domestic crackdowns and foreign aggression. [...] Now, the narrative goes, Mr. Putin is finally carrying out the Soviet Union’s unfinished business.

Also mentioned in the findings sections, the third New York Times article likens Medvedchuk and Azov commanders to prizes for both sides of the conflict. Furthermore, a large portion of the report is dedicated to outlining the Ukrainian fighters' bravery against Russian brutality:

The Azov soldiers' defense of Mariupol, the southern Ukrainian port city decimated by Russian forces in the first months of the war, has become a source of inspiration and pride for Ukrainians, with the commanders' likenesses displayed on billboards around the country.

In this way, members of the ingroup are likened to heroes, while outgroup members are portrayed as villains. While we cannot dismiss the financial prospects that play into dramatizing events and subsequently captivate readers, this does not come without consequences. It is best summarized by the *New York Times*; this narrative style can be used unethically to militarize "society and justify domestic crackdowns and foreign aggression."

RQ1: What are the propagandist features of the news reports that pertain to neo-Nazi militias in Ukraine?

Returning to the research questions this study sought to answer, we can see that multiple propaganda techniques have been used by the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. While establishing ingroups from outgroups is the most prominent, the emphasis on the conflict over cooperation ultimately advocates for the West's continued involvement as tensions rise and more innocent lives are lost in the crossfire. What remains to be seen is whether this was intentional and whether continued support will cause more harm than good.

RQ2: Do the reports following Putin's claim differ from the source's earlier publications?

The hypothetical shift in attitudes toward neo-Nazi militias following Putin's claim also has many considerations. For one, the prevalence of neo-Nazism in Ukraine is still being speculated. Thus, it is hard to determine how much it should be reported on. This can help explain why direct interaction with Putin's claim is often avoided, downplayed, or refuted by other implicit means in place of empirical evidence. At the same time, we can see that the absence of information about neo-Nazism in Ukraine does not deter support for Ukraine in this corner of the United States media.

Furthermore, the findings indicate an acceptance of the Azov Regiment's role in the battle against Russia. This is more explicit in the *New York Times*' reporting, with the last two reports positioning them as "heroes" in their narrative style. In that way, the ideological opposition toward Putin seems to triumph over Azov's far-right, neo-Nazi status in the neoliberal media and has defaulted to its ingroup membership. This begs the question if anti-Semitism has become the lesser of two evils regarding residual anti-Communist sentiment, which only time can answer.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the effort to improve the quality of media that this country dearly depends on by engaging with it critically and challenging popular belief. To that end, the analysis successfully identifies the most prominent propagandistic elements in reports from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* on three selected dates of the Russia-Ukraine conflict using van Dijk's schemata analysis and Black's propaganda typology. The findings also indicate a gradual acceptance of far-right paramilitary groups in Ukraine that espouse neo-Nazi ideology (CISAC, 2022), wherein in specific contexts, praise is given for their defense against Russia.

Like many political conflicts, wartime reporting comes with limited access to information and severe polarization. In that way, this study is also confined to what is known in the present. For instance, the prevalence of neo-Nazism in Ukraine is still being speculated, making it hard to determine the extent to which it should be reported. However, it does appear that reports from the prisoner swap have implicitly validated certain aspects of the Azov controversy, such as the direct far-right mention in the *Washington Post* lead.

In that regard, this study is based on understanding how stories are told when the facts are not always present, emphasizing the level of transparency through which it is conveyed. After all, journalists are supposed to empower citizens with access to information, not prescribe the beliefs necessary to garner support for a cause. To that end, if the triumph of an American foe is seen as the worst possible outcome, then collaborating with neo-Nazi militias can be justified. However, with transparency, people can reach that conclusion on their own.

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