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THE IMAGE OF WAR IN CNN'S "RUSSIA-UKRAINE NEWS" HEADLINES. REPORT FROM SEPTEMBER 2022

Abstract

The study depicts ways used in CNN news portal to portray Russian aggression of Ukraine in 2022, on the example of "Russia-Ukraine News" headlines, published in September 2022. Using both quantitative and qualitative analysis, author revealed most common means of portraying the war, as well as sources most often referred to. Additionally, the study covers categorization of news provided by CNN themselves.

Key words: Russian invasion of Ukraine, CNN, online news headlines, mediatization of war, depiction of war

Introduction

Mediatization of war is one of crucial topics of media studies research. By some estimations, since the end of World War II the longest period without any conflict in the world lasted for 26 days (ZPE, n.d.). Since the end of World War II there was also great media development, including invention and dissemination of the Internet, and its evolution from the cathedral model to the bazaar model (Raymond, 1999).

Denis McQuail (2006) noted, that since the end of World War II warfare has been conducted under new set of conditions: rather than global total war there are "small wars" with global "ideological antagonisms" or threats. According to McQuail (2006, p. 108): "It is arguable that warfare of the kind described also requires more support in public opinion than past warfare and that the media are the key to obtaining this support." The role of media in times of war is crucial, and modern

media technologies, as live tracking of ground and air traffic, makes media users closer to the war zones than ever. The data however, without proper interpretation, does not guarantee the access to the truth. That's why processing the data into the information and communicating this information properly is still a crucial in warfare coverage.

As Jean Baudrillard (2006) noted, nowadays electronic media determine the human mentality. Media are picturing the war for those outside of conflict-affected areas. The means they use result in image they create, and the created image results in media receivers' knowledge about the conflicts. As a consequence, media may influence receivers attitudes, opinions and beliefs – but the media effect is another subject of media studies (see: Valkenburg, Peter, Walther, 2016).

Recent military conflicts, including Russian invasion of Ukraine, bring new challenges for media, as well as media users and researchers, due to the new technologies for war coverage, available both for journalists and non-professionals. The Internet is overflowing with news about war, and pictures or footage published by anonymous users sometimes are impossible to verify (Khaldarova, Pantti, 2016; Hoskins, O'Loughlin, 2015). However, just because the war news are disseminated worldwide, does not mean that they increase the ability to think about the suffering of people in distant places (Sontag, 2016).

Moreover, the increase of information amount in media does not increase human capacity for information processing (Halavais, 2012). Studies show, that nowadays most of American media users focus mainly on headlines, while only a minority goes beyond the headline and leading paragraph (Cillizza, 2014; American Press Institute, 2014). Study by Holmqvist et al. (2003) showed that net paper readers behavior is more scanning than reading. Therefore, the headlines are interesting research object of an interdisciplinary meaning (Hudock, 2005; Molek--Kozakowska, 2013; Lai, Farbrot, 2014; Catalán-Matamoros, Peñafiel-Saiz, 2019; Finkbeiner, 2020).

This article focuses on ways of picturing the Russian-Ukraine war in CNN news portal, on the example of headlines gathered in "Russia-Ukraine News" subsites. The study presented in the article aims to answer the following research questions:

Q1. What are the key features of headlines in CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News"?
Q2. To whose words CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News" headlines refer most often?
Q3. Which of the thematic categories provided by CNN occur most often?

Materials and Methods

The CNN station was chosen because of so-called "CNN effect": "a communication theory of international relations that asserts that global television networks, such as CNN and BBC World, have become a decisive actor in determining policies and

outcomes of significant events" (Gilboa, 2005, p. 27). While the effect itself is arguable (Gowing, 1994), the station is one of key actors on the stage of American media (Statista, 2022).

On their website, CNN provides special daily subpages named "Russia-Ukraine News," where news regarding war in Ukraine are gathered. There is a separate subsite for each day, and news there are displayed chronologically. Some news are also sorted thematically (users can choose whether they want to see "All" news, or only those assigned to given topic).

The study covered "Russia-Ukraine News" published from 1st to 26th September 2022. Some headlines appeared more than once: for example headline: *Municipal deputies from Moscow and St. Petersburg call for Putin's resignation* was published on September 12th at 10:10 a.m. and also on September 13th at 1:51 a.m. Headlines that appeared more than once were not excluded from the analysis. Overall research material consists of 695 headlines.

Headlines were subjected to the quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Each headline was read by the author, and on the basis of given words (e.g. "says") or characters (e.g. ":") which constituted its structure, it was than categorized (quantitative content analysis). Divided according to the structure, the headlines were then analyzed in terms of whom/what they concern (qualitative content analysis). Therefore the "category" refers to qualitative results in terms of how the author understood and interpreted given headline; and "structure" refers to quantitative results – occurrence of given words or characters that define the way given headline is organized.

Whenever headlines referred to military, forces, countries, regions or organizations as decision-making and causative, those were treated as "people behind them." For example in headline: *Russia launches fresh airstrikes on Kharkiv region* "Russia" was treated like "someone" instead of "some place."

Additionally, the study also included the news categorization provided by CNN themselves, in order to check which topics, suggested by CNN, occur most often.

Results

The structure of the headlines

The analysis of 695 CNN's headlines revealed 12 categories and the structures representing them occurred with varying frequency. Table 1 presents the structures of headlines with their frequency and typical examples. If given category occurred more often, non-recurring structures are classified as "other."

Table 1. Structure of headlines in CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News" published from 1st to 26th September 2022, divided into categories

Category (number of headlines)	Structure	Number of headlines with following structure	Example
reader (24)	catch up	6	It's nighttime in Kyiv. Catch up here on the latest headlines
	what (you need) to know	18	It's 2:00 a.m. in Kyiv. Here's what you need to know.
footage/ proofs (7)	what is detailed where	2	Forcible deportations of Ukrainian civilians to Russia are detailed at UN Security Council
	according to what	1	UN nuclear watchdog saw military vehicles and equipment inside Zaporizhzhia plant, according to report
	report has been released	1	The IAEA report on Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant has been released
	something shows something	3	Video shows centuries-old Ukrainian monastery damaged by Russian shelling in June in liberated town
map (3)	here's the map	1	Here's the latest map of control in Russia's invasion of Ukraine
	see the map	1	See the latest map of control
	here's a look at the territory	1	Here's a look at the territory reclaimed by Ukraine through its counteroffensive
CNN (6)	what we know	2	It's 3 p.m. in Kyiv. Here's what we know.
	CNN on the ground	2	CNN on the ground: What the scene is like at Ukraine's second-largest nuclear plant as daily threats continue
	what CNN saw	1	What CNN saw on the ground at a mass burial site in Izium
	CNN goes to	1	CNN goes to Izium, a city recaptured by Ukraine after months of Russian occupation

future (24)	what is (not) expected to happen	4	Two IAEA inspectors expected to remain at Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant "on a permanent basis"
	what would/could	3	What today's election in Italy could mean for the war in Ukraine
	what will/won't happen	5	Austria will freeze electricity prices from December until June 2024
	someone to something	8	Biden to meet families of Americans jailed in Russia
	what appears to happen	4	Russian decree appears to allow for wider mobilization
past (35)	someone was killed	2	Prosecutor in Russian-backed separatist region killed in "terrorist act"
	something was seen/heard	2	Several large explosions heard overnight in Kharkiv
	someone did something	13	Biden met with families of Brittney Griner and Paul Whelan
	other (something happened)	18	–
presence (119)	something happens as something happens	4	Heavy fighting in Bakhmut continues as Russians press offensive in parts of Donetsk
	something happens after something happened	3	Projectile veers off course after launching from near Russian city of Belgorod
	something happens amid something	3	Kharkiv region loses power and water supply amid shelling
	something is happening right now	2	There's a sharp rise in demand for flights out of Moscow right now
	something happens over something	2	Protests erupt in Russia's Dagestan region over mobilization
	someone is doing/does something	91	Foreign ministers discuss special tribunal to punish Russia for atrocities in Ukraine
	other (something happens/is happening)	14	–

plans (9)	there are (no) plans for	1	There are no plans for Blinken and Lavrov to meet at UNGA, but US won't rule out meeting on detained Americans
	someone plans something	7	Russian-backed administration in Kherson plans immediate referendum on joining Russia
	someone intends to	1	US intends to provide additional $2 billion to bolster security of Ukraine and other regional countries
feelings (5)	how someone feels	5	UK finance minister hopes G7 ministers will agree to a price cap on Russian oil exports
analysis (11)	analysis	11	Analysis: Reports of Putin's problems are mounting
communication: someone communicates/ed something (450)	according to whom	7	Ukrainian forces entered key city of Izium on Saturday, according to officials
	accuse	8	Zelensky accuses Russia of deteriorating situation at Zaporizhzhia plant
	announce	6	US announces $675 million in assistance to Ukraine
	ask	4	Ukraine's Zelensky asks France's Macron for additional defense support
	call	21	US secretary of state calls for extension of Russia-Ukraine grain deal
	claim	25	Ukraine claims it struck FSB base in Zaporizhzhia
	condemn	4	Russian pop star condemns "illusory aims" of Putin's Ukraine war
	confirm	6	Ukrainian military confirms attacks on Russian positions in Luhansk
	demand	2	Zelensky demands punishment for Russia over crimes committed in Ukraine
	deny	2	North Korea denies selling weapons to Russia
	describe	2	Ukrainian officials describe 'coercion' tactics of "sham" referendums
	express	4	US officials express caution on state of the war
	pledge	2	Biden pledges US will continue to stand in solidarity with Ukraine

communica-tion: someone com-municates/ed something (450)	report	6	Russian parliament amends law on military service, state media reports
	respond	2	China responds to questions regarding an official's remarks during a visit to Russia
	say	255	UN to send team to site of mass burials in Izium, source says
	speak	3	Russian pop legend speaks out against war
	tell	11	Putin's "partial mobilization" is a "mistake," Macron tells CNN
	urge	4	Estonia's economy minister urges unity on energy as Putin sends warning
	warn	8	Biden warns Putin against escalating the fighting in Ukraine
	what: who	9	More than 1,000 people detained for anti-war protests: monitoring group
	who: what	34	IAEA: Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant's back-up power line is restored
	other (each occurring only once)	25	–
other (2)	N/A	2	–

Source: own study.

The study revealed, that vast majority of CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News" headlines is reporting someone else's words. The 65% of all headlines was structured according to the pattern "someone communicates/ed something," and most of them regarded "who says what" or "what is said by whom." The "say(s)" structure occurred in 255 headlines, which constitutes 57% of "communication" category, and 37% of all researched material.

Apart from "communication," most common categories of headlines were respectively "presence," "past" and "future." Headlines regarding presence occurred 119 times (17%), and their most common structure was "someone is doing/does something," which appeared in 91 headlines, what makes this structure second most common in research material. Headlines regarding past occurred 35 times (5%), and apart from structure "someone did something" no particular scheme stands out. Headlines referring to future appeared 24 times (3%), mostly in structure "someone to something." It is worth mentioning, that while the "what would"

or "what could" is always a presumption, the headline *What would happen if Russia deployed a tactical nuclear weapon?* was the only one question headline in all research material.

Headlines referring to the future occurred equally often as those addressed directly to readers – 24 times. The latter category was represented by two structures "catch up" or "what (you need) to know." For comparison, CNN mentioned themselves in only six headlines – four times less often. Two of "catch up" headlines encouraged reader to catch up not the news, but headlines: *It's nighttime in Kyiv. Catch up here on the latest headlines.*

The "analysis" structure, assigned to the category of the same name, referred to the analysis provided by CNN. After the colon, there was a short recap of what is analyzed in the news. The "analysis" headline never contained questions or quotations – they rather stated "what is going on." The headline: Analysis: *Winter is fast approaching in Ukraine. Here's what comes next for the conflict* was the only one "analysis" headline announcing, that the news underneath it analyzes the future.

Referring to statements in headlines

In order to reveal to whose words CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News" headlines refer most often, the categorized research material was subjected to further study.

The second stage of analysis covered the 450 headlines of "communication" category. The bottom-up analysis resulted in 14 first-order categories, some required more detailed second order categories. The overall results with the number of headlines is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Sources referred to in CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News" published from 1ˢᵗ to 26ᵗʰ September 2022, organized in "communication" structure

First order categories	Number of headlines	Second order categories	Number of headlines
officials	260	Ukrainian officials	97
		US officials	53
		US & Ukrainian officials	1
		Russian officials	41
		pro-Russian officials and separatist leaders	12
		German officials	10
		non-specified	12
		other	34

country	50	Ukraine & Russia	2
		Ukraine	26
		Russia	4
		US	7
		other	11
military (officials)	36	Ukrainian	23
		US	7
		non-specified	4
		Finnish	2
organizations or their representatives	32	IAEA	13
		NATO	4
		United Nations	7
		other	8
watchdogs or monitoring groups	16	United Nations	8
		non-specified	8
other	11	Ukrainians	5
		Russians	3
		non-specified	3
sources	10	non-specified	7
		UK sources	1
		US sources	2
media	8	Russian	7
		Chinese	1
nuclear workers/operators	6	Ukrainian	5
		Russian	1
civilians	6	US	4
		Ukrainian	2
manufacturers and companies	4	non-specified	2
		Wizzair	1
		Aeroflot	1
people	4	Ukrainian	2
		American	1
		British	1
pope	4	Pope Francis	4
celebrities	3	Russian	3

Source: own study.

The second stage of analysis revealed that headlines referring to statements mostly allude to officials (260 out of 450 headlines – 58%), especially Ukrainian ones (97 headlines), afterwards US (53 headlines) and Russian (41). Pro-Russian officials and separatist leaders were mentioned in 12 times. In the analysis they were treated separately due to the specificity of that group.

Since the officials were most cited group, additional attention was gave to that group. Within this category, 84 headlines referred to presidents. Mostly to Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky (54 headlines), less often to Joe Biden (10 headlines) or Vladimir Putin (12 headlines). Headlines also referred to presidents of Turkey, Moldova, Latvia, France and China.

Fifty headlines referred to what countries communicate, for example: *Russia says it will suspend oil and petrol supplies if price caps imposed*. Among this type of headlines, those referring to Ukraine occurred most often.

Ukrainians were also most commonly cited in headlines referring to military and military officials; people; nuclear workers and operators; and other, non-categorized.

Headlines referring to organizations or their representatives most often cited IAEA – International Atomic Energy Agency. Out of 32 headlines, 13 (41%) referred to IAEA, and 7 (22%) to United Nations. United Nations watchdogs, statements were recalled in half of headlines referring to watchdogs and monitoring groups.

While only 8 headlines referred to media, seven out of them recalled Russian media. Also Russian celebrities were only one whose words were recalled in headlines.

The overall analysis of sources in headlines under "communication" category revealed, that CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News" headlines in September 2022 referred mostly to what Ukrainian sources communicate. Out of 450 "communication" headlines, 164 (36%) based on statements given by Ukrainian forces, officials, civilians or organizations. Second most often occurred sources are Americans (74 headlines – 16%) and third – Russian (62 headlines – 14%).

The CNN's categories

In the "Russia-Ukraine News" CNN runs their own post categorization. Not every day of "Russia-Ukraine News" coverage had this type of sorting – in collected data there was no such categorization in five subpages (from 17th–19th and 24th–25th September). Also not every post is categorized. For example on 8th September there were 24 post published on "Russia-Ukraine News" site, but only one was categorized.

CNN provided 10 categories of their posts. Table 3 presents their occurrence and number of posts displayed under those categories.

Table 3. CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News" published from 1st to 26th September 2022, categorized by CNN

CNN's post category	Number of days when this category occurred	Number of displayed posts
Catch up	14	18
Zaporizhzhia	6	58
Counteroffensive	2	19
Kharkiv	2	12
SCO Summit	1	6
Griner	1	4
Izium	1	5
Whelan	1	4
UNGA	1	18
UN	1	7

Source: own study.

Additional analysis of CNN's self-categorization of posts revealed that most categories occur in specific conditions, not on daily basis. Only the "Catch up" category appeared regularly, in more than half time covered by the study (14 out of 23 days). Most posts categorized by CNN referred to Zaporizhzhia, nut those were only published in the first half of the September – none occurred after 12th.

Discussion

The structure

The analysis of 695 CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News" headlines published from 1st to 26th of September 2022 revealed 11 types of headlines, mostly organized according to specific structure, presented in Table 1. The 65% of all headlines was structured according to the pattern "someone communicates/ed something," and most of them regarded "who says what" or "what is said by whom." Referring to other's statement may result from the need of credibility: CNN doesn't claim, that something is happening, if they are not on the ground, but they highlight the source of given information.

Such way of reporting creates the image of war based on quotes, rather than actions – reading the highlights allow users to know "who communicated what" instead of what is actually happening. And just because something is said, doesn't mean that it's going to be followed with actions. Such way of constructing headlines

may portray war more as an argument between countries and officials, than as a military actions harming thousands of people.

Notwithstanding, headlines with structure "someone is doing/does something" were second most often – appeared 91 times. They were categorized as reflecting presence, with 5 another structures and few non-specific presence-related headlines. The "presence" category was second most often occurring, followed by "past" and "future" respectively. Such ratio may be a result of balancing between credibility and attention-seeking. Relating to past allows for better verification of sources and credibility of information – facts are facts, the issue is to establish the truth. Yet, the presence and future are those presumably most interesting to audience. Relating what's happening now gives less time for verification, but also gives chance for better click and share ratio. Since the war zone is outside of U.S. territory, future might be the aspect of war most interesting to Americans. But relating to future is always presumption, even when based on meticulous analyzes and calculations, or announcements of decision-makers.

While question headlines are proven to be "an effective strategy for enhancing readership in computer-mediated communication" (Lai, Farbrot, 2014, p. 298), only one such headline appeared in research material. Question headlines have been used widely in spread of fake news. As Yimin Chen et al. (2015) noticed, question mark creates the impression that the claim is credible. Even though it may not. For this reason, question headlines may be associated with fake news by some Internet users, and nowadays it may be wise not to apply them, when there is no need to.

The reference

The analysis of 450 headlines structured according to "someone communicates/ed something" pattern, revealed that official are group most often referred to in CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News" headlines (in 260 out of 450 cases – 58%). Headlines mostly referred to Ukrainian, U.S. and Russian officials. Over one third headlines referring to officials recalled presidents – usually Volodymyr Zelensky (54 headlines), less often to Joe Biden (10 headlines) or Vladimir Putin (12 headlines). Due to their decision-making and obligations arising out of holding public office, officials are credible source of information. They are, however, most privileged group. Many of them, such as presidents, can count on protection when their lives are in danger. Apart from headlines referring to Zelensky, the reporting of the war takes place from the perspective of a people mostly being in safe position. Civilians are quoted over 43 times less often than officials, over 8 times less often than countries and 6 times less often than military. And civilians are referred to – they are mostly Americans. This could be a matter of credibility, but at the same time it neglects the perspective of those most in need and most disadvantaged.

Overall, headlines presenting other people statements mostly referred to Ukrainian sources, so the Ukrainian perspective is strongly present in the image of

war created by CNN's headlines. Second most often recalled sources are Americans, and third – Russians. This shows that CNN's picture of the war involves both fighting countries and local, American perspective.

Headlines referring to organizations most often referred to IAEA. Nuclear danger might be one of the greatest Americans' worries over the war. Taking up this topic is providing wanted content for the audience, and thus providing traffic on the website, which results in improved statistics and, consequently, better sales of digital advertising space. The reason for taking up the issue of the nuclear threat may also be much less mundane. This could be drawing viewers' attention to the war and arousing their interest in the fate of Ukrainians: as Susan Sontag (2016, p. 119) noted, when people feel safe, they become indifferent.

The CNN's categorization

While the initial aim of the study was to focus on headlines, author noticed, that CNN provides their own categorization of posts published as "Russian-Ukraine News." Since the self-categorization seem to be interesting field of study, the additional attention was paid to this phenomenon.

Not every day of "Russia-Ukraine News" coverage provided thematical sorting of news, and most of categories occurred only once. Only the "Catch up" category occurred regularly in more than half of time covered by the study. This could suggest, that summarizing, general overviews have the greatest interest of users.

Most of posts, however, were published in "Zaporizhzhia" category, which may reflect audiences need for information on nuclear danger – real or presumed by CNN.

Limitations and indications for further studies

The study revealed repetitive patterns of CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News" headlines, and brought to attention the self-categorization of news provided by CNN. The influence of headline's structure and sources referred to in headlines on the image of war were discussed. However, presented study is no without limitations.

The article presents the report from September 2022, but the "Russia-Ukraine News" subsites were available much earlier. While the case studies have been proven efficiency in providing tools for further investigations and formation of new theories (Schell, 1992; Yin, 2003; Mills et al., 2010), no doubts that wider study could reveal new dependencies or perhaps greater or lesser polarization of the results. Perhaps, such wider study could also allow to observe if headlines' patterns changed over time.

The power of headlines as source of information has been proven among Americans, but CNN website may be visited by users from all over the world. The

efficiency of CNN's headlines in creating the image of war in Ukraine could be better studied, if the percentage of American users of CNN's "Russia-Ukraine News" would be known, or if studies on drawing information from headlines would be carried out more often worldwide.

Author suggested, that headlines regarding future could be most interested for CNN's audience. The data on the click-through rates of individual headlines, obtained from CNN, could be helpful in verifying such assumptions.

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