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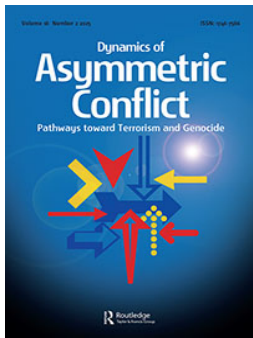
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Behind the Enemy News: issue salience in the Russo-Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT

Agenda-setting theory and warfare studies hold that setting the national agenda is strategically advantageous to foreign policy goals. We probe this theory on the Russo-Ukrainian War by analysing the conflicting agenda set by RIA Novosti, RT Russian, RT International, BBC News Russian, and BBC News from February 2022 to July 2023. In contrast to previous work that identified press coverage misalignment to be largely concentrated in the framing of events, our study provides evidence of substantive and sustained misalignment in the event selection by revealing that Russian state media tailored a specific version of the news for Russian-speaking audiences, often downplaying key developments of the conflict, such as the mobilization crisis in Russia, the Wagner group rebellion, the Ukrainian counteroffensive, and the prospect of nuclear escalation. Our results contribute to understanding how modern Russian propaganda has shaped the public perception of the invasion of Ukraine.

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Introduction

The short period of freedom of speech that followed the collapse of the USSR gave way to the gradual ousting or takeover of independent media in Russia. While independent federal media coverage was still possible during the First Chechen War, the situation changed significantly with Vladimir Putin's rise to power, when independent media came under the control of forces loyal to the Kremlin (Hutchings & Rulyova, 2009). During this period, a series of Soviet propaganda strategies that utilized information to gain strategic advantages domestically and internationally were reactivated, including strategic disinformation that must at least partially correspond to reality or generally accepted views (Bittman, 1985). This propaganda toolbox continues to be refined, with important milestones including the large-scale distribution of misinformation during the Second Chechen War, the annexation of Southern Ossetia in 2008, and the invasion of Crimea in 2014.

This revived playbook of Soviet propaganda emerged against the backdrop of historical tensions between Russia and Europe, particularly the enlargement of NATO, and

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broke into attrition warfare when Russian President Vladimir Putin started a full-scale war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022. News outlets like RT (formerly Russia Today) and RIA Novosti covered the conflict as a “special military operation” that lacked any intention to annex Ukrainian territory. RT’s news coverage promoted Putin’s official statements underscoring a commitment to peacekeeping efforts aimed at forestalling Ukrainian aggression, while RIA Novosti, the most cited information source in Russia (Medialogiya, 2023), provided detailed excerpts from Putin’s official statements with allegations of genocide and nuclear armament pursuits by Ukraine. The dissonance observed in how Russian state media covered the conflict compared with the coverage in Western public service media highlights the disparate narratives and the fractured political space between Russia and Western nations.

Despite looming threats of substantive economic sanctions, and in sharp contrast to a relatively unified viewpoint in the West, a significant portion of Russian society reportedly rallied behind the President’s actions (Levada-Center, 2022). This required a concerted effort from the Russian government to continuously push for press coverage of Putin himself, ultimately triggering a rally-around-the-flag effect through which increased popular support of a country’s political leaders is secured during periods of international crisis (Baker & Oneal, 2001). Such propaganda efforts were subjected to substantive international scrutiny following the reported Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential elections and the UK EU Membership referendum (Kim et al., 2018). Expanding on traditional Soviet propaganda based on mass communication, these influence campaigns were marked by the utilization of novel technologies such as “troll farms” and the use of advertisement-supported features on social media to distribute propaganda (Benkler et al., 2018).

But the social media campaign did not preclude Russian propaganda efforts on mass media. Russia continued to invest in news outlets like RT (formerly Russia Today) to secure a persistent foothold in the foreign media ecosystem (Grigor’ev, 2021). Propaganda distributed through the Russian foreign press remained unsanctioned for decades despite the protracted history of combating Russian propaganda in the West. Indeed, the European Union only enforced a ban on Russian-funded RT television after the onset of the Ukrainian invasion. These channels remained nonetheless operational, with portals like rt.com and sputnikglobe.com remaining accessible beyond the European Union’s boundaries and facilitating the Russian government’s influence on public debate in a manner that is advantageous to its foreign policy goals (Livermore, 2018; Wilbur, 2021). While war fatigue has arguably emerged in the West, Russian support for the invasion of Ukraine remains reportedly undeterred (Levada-Center, 2022, 2023b, 2023c) notwithstanding the increased scale of repression inside Russia and the wave of emigration after the mobilization.

Given the above, we seek to identify the agenda featured in the press coverage of the war in Russia and Britain. While Western media was relatively unified in condemning the invasion (Nordenstreng et al., 2023), survey responses collected by the Levada Institute indicate substantial support for the war effort in Russia (with the important caveat that polling data in authoritarian regimes is subjected to government interference and self-censorship). As such, we seek to identify and unpack the conflicting issues that received sustained press coverage by the BBC and those distributed by Russian state media. In contrast, we also compare the foreign press services of BBC Russian with RT International.

Our expectation is that the Russian press will present substantive variation in the event selection pushed domestically compared with those distributed to international audiences. To this end, we contrast the domestic (RIA) and international (RT) coverage disseminated by Russian state media.

The theoretical import of this study draws from agenda-setting theory and warfare strategies positing that the media sets the national agenda by telling the public what issues are important and that infiltrating and subverting adversary news media allows for steering public debate in a manner that is advantageous to its foreign policy goals (Livermore, 2018; Wilbur, 2021). While much propaganda research focuses on framing and the “spin” applied to information, we seek to untangle propaganda efforts within the first level of agenda setting, i.e., by identifying efforts to set the agenda through coverage that elevates the salience of specific issues and events. We expect to find not only a significant disconnect between the news coverage in Russian and British news outlets but also important similarities, as there are considerable limits to what news organizations can ignore without losing credibility even in authoritarian contexts (Roudakova, 2009, 2017). Our expectation, therefore, is to find strategic misalignment in issue salience (event selection) between national news outlets, but also commonalities in the international news outlets monitored and analysed in this study.

To be sure, there are no correct levels of attention or issue selection that could provide a reliable benchmark, but we expect the differences in over and under-reporting across five fundamentally different news organizations to yield considerable insights on the agenda set by the press during war events. We also expect the agenda set by the national presses in Russia and Britain (RIA and BBC, respectively), and conversely, the agenda pushed by RT International and BBC Russian, to diverge substantially as the war becomes more intense and drawn-out, particularly during the faltering of the Kyiv invasion and the realization that the Russian war effort was not progressing as intended. During these junctures, we expect references to “Vladimir Putin” and rally-around-the-flag effects to vary in Russian news coverage, along with a range of other agenda-setting devices that are embedded in the events unfolding in Ukraine.

Previous work

Propaganda studies stem from seminal studies on influence operations by foreign governments that defined propaganda as the systematic attempt to manipulate behaviour to achieve the desired intent of the propagandist (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014). There are, however, important differences between Russian domestic propaganda (Karpchuk, 2021), Russian foreign propaganda (Bittman, 1985), and the more diffuse notion of propaganda that is often synonymous with persuasive communication and that informed recent research on network or computational propaganda (Benkler et al., 2018). Propaganda campaigns that target the state's own population to maximize control and ideological adherence are commonly referred to as white propaganda, insofar as the source of the propaganda is not masked (Becker, 1949). Such campaigns rely on mass media such as newspapers, radio, and television which are central to propaganda techniques (Taylor, 2003).

This body of work is of critical importance for this study, as we seek to unpack Russian propaganda that permeates news coverage. Indeed, one of the tenets of propaganda

research has long been the identification of ideological discourse distributed through mass media (Bittman, 1985). These studies are primarily concerned with identifying the compositional tropes of propaganda campaigns through framing analysis. Conversely, we seek to isolate specific differences in the news coverage observed across countries and news outlets that are meaningful vectors of agenda-setting efforts. By focusing on issue salience more than issue attribute, we begin by reviewing research that identified the propaganda efforts during the earlier phases of the Russo-Ukrainian War, both in Russian pro-regime media and in Western media outlets (Fengler et al., 2020; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2020).

There is indeed a large body of research on Russian state media propaganda that focuses on qualitative assessments of Russian news content. Yablokov (2015) examined how conspiratorial theorizing is central to RT's news agenda, and the extent to which it was leveraged to promote the Russian political agenda while also undermining American interests. Kablukov (2016) traced the evolution of the term "fifth column" in Russian media, often used to delegitimize and label Russian opposition as traitors. Binder and Kaltseis (2020) explored how Russian TV propaganda relied on the "fabrication of facts" and deeply emotional narratives to establish "alternative news" and shape public opinion without resorting to actual investigation or reporting of the events. Fortuin (2022) analysed Russia's decade-long weaponization of the "genocide" frame (including "Nazi" and "Fascist" references) to promote the "Russian World" concept and, of recent, rally support for the war against Ukraine. The author found a combination of falsehoods and verifiable facts, some of which were broadly suppressed while others included markers of exaggeration to convey strategic political messaging.

Propaganda efforts accompanying the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian military extended beyond mass media. Littell and Starck (2023) examined how Russian state media reacted on Twitter by shifting the war narrative and focusing their communication efforts regionally. The authors concluded that the limited success of Russian information efforts in Europe was counterbalanced by substantive gains of influence in South America and the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), where influence operations could leverage latent anti-Western sentiment and face minimal obstructions or sanctions. Similarly, Nordenstreng et al. (2023) compared the broadcast news in nine countries and found significant differences between Russia and other nations, but also between the Western and BRICS countries. Tolz and Hutchings (2023) analysed the "the truth status" of Ukraine war claims by Russian state propaganda, which pivoted along the tropes of colonialism, imperialism, and the imaginary West, and argued that such discourses inform war-related coverage in Russophone oppositional media.

A key objective of propaganda campaigns is, of course, to influence public opinion, which is often accompanied by attempts to erode the general public's ability to distinguish facts from opinion-based statements (Walter & Salovich, 2021). This is a recurring inflection in affective politics (Young, 2021) that often intersects with contemporary conservative political thought (Tripodi, 2018). In contexts of attrition warfare, markers of facticity may be supplanted by shifting the agenda of the press to events that boost morale and provide up-to-date information on the war effort. In addition to eroding journalistic norms surrounding verification and reporting, the inflection of propaganda on agenda setting also entails the selection and reporting of issues to increase public attention on issues that are of strategic importance to the war effort. Our theoretical

framework thus relies on the agenda-setting hypothesis asserting that media exerts an indirect effect by choosing certain issues for emphasis and elevating them in salience (Cohen, 1963), with the comparison between the Russian state media and British public service media throwing into sharp relief the interplay between similarity and dissimilarity in news coverage.

Central to this framework is previous research that probed the tension between similarity and dissimilarity in contexts of conflict. Aday et al. (2005) inspected the television coverage of the 2003 Iraq War across six broadcasters and found that objectivity was largely defined by culture and ideology more than actual events. Similarly, Boaz (2005) argued that Americans were particularly successful at setting the international agenda on Iraq by informing the coverage in the international press. Indeed, attrition warfare is likely to drive quantifiable changes in issue salience in both domestic and foreign news, with the tension between the national presses of adversarial nations limited only by international news coverage that converges towards salient issues and that cannot be ignored if the population is exposed to this information from other sources (Kampf & Liebes, 2013).

In summary, we expect developments in the war to change the salience of events in connection to the escalation and de-escalation of hostilities, with the escalation most obviously leading to furthering antagonism of news audiences in opposing camps (Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2017). News organizations, particularly those operating in Russia with limited press freedom, may promptly adopt specific ideological positions on particular issues to align their news coverage with the heightened patriotic or nationalistic sentiments driven by rally-around-the-flag effects (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013; Zandberg & Neiger, 2005). Baden and Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2017) argued that these pressures can foster a uniform framing of news within the domestic media sphere at the same time the surge in public interest may stimulate news organizations to pursue additional narratives, whereas in international media outlets this may lead to an increased reliance on official pronouncements. As such, periods of conflict escalation are likely to lead to a convergence of issues covered by news outlets nationally, whereas coverage by external sources should exhibit a relatively balanced if bureaucratic perspective (Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2017).

We are therefore particularly interested in the structural similarities and dissimilarities that endure between national and international Russian state media and British public service media throughout the Russo-Ukrainian War. In other words, we expect to find long and short-term alignments and misalignments in the coverage by BBC RU and RT RU, on the one hand, but also between BBC and RIA, on the other. Such movements should foreground important shifts in public opinion formation and political decision-making that accompany military escalation and intervention (Wolfsfeld, 2023). With the topics covered nationally indicating the agenda set by the local press, we also expect the Russian and British news outlets to select and deselect sources perceived as adversarial or hostile (Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2017; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Objectives

The agenda-setting theory, at its core, foregrounds how the importance of news events is communicated to the audience. The theory posits that the transfer of issue salience from the media to public opinion occurs regardless of whether the

agenda is intentionally set by any actors, as intermedia agenda-setting may occur without coordination between media outlets (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The atomized nature of agenda-setting implies that this effect takes place even if individuals are not directly exposed to the story, as they can still gauge its salience from other cues like article placement on the website or the relative prominence on newspapers (Wilbur, 2021). In particular, readers gauge the prominence of stories based on headlines and, increasingly more so, on metadata that identifies central topics, chief of which are news article tags. As such, we expect the tags applied to news articles to be procedurally aligned with the concept of issue salience by both summarizing the content and providing an immediately accessible public-facing element to news stories.

In light of these observations, we seek to identify significant deviations in the war coverage reported by Russian news outlets compared with those observed in the BBC. We also expect to contribute to studies on agenda setting and public opinion formation in authoritarian contexts by unpacking the atomistic but continuous stream of domestic propaganda that is distributed in the Russian language through a network of Kremlin-sponsored news outlets. This study is also informed by reports that the Russian population largely supported the so-called “special military operation” in contrast to the European nations that backed Ukraine’s defence in 2022 (Levada-Center, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). As such, we seek to identify the magnitude and measurable differences between Russian and British media coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

To this end, we select a set of keywords and tags that curate a range of topics central to the war coverage of news outlets. This metadata allows us to quantify the airtime given by each news outlet to consequential issues and to identify significant shifts in the battle for narrative supremacy that accompanies a war of attrition. Given this set of highly charged issues, we rely on Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests to identify statistically significant deviations between any two time series of tags. This approach allows us to probe the following hypotheses centred on which issues are brought to the public’s attention and how they intersect with key developments in the Russo-Ukrainian War:

H1: the agenda set by the Russian (RIA) and British National Media (BBC) differs significantly with respect to the Russo-Ukrainian War. The null hypothesis is that there is no quantifiable difference in issue salience between the BBC and Russian national media as the data are drawn from comparable distributions.

H2: the agenda set by foreign press services based in Russia (RT) and Britain (BBC Russian) differs significantly with respect to the Russo-Ukrainian War. The null hypothesis is that there is no quantifiable difference in issue salience between British and Russian foreign press services as the data are drawn from comparable distributions.

H3: BBC and RIA over and under-report developments in the war to support the agenda advanced by their governments. These structural similarities and dissimilarities are tested against the null hypothesis that variance in the war coverage is not associated with developments in the war as the data are drawn from comparable distributions.

Methods & data

Data collected for this study include five national news outlets operated by two large media groups in Russia and the UK. These news organizations can be divided into four groups (Table 1) and include, firstly, MIA Rossiya Segodnya, which translates to “Russia Today,” a state-owned, leading Russian media group. It operates several news outlets and brands, including, among others, RIA Novosti, Sputnik, and Baltnews. The corporation distributes news content to Russian and international markets (MIA Rossiya Segodnya, 2023b). Central to our study is RIA Novosti, which translates to “RIA News,” the flagship news outlet managed by the corporation that is the most important source for news and social media in Russia (Medialogiya, 2023). The database curated for this study is detailed in the project’s repository and includes RT (formerly Russia Today), a news network financed by the Russian government and tailored to the international market, with subsidiaries distributing content in ten languages worldwide (RT, 2023, 2025).

The database also includes the RT subsidiary dedicated to the Russian market, a division of RT that is Russia’s third most popular source of news on the internet (Medialogiya, 2023). On the Western side, the database includes content published by the British Broadcasting Corporation, a public service corporation primarily funded through the licence fee paid by UK households (BBC, 2023), including news content distributed by the BBC division responsible for news. Lastly, the database covers content distributed by BBC News Russian (formerly BBC Russian Service), a subdivision of the BBC World Service that provides news services worldwide in over 40 languages (BBC, 2023). BBC News Russian ranked in the top eight most cited internet news sources in the Russian social media (Medialogiya, 2023).

We note that BBC Russian and BBC English are different news outlets with different audiences and editorial aims. Similarly, RIA and BBC English cater to domestic audiences, while RT English and BBC Russian are aimed at foreign audiences. There are also important differences in how broadcasters in authoritarian regimes operate compared with the BBC’s foreign service. RT’s editor-in-chief is directly instructed by the Kremlin in weekly strategy meetings over phone calls and “theme sheets,” whereas the British government has limited direct influence over the BBC (Kovalev, 2021). There are also vast differences in journalistic standards and practices of state media, typically funded, operated, or significantly influenced by the government, and public service media, which operate independently of government control and are financed through a combination of public funding, licencing fees, and sometimes advertising.

For the purposes of this study, we scraped all articles published by the abovementioned news outlets between January 2021 and August 2023. News articles were retrieved from their respective websites between 1 March 2023, and 8 August 2023. Additional filtering was applied to exclude sports articles and content without tags. After scraping the data, we selected articles published between 1 February 2022 and 31 July 2023, which is the time frame of interest for this study (Table 2). The resulting database is longitudinal

Table 1. Media outlets grouped by target audience.

	Russian-affiliated media	Western media
For English-speaking audiences	RT	BBC News
For Russian-speaking audiences	RIA Novosti, RT in Russian	BBC News Russian

Table 2. Total number of news articles in the database.

	RIA Novosti	RT English	RT Russian	BBC News	BBC News Russian
News articles	403 339	56 489	326 765	203 552	13 048
Articles with tags	403 324	53 915	326 190	166 300	12 561
Without sports articles	396 901	45 804	230 242	166 300	12 286
War-related articles	52 394	15 146	22 295	3 872	3 159

as it includes the date each news article was published, thereby allowing for time-series analysis at various levels of data aggregation (daily, weekly, or monthly). Previous work has found that the daily number of news articles shows significant autocorrelation (Hogenraad et al., 1997), both temporal (Zhang et al., 2020) and spatial (Wang, 2023), with our database following this pattern. We subsequently applied the following filtering rules to the data: 1. RIA Novosti (<https://ria.ru/>): all articles were scraped and no filtering applied; 2. RT (<https://www.rt.com/>): all articles scraped, except for those posted in “podcast,” “shows,” and “on-air” directories (e.g., <https://www.rt.com/shows/>); 3. RT in Russian (<https://russian.rt.com/>): all articles scraped and no filtering applied; 4. BBC (<https://www.bbc.com/news>): all articles scraped except for those that featured in “pictures,” “live,” “podcasts,” “reel,” and “video” directories; 5. BBC News Russian (<https://www.bbc.com/russian>): all articles scraped except those posted in “pictures,” “live,” “podcasts,” “reel,” and “video” directories.

Finally, we filtered the entire database to remove content that was not associated with the Russo-Ukrainian War based on the following criteria. For RIA Novosti, we selected articles that include “Специальная военная операция на Украине” (“Special military operation in Ukraine”); for RT, given the relative absence of war-related tags, we selected all articles containing Russia- or Ukraine-related tags (Russia, Ukraine, Moscow, Ukraine turmoil, and Kiev) and filtered the database for war-related content. For RT in Russian, we selected articles that include “Военная операция по защите Донбасса” and “Спецоперация на Украине” (“Military operation to protect Donbas” and “Special operation in Ukraine”). For the BBC News, we selected articles that include the tag “Russia-Ukraine war.” Finally, for BBC News Russian we selected articles that include the tag “Война России с Украиной” (“Russian war with Ukraine”). Table 2 shows the breakdown of the database, with all articles being lemmatized to reduce words to their base forms using the pymystem3 library for Russian texts and WordNet Lemmatizer for English (Bird et al., 2009). Descriptors of the database and supplementary information are available in the project’s repository.

Identifying the issues made salient by the news outlets imposes many challenges stemming from the relative size of the database, the different languages employed to refer to the same events, and the subtle editorial choices underlying any news coverage. With the press being “stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963:13), the methodological challenge entails identifying not only what has been reported but what has been omitted from the press coverage. This challenge can nonetheless be resolved by tracking variations in the use of tags and keywords over time, with our results below showing that the term “special military operation” does not even rank in RT’s top 10 list of tags. We expect this approach to provide a reliable measure of the topics featured in the articles of Russian and British news outlets over the period.

We proceeded by indexing the content published by news organizations based on the normalized distribution of tags. This allows for quantifying significant variations in the coverage of news outlets and identifying the issues made salient in the period. We therefore leveraged the news outlets' own classification of the content, which is often created through a combination of algorithmic classification and manual tagging of the content by journalists and editors. This routine journalistic work provides the public with tags or topics at the bottom of each news article that organize the content into meaningful categories.

Tags or topic tags are short descriptors for web resources (Hayes, 2007) that, in the context of news articles, refer to specific topics, persons, or events featured in the news article. Typically located at the end of the news article, tags can help users find related articles and are usually selected from a predefined list created by journalists and editors, or automatically generated based on the local pre-processing of the news content. There are, however, considerable differences in the extent to which news outlets leverage this resource. While most articles published by RT in the period covered the Russo-Ukrainian War and related developments, the news outlet does not employ specific war-related tags, with the "Ukraine turmoil" tag representing only a portion of war-related articles published by the organization.

As tags are employed asymmetrically across news organizations, we compare the distribution of tags and keywords to quantify the reliability of tags across news outlets. This was achieved by normalizing the distribution of article tags and keywords across news outlets. For news organizations that did not employ tags in a consistent manner, we relied on the frequency distribution of keywords featured in the article (Figure 1). We then performed consistency checks and found that for news outlets where tags were available, the number of articles with tags of a particular group was positively correlated with mentions of keywords and phrases that summarized these topics (aggregated over day, week, or month). Figure 1 shows these robustness checks performed on the database to consolidate the relative differences in the distribution of tags and keywords across news articles. This procedure allowed us to rely on mentions of keywords as the unit of analysis in this study, an effective proxy for the editorial decisions driving the creation of tags. Lastly, we also leveraged metadata about the article, particularly the news desk (including local, national, and world news) to remove sports and soft news items irrelevant to issues related to the Russia/NATO divide.

Upon normalizing the distribution of tags and keywords across news outlets, our approach yielded a list of 30 tags for each news outlet that matched 17 groups of issues or topics (see the appendix for the complete list of groups of topics). This approach allows us to contrast the relative distribution of tags as a proxy for the coverage and airtime dedicated to significant events and developments during the war. While tags may be used primarily as ordering devices with little intention to communicate a frame, the relative incidence of tags and keywords shows that it is not possible for news organizations to completely suppress developments of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Results

Different news diets

We analysed a total of 96,866 articles related to the Russo-Ukrainian War (Table 2) to test the hypotheses of this study. We approach H1, which hypothesized that the agenda set by

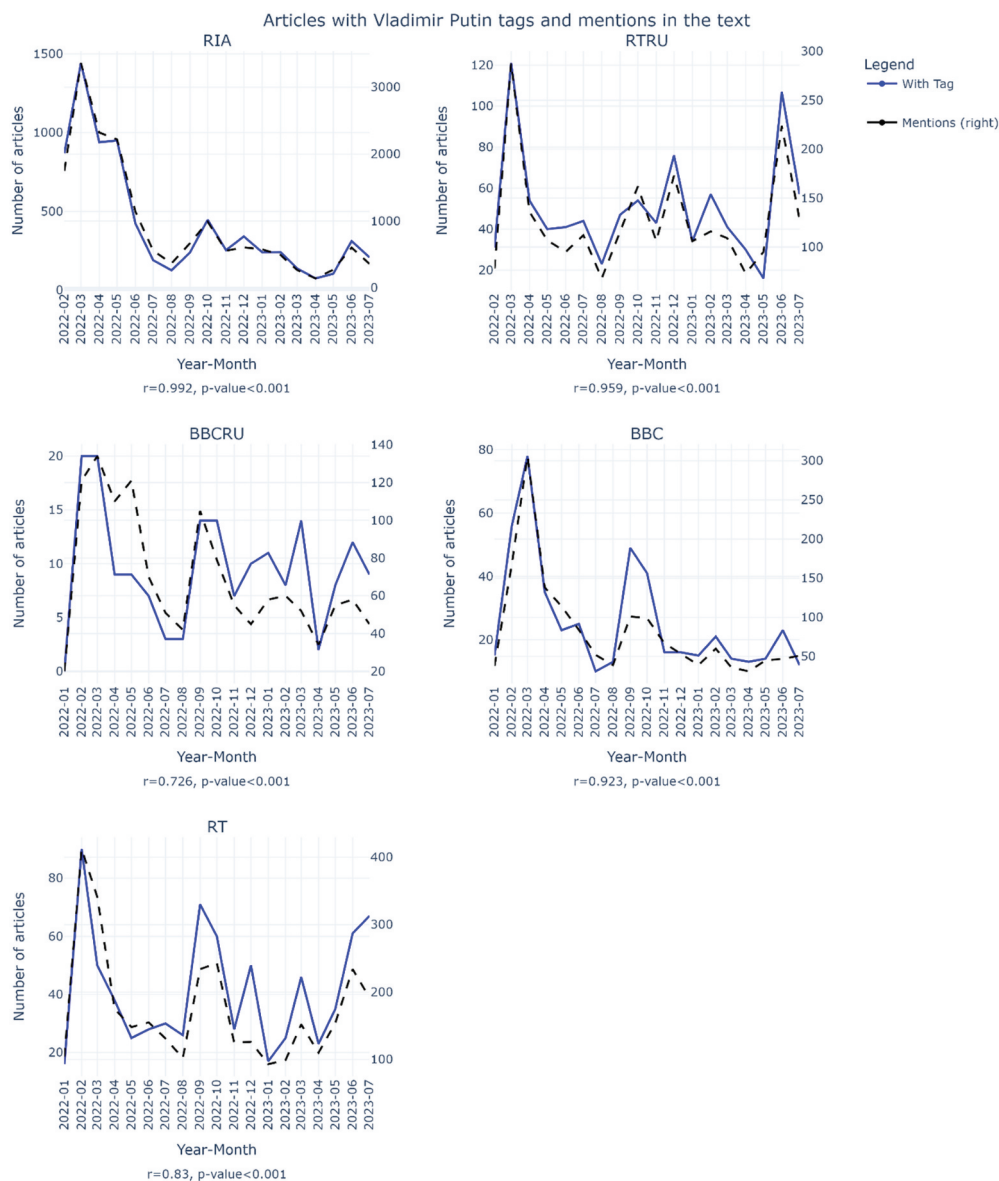


Figure 1. Correlation between tags and mentions of Vladimir Putin over time.

the Russian (RIA) and British national media (BBC) differs significantly, by plotting the relative distribution of news articles compared with war-related articles published by each organization in the period. We found that the share of news about the Russo-Ukrainian War on BBC News is small due to the expected focus on British affairs, with a monthly average of 3% and a peak of 16%. The incidence of articles mentioning the war was notably higher on BBC News Russian (45%), with a significant peak in March 2022.

Coverage of the war occupied on average 20% of RIA Novosti and 14% of RT Russian news coverage, with relatively small peaks of 29% and 22%. This intense coverage is

nonetheless dwarfed by BBC News Russian where the war averaged 45% of their coverage, with a peak of 85% as shown in Figure 2(b). Given the substantive casualties faced by the Russian war effort and the economic and political challenges faced by the country, this might be indicative of strategic decisions to de-emphasize the war coverage. Consistent with H1, we found marked differences in the topics covered by Russian state media, and not only to the BBC but also between Russian domestic and international media (i.e., RIA Novosti vs RT). More importantly, Figure 3 shows the tests where the null hypothesis of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov was not rejected, thereby indicating that the distribution of news articles have the same distribution for RIA Novosti & RT in Russian, on the one hand, and BBC News & BBC News Russian, on the other. The results are thus consistent with hypothesis H1, as the news coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War differs between state and public service media.

Next we approach H2, which posits that the agenda set by the foreign press services based in Russia (RT) and Britain (BBC Russian) differ significantly based on Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests. RT dedicated considerable attention to war-related news (Figure 2(a)), which is perhaps surprising given the international scope of the network, but is consistent with H2 and foregrounds RT's mission of "breaking the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams," as stated by Vladimir Putin (Simonyan, 2013). Another important marker of the disconnect between Russian national media and its foreign press service can be found in the coverage of China and India, which are subjected to considerable coverage, particularly by RT, an outlet derided as a propaganda outfit of the Kremlin but that nonetheless follows the agenda of the international press (Aday et al., 2005). RT's coverage became particularly intense following the publication of the Chinese Peace proposal in February 2023 and Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow in March 2023 (Figure 7(c)).

Finally, we approached hypothesis H3 by testing whether Russian state media and British public service media report developments in the war in line with strategic national objectives. We identified two distinct groups based on the distribution of keywords and tags, with RIA Novosti and RT in Russian extensively leveraging the latter, with a mean of 6.55 (1.99) and 6.41 (3.85) tags per article, respectively, compared with 3.25 (1.26), 3.63 (1.85), and 4.03 (1.74) for BBC News Russian, RT, and BBC News, respectively. The choice of tags and keywords also reflect specific editorial stances on the same event, with RIA Novosti using the tag "Special military operation in Ukraine," while RT in Russian favours "Military operation to protect Donbas," and RT speaks of "Ukraine turmoil." In contrast to

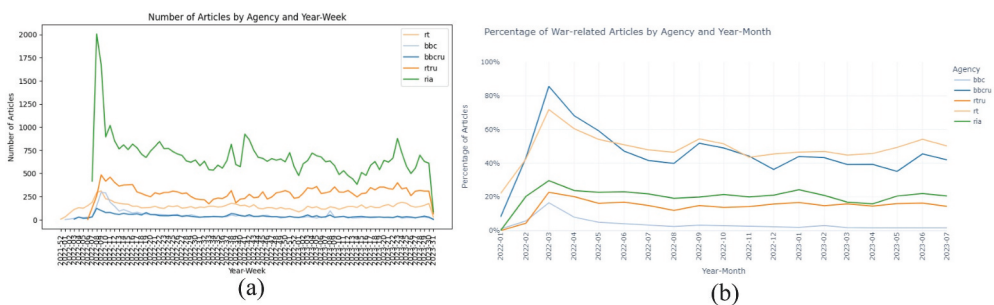


Figure 2. (a): number of articles per week. (b): percentage of war-related articles per month.

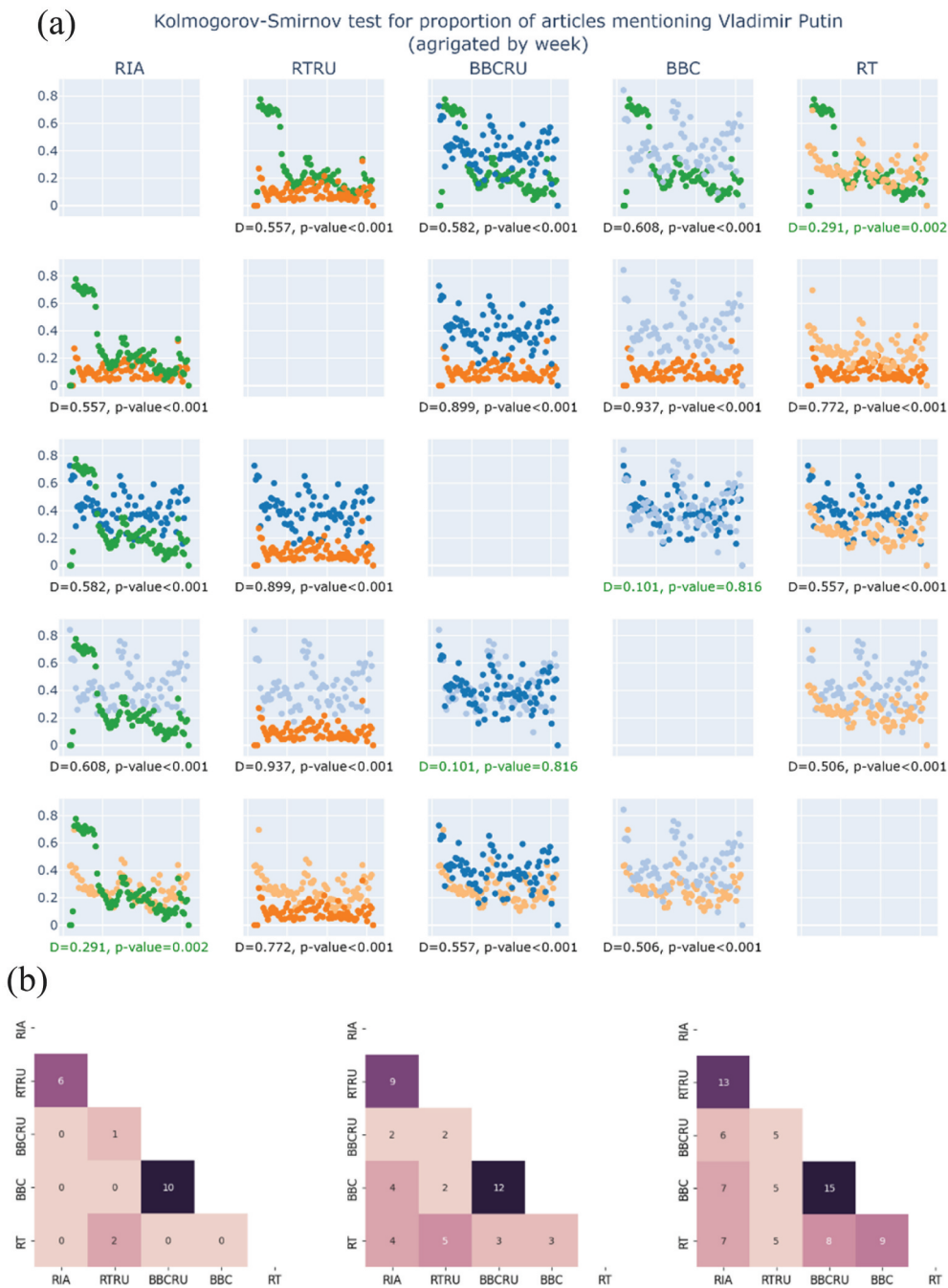


Figure 3. a) Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for the distribution of articles mentioning Vladimir Putin aggregated by week. b) number of tests where the null hypothesis of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov was not rejected, thereby indicating that the news articles have the same distribution.

that, BBC News uses the tag “Russia-Ukraine war” and BBC News Russian refers to “War between Russia and Ukraine.”

We further probe these hypotheses by parameterizing the distribution of news across 17 groups of topics across the news outlets in our database. [Figure 3\(a\)](#) shows the significant differences in the distribution of articles across each pair of news outlets, with the results rejecting the null hypothesis that the data were drawn from comparable distributions, and [Figure 3\(b\)](#) shows the aggregate number of tests where the null hypothesis of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was not rejected, thus identifying news outlets with comparable editorial stances. In both instances, we aggregated the number of articles by day, week, and month, with a significant number of groups where the null hypothesis was not rejected – namely the pairs RIA Novosti & RT in Russian and BBC News & BBC News Russian ([Figure 3\(b\)](#)). The results further support the hypothesis that Russian state media selected a significantly different set of events during the war campaign compared with the BBC, where the relative distribution of news topics is constant over the period (H3).

A comparison between the issues made salient reveals pronounced differences across news organizations. [Figure 4](#) shows that RIA Novosti and RT in Russian are primarily focused on the Armed forces, with a particular emphasis on Ukrainian-related issues and the alleged shelling of Russian-occupied territories by Ukraine. In contrast, BBC News and BBC News Russian emphasize strategic issues to the West, but also the economic implications of the war, the ensuing refugee crisis, the Russian Army, Crimea, and the United Nations. Interestingly, RT’s coverage is broadly aligned with topics covered by the BBC, namely the economic sanctions, the Minsk Agreements, China, and India, but it conspicuously avoids topics perceived to be negatively charged in Russia, including the refugee crisis, the military mobilization in Russia, and the Wagner group. Conversely, RT in Russian and RIA Novosti’s coverage are strikingly similar across multiple subjects ([Figure 1](#)). Despite the independence touted on their respective websites, there is reportedly intense collaboration between these organizations dating back to RT’s creation by Rossiya Segodnya (RIA Novosti, [2005](#)) and the sharing of an Editor-in-Chief, Margarita Simonyan, who presided over both RT and RIA Novosti (MIA Rossiya Segodnya, [2023a](#); RT, [2023](#)).

Adversarial issue salience

We further unpack hypotheses H2 and H3 by tracing the evolution of issues covered in the course of the war. Vladimir Putin is a central theme across news organizations, with mentions peaking early in 2022 with the outbreak of the war followed by a downward trend until August 2022, when mentions of Putin peak again in September–October 2022 following the announcement of the mobilization in Russia and the annexation of the occupied territories of Ukraine. The normalized distribution, however, presents important differences, with 40% of articles mentioning Putin in the BBC News and BBC News Russian, compared with only 27% for RT in Russian, and an even lower count of only 11% in RIA Novosti, which also has a high standard deviation due to the dramatic decline in mentions from 73% in March to 14% in August 2022 ([Figure 5\(a\)](#)). RIA Novosti content featuring Putin is broadly categorized into two main groups of duplicated sentences: “Goals” and “Shelling and Supply” – central issues for the Russian war campaign. These boilerplate

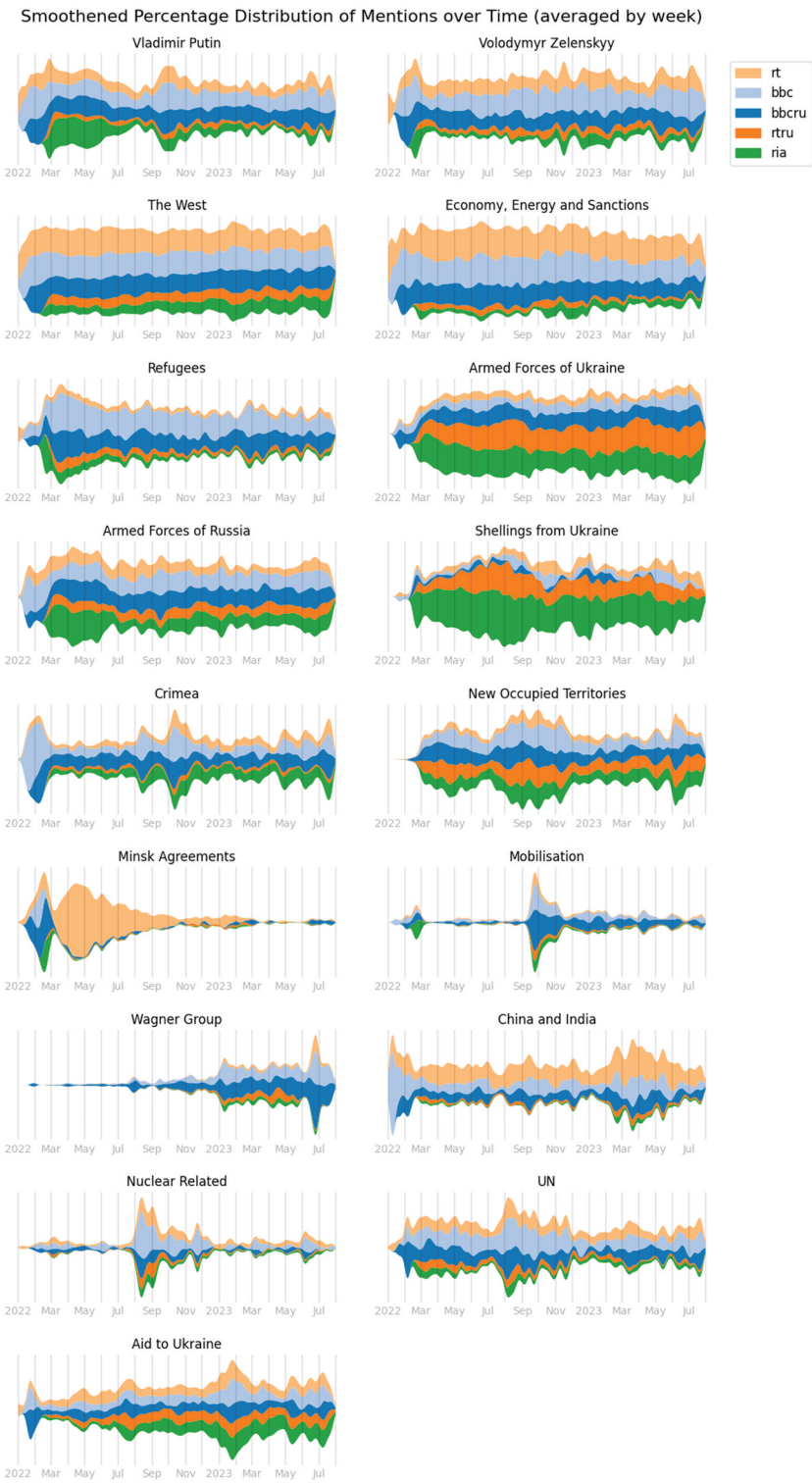


Figure 4. Mentioned topics over time (averaged by week), with significant similarities between RIA Novosti and RT in Russian, and a sharp contrast to the editorial coverage observed in BBC News and BBC News Russian.



Figure 5. A) references to Vladimir Putin across the database. b) RIA Novosti articles featuring “Goals” and “Supply/shelling” content over time. c) RT articles on the Minsk Agreements and Kyiv. d) articles published by RT in Russian mentioning state sources. e) BBC coverage. f) mention to Volodymyr Zelenskyy over time.

sentences appear across several news articles and news organizations and are likely provided by the Russian government for repackaging by each news organization.

The “Goals” category includes articles detailing the various objectives and justification for the war in Ukraine, including “protecting the people,” “demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine,” and “the liberation of Donbas.” Justification for the war is provided as pledges of “no occupation of Ukraine” and that only “military infrastructure and Ukrainian troops” will be targeted. These sentences appear repeatedly in articles related to the war and read much like official statements. The second category, focused on “Shelling and Supply,” includes articles describing the supply of arms to Ukraine by NATO countries, the use of NATO ammunition in the shelling of Russian-controlled territories, descriptions of the alleged Ukrainian shelling of Horlivka, Yasynuvata, and Petrovskiy District of Donetsk, and official statements condemning the supply of weapons to Ukraine.

Articles extolling such “Goals” peaked between March and May 2022, followed by a sharp decline in July, and then a brief resurgence between October 2022 and

January 2023, reflecting further justifications for Russian military strikes against Ukrainian infrastructure. [Figure 5\(b\)](#) shows that Putin's position on the war dominated the content of RIA Novosti during the initial stages of the conflict, but it significantly receded in the ensuing months as the Russian military campaign struggled through many setbacks and the absence of a clear war strategy. These developments led to an information overload in the first half of 2022 followed by an information vacuum in the Russian media, potentially contributing to the Russian population perceiving the objective of the war in different ways (Levada-Center, [2022](#), [2023c](#)), with the extensive references to "genocide" and "Nazi" rhetoric supporting previous findings of a disinformation campaign spearheaded by the Russian government (Fortuin, [2022](#)).

With articles focused on "Goals" quickly disappearing, news articles featuring "Shelling and Supply" increase gradually to become the largest theme in the Russian press by July 2022. Shelling and supply appear in articles discussing "The West" and the alleged "shelling from Ukraine," with specific references to NATO, Russia's Joint Center of Control and Coordination (JCCC), "Horlivka," and "Yasynuvata." These articles foreground the uptake in the procurement of Western weaponry as the reason for the setbacks experienced by the Russian military. They effectively shaped the public opinion measured in June 2023 polling data, when 81% of Russian respondents expressed apprehension about the provision of Western armaments to Ukraine, in contrast to 77% recorded in April (Levada-Center, [2023a](#), [2023b](#), [2023c](#)). The alleged shelling of civilians supported by Western weaponry is then construed as an additional rationale for the war that continues to lack, however, a clearly articulated objective. These findings underscore a notable change in the coverage of RIA Novosti, initially centred on Putin's justifications for the invasion, and subsequently focusing on the supply and targeting of civilian populations by Western weaponry. The mounting public concern about the provision of Western armaments to Ukraine identified by the Levada-Center provides further evidence of agenda-setting effects and the effective shaping of public perceptions.

This editorial shift is also found in RT news articles where duplicated sentences justifying the outbreak of the war abound (e.g., "... following Kiev's failure to implement the terms of the Minsk Agreements" and "... Kiev's main goal was to use the ceasefire to buy time.") There is a stronger emphasis on the failure to comply with the Minsk Agreements, the involvement of European countries, and Ukraine's claim that the Russian offensive was completely unprovoked. The incidence of content reporting on the Minsk Agreements on RT and RIA Novosti is broadly similar ([Figure 5\(c\)](#)) and suggests they share editorial resources and conflicts with the expectation that the Russian state media would develop tailored content for Western and Russian audiences. This alignment is however more pronounced in RT in Russian, which largely relays wire copy from state-owned news organizations RIA Novosti and TASS (the second largest news agency in the Russian Federation). [Figure 5\(d\)](#) shows the distribution of references to Russian state sources, with 48% of the articles published by RT in Russian mentioning either RIA Novosti, TASS, or the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.

On 4 March 2022 the Russian war censorship laws came into effect forcing the BBC to move its news operations outside Russia (INTERFAX, [2022](#)). The BBC news coverage emphasized the economic toll of the Western sanctions on the Russian economy and the death toll of the war, particularly the losses of the Russian army ([Figure 5\(e\)](#)). In contrast to RIA and RT, which promoted Russia's official narrative about the war, coverage

by the BBC in Russian and English is marked by an editorial stance that highlights the staggering costs of the war.

RIA Novosti and RT in Russian are less preoccupied with economic issues such as the energy crisis resulting from the war and covered instead the damage caused by the sanctions on the global economy that coincided with the peak of the energy crisis in Europe (Figure 6(a)). The refugee crisis is also covered much more extensively by BBC News and BBC News Russian compared with Russian state media, as is the focus on “The West” (i.e., NATO, EU, and the USA) which features less prominently in RIA Novosti and RT in Russian compared with the BBC and RT, both of which mentioned the West in virtually all war-related articles (Figure 6(b)). RT, however, places a much stronger emphasis on the Minsk Agreements that proved central to Russia’s justification for the war. The coverage is so intense that by April 2022 nearly half of RT content about the war is dedicated to the Minsk Agreements, the period when a justification for a protracted war was advanced to English-speaking audiences.

Another clear tension in the coverage of the British and Russian presses is the focus on the army forces. Figure 6(c,d) show that RIA Novosti and RT in Russian largely write about the Ukrainian army forces, whereas BBC News and RT featured significantly more articles about the Russian army. Consistent with previous reports (Fortuin, 2022), we found that RIA Novosti and RT in Russian frequently resort to “Nazi” rhetoric when referring to units



Figure 6. A) coverage of economic issues. b) articles mentioning “The West” over time. c) mentions of the Ukrainian Army. d) mentions of the Russian Army. e) articles mentioning Crimea. f) articles covering the battleground in Kherson over time.

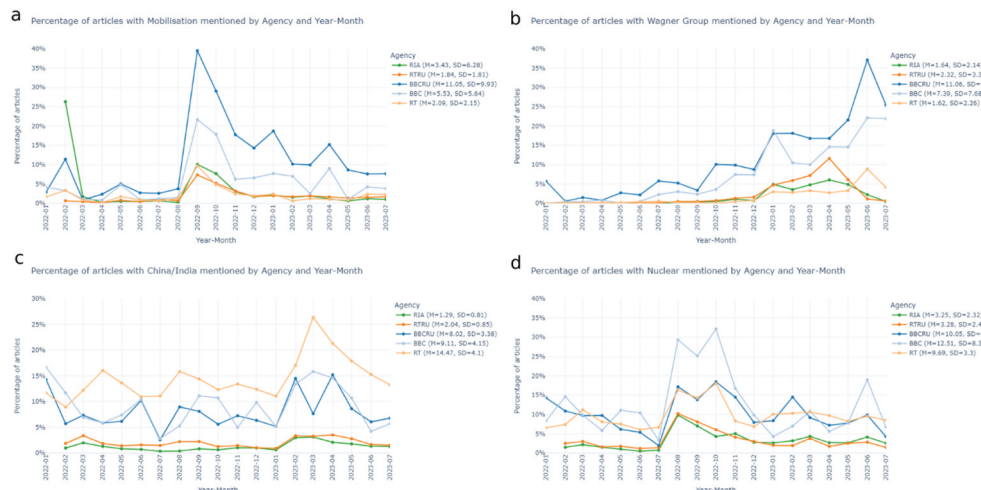


Figure 7. A) articles mentioning the Russian Military Mobilization over time. b) articles mentioning the Wagner Group. c) coverage of China and India d) articles mentioning nuclear-related issues.

of the Ukrainian Army Forces as nationalist formations (“националистические формирования”) and armed formations of Ukraine (“вооруженные формирования Украины” or “ВФУ.”) The deliberate use of the term “armed formations” instead of “armed forces” leads to the frequently used abbreviation “VFU” (translation of “armed formations of Ukraine”) instead of the generally accepted VSU (Army Forces of Ukraine), a framing device that fosters a sense of illegality surrounding the Ukrainian army.

As hypothesized in the present study, RT’s coverage is broadly in line with the agenda set by the international press (H2). The purported shelling of Russian-controlled territories by Ukraine was extensively covered by RIA Novosti and RT in Russian, but not by the BBC News, BBC News Russian, or RT. Similarly, the bombing of the Crimea bridge in October 2022 and July 2023 received little coverage by RIA Novosti and RT in Russian, in sharp contrast to the BBC News, BBC News Russian, and RT (Figure 6(e)). RIA Novosti and RT in Russian also cover the newly occupied Russian territories in the first month of the war, including the annexation of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts in August–October 2022, but less so during the Ukrainian counteroffensive in June 2023. Similarly, the liberation of Kherson by the Ukrainian Army in November 2022 was mostly ignored in the Russian-controlled media compared with the BBC (Figure 6(f)).

In addition to the displacement of Ukrainians, the military mobilization in Russia also caused an immigration crisis, with some sources estimating that up to 700,000 Russians had fled Russia by October 2022 (More & Chambers, 2022). Between 300 (official figures) to 528 thousand (Mediazona, 2023) Russians were conscripted, but the mobilization received little attention in the Russian state media. The number of RIA Novosti articles mentioning the mobilization in Russia was in fact lower than mentions of the Ukrainian and occupied DPR and LPR mobilizations at the beginning of the war (Figure 7(a)). Mentions to the Wagner Group followed a similar pattern of relative silence. Although the Wagner Group rebellion of June 2023 was the first military rebellion in Russia in a hundred years, it received little coverage in Russian state media (Figure 7(b)).

The nuclear threat posed by the war was another point of cleavage in the press coverage, particularly during the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant crisis, when RIA Novosti and RT in Russian offered little coverage of the topic in contrast to the BBC, BBC News Russian, and RT (Figure 7(d)). This is also observed in the coverage of nuclear weapons, which barely features in RIA Novosti and RT in Russian but is subject to intense coverage by the BBC News. This is perhaps surprising given the many ambiguous statements by Russian officials on the possibility of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Interestingly, RT covered this topic extensively compared with the Russian national press, whose coverage may have been effective as most Russians (86% of respondents) believed nuclear weapons could not be used under any circumstances (Levada-Center, 2023a). The near absence of this topic in the Russian state media and the lack of civil preparation for the possible use of nuclear weapons may also indicate that the Russian government did not perceive its own threats realistically but used them strategically to deter aid to Ukraine, which may have been effective given the attention given to the issue in the West and delays in the supply of weapons to Ukraine.

Discussion

While it is not possible to establish universal baselines for balanced press coverage, our results show that several key events and issues were significantly downplayed, omitted, or framed differently by Russian state media in comparison not only to the British press but also to the Russian foreign press service (RT). These results are at odds with previous studies that found that event selection tended to be relatively consistent even in conflict news (Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2017). Instead, we found marked differences in issue salience across Russian and British national outlets (RIA and BBC), but relative consistency across foreign press services (RT and BBC Russian). In other words, while misalignment in the press coverage is usually restricted to the framing or spin of accounts, we found a misalignment in the bare event selection, a consequential development to the fractured space of world news reporting.

Our results are consistent with work on journalistic coverage in violent conflict by showing that Ukrainian casualties get covered on the BBC but not on RT – a deliberate omission that is a recurrent finding in literature about war coverage where national hardships receive coverage but not the adversary's (Aday et al., 2005; Boaz, 2005; Kampf & Liebes, 2013). The comparisons between British and Russian-controlled media, on the one hand, and domestic vs. foreign news channels (Table 1), on the other, show significant differences in issue salience that portray the developments of the war in a different light. The significant temporal differences in issue salience allow for tracking emphases and omissions of key developments during the war.

Conclusion

This study offers a systematic assessment of the issues made salient during the Russo-Ukrainian War by unpacking the editorial emphasis placed on topics associated with the war and the ensuing geopolitical crisis. Our analysis reveals significant differences in issues covered by the British and the Russian state media, with the latter employing specific terms such as “armed formations” instead of “armed forces” to frame the

Ukrainian Army as illegitimate. Such strategies foreground how Russian state media can shape the public perception of the war by prioritizing specific subsets of news and regularly avoiding certain issues. Our findings also reveal that Russian state media tailored a specific version of the news for domestic audiences, often downplaying or ignoring altogether key developments of the conflict, such as the mobilization crisis in Russia, the Wagner group rebellion, the refugee crisis, the Ukrainian counteroffensive, and the nuclear threat. These topics not only received substantive coverage by the BBC; they also received sustained coverage by RT, a state-controlled news television network funded by the Russian government but tailored for international audiences.

Indeed, RT adapts Russian-speaking content to the English-speaking expectations set by the broader ecosystem of the international press, thereby covering developments of the war that touched the economy, the European involvement in the Minsk Agreements, and the potential use of nuclear weapons. By covering topics and issues deemed essential to English-speaking audiences, it can effectively distribute the Russian version of the war that would otherwise remain restricted to Russian state media, including contentious issues about the conflict such as the participation of Western countries, its impact on the global economy, and the prospect of nuclear escalation, but also peace proposals beneficial to Russia. There is, however, a limit to RT's alignment with the agenda set by the international press. It conspicuously avoided antagonistic topics in Russia, particularly the refugee crisis, the military mobilization, the Ukrainian counteroffensive, and the Wagner group rebellion.

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Data availability statement

The database curated for this study is available upon request from the research team. Descriptors of the databases, in addition to the computer code used in the analysis, are available at https://osf.io/bh647/?view_only=d8ec772543754d7a9178f8949c35b2fd.

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