

fög

Forschungszentrum
Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft

Yearbook 2022

The Quality of the Media Study 3/2022

The quality of coverage of the
war in Ukraine



Universität
Zürich ^{UZH}

Research Center for the Public Sphere
and Society (fög) / University of Zurich

The quality of coverage of the war in Ukraine

Linards Udris, Daniel Vogler, Mark Eisenegger, Dario Siegen, Morley Weston, Sophie Schäfer

Summary

This study examines the way in which the Swiss media has been reporting on the war in Ukraine, focusing on several specific quality indicators. Thirteen media outlets were analysed using a combination of manual ($n = 1,950$) and automated ($n = 25,825$) content analyses. The results show that the invasion of Ukraine has led to an extremely high media attention and replaced the COVID-19 pandemic as the most salient topic in late February 2022. Reporting on the war has incorporated a relatively wide range of topics and exhibited an above-average degree of contextualisation of 25%. This is considerably higher than the reference figure of 14% for topic-independent overall reporting in 2021. There has also been a certain extent of self-reflection on the role of the media in the war, with 4% of all items incorporating such a perspective. Another positive aspect is the careful handling of images from a media ethics perspective. The analysed items hardly contain any problematic depictions of dead or injured people. The study has also confirmed that the media types perform differently. Subscription media and public broadcasting generally seek to contextualise the events of the war, while the tabloid press and commuter media focus more strongly on each day's developments in the war. However, all media types are highly dependent on news agencies and certain external sources. The tabloid and commuter media rely on news agency reports in 62% of their foreign coverage. Unlike subscription media and public service media, where 32% and 18% of articles, respectively, come from correspondents, most tabloid and commuter outlets do not operate their own network of correspondents. *nzz.ch* and *letemps.ch* in particular published many correspondents' reports from various countries during the analysed period. In addition to news agencies, other news media (21%) and social media (16%), especially Twitter, have been important external sources of news. Governmental and military sources, cited in 31% of articles, have also played a key role. This level of dependence on external sources risks the unquestioning reproduction of narratives favoured by the warring parties. Generally speaking, Ukrainian governmental and military sources (21%) are considerably more present in the war coverage than those of Russia (12%), and Ukrainian sources rarely elicit criticism compared to Russian ones. This is understandable to an extent as Russia is the aggressor and has had a reputation for running disinformation campaigns for many years. Reporting has also been largely focused on the two conflicting parties of Ukraine (20%) and Russia (13%), but has neglected indirectly affected regions such as countries of the Global South that are on the brink of famine.

1 Introduction

The Russia-Ukrainian war, which has been ongoing since 2014, culminated in an escalation on 24 February 2022, when President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukrainian territory and Russian troops invaded Ukraine. On 2 March 2022, the United Nations General Assembly condemned the invasion of Ukraine by a large majority. Many states have demonstrated their support for Ukraine in the form of declarations of solidarity or concrete efforts, such as the imposition of extensive economic sanctions against Russia as well as humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine. In many countries, this conflict escalation was perceived as a turning point and as the first major war in Europe since the Second World War. Such major wars lead to a rapidly increasing

need for information and direction, even in countries not directly involved in the war. As distributors of information, the media play a key role. The great deal of attention that the events in Ukraine generate worldwide is also reflected in the extensive media coverage of the war. In their reporting, journalists focus on the war as a key event that quickly pushes other matters into the background (Fengler et al., 2020).

Wars are special events not only for politics and society, but also for journalists (Gleich, 2003; Prinzling, 2021). During wars, access to information often becomes more difficult, either because the government and military withhold certain information, or because on-site research is too dangerous (Christensen & Khalil, 2021). Reporters sometimes also face censorship, and powerful stakeholders

(especially the warring parties) engage in propaganda and military information management (Brüggemann & Wessler, 2009). To a certain extent, the war ultimately blocks itself against journalistic quality criteria such as factual accuracy and objectivity (Imhof, 1995). After all, wars reduce social tensions to one line of conflict, identify the various participants as either aggressors or defenders and call for polarised moral judgements (Gleich, 2003). In these situations, media outlets in a country operate to an even greater extent against the background of social norms and values and (political) interests that characterise the respective country.

In view of these challenges, the question of the quality of war reporting arises all the more. In principle, the usual journalistic standards and requirements for the media also apply to war reporting (Hanitzsch, 2007): contextualise events through background reporting, cover all parties involved in the war, uncover lies and report abuses and responsible persons on all sides, and include voices from civil society that may have been severely affected by the war.

There are still no studies that examine in greater detail the reporting quality for the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which has been ongoing for a long time. Studies that deal centrally with media coverage usually focus on individual aspects of quality, such as topics, stakeholders or frame diversity (Gackowski & Brylska, 2022; Nygren et al., 2018; Ojala & Pantti, 2017). The question of journalistic contributions, for example correspondent reports and contextualisation such as the existence of background reporting, barely plays a role in these studies. Little can be said about the Swiss media. In their comparative study, Fengler et al. (2020) look into two Swiss newspapers (NZZ and Tages-Anzeiger), but only briefly touch upon Switzerland-specific findings. There are currently no studies that examine the quality of media reporting on the Ukraine war that escalated in February 2022 more comprehensively and with a broader media sample. This is where our study comes in. It examines the coverage of the war in Ukraine in the Swiss media based on selected quality criteria in the first three months after the outbreak of the war.

2 Method

This study combines automated and manual content analysis of media reports that deal primarily with the war in Ukraine. We focus on online media ($n = 13$) from three different media types from the German-speaking and French-speaking parts of Switzerland. The first type comprises subscription media, i.e., news sites that are largely funded by subscription revenues; here, we include *24heures.ch*, *aargauerzeitung.ch*, *letemps.ch*, *nzz.ch* and *tagesanzeiger.ch*. The second type comprises the news section on the websites of the publicly funded broadcasting corporation SRG SSR, specifically *srf.ch* and *rts.ch*. In the third type, tabloid/commuter media, we examine online media outlets that are primarily funded by advertising revenues. These include the websites of the classic tabloid newspapers *blick.ch* and *lematin.ch*, the news sites of the commuter newspapers *20minuten.ch* and *20minutes.ch*, the online pure player *watson.ch* and the news section of the e-mail provider *bluewin.ch* (blue News). All of the media outlets examined are among the offerings with the widest reach in their language regions (see Reuters Institute, 2022).

Articles were found using search terms (*ukraine*). This resulted in a total of 25,825 articles for the 13 examined media outlets for the period from 1 January 2022 to 31 May 2022. For the period from 24 February 2022 to 24 May 2022, a stratified sample with 150 articles per medium ($n = 1,950$) was drawn and examined using manual content analysis. Only articles that focused on the war in Ukraine or its effects were analysed. Live tickers and other tickers were not recorded. The title, lead and the first sections (up to the subheading) were taken into account for the coding. Five variables were recorded by trained coders. Firstly, the topic was recorded. Secondly, the thematic focus of the images was coded. The first image in the article was examined in each case. In addition, it was recorded whether the image showed injured or dead people and whether those depicted were anonymous. Thirdly, the editorial research was recorded in comparison to third-party research (e.g., news agency reports). Fourthly, the existence of three types of external sources was coded: social media, journalistic media and governmental and/or military sources. Fifthly, contextualisation

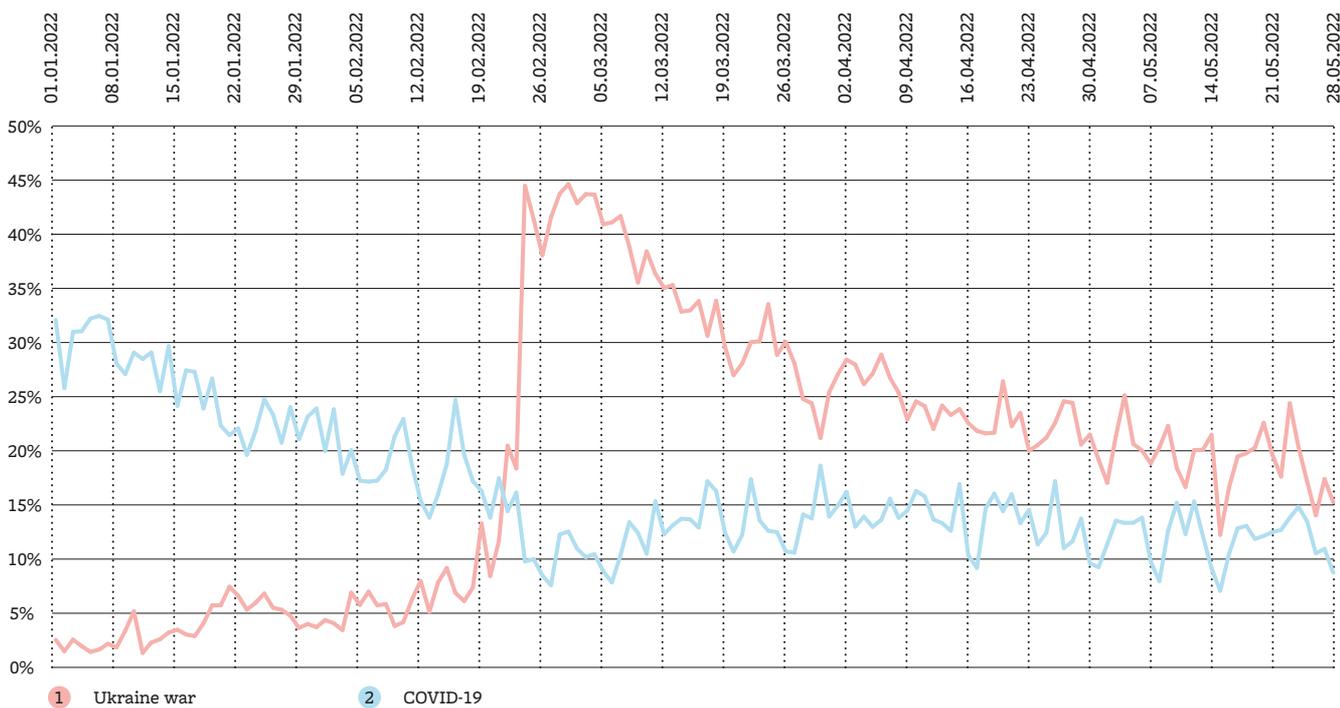


Figure 1: Percentage of coverage of the war in Ukraine out of total coverage

The figure shows how much of the overall coverage of the Swiss media consisted of content referring to the war in Ukraine (red line). The share of content covering the COVID-19 pandemic (blue line) has been used as a reference.

Reading example: In the first days after the start of the invasion on 24 February 2022, up to 45% of all items published by the Swiss media referred to the war in Ukraine. The figure for late May is around 18%.

was recorded and a distinction was made between contextualising and episodic articles. Intercoder reliability was satisfactory for all variables (Krippendorff's alpha at least greater than 0.75).

In addition to manual content analysis, automated procedures were used for this study. Firstly, an automated coverage analysis was carried out. For this purpose, the proportion of articles with reference to the war in Ukraine in the overall reporting of the examined media was determined. The proportion of reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic was used as a reference value (Eisenegger et al., 2021). Secondly, we carried out automated identification of place names to determine country coverage in reporting. The publicly accessible database geonames.org was used for this. All place and country names with more than 10,000 inhabitants were used for this analysis. All place names in the media items were de-

termined in Python using Named Entity Recognition (NER) with the software library SpaCy (Honnibal and Montani, 2017). Finally, all extracted place names ($n = 116,288$) were aggregated at country level and the total number of mentions per country was identified. For control purposes, the place names in data records of 200 articles in each language (German and French) were checked manually. The automated analysis method achieved 93% precision and 84% recall in German, and 94% precision and 87% recall in French, which is a very satisfactory result.

3 Results

The results of the automated and manual content analysis are presented in the following chapter.

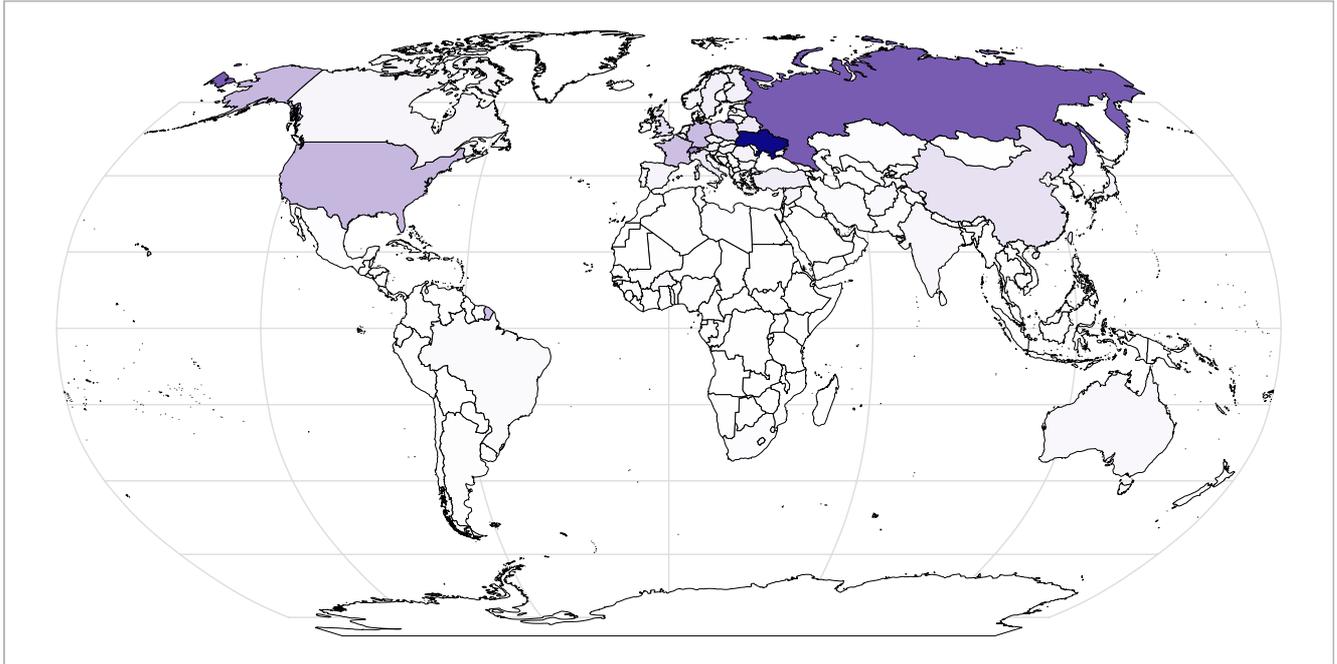


Figure 2: A comparison of geographic focus points in coverage of the Ukraine war

The figure shows the shares of visibility (mentions) of the individual countries in coverage of the war in Ukraine ($n = 25,825$ items). All countries mentioned and their localities were automatically recorded for each article ($n = 116,288$ mentions). The darker the colour applied to a country, the more coverage it received in articles (logarithmic scaling).

Reading example: Ukraine received the most coverage and is therefore very dark in colour. Countries depicted in light colours received lower coverage.

3.1 Coverage

Wars are extremely newsworthy events and regularly receive a lot of media attention. This is particularly true when it can have negative consequences for the country from which the war is being reported. This applies to the war in Ukraine, one of the first major armed conflicts in Europe since the Second World War. As the automated content anal-

In the first days after the invasion, up to 45% of all media items referenced the war in Ukraine.

ysis shows, the deployment of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine led to increased attention in the Swiss media – even before the attack on 24 February 2022 – to the conflict that had been simmering since 2014 (see Figure 1). However, after the inva-

sion by Russian troops, this increased by leaps and bounds.

In the first days after the invasion, up to 45% of all media items referenced the war in Ukraine. However, the amount of attention decreases continuously over time and levels off at around 20% of overall reporting – a proportion that is still very high.

The war in Ukraine follows a period in which the COVID-19 pandemic was the clearly dominant topic in the media for almost two years. From the end of February 2022, the war in Ukraine has had a much higher profile in the media than the pandemic. It can therefore be said that the war is, to a certain extent, pushing the pandemic out of the news. On the other hand, with the lifting of the measures and the temporary easing of the pandemic situation, less reporting was carried out about the pandemic even before the outbreak of the war. However, in its initial phase, the COVID-19 pandemic received much more attention than the war in

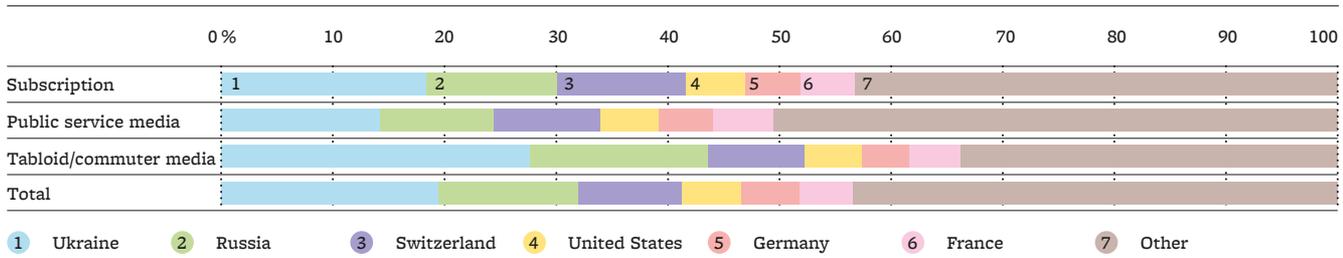


Figure 3: A comparison of geographic focus points in reporting on the war in Ukraine

The figure shows the shares of mentions of the individual countries in reporting on the Ukraine war per media type and for the overall sample ($n = 25,825$ items). All countries mentioned and their localities were automatically recorded for each article ($n = 116,288$ mentions).
Reading example: While Ukraine accounts for 18% of all mentions in subscription media, this number rises to 28% for tabloid press and commuter media.

Ukraine, with up to 70% of all coverage (see Eisenegger et al., 2021).

3.2 Geographic areas

The automated analysis shows that in reporting on the Ukraine war, the two conflicting parties are the main thematic focus (see Figure 2). A total of 19.5% of all mentions relate to Ukraine. That is significantly more than Russia (12.6%), which can also be explained by the fact that the war is mostly taking place on Ukrainian territory. Switzerland also plays a central role in Swiss media reporting. Almost every tenth mention (9.2%) relates to Switzerland. The United States (5.4%), Germany (5.2%) and France (4.8%) each receive similar amounts of coverage relating to the conflict. Poland, which was prominently discussed in the context of the refugee issue, receives more coverage than the geopolitical heavyweights of Great Britain (2.5%) and China (2.2%). Finland (1.2%) and Sweden (1.1%), which applied to join NATO as a result of the war, and Belarus (1.7%), as an ally of Russia, also receive a relatively large amount of attention. The Baltic states of Latvia (0.5%), Lithuania (0.5%) and Estonia (0.4%), as well as Moldova (0.6%) receive substantial attention, especially taking into account their size. They receive a similar level of coverage as the significantly larger European NATO states of Norway (0.6%), the Netherlands (0.6%), Denmark (0.4%) and Slovakia (0.6%). Emerging countries such as Egypt (0.2%) and other countries in the Global South, which are indirectly affected by the

consequences of the war, e.g., the threat of famine due to the lack of Ukrainian grain deliveries, receive little attention.

The example of the low level of discussion of the threat of famine shows that there are blind spots in Swiss media coverage due to a strong focus on the conflict region.

This is partially understandable as they are less affected by the conflict. However, the example of the low level of discussion of the threat of famine shows that there are blind spots in Swiss media coverage due to a strong focus on the conflict region. Africa represents one such blind spot. However, regardless of the type of media, the media in French-speaking Switzerland give the African region more weight than the media in German-speaking Switzerland. The proportion of coverage for African countries is higher among all examined media in French-speaking Switzerland, especially *rts.ch* (8.5%) and *letemps.ch* (7.7%), than in media from German-speaking Switzerland. In German-speaking Switzerland, *NZZ* is the outlet with the highest level of reporting about Africa (4.2%). The media types differ primarily in how much weight they give the two conflicting parties. In tabloid press and commuter media, 28% of mentions relate to Ukraine and 15% relate to Russia (see Figure 3). These proportions are significantly lower in coverage in subscription media (Ukraine

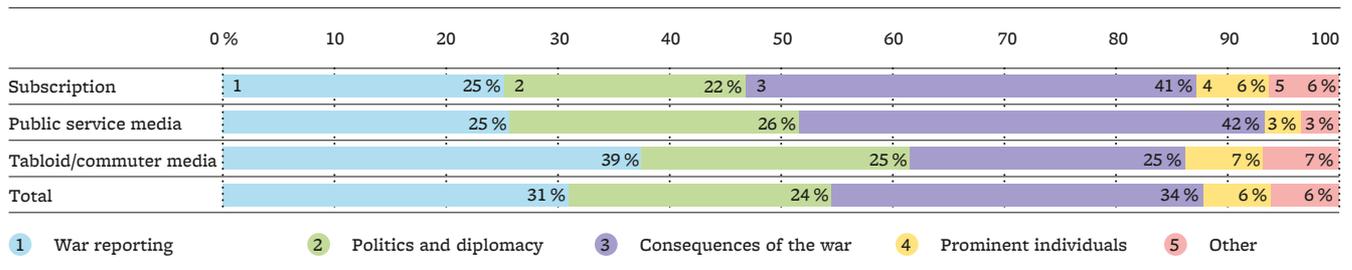


Figure 4: A comparison of thematic focus points in reporting on the war in Ukraine

The figure shows the thematic focus points in reporting on the war in Ukraine per media type and for the overall sample (n = 1,950).

Reading example: While 41% of all items in subscription media treat the consequences of the war as a thematic focus, this number falls to 25% for tabloid and commuter media.

18%; Russia 12%) and public broadcasting websites (Ukraine 14%; Russia 10%). Their reporting is therefore more diverse when it comes to geographic focus. Switzerland, the United States, Germany and France, on the other hand, are weighted similarly across all media types. The different levels of attention given to the conflicting parties in the tabloid press and commuter media is also a result of the different weighting of the actual topics. As will be shown in the next section, tabloid and commuter media rely more heavily on war reporting in the narrower sense, which results in a focus on the conflicting parties.

3.3 Thematic focus points

International conflicts are multi-layered events, but not all conflicts and wars involve a variety of different thematic focus points. At any rate, the Swiss media highlights very different focus points in their reporting on the Ukraine war. Around a third of the articles (31%) focus on narrower war reporting, i.e., the military operations and their consequences for the civilian population (see Figure 4), while 24% of items focus on political and diplomatic measures and the institutional process, such as peace efforts, as well as sanctions and aid in the form of weapons or funds for reconstruction. The political, economic and social consequences of the war are mentioned in 34% of reporting. In 6% of cases, the focus is on prominent individuals – above all on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

How the different topics are weighted also depends on the media type. In the tabloid and commuter media, war coverage (39%) accounts for the largest proportion. This proportion is significantly higher than in subscription media or public service media (25% in each case). In contrast, subscription

Subscription media and public service media thus generally seek to contextualise the events of the war, while the tabloid press and commuter media focus more strongly on each day's developments in the war.

media (41%) and public service media (42%) focus more on the consequences of the war than tabloid and commuter media (25%). Subscription media and public service media thus generally seek to contextualise the events of the war, while the tabloid and commuter media focus more strongly on each day's developments in the war. The diplomatic and political measures are weighted similarly across the three media types, but most heavily in the reporting of public service media (26%). Items that focus on prominent individuals are more likely to be found in tabloid and commuter media (7%) or in subscription media (6%) than in public service media (3%).



Figure 5: A comparison of focus points in the illustration of war coverage

The figure shows the percentage of focus points in the images for each media type and for the overall sample which serve as a visual hook for the articles. All items that were assigned to the topic of war coverage were taken into account ($n = 612$).

Reading example: While 25% of all images in subscription media show soldiers or military equipment, this figure rises to 35% in tabloid and commuter media.

3.4 Handling of images

Images play a central role in the depiction of war in the media. Iconic journalistic images, such as the photo of a girl during a napalm attack by the US Air Force in the Vietnam War or the staged photo of the raising of the US flag on the Pacific island of Iwo Jima during the Second World War, continue to shape perceptions of the wars to this day. Images also play a central role in the Ukraine war. Particularly through social media and messenger services like Telegram, pictures and videos can be distributed directly to a large audience. On the one hand, this is deliberately used by the warring parties for staging purposes. The keenly tracked social media appearances of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy are a good example of this. On the other hand, soldiers and civilians can also distribute images and videos of war events directly via social media. This eliminates the gatekeeping and filtering of journalistic media.

For the analysis of the images in Swiss media coverage, we have focused on war reporting in the narrower sense (see Figure 5). We distinguish between depictions of military personnel and material (31%), images of the civilian population (31%), images of prominent individuals (18%) and other images (20%). The images used in war reporting in Swiss media differ by media type. More than a third of the images in tabloid and commuter media (35%) show soldiers or military material such as tanks or planes. In a type comparison, these outlets tend to have fewer depictions of the civilian population (26%).

Prominent individuals, on the other hand, often serve as visual hooks for their items (21%). In subscription media, images of the civilian population are used much more often (39%), while military personnel or material (25%) are given less weight. Public broadcasting uses images of prominent individuals the least (11%), while depictions of the civilian population and the military are given equal weight (30% in each case). In addition, other images such as symbolic images of government buildings or photos of experts who provide a statement for the article are used in 29% of cases.

Overall, the handling of images of the injured and dead has been correct from a media ethics perspective.

From a media ethics perspective, how strongly the horror of war should be conveyed is a controversial issue. On one side of the argument lies the protection of users from potentially disturbing content and the protection of the persons depicted. However, war should not be downplayed by sterile depictions.

Precisely because many users on social media and messenger services like Telegram encounter ethically problematic depictions of the war, it is (to a certain extent) legitimate and desirable for journalistic media to also contextualise these images. At any rate, the examined items hardly contain any problematic depictions of dead or injured people. Only

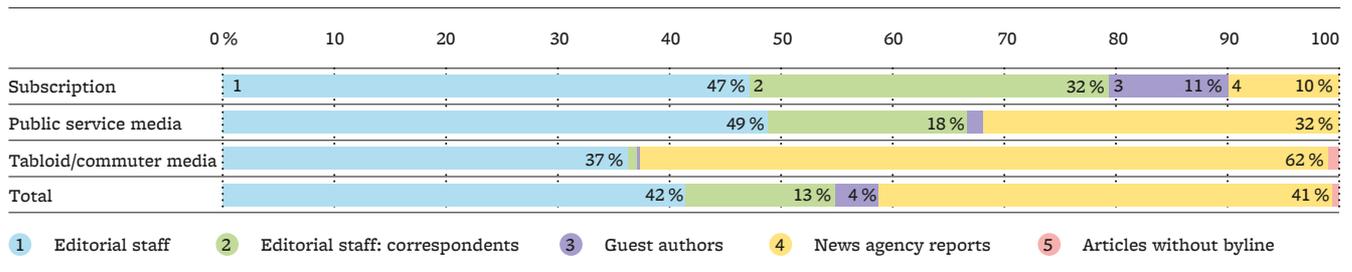


Figure 6: In-house and third-party contribution in foreign news coverage

The figure shows the percentage of articles based on various forms of in-house and third-party contributions for each media type and for the overall sample. The analysis took all article with no reference to Switzerland (= foreign news coverage) into account (n = 1,198).

Reading example: While 32% of all articles in subscription media are authored by correspondents, this number falls to 1% for tabloid and commuter media.

4% of war reporting shows images of injured or even dead people.

All depictions of the dead were anonymised, meaning that the faces were either not visible or pixelated, or the bodies were covered or also pixelated. When depicting injured persons, a few depictions were not anonymised. However, all of the people in these photos had only minor visible injuries. Overall, the handling of images of the injured and dead has been correct from a media ethics perspective. Watson.ch is a positive example. A «trigger warning» was used as the main image for individual articles to warn of subsequent potentially disturbing images.

The production of in-house research is a central quality criterion. It also indicates whether and to what extent media outlets are willing to invest resources in their own editorial offices and correspondent networks. This question can be reviewed particularly well in the case of foreign reporting, because when it comes to topics and events abroad, the Swiss media has less prior knowledge and fewer networks to rely on than in the case of national or regional reporting. We therefore now examine more closely the items that do not focus on Switzerland, i.e., that can be described in the narrower sense as foreign news coverage of the war in Ukraine.

Slightly more than half of the articles can be traced back to in-house editorial contributions (55%), i.e. items by editorial staff (42%) and own correspondents (13%), 41% to news agency reports and 4% to items by guest authors (see Figure 6). The high proportion of news agency reports shows the great

importance of news agencies, which for many media companies are the only way to consistently cover topics and events abroad.

The analysis also shows large differences between the media types, but also partly within the media types. While the majority of items from subscription media (79%) and public service media (67%) consist of own editorial contributions, the average among the tabloid press and commuter media is only 37% – particularly few at bluewin.ch (5%), lematin.ch (8%) and 20minutes.ch (14%), but significantly more at watson.ch (69%) and blick.ch (71%). Overall, the tabloid and commuter media are dominated by news agency reports (62%), some of which are edited or adopted in their entirety.

In the case of public service media, almost every fifth article (18%), and in the case of subscription media, almost every third item (32%), comes from a correspondent.

An important reason for these differences is that the tabloid and commuter media have few or no correspondents reporting from abroad (1%). Among the examined items, there were only isolated correspondent reports, namely from watson.ch and 20minuten.ch – at watson.ch primarily because of the acceptance of correspondent items from CH Media, and at 20minuten.ch because of a foreign

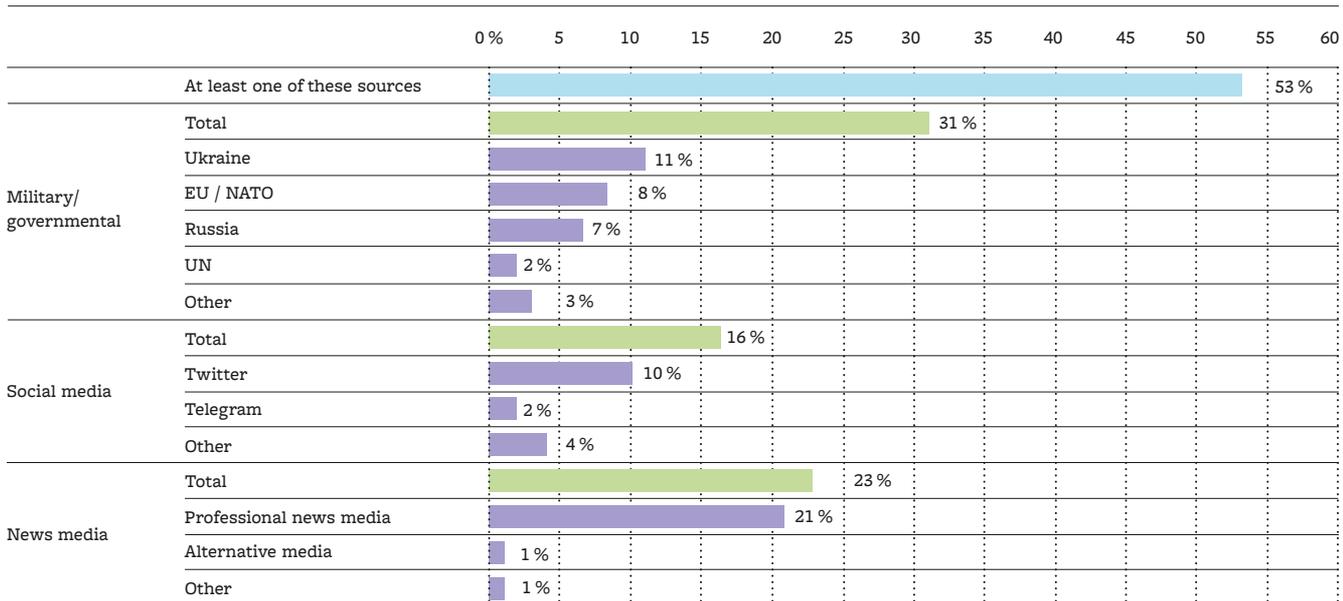


Figure 7: External sources in foreign news coverage

The figure shows the percentage of articles in which external sources play a central role. We examined three types of external sources along with certain characteristics: military/government (and the origin of these sources), news media (and the type of news media), social media (and specific platforms). A single item could contain all three types, meaning that the percentage values of the green bars can theoretically add up to 300%. The analysis took all items with no reference to Switzerland (= foreign news coverage) into account (n = 1,198).

Reading example: In 31% of all articles with no reference to Switzerland, governmental and/or military sources play a central role. In 11% of all items with no reference to Switzerland, Ukrainian governmental and/or military sources play a central role.

correspondent who was still reporting from the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv when the war broke out. In the case of public broadcasting, almost every fifth item (18%), and in the case of subscription media, almost every third item (32%), still comes from a correspondent. In absolute figures, nzz.ch and letemps.ch in particular publish the most correspondent reports from different countries. Together with tagesanzeiger.ch – which shares foreign correspondents with the partner medium Süddeutsche Zeitung – 24heures.ch, aargauerzeitung.ch, rts.ch and srf.ch are among the media outlets that often report on the ground under sometimes challenging conditions from Ukraine or from Russia.

3.5 External sources

Regardless of whether the media outlets rely on agencies as suppliers or whether they produce items themselves in their editorial offices and with correspondents, the question arises about the external sources that provide information in a news item and sometimes even constitute the reason for reporting. For the sake of transparency and the diversity of stakeholders, it is desirable for the media to indicate and clearly identify various external sources in their reporting. Conversely, when it comes to the independence of the media and the variety of stakeholders, a strong dependence on a few external sources would be problematic. At the same time, this depends on the type of external sources. In foreign reporting in general and in war reporting in particular, three types of external sources are considered particularly important: government and military stakeholders, because they often have exclusive information and

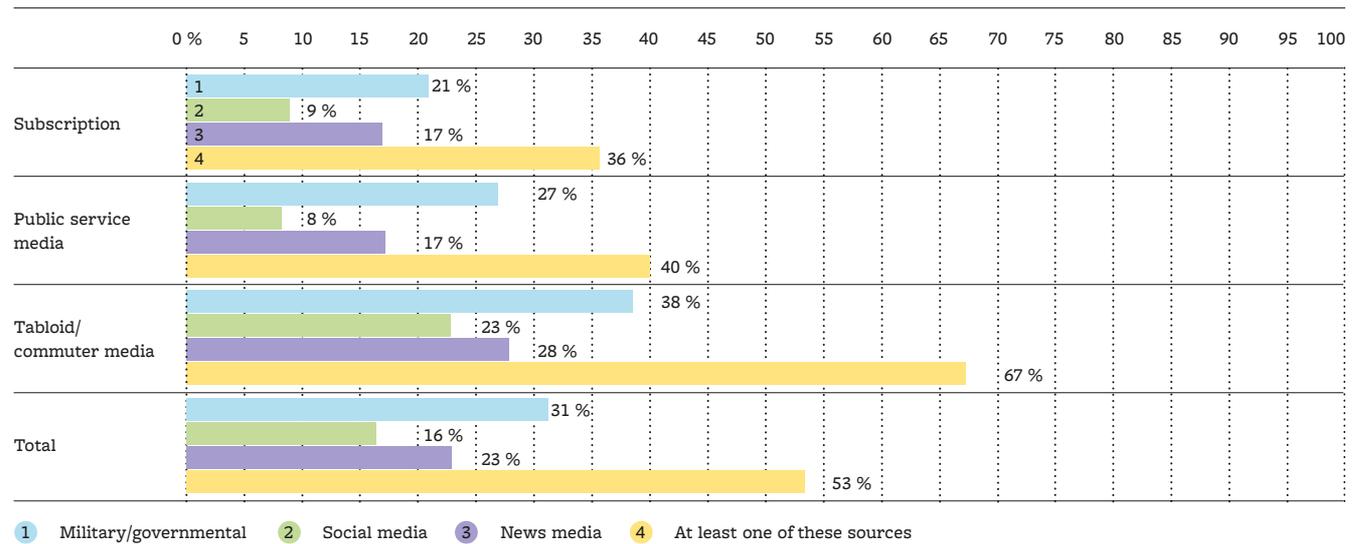


Figure 8: External sources in foreign news coverage of the media types

The figure shows the percentage of items per media type in which external sources play a central role. We examined three types of external sources along with certain characteristics: military/government (and the origin of these sources), news media (and the type of news media), social media (and specific platforms). A single item could contain all three types, meaning that the percentage values of the three types can theoretically add up to 300%. The analysis took all items with no reference to Switzerland (= foreign news coverage) into account (n = 1,198).

Reading example: In tabloid and commuter media, at least one of the three source types plays a central role in 67% of all items without reference to Switzerland, specifically in 38% of governmental and military sources, in 28% of news media and in 23% of social media.

the greatest level of power to influence the war, and at the same time present a risk of one-sided war propaganda for the media; news media, because they contribute to the flow of news, especially in uncertain times, and can contribute to the credibility of information through journalistic standards; and social media, because information can also be distributed via

In war reporting in the narrower sense, governmental and military sources from Ukraine play a central role in 21% of articles, which is significantly more frequent than Russian sources (12%).

these platforms, both by powerful stakeholders and by less powerful stakeholders such as eyewitnesses, in such cases usually not on the basis of journalistic standards. We therefore analyse whether and to what extent these three types of sources appear in the re-

porting. We did not record other types of sources, such as NGOs or companies.

The analyses show that the Swiss media use such external sources relatively frequently. These sources play a central role in 53% of all items without a reference to Switzerland (see Figure 7). Governmental and military sources are the most important (31%), but news media (23%) and social media (16%) are also frequently used sources.

When it comes to governmental and military sources, sources from Ukraine (11%) are more present than sources from Russia (7%), particularly when it comes to war reporting in the narrower sense. Governmental and military sources from the EU (2%), NATO (1%) or the large NATO countries United States (4%), France (1%) and Germany (1%) (together 8%) also play a role, not least because of the much-discussed measures such as the delivery of weapons to Ukraine and economic sanctions against Russia. If we assign the governmental and military sources to two camps, the presence of the «pro-Ukraine» camp is significantly higher compared to Russia. This finding is

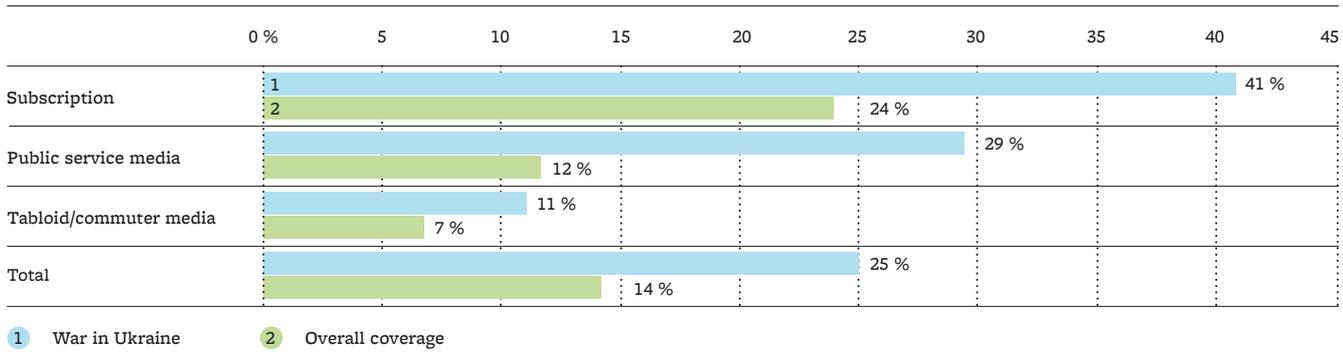


Figure 9: A comparison of contextualisation in coverage of the war in Ukraine

The figure shows the percentage of articles with a thematic focus per media type, i.e., measurable contextualisation. The data is based on all analysed articles about the Ukraine war ($n = 1,950$; blue bars). For comparison, the respective percentages in the overall reporting are shown on the basis of artificial weeks in 2021 ($n = 4,634$; green bars).

Reading example: In the coverage of the Ukraine war, an average of 41% of the articles in subscription media show a thematic focus or contextualisation. The contextualisation is 17 percentage points higher than in the topic-independent overall reporting in 2021 (24%).

accentuated again in war reporting in the narrower sense: there, governmental and military sources from Ukraine play a central role in 21% of items (together with the EU and NATO in 27%), i.e., significantly more frequently than Russian sources (12%). Ukrainian sources are also rarely contradicted. In this respect, the Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian military succeed in determining an important part of the flow of information in war reporting. Russian sources, on the other hand, are often contradicted. There are certainly items, usually agency articles, in which Russian sources can convey their positions, e.g., Russian officials who accuse Ukraine of bombing a Russian fuel depot (20minutes.ch, 1 April 2022), or Foreign Minister Lavrov, who accuses the United States of secretly operating bio-weapon laboratories in Ukraine (bluewin.ch, 10 March 2022). However, in a substantial proportion of items, statements from official Russian sources are contextualised and critically commented on, such as the «rant» by Russian President Vladimir Putin, in which he accuses the West of wanting to «dismember» Russia (blick.ch, 17 March 2022), and in which he describes critics in his own country as flies to be spat out (letemps.ch, 18 March 2022). In addition, the media also uses (quasi-)official Russian sources, such as secret service employees or former members of the army who do not agree with the official position.

If news media is a central source (23%), then in most cases this involves professional, independent information media (21%). For example, blick.ch focuses on research by the Washington Post on a large shipment of weapons from the United States to Ukraine, which took place in December 2021. Meanwhile, 1% of all items focus on alternative media as a source, including TV stations dependent on the Russian state. As a rule, alternative media outlets are looked upon critically as sources. Social media platforms (16%) are also regularly used as sources, most frequently Twitter (10%) and Telegram (2%) – both when powerful stakeholders from the military and government make statements there as well as to include lesser-known voices.

Dealing with such external sources differs significantly between media types. The tabloid and commuter media are the outlets that use these external sources most frequently (67%), much more than public service media (40%) and subscription media (36%) (see Figure 8). In tabloid and commuter media, governmental and military sources play a key role in 38% of items, news media in 28% and social media in 23%. Viewed together, a pattern emerges to show that the tabloid and commuter media rely more heavily on such external sources, likely due to a lack of resources and the general lack of correspondents.

However, even for the types of subscription media that tend to be of higher quality and for public broadcasting, such external sources are an essential part of foreign reporting on the war in Ukraine. The fact that around every fourth article there is based on official governmental and/or military sources indicates that access to other types of sources appears to be restricted during the war. Again, whether or not a media outlet has access to a large network of correspondents seems to play a role. Next to *tagesanzeiger.ch* (21%) and *srf.ch* (19%), *nzz.ch* (8%) relies the least on governmental and/or military sources.

3.6 Contextualisation and reflections

Conveying background information, i.e., contextualisation, is another quality criterion. The thematic focus of a post was reviewed via the manual content analysis, i.e., whether an article provides thematic contextualisation of the reported events. Since the methodology is the same as for the quality analysis in the «Yearbook Quality of the Media», the thematic focus in reporting on the war in Ukraine can be compared with the overall reporting in 2021.

Every fourth article is characterised by a thematic focus, i.e. shows measurable contextualisation (25%).

The examined Swiss media outlets make a clear effort to contextualise their reporting on the war in Ukraine (see Figure 9). Every fourth article is characterised by a thematic focus, i.e. shows measurable contextualisation (25%). This includes, for example, background reports on the successful staging of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the «guerre des images» (*letemps.ch*, 6 March 2022), on the morale of Russian society (*nzz.ch*, 4 April 2022) or the state of the Ukrainian army (*tagesanzeiger.ch*, 18 March 2022). Even in war reporting in the narrower sense, which focuses on combat operations, war strategies and the effects on the civilian population, the proportion of contextualisation is 22%.

Contextualisation is clearly higher than in the topic-independent overall reporting in 2021 (14%). Subscription media (41%) makes a particularly high contribution to contextualisation, above all *letemps.ch* (53%) and *nzz.ch* (55%), whose thematic focus is even 17 percentage points higher than in overall reporting.

Public broadcasting (29%), *srf.ch* (38%) more than *rts.ch* (21%), also provides more contextualisation than usual (12%). Finally, tabloid press and commuter media also provide greater contextualisation for the topic of the war in Ukraine (11%), but only by 4 percentage points. However, *watson.ch* stands out in a positive sense (31%).

In addition to contextualisation, the self-reflections on the part of the media are of interest taking into account the special challenges in times of war. Meta-coverage (Esser et al., 2005) deals with the conditions under which information is produced during war and the role played by the media. We re-

Overall, 4% of all articles incorporate meta-coverage.

corded whether such meta-coverage existed or not for each article. Overall, 4% of all article incorporate meta-coverage. This percentage may seem small at first glance, but should not be underestimated. The percentage is somewhat higher than in the reporting about the COVID-19 pandemic (1,5%; see Eisenegger et al., 2021). Fengler et al. (2020), in their analysis of the Ukraine conflict after 2014, also come to a meta-reporting proportion of around 3% and state that meta-coverage has thus become a relevant element of current war and conflict reporting. The proportion of meta-coverage at *watson.ch* (9%) and at *tagesanzeiger.ch* (9%), which also ran its own ticker («UkraineBlog») with fact checks of various sources and provided explanations as to why certain sources and information are more reliable, is particularly high in our analyses. However, (almost) no meta-coverage can be observed in the articles from *20minutes.ch* (1%), *bluewin.ch* (0%) and *lematin.ch* (0%).

4 Conclusion

With this study, we examined the quality of coverage of the war in Ukraine based on various quality criteria. The overall finding is a positive performance by the media. As a relevant topic, the war receives wide coverage and the reporting shows relatively high thematic diversity. Coverage of the war is also characterised by the high level of contextualisation and involves a certain degree of self-reflection on the role of the media in the war. Another positive aspect has been the cautious use of images. However, there have been blind spots. Reporting focuses very strongly on the two conflicting parties and neglects indirectly affected regions such as countries in the Global South.

The study has also confirmed that media types perform differently, with differences especially between subscription media and public broadcasting on one side and the tabloid and commuter media on the other. However, the tabloid and commuter media show above-average contextualisation for their standards and do not drop off excessively in any particular quality indicator. In the case of certain tabloid and commuter media outlets, however, the strong dependence on news agency reports is clearly evident. Unlike articles by subscription and SRG media, they do not have correspondents and are sometimes particularly dependent on external sources from the military and government, on other news media or on voices from social media. Such reporting on the Ukraine war can be described as «reporting from a desk», which can potentially be carried out with less effort. However, there are major differences in this respect within the tabloid and commuter media outlets. *Watson.ch* and *blick.ch*, for example, have the same proportion of editorial contributions as public broadcasting, albeit not via correspondents.

Overall, our study shows a relatively high dependency on certain external sources across all media types. On the one hand, this includes news agencies as established providers. On the other hand, it includes certain external sources, especially governmental and military sources, news media and social media. Social media sources such as tweets or posts on Telegram are only slightly less important than news media. This underlines the increasing importance of social media as a source for journalism. It is

precisely here that there is a risk of influence from external stakeholders if content on social media by supposedly authentic and independent senders is accepted without scrutiny. In particular, the positive staging of the Ukrainian army is associated with a targeted social media campaign (Trouillard, 2022). Furthermore, it is generally evident that governmental and military sources from Ukraine have a much stronger presence than Russian ones.

The use of military and governmental sources in particular can also lead to a form of horse-race journalism in war, i.e. an uncritical, non-contextualised and fragmented depiction of the course of the war with a strong framing of winners versus losers. This form of journalism carries the risk that the narratives of the warring parties are adopted uncritically. The question of the superficiality of the reporting «that concentrates on the episodic technical-strategic aspects of the combat and ignores complex thematic connections from the political and cultural field» is typical in the reporting of many wars (Eilders & Hagen, 2005, p. 208). However, our analysis shows that reporting on the Ukraine war is not limited to horse-race journalism, but covers many different thematic areas. Furthermore, around one in four items provides a high level of contextualisation, even in war reporting in the narrower sense.

Our study does not claim to cover all aspects of war reporting. Analyses to evaluate the stakeholders involved, the political positioning and the legitimacy of adequate measures would be worthwhile in further studies. Such reporting patterns often reflect a country's general political climate and culture; cross-country comparative analyses would therefore be useful. We were also unable to assess the handling of disinformation, which some media outlets even reveal and refute using forensic methods. This would require a very detailed and time-consuming reconstruction of the evidence. Furthermore, supposing a possible end to the war, a more detailed investigation would be possible into the importance of conflict-sensitive journalism (Bilke, 2008) and peace journalism (Kempf, 2021), i.e., to what extent the media reports with a greater focus on solutions than conflict, for example. Despite these limitations, this study has made it possible to draw a holistic picture of coverage of the war in Ukraine in the Swiss media, which can serve as a starting point for further studies.

References

- Bilke, N. (2008). *Qualität in der Krisen- und Kriegsberichterstattung. Ein Modell für einen konflikt sensitiven Journalismus*. [Quality in crisis and war reporting. A model for conflict-sensitive journalism.] VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-91137-3>
- Brüggemann, M. & Wessler, H. (2009). Medien im Krieg: Das Verhältnis von Medien und Politik im Zeitalter transnationaler Konfliktkommunikation. [Media during war: the relationship between media and politics in the age of transnational conflict communication. In F. Marcinkowski & B. Pfetsch (eds), *Politik in der Mediendemokratie [Politics in media democracy]* (p. 635-657). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-91728-3_26
- Christensen, B. & Khalil, A. (2021). Reporting Conflict from Afar: Journalists, Social Media, Communication Technologies, and War. *Journalism Practice*, 43(2), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1908839>
- Eilders, C. & Hagen, L. M. (2005). Kriegsberichterstattung als Thema kommunikationswissenschaftlicher Forschung. Ein Überblick zum Forschungsstand und den Beiträgen in diesem Themenheft. [War reporting as a topic of research in communication studies. An overview of the state of research and the items in this special issue] *Medien und Kommunikationswissenschaft M&K*, 53(2-3), 205-221. <https://doi.org/10.5771/1615-634x-2005-2-3-205>
- Eisenegger, M., Oehmer, F., Udriș, L. & Vogler, D. (2021). Lessons learned? Die Qualität der Medienberichterstattung in der ersten und zweiten Welle der Corona-Pandemie. [The quality of media coverage in the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic.] In Föğ – Forschungszentrum Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft (ed.), *Jahrbuch Qualität der Medien. Schweiz – Suisse – Svizzera* (p. 37-49). Schwabe.
- Esser, F., Schwabe, C. & Wilke, J. (2005). Metaberichterstattung im Krieg. Wie Tageszeitungen die Rolle der Nachrichtenmedien und der Militär-PR in den Irakkonflikten 1991 und 2003 framen. [Meta-reporting in war. How daily newspapers frame the role of news media and military PR in the Iraq conflicts of 1991 and 2003] *Medien und Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 53(2), 314-332. <https://doi.org/10.5771/1615-634x-2005-2-3-314>
- Fengler, S., Kreutler, M., Alku, M., Barlovac, B., Bastian, M., Bodrunova, S. S., Brinkmann, J., Dingerkus, F., Hájek, R., Knopper, S., Kus, M., Láb, F., Lees, C., Litvinenko, A., Medeiros, D., Orlova, D., Ozoliņa, L., Paluch, A., Radu, R. N., Stefanikova, S., Veldhoen, H. & Zguri, R. (2020). The Ukraine Conflict and the European Media: A Comparative Study of Newspapers in 13 European Countries. *Journalism*, 21(3), 399-422. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918774311>
- Gackowski, T. & Brylska, K. (2022). ›Machiavellian Russia‹ in the Crimean Conflict: Clarification of Strategic Narratives Analysis Method. *Journalism*, 23(4), 773-788. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920928157>
- Gleich, U. (2003). Qualität im Journalismus am Beispiel der Kriegsberichterstattung. [Quality in journalism using the example of war reporting.] *Media Perspektiven*, (3), 139-148. https://www.ard-media.de/fileadmin/user_upload/media-perspektiven/pdf/2003/03-2003_Gleich.pdf
- Hanitzsch, T. (2007). Situating Peace Journalism in Journalism Studies: A Critical Appraisal. *conflict & communication online*, 6(2). https://regener-online.de/journalcco/2007_2/pdf/hanitzsch.pdf
- Honnibal, M. & Montani, I. (2017). *spaCy 2: Natural language understanding with Bloom embeddings, convolutional neural networks and incremental parsing*. *Sensometrics Research*. <https://sensometrics-research.com/publication/72/>
- Imhof, K. (1995). Kriegskommunikation im sozialen Wandel. [War communications in times of social change.] In K. Imhof & P. Schulz (eds), *Medien und Krieg - Krieg in den Medien* (p. 123-136). Seismo.
- Kempf, W. (2021). *Friedensjournalismus. Grundlagen, Forschungsergebnisse und Perspektiven*. [Peace journalism. Basics, research results and perspectives.] Nomos. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748911937>
- Nygren, G., Glowacki, M., Hök, J., Kiria, I., Orlova, D. & Taradai, D. (2018). Journalism in the Crossfire: Media Coverage of the War in Ukraine 2014. *Journalism Studies*, 19(7), 1059-1078. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1251332>
- Ojala, M. & Pantti, M. (2017). Naturalising the New Cold War: The Geopolitics of Framing the Ukrainian Conflict in Four European Newspapers. *Global Media and Communication*, 13(1), 41-56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766517694472>
- Prinzing, M. (2021). Kriegsberichterstattung: Fragen von Marlis Prinzing an Kurt Pelda. [War reporting: questions from Marlis Prinzing to Kurt Pelda.] In M. Prinzing & R. Blum (eds), *Handbuch Politischer Journalismus* (p. 179-190). Halem.
- Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. (2022). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*. <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org>
- Roman, N., Wanta, W. & Buniak, I. (2017). Information Wars: Eastern Ukraine Military Conflict Coverage in the Russian, Ukrainian and U. S. Newscasts. *International Communication Gazette*, 79(4), 357-378. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048516682138>
- Trouillard, S. (2022). *Following the Ukraine war - and fighting it - on social media*. France 24. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220308-following-the-war-in-ukraine-%E2%80%93-and-fighting-it-%E2%80%93-on-social-media>

Copyright

Research Center for the
Public Sphere and Society
(fög) / University of Zurich

Contact

fög / University of Zurich
Andreasstrasse 15
CH-8050 Zürich

kontakt@foeg.uzh.ch
+41 (0)44 635 21 11
www.foeg.uzh.ch
