

War of Words: How Soldiers in the Ukraine Conflict Stay in the Know

Author:

Leonardo Ingannamorte

Editors:

Marius Dragomir

Theodore Southgate

Introduction

The idea for this study initially emerged during the implementation of another research project focused on military violence. As part of that project, acting combatants from the Russian and Ukrainian armed forces participated in semi-structured interviews, answering a wide range of questions from their self-identification and motivations to their hypothetical actions in simulated scenarios. During these interviews, a notable pattern emerged: a significant proportion of combatants demonstrated a distinctive way of perceiving and processing information from their environment. Specifically, they exhibited a high level of conspiratorial thinking and what the literature refers to as “epistemic mistrust” – a cognitive bias in which individuals adopt an extremely critical stance toward incoming information, often perceiving it as potentially hostile or unreliable (Bincoletto et al. 2025; Campbell et al. 2021).

Interestingly, this mistrust was not primarily directed at information sources associated with the opposing side in the conflict – virtually no interviewees mentioned those – but rather at sources from their own side. This observation raised critical questions about the nature of combatants’ information sources, their levels of trust in these sources, and the underlying reasons for such trust or distrust. Addressing these questions is essential for understanding how combatants’ motivations, beliefs, and values are shaped, with far-reaching implications ranging from their combat effectiveness to their potential involvement in military violence.

The Agenda Setting Theory (AST) posits that media can influence public perceptions of the importance of various issues by emphasizing certain topics while neglecting others (McCombs & Shaw 1972). However, recent scholarship highlights the limitations of this theory in the modern world, particularly in the digital era where the proliferation of social media has fragmented information consumption and diminished the agenda-setting power of traditional media (Meraz 2011; Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen 2018). This study provides further evidence of these limitations by examining the influence of traditional media in the context of trust, demonstrating that under certain circumstances, media narratives may not be as authoritative as previously assumed when it comes to shaping public perceptions.

This study has been conducted as part of the aforementioned research project under the aegis of Central European University, Vienna, Austria. In this segment of the project, combatants were asked about where they obtain information about domestic and global events, how much they trust various sources, and what drives their trust or distrust. Additionally, interviews examined how combatants engage with and make sense of events as presented by different media sources, capturing their perception and processing of information. Methodologically, this study employs semi-structured interviews and content analysis as methods for data collection and empirical analysis, respectively.

The findings reveal a high level of epistemic mistrust among active combatants. It is hypothesized that this may be linked to both the traumatic experience of combat and the perception that media sources frequently disseminate false or misleading information. Moreover, a substantial proportion of combatants appear to operate within epistemic bubbles, or echo chambers, composed of individuals serving alongside them in the same military unit. This study raises concerns about this phenomenon and discusses its potentially negative consequences, particularly in relation to shifts in combatants' cognitive frameworks, beliefs, and decision-making processes. Additionally, the study discusses the potentially counterproductive nature of the state propaganda approach to the military, which uses false information and likely leads to the opposite of the intended result.

The dataset of this study has not been published, even in anonymized form, due to confidentiality commitments made to the combatants and security considerations. Beyond immediate and obvious concerns, Central European University, which serves as the academic institution overseeing this research, has been designated as an "undesirable organization" in the Russian Federation. Consequently, disclosure of participation in this study could lead to criminal prosecution for the interviewed Russian combatants.

Media and their impact in the modern world

The Agenda Setting Theory (AST) has long been a foundational theoretical framework in media studies, emphasizing the ability of mass media to influence public perception by determining the salience of issues (McCombs & Shaw 1972). According to AST, the media do not dictate what people think, but they do play a significant role in shaping what people think about by selecting, framing, and prioritizing certain topics over others. Over decades, this theory has been extensively applied across various domains from political communication to public health messaging, underscoring how media can effectively shape public discourse by structuring issue visibility (McCombs 2004).

However, the heuristic power of AST has increasingly been questioned in light of contemporary media landscapes characterized by digitization, fragmentation, and participatory culture. A growing body of research suggests that while traditional media still hold agenda-setting power, this influence is now increasingly contested and moderated by alternative information flows, particularly through social media (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen 2018). The proliferation of online platforms has enabled users to engage in selective exposure, algorithmically curated information consumption, and personalized news feeds, which challenge the top-down influence traditionally exerted by mainstream media (Neuman et al. 2014). Consequently, the role of media in structuring public attention has shifted from a centralized process controlled by gatekeepers to a decentralized network where multiple actors including social media influencers, citizen journalists, and algorithmic recommendations contribute to shaping issue salience.

Another significant limitation of AST which scholars have recently addressed concerns the erosion of trust in traditional media sources. The rise of disinformation and widespread skepticism toward institutionalized media have led to a fragmented epistemic environment in which audiences increasingly rely on peer-to-peer communication and alternative narratives (Tsfati & Arieli 2014). From a psychological perspective, studies on motivated reasoning suggest that individuals engage in selective information processing, reinforcing their pre-existing beliefs rather than being passively influenced by media agendas (Stroud 2008).

Similarly, from a sociological standpoint, the concept of networked gatekeeping posits that agenda-setting functions are now distributed across digital communities rather than being monopolized by traditional news organizations (Meraz & Papacharissi 2013). These theoretical expansions highlight the diminishing influence of mainstream media and the increasing role of interpersonal and algorithmically mediated information flows in shaping public perception.

It is crucial to consider this issue from the perspective of trust – a key parameter in how audiences perceive information from the media. Research has shown that trust in media varies significantly across different contexts and is influenced by factors such as political polarization, media literacy, exposure to misinformation, and the degree of governmental control over media institutions (Tsfati & Arieli 2014; Hanitzsch, van Dalen, & Steindl 2017; Van Aelst et al. 2017). For instance, studies suggest that with evidence of heavy government influence or censorship, media trust tends to erode, as audiences perceive news to be propaganda rather than independent reporting (Lee 2010). This weakening of trust in media not only undermines the agenda-setting function but also compels audiences to seek alternative or unofficial sources, further fragmenting the information landscape (Stroud 2008; Bennett & Livingston 2018).

In the context of wartime media influence, research has explored the role of propaganda, state-controlled narratives, and their impact on military personnel and civilians alike. Studies suggest that while media can serve as a powerful tool for mobilization and shaping national sentiment (Herman & Chomsky 2002), it can also backfire when perceived as overly manipulative or disconnected from ground realities (Bennett & Livingston 2018). For soldiers and individuals in conflict zones, skepticism toward official media narratives is often heightened due to firsthand experiences that may contradict the presented information. This dynamic underscores the complexities of wartime media influence, wherein strategic communication efforts may not always yield the intended effects.

This research contributes to the ongoing discussion on the limitations of AST, trust in media, and the role of media in wartime by providing empirical insights into the declining influence of traditional media, particularly in connection to the idea of epistemic trust, which is to be discussed in the coming sections of the paper. The findings illustrate how, in contexts of heightened skepticism and media fragmentation, even individuals directly involved in high-stakes environments – such as soldiers in conflict zones – exhibit mistrust toward their own institutional media narratives. This may suggest the counterproductive effects of propaganda and state-controlled narratives, as excessive reliance on manipulative communication strategies can erode trust rather than reinforce compliance. Thus, the study adds to the growing body of literature suggesting that the media's agenda-setting power may not only be constrained by the rise of digital platforms but also by the public's declining confidence in sources of information.

Methodology and sample

This study employs semi-structured interviews and content analysis as the primary methods for data collection and empirical analysis, respectively. A total of 19 combatants participated in the study, 12 from the Russian side and 7 from the Ukrainian side. Participants were recruited through random sampling via social media (n=11) and snowball sampling (n=8). The latter approach helps counterbalance potential bias toward active social media users; however, to prevent the over-representation of any single empirical context, no more than three participants were recruited from the same military unit.

The sample includes participants from various age groups: 20s (n=5), 30s (n=8), 40s (n=4), and 50s (n=1). Their educational backgrounds also vary, with some having completed secondary education (n=6), others vocational training (n=8), and the rest holding higher education degrees (n=5). In terms of military status, the sample consists of mobilized soldiers (n=6), professional military personnel (n=11), and so-called “mercenaries” (individuals released from prison in exchange for participation in the war) (n=2). The participants serve in different military units. On the Russian side, they include combatants from the National Guard, the Marine Corps, Storm Z, and other units. On the Ukrainian side, they represent various infantry and volunteer units, including the “Freedom of Russia” Legion, composed of Russian citizens fighting for Ukraine.

Interviews were conducted remotely via audio and video call over an encrypted communication channel in Telegram messenger, to ensure the security of combatants’ data. With the combatants’ consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, after which the recordings were transcribed and analyzed. Following transcription, the recordings were permanently deleted through triple overwriting of empty storage space. No combatant data has been uploaded to the internet; instead it is securely stored in encrypted form on the researchers’ personal devices.

During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked about their sources of information regarding domestic and global events, the degree of trust they place in these sources, and the reasons underlying their trust or distrust. Additionally, discussions explored media consumption patterns to better understand how combatants engage with and process information (See *Annex*).

Results:

Interview data from Russian and Ukrainian combatants

The first research question examines the sources from which combatants obtain information about domestic and global events. Ten combatants identified social media platforms (Facebook, VK, Odnoklassniki, Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube) as their primary source of information. Six combatants rely on traditional media (television, newspapers, and radio), while three stated that they receive information primarily from “people” – their close social circles. At the same time, some combatants (n=3) who do not consider traditional media as their main source still reported occasionally monitoring it to obtain “surface-level facts”, i.e. to get a general awareness of the narratives being disseminated without integrating them into their worldview. When asked about this behavior, they explained that they just “want to stay informed about what is being said in official sources.”

When questioned about their distrust of traditional media, combatants frequently cited propaganda and misinformation. One Russian respondent stated, “trusting TV means not respecting yourself.” When asked what specific kinds of misinformation traditional media spread, they pointed to reports about battlefield events, military actions, and casualty figures. Another Russian combatant remarked, “the media only tell people what they want to hear, to prevent panic.” One Ukrainian combatant, reflecting on how the media portray war, spoke of “beautiful heroism”, asserting that people do not wish to see anything else. He questioned why the media do not address serious issues, among which he highlighted forced mobilization through unacceptable methods and the severe understaffing of military units.

Interestingly, some combatants who named traditional media as their primary source (n=2) provided contradictory responses: while they claimed to rely on and trust traditional media, they also acknowledged its misinformation, citing the same examples. Despite recognizing the false nature of the information, they continue using these media sources. When asked why they still consume such content and whether they find the dissemination of misinformation in the media acceptable, their response was simply, “everyone lies.”

At the same time, despite their stated trust in their chosen sources, several responses cast doubt on the extent of this trust. First, as mentioned, some combatants dismissed all media as unreliable, stating that “everyone lies.” Second, as previously noted, some respondents engage with media sources only superficially, without fully accepting their content at face value. Ten combatants described this approach – monitoring information, but critically evaluating it rather than taking it at face value. A similar number of combatants, when discussing various news reports, emphasized the importance of personal experience, frequently asserting, “how can you know if you weren’t there?” In all cases, this argument is used to reject facts that seemingly contradict their existing beliefs. For instance, when discussing the atrocities committed by the Russian army in Bucha[1], several Russian combatants outright denied the events, arguing that neither they nor the researcher were present to verify their authenticity. The number of combatants who adopt this approach to information processing may be higher, as for several reasons, reports were not discussed with five of the study’s participants.

It is challenging to identify a correlation between media consumption patterns and self-identification, motivation, and moral convictions. The study does not collect sufficient empirical data for a comprehensive quantitative analysis; however, a case-by-case examination of interview data suggests the absence of a clear connection. Let us consider the data from several Russian combatants.

One Russian combatant identified social media as his primary source of information, expressing distrust toward traditional media and adopting what he calls a “critical” approach to information consumption. Regarding self-identification, he described himself as “neutral” and, when asked about belonging to something greater, cites his family and unit. When questioned about his affiliation on a global scale, he responded with, “humanity.” He named material incentives as his primary motivation for participating in the armed conflict and refrained from immoral actions in hypothetical scenarios, out of fear of potential punishment and social condemnation.

Another Russian combatant also distrusts traditional media, stating that “trusting TV means not respecting yourself.” At the same time, he claimed that combatants are motivated by witnessing “dead children,” and when asked about financial incentives, he responded, “they don’t pay anyway.”

[1] The Bucha massacre refers to the mass killing of Ukrainian civilians by Russian forces during their occupation of the town in March 2022, with bodies found in the streets, mass graves, and evidence of torture (Human Rights Watch 2022a). Similar atrocities have been documented in other occupied cities, such as Kherson, Izium, and others, highlighting widespread war crimes committed by the Russian army (Human Rights Watch 2022a, 2022b).

Like the previous combatant, he refrained from immoral actions but attributed the restraint to personal convictions. In response to one of the questions, he emphasized that he is “not a Ukrainian to loot.” However, when discussing self-identification, he also referred to himself as part of “humanity” and stated that he serves in the military solely out of a sense of “duty.” The interview did not explore the nature of this duty or its recipient.

A third Russian combatant also distrusts the media, stating that his sources of information are his “own eyes and ears.” When discussing self-identification, he expressed hatred toward the state, describing it as a place run by “fat bastards who steal money and pay nothing.” His motivation for participating in the war is “freedom” – he is a member of the Storm Z unit, composed primarily of former convicts released in exchange for military service. Unlike the previous combatants, he accepted the possibility of committing immoral acts in hypothetical situations, for example looting, killing civilians, and torturing prisoners of war, although, like the first combatant, he acknowledged potential consequences. The only condition under which he refrained from immoral behavior was in the case of hypothetical pressure from his peers.

Finally, the fourth Russian combatant, who also distrusts traditional media, explicitly identifies with Russia when asked about self-identification. He cited the need to “defend Donbas” as his motivation and rejected immoral actions on the grounds of conscience.

These four cases illustrate that, despite sharing a common distrust of traditional media, which in Russia disseminate state propaganda narratives about the war, its causes, and objectives, the combatants exhibit diverse motivations, self-identifications, and degrees of restraint in warfare. Similar variations can be observed among those who do trust the media and among Ukrainian combatants. This suggests that a detailed quantitative study, including additional variables and the peculiarities of individual experiences, would identify correlations between the variables of interest.

[2] In 2014, amid pro-Russian protests and the annexation of Crimea, Russian-backed separatists seized parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, declaring the so-called “DPR” and “LPR,” which led to an armed conflict with Ukraine. The war continued at a low intensity for years until Russia launched a full-scale invasion in 2022, claiming to “liberate” Donbas while heavily bombarding cities like Mariupol, Severodonetsk, and Bakhmut located in the province. Russia justifies its actions by claiming it is acting in defense of Russian-speaking populations, but this narrative is widely dismissed as false and unrecognized by most of the world.

Discussion

One of the primary takeaways of this study is that only a small fraction of combatants rely on traditional media as their main source of information. Moreover, even some of those who do reference traditional media engage with them only superficially, merely to track official narratives without fully internalizing them. The majority of participants prefer to receive information through direct interpersonal exchanges, either face-to-face or via social media. According to the combatants themselves, this media consumption pattern stems from their perception of traditional media as untrustworthy and propagandist, a view that aligns with the fact that, during modern armed conflicts, traditional media frequently disseminate inaccurate information (Carrutherts 2000; Crilley & Chatterje-Doody 2021; Payne 2005). Being on the front lines, combatants are uniquely positioned to witness the extent of these inaccuracies firsthand. This may suggest that the use of false information in state narratives or traditional media reports may have the apparently undesirable consequences of reducing trust levels, information consumption from these sources and, as a result, reducing the effectiveness of these narratives.

However, this phenomenon may not stem solely from subjective media consumption experiences but also from the traumatic conditions in which the combatants find themselves. It is well established that participation in armed conflicts can lead to cognitive distortions, often grouped under the umbrella of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Chambliss, Hsu, & Chen 2024; Friedman & McDonagh-Coyle 1994). Recent studies suggest that trauma can also lead to disruptions in epistemic trust – the capacity to evaluate and rely on external information (Benzi et al. 2023; Kampling et al. 2022). In simple terms, traumatic experiences may alter how individuals trust external sources of information. In this study, a significant number of combatants ($n=10$) demonstrated an extremely high level of skepticism toward all sources except their own experiences or the accounts of trusted individuals within their immediate social circles. While this research does not establish a causal link between trauma and epistemic distortions, it highlights the apparent prevalence of such tendencies among acting combatants and the potentially negative consequences they may entail. It may be suggested that other forms of traumatic experience, such as living under a dictatorship (Cabrera Sanchez 2023; Traverso 2010) or economic crisis (Guerra & Eboreime 2021), may also entail disruptions in epistemic trust.

In the context of warfare, one negative consequence could be a decline in combat effectiveness. Ideological commitment is widely regarded as a key factor in combat motivation, which in turn, directly impacts battlefield performance (Maheshwari, Sharma, & Kumar 2021; Sherer 2017; Wong 2006). A lack of trust in state-controlled information sources may undermine efforts to sustain this motivation, thereby diminishing combatants' effectiveness in battle. However, reduced motivation has broader implications beyond combat performance. Data suggests that combatants who are primarily motivated by private incentives rather than a common cause (e.g., defense) are significantly more prone to acts of military violence (Ingannamorte, forthcoming). If combatants only trust individuals within their close social circles and disregard traditional media, which serves as a vehicle for state narratives during wartime, this could substantially reduce the likelihood of motivation based on a collective cause.

Manekin (2013) argues that the longer a military unit remains deployed, the higher the likelihood of its members engaging in acts of wartime violence. If we accept the hypothesis that both traumatic experiences and exposure to misinformation from traditional media lead to declining trust in these sources, which in turn erodes combat motivation, and that this motivational decline contributes to violent behavior, then Manekin's empirical pattern finds additional support and explanation within the framework of this study.

At the same time, it would be an oversimplification to argue that combatants' motivation depends solely on traditional media and external information sources. Research suggests that leadership, personal attributes, training, skills, and other factors also play a role in shaping motivation (Archana 2023; Catignani 2004; Van den Aker et al. 2015; Wessely 2006). However, recognizing the multifaceted nature of combat motivation should not lead to dismissing individual factors, including the potential influence of traditional media.

The tendency of combatants to trust only their immediate social circles, particularly fellow soldiers from their own units, may reflect a well-documented phenomenon known as "microsolidarity," a term coined by Siniša Malešević (2017) to describe the deepening of social bonds among comrades-in-arms. In the context of information flows, this phenomenon contributes to the formation of "echo chambers" or "epistemic bubbles" (Nguyen 2018), where information circulates exclusively within a closed group due to a lack of trust in external sources. In itself, this process is neither inherently negative nor positive; its consequences depend on the nature of the information being disseminated. It can reinforce both radical beliefs and immoral behavior or, conversely, restraint and ethical standards. However, given the patterns described earlier, the latter outcome appears less probable.

The question of how to mitigate the negative consequences of declining trust remains open. Eliminating the traumatic experiences of war is impossible, and it is unlikely that governments will cease disseminating misleading information during armed conflicts, as state authorities will always take measures to control wartime narratives. However, given the collected data and the possible causal links between media consumption patterns, motivation, combat effectiveness, and military violence, both further research and practical interventions are necessary to address these challenges. At the same time, the collected data demonstrate that trust is one of the key variables in the study of the influence of the media on public opinion; and problems with trust, including those associated with the perception of false information in the media, can lead to a decrease in the effectiveness of disseminated narratives. The latter is important, among other things, in the context of state narratives during armed conflicts.

Conclusion

The collected data indicate that Russian and Ukrainian combatants participating in the war in Ukraine exhibit a high level of epistemic mistrust, skepticism toward external sources of information. This is particularly evident in their rejection of traditional media, which play a crucial role in disseminating state narratives and shaping combatant motivation. Such a dynamic may contribute to a decline in combat effectiveness and an increased likelihood of engagement in acts of wartime violence. The underlying causes, as suggested by the existing literature, include the traumatic nature of war, as well as the perception, voiced by the combatants themselves, that traditional media disseminate false information.

This finding has important implications for the role of trust and traumatic experiences on the extent of media influence on contemporary society. It complements the literature on the role of traditional media by suggesting that it is not only modern technologies that are changing the position of traditional media, but also natural psychological mechanisms. Further research could examine how different forms of traumatic experience correlate with levels of media trust.

Finally, the study questions the effectiveness of propaganda based on lies. At a minimum, combatants on the contact lines with first-hand knowledge of the situation reject and distrust lies in traditional media when confronted with them. Given that traditional media is the main conduit for state narratives, the findings highlight the potential ineffectiveness of such information strategies.

However, in the context of warfare, media consumption remains only one of several factors influencing combat effectiveness and proneness to military violence. Despite the similar response patterns observed among combatants on both sides, there are significant differences in both the effectiveness and the level of military violence between the Russian and Ukrainian armed forces (Human Rights Watch 2022a, 2022b; the OHCHR 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). Whether this suggests that media consumption, contrary to the theories discussed, is not a significant variable at all, or whether there exist major discrepancies in other contributing variables, remains an open question requiring further research.

Similarly, the issue of mitigating the negative consequences of declining trust remains unresolved. Eliminating the traumatic nature of war seems virtually impossible, and halting the spread of misinformation in traditional media in wartime appears unlikely. However, given the significance of the issues at hand, continued research in this area is both necessary and urgent.

References

O.P. Soni **Archana** and Megha Ojha. (2023). A study on combat motivation: how soldiers get immune to the perpetual fear of death. *Defence Studies* 24 (2): 189–209. DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2023.2253740.

Lance W. **Bennett** and Steven Livingston. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication* 33 (2): 122–139. DOI: 10.1177/0267323118760317.

Ilaria Maria Antonietta **Benzi**, Nicola Carone, Laura Parolin, Gabriel Martin-Gagnon, Karin Ensink, and Andrea Fontana. (2023). Different epistemic stances for different traumatic experiences: implications for mentalization. *Research in Psychotherapy* 26 (3): 708. DOI: 10.4081/ripppo.2023.708.

Alice Fiorini **Bincoletto**, Marianna Liotti, Mariagrazia Di Giuseppe, Flavia Florentino, Filippo Maria Nimbi, Vittorio Lingiardi, and Annalisa Tanzilli. (2025). The Interplay of Epistemic Trust, Defensive Mechanisms, Interpersonal Problems, and Symptomatology: An Empirical Investigation. *Personality and Individual Differences* 233: 112893. DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2024.112893.

José **Cabrera Sanchez**. (2023). Transgenerational Trauma and Post-memory Among the Grandchildren of Victims of the Chilean Dictatorship. *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 84: 59–76. DOI: 10.7440/res84.2023.04.

Chloe **Campbell**, Michal Tanzer, Rob Saunders, Thomas Booker, Elizabeth Allison, Elizabeth Li, Claire O'Dowda, Patrick Luyten, and Peter Fonagy. (2021). Development and validation of a self-report measure of epistemic trust. *PLoS ONE* 16 (4): e0250264. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0250264.

Susan L **Carrutherts**. (2000). *The Media at War: Communication and Conflict in the Twentieth Century*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Sergio **Catignani**. (2004). Motivating Soldiers: The Example of the Israeli Defense Forces. *Parameters* 34 (3): 108–121. DOI: 10.55540/0031-1723.2212.

Tormechi **Chambliss**, Jung-Lung Hsu, and Mei-Lan Chen. (2024). Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in Veterans: A Concept Analysis. *Behavioral Science (Basel)* 14 (6): 485. DOI: 10.3390/bs14060485.

Rhys **Crilly** and Precious N. Chatterje-Doody. (2021). Government disinformation in war and conflict. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, edited by Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord. Routledge.

Matthew J. **Friedman** and Annmarie McDonagh-Coyle. (1994). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Military Veteran. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 17 (2): 265-277.

Olivia **Guerra** and Ejemai Eboeime. (2021). The Impact of Economic Recessions on Depression, Anxiety, and Trauma-Related Disorders and Illness Outcomes – A Scoping Review. *Behavioral Science (Basel)* 11 (9): 119. DOI: 10.3390/bs11090119.

Thomas **Hanitzsch**, Arjen van Dalen, and Nina Steindl. (2017). Caught in the Nexus: A Comparative and Longitudinal Analysis of Public Trust in the Press. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23 (2): 3-23. DOI: 10.1177/1940161217740695.

Edward S.S. **Herman** and Noam Chomsky. (2002). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Human Rights Watch. (2022a). Ukraine: Russian Forces' Trail of Death in Bucha. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/21/ukrainerussian-forces-trail-death-bucha>.

Human Rights Watch. (2022b). Ukraine: Torture, Disappearances in Occupied South. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/22/ukraine-torture-disappearancesoccupied-south>.

Leonardo Aurelio **Ingannamorte**. Forthcoming. *Morality at War: A Quasi-Experimental Comparative Study of Military Restraint of Russian and Ukrainian Combatants*. Central European University.

Hanna **Kamplig**, Johannes Kruse, Astrid Lampe, Tobias Nolte, Nora Hettich, Elmar Brähler, Cedric Sachser, Jörg M. Fegert, Stephan Gingelmaier, Peter Fonagy, Lina Krakau, Sandra Zara, David Riedl. (2022). Epistemic trust and personality functioning mediate the association between adverse childhood experiences and posttraumatic stress disorder and complex posttraumatic stress disorder in adulthood. *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13: 919191. DOI: 10.3389/fpsy.2022.919191.

Leonardo Aurelio **Ingannamorte**. Forthcoming. *Morality at War: A Quasi-Experimental Comparative Study of Military Restraint of Russian and Ukrainian Combatants*. Central European University.

Tien-Tsung **Lee**. (2010). "Why They Don't Trust the Media: An Examination of Factors Predicting Trust." *American Behavioral Scientist* 54 (1): 8-21. DOI: 10.1177/0002764210376308.

Nidhi **Maheshwari**, Rachana Sharma, and V. Vineeth Kumar. (2021). Reflections on Sustaining Morale and Combat Motivation in Soldiers. *Defence Life Science Journal* 6 (1): 49-55. DOI: 10.14429/dlsj.6.16680.

Siniša **Malešević**. (2017). The organisation of military violence in the 21st century. *Organization* 24 (4): 456-474. DOI: 10.1177/1350508417693854.

Devorah **Manekin**. (2013). Violence Against Civilians in the Second Intifada The Moderating Effect of Armed Group Structure on Opportunistic Violence. *Comparative Political Studies* 46 (10): 1273-1300. DOI: 10.1177/0010414013489382.

Maxwell E **McCombs** and Donald L. Shaw. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (2): 176-187.

Maxwell E **McCombs**. (2004). *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion*. Polity Press.

Sharon **Meraz** and Zizi Papacharissi. (2013). Networked Gatekeeping and Networked Framing on #Egypt. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18 (2): 138-166. DOI: 10.1177/1940161212474472.

Sharon **Meraz**. (2011). The fight for 'how to think': Traditional media, social networks, and issue interpretation. *Journalism* 12 (1): 107-127. DOI: 10.1177/1464884910385193.

Russell W. **Neuman**, Lauren Guggenheim, S. Mo Jang, and Soo Young Bae. (2014). The Dynamics of Public Attention: Agenda-Setting Theory Meets Big Data. *Journal of Communication* 64 (2): 193-214. DOI: 10.1111/jcom.12088.

Thi C. **Nguyen**. (2018). Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles. *Episteme* 17 (2): 141-161. DOI: 10.1017/epi.2018.32.

Kenneth **Payne**. (2005). The Media as an Instrument of War. *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 1 (35): 81-93. DOI: 10.55540/0031-1723.2243.

Idan **Sherer**. (2017). 'When War Comes They Want to Flee': Motivation and Combat Effectiveness in the Spanish Infantry During the Italian Wars. *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 48 (2): 385-411.

Natalie Jomini **Stroud**. (2008). Media Use and Political Predispositions: Revisiting the Concept of Selective Exposure. *Political Behavior* 30 (3): 341-366. DOI: 10.1007/s11109-007-9050-9.

The **OHCHR**. (2022a). Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine. 1 February – 31 July 2022. <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/ReportUkraine-1Feb-31Jul2022-en.pdf>

The **OHCHR**. (2022b). Killings of Civilians: Summary Executions and Attacks on Individual Civilians in Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy Regions in the Context of the Russian Federation's Armed Attack Against Ukraine. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2022/2022-12-07-OHCHR-Thematic-Report-Killings-EN.pdf>.

The **OHCHR**. (2023a). Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine. 1 August 2022 – 31 January 2023. <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/23-03-24-Ukraine-35th-periodic-reportENG.pdf>.

The **OHCHR**. (2023b). Treatment of prisoners of war and persons 'hors de combat' in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2023/23-03-24-Ukraine-thematic-report-POWs-ENG.pdf>.

The **OHCHR**. (2023c). Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine. 1 February – 31 July 2023. <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/23-10-04%20OHCHR%2036th%20periodic%20report.pdf>.

Yariv **Tsfati** and Gal Ariely. (2013). Individual and Contextual Correlates of Trust in Media Across 44 Countries. *Communication Research* 41 (6): 760-782. DOI: 10.1177/0093650213485972.

Antonio **Traverso**. (2010). Dictatorship memories: Working through trauma in Chilean post-dictatorship documentary. *Continuum Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24 (1): 179-191. DOI: 10.1080/10304310903444037.

Peter **van Aelst**, Jesper Strömbäck, Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Claes de Vreese, Jörg Matthes, David Hopmann, et al. (2017). Political communication in a high-choice media environment: a challenge for democracy? *Annals of the International Communication Association* 41 (1): 3-27.
DOI: 10.1080/23808985.2017.1288551.

Chris J. **Vargo**, Lei Guo, and Michelle A. Amazeen. (2018). The agenda-setting power of fake news: A big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 2016. *New Media & Society* 20 (5): 2028-2049.
DOI: 10.1177/1461444817712086.

Peter **van den Aker** and Joseph Soeters. (2015). Combat Motivation and Combat Action: Dutch Soldiers in Operations since the Second World War; A Research Note. *Armed Forces & Society* 42 (1): 211-225.
DOI: 10.1177/0095327X15579403.

Simon **Wessely**. (2006). Twentieth-century Theories on Combat Motivation and Breakdown. *Journal of Contemporary History* 41 (2): 268-286.
DOI: 10.1177/0022009406062067.

Leonard **Wong**. (2006). Combat Motivation in Today's Soldiers: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. *Armed Forces & Society* 32 (4): 659-663.
DOI: 10.1177/0095327X06287884.

Annex

Interview topics with sample wording of questions[3]

Section 1. Self-identification and perceptions of society*

1.1. Each person is a part of something bigger, a group of people to which they belong and with which they feel unity. What are you a part of? There may be more than one answer here.*

1.2. Speaking globally, at the world, civilizational level, what civilization do you feel you are part of?*

1.3. When you think about your country, what images and feelings come to mind first?

1.4. What does it mean to you to be part of /society, nation, social group/?

1.5. How do you demonstrate your belonging to /society, nation, social group/ in everyday life and in service? How is it expressed, in what actions?

1.6. What are the differences between /interviewee's society, nation, social group/ and /rival society, nation, social group/?

1.7. If you were offered the chance to move to another country, which country would it be and why?

1.8. What values are important in raising children?

1.9. What is your attitude towards the idea of patriotism? How do you understand it?

[3] Topics and questions, the answers to which are used in this paper, are marked with the symbol "**"

Section 2. Perception of conflict dynamics*

The questions in this section were preceded by an introductory description of the situation by the researcher, framing the conflict and the prospects for the interviewees' respective sides in positive, negative and neutral terms.

- 2.1. How do you assess the unity of the Russian / Ukrainian people and their contribution to the common cause?
- 2.2. How do you assess the unity and strength of the Russian / Ukrainian army?
- 2.3. How do you assess the enemy's unity and strength?
- 2.4. What do you think is the main incentive for your colleagues to fight in the war?*

Section 3. Combatants' decision-making process

- 3.1. What guides you when making decisions during combat missions?
- 3.2. List your three most important priorities in descending order of importance.
- 3.3. Let's imagine a hypothetical situation. During a combat mission, you and your unit took up a position in a residential area. There you found a box filled with gold jewelry and diamonds. Will you take the jewelry for yourself? Why no / yes?
- 3.4. Several questions that increase / decrease calculation of the subjective value of plundering (absence / presence of a colleague, refusal / consent of a colleague to steal and share stolen property, living quarters of the enemy's / one's own civilians...).

Section 4. Military violence: perception, acceptability, and inclination to engage*

The questions in this section were preceded by an introductory description of the military violence phenomenon by the researcher, framing the phenomenon in positive (understanding), negative (condemning) and neutral (descriptive) terms.

4.1. How do you personally assess the acceptability of attacks on civilians?*

4.2. The death of civilians during artillery, missile and drone strikes, even if these strikes are aimed at a legitimate military target – a tragedy and “collateral damage” or a crime by those who carried out the strike? Why?*

4.3. Let’s imagine hypothetical situations. Here is the first one. While performing a combat mission, you received information that civilians on enemy territory are collaborating with their intelligence services and army, providing them with information about your unit, its movements and actions. What actions will you take and why?*

4.4. Second. You have received orders from your commander to neutralize a civilian. Your actions? Why?*

4.5. Third. You have captured enemy soldiers. Your colleague, throwing out their emotions, began beating one of the prisoners. Will you join or stop and why?

4.6. Several questions that increase / decrease calculation of the subjective value of torture (condemnation of inaction / torture on the part of fellow soldiers, the presence / absence of fellow soldiers and other prisoners, the presence / absence of information valuable to the unit from the prisoner...)*.

Section 5. Demographic data and patterns of media consumption*

5.1. Give your approximate age (20-29, 30-39...)*

5.2. What is your level of education?*

5.3. What did you do before you started serving?

5.4. What is your main information source about events in the country and the world?*

5.5. Do you trust /media type/? Why?*

5.6. What information do you get from /media type/?*

5.7. Free discussion of individual media reports for capturing the peculiarities of perception and processing of information by combatants.



Media and Journalism Research Center

Legal address

Tartu mnt 67/1-13b, 10115,
Tallinn, Harju Maakond, Estonia

Postal address

6 South Molton St, London,
W1K 5QF, United Kingdom

MJRC has an academic cooperation agreement with
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela (USC)
Colexio de San Xerome, Praza do Obradoiro s/n,
CP 15782 de Santiago de Compostela.

Contact

www.journalismresearch.org
mjrc@journalismresearch.org

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Disclosure Statement

In the course of conducting research for this report, ChatGPT was used for translation of texts from Russian into English.

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>