Abstract

This study delves into the portrayal of far-right Ukrainian nationalist groups in U.S. media, specifically within the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict that has been unfolding since 2014. The primary aim was to uncover underlying narratives and biases in the conflict's reporting, especially in light of the complex relationship between Russia and the United States. Utilizing van Dijk's schemata analysis and Black's propaganda typology, online reports from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were analyzed to understand the dynamics at play.

The findings reveal a subtle yet consistent preference for the Western narrative in both digital publications. This approach often relied on outdated Cold War narratives as a way to undermine the credibility of Russian perspectives in lieu of concrete evidence. Intriguingly, these left-leaning outlets defended far-right actors in Ukraine, reflecting a strong opposition to Russia, irrespective of ideological alignments. The reports lacked nuance, echoing official Western narratives and reverting to simplistic wartime tropes of heroes versus villains. Such a dichotomous portrayal underscores a common characteristic of propaganda, emphasizing conflict over cooperation and reinforcing divisions between ingroups and outgroups.

This study highlights the critical role of the media in shaping public perceptions of geopolitical conflicts. It underscores the need for a more nuanced and balanced approach in conflict reporting, moving beyond ingrained biases and narrative structures that perpetuate simplistic and polarizing views of international relations when lives are at stake.

Beyond Black and White: Unraveling U.S. Media Narratives of Ukraine's Far-Right

The controversial emergence and influence of Ukraine's white nationalist groups, a development that challenges the conventional narratives of the conflict and raises confounding questions about United States involvement, has been a point of contention in the ongoing

Russia-Ukraine conflict since 2014. Among these groups, the Azov Battalion stands out as a prominent example. Identified as a far-right nationalist network encompassing military, paramilitary, and political organizations, the Azov Battalion has been a recurrent subject in United States media coverage, both as a key defender of Ukraine and a component of Putin's justification for war (CISAC, 2022). Azov's significant role during key events such as the Euromaidan uprising and their involvement in a high-profile prisoner swap have further highlighted their controversial yet influential position within the conflict.

The complexity of the conflict and the involvement of groups like the Azov Battalion pose significant challenges in understanding and interpreting the dynamics at play. This study seeks to examine the portrayal of these white nationalist groups within the broader narrative of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, particularly focusing on how the United States media has reported on these entities over time. By analyzing news coverage from the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, this research aims to uncover the potential biases that shape public perception of the conflict and the controversial role of groups like the Azov Battalion. The methodology includes van Dijk's schemata analysis (1991) and Black's propaganda typology (2001), offering a comprehensive approach to understanding the media's role in framing this complex geopolitical issue.

Literature Review

Journalism

Mass media, according to Bagdikian (2000), holds unparalleled authority in shaping truth, reality, and public perception. The American Press Association emphasizes journalism's central purpose as providing accurate information necessary for citizens to function in a free society. A shared professional standard in the United States was created to meet that need. While

the history of professional journalism began almost a century ago, its principles were updated in hopes of solving its prevailing problems. Professional standards, established in 1997 by the Committee of Concerned Journalists, prioritize truth, citizen loyalty, verification, independence, power monitoring, public criticism, relevance, comprehensiveness, proportionality, individual conscience, and citizen responsibility (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

The overarching theme within the elements could be identified with the value of independence. Maintaining independence is viewed as the key to producing fair and accurate journalism. As such, journalists tend to pride themselves on shedding their personal biases. However, neutrality was not always an integral part of the practice, but would prove detrimental in curbing commercialization's effects. McChesney (2008) points out that during the first two or three generations of the Republic, nonpartisan journalism would have been viewed as "nonsensical," arguing that, "A partisan press has much to offer a democratic society, as long as there are numerous, well-subsidized media providing a broad range of opinions" (p. 26). However, this attitude shifted as the industry became more profitable from advertising (McChesney, 2008).

It may not come as a surprise that in the digital age, corporate control over media persists, hindering diverse viewpoints with just five corporations controlling most of American media: Comcast, Disney, News Corporation, AT&T, and National Amusements (MacLeod, 2019). With this in mind, it is fair to say that journalists are not the sole producers of news. Fairclough (1989) argues that much more comprehensive and sophisticated institutions represent journalists, with power holders who determine the angle from which different stories and events will be reported.

The professional code's notion of neutrality has many implications in the eyes of political economists. For example, the belief that following the professional code will ensure complete

objectivity can be misleading. McChesney (2008) argues that journalists cannot be neutral or objective without acknowledging the values that frame news stories, "Decision-making is an inescapable part of the journalism process, and some values have to be promoted when deciding why one story rates front page treatment while another is ignored" (p. 30). Kennard (2019) further criticizes the notion of neutrality by pointing out that journalists allowing corporate powers to have a say in news production is problematic because it can lead to default support for their underlying interests.

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

Interestingly, much of the opposition to the liberal nature of the profession aligns with the anti-Communist sentiment, which has been prominent in the United States for more than a century. Starting with the Russian Revolution of 1917, when a socialist government came into power, reports from the *New York Times* show statements from unidentified official sources predicting the regime's collapse more than 91 times (Herman, 2017). This negative perception of Russia reached new heights during the Cold War when Americans feared a Communist takeover

would threaten their livelihood. The concern led to a socially enforced purge of leftist ideas known as McCarthyism. Herman and Chomsky (1994) describe McCarthyism as a "mechanism of control" used by state and business powers. According to them, this era was marked by a strategic labeling of individuals who did not exhibit sufficient loyalty to state and corporate interests as Communists, a tactic that could potentially jeopardize their careers (p.32). This historical example underscores the powerful role of media and ideological narratives in shaping public perception and controlling social and political discourse.

The latter could be observed in the present, following what is known as Russiagate, when reports of the Kremlin's interference with the United States 2016 presidential election took over the media after Donald Trump's victory against Hilary Clinton. In response to worries about fabricated Russian news, major platforms such as Google, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter adjusted their algorithms to prioritize well-known, mainstream outlets (MacLeod, 2019). Consequently, this change led to the reduction in monetization for progressive news outlets that challenge prevailing narratives on political issues, effectively reinstating corporate dominance in the media landscape of the digital era.

While the conservative critique is largely uncontested since it aligns with the liberal reputation of most journalists, it also works in conjunction with the commercial and political goals of media corporations (McChesney, 2008). In that way, corporate-level liberalism in the present media environment may only be tolerated as long as it doesn't disrupt existing power structures. Due to the conservative critique, perceptions of liberalism have shifted dramatically. What used to be seen as a remedy for media credibility issues is now viewed as problematic in the digital news age. However, the importance of adopting liberalism to uphold journalists'

credibility cannot be overstated. This very adoption is what has influenced the formation of the professional standards that continue to guide journalism today.

Propaganda

Identifying propaganda is highly contingent on the definition that is applied. Jowett & O'Donnell (2015) categorize propaganda based on source acknowledgment and information accuracy. To illustrate, *white* propaganda comes from a source identified correctly, and the information tends to be accurate. In contrast, *black* propaganda happens when the source is concealed or credited to false authority and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions. *Gray* propaganda, however, exists between *white* and *black* propaganda in that the source may or may not be correctly identified and the accuracy of the information is uncertain. Along with the recent phenomenon of fake news and our acute awareness of extremist groups, *black* propaganda (justifiably) dominates the propaganda research field. However, understanding the nuances of propaganda can help broaden the discussion past *black* propaganda and into less understood territory that is also in dire need of attention.

Pratkanis & Aronson (1992) define propaganda as manipulating targets with one-sided appeals. While scholars like Doob (1948) and Ellul (1965) offer a more neutral definition of propaganda. Ellul's (1964) sociological propaganda is described as influencing individuals to conform to societal concepts. Removing the pejorative association of propaganda allows for a critical perspective on the press, separate from journalists' intent.

Propaganda, whether neutral or pejorative, has been shown to diminish audience agency and stifle competing ideas, hindering civil society, transparency, and free speech (Chernobrov & Briant, 2022; Black, 2001).

Herman and Chomsky (1994) emphasize how the media employs propaganda in portraying victims, with the focus swayed more by political allegiances than by religious or national identities. They particularly mention the extensive media attention given to Jerzy Popieluszko, a Polish priest murdered by Polish police in 1984. This coverage was notably more extensive than that of victims in Latin America, even in incidents involving American casualties. Such a discrepancy indicates that the media's depiction of victims is influenced by political biases.

Somerville (2017) emphasizes how journalists' core values influence story selection and framing, unintentionally advancing political aims. The effects of framing are also notable in the post 9/11 wars. Reese & Lewis (2009) show how the "War on Terror" frame was misused by the media, leading to widespread support for post-9/11 wars that resulted in more than 385,000 civilian deaths, according to the Council on Foreign Relations.

Studies during the Coronavirus pandemic (Abbas, 2020; Dezhkameh et al., 2021) and the Flint water crisis (Kong, 2022) further underscore media's political biases. Negative stories between governments dominated coverage, indicating a focus on political feuds rather than public health (Abbas, 2020; Dezhkameh et al., 2021). In the Flint water crisis, news coverage favored government actions over public health concerns and included racial cues that distorted public perceptions (Kong, 2022). These studies collectively reveal how propaganda in mass media can serve political interests, compromise objectivity, and shape public narratives.

Research Questions. The evidence presented thus far reveals a significant gap in the provision of accurate and reliable information, which is fundamental for the functioning of a free society. It brings into sharp focus the necessity of scrutinizing media narratives to either corroborate or challenge the legitimacy of mainstream media's portrayal of events. By

employing critical discourse analysis and drawing upon propaganda research frameworks, this study seeks to address this gap. It aims to offer a comprehensive and critical examination of media representations, especially concerning the contentious issue of Ukraine's far-right factions and their portrayal in the neoliberal mainstream media, in order to answer the following questions:

1. How are far-right actors portrayed in the reports?

2. What are the propagandist features of the news reports?

Methods

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an analytical approach that examines the interplay between discourse, ideology, and power within sociocultural contexts (Fairclough, 1993). This study applies CDA to news reports, which often claim adherence to objective reporting standards. However, these reports can, at times, reflect the ideologies of specific social groups. CDA is predicated on the understanding that ideology is deeply embedded in language, manifesting through both grammatical and lexical choices (Amerian & Esmaili, 2015). While the influence of language in shaping ideologies may be subtle, Kong (2022) emphasizes that its significance becomes apparent when examined within the larger discourse.

Therefore, CDA is a valuable tool for exploring the interrelation between media narratives and language choice, taking into account a wide array of factors (Fairclough, 1993). This involves framing the discourse within its social, political, cultural, economic, and ideological contexts (Shojaei et al., 2013). In this study, CDA will be used to dissect and analyze the linguistic patterns in news coverage of Ukraine's far-right factions, seeking to uncover underlying ideologies and biases that may influence public perception and discourse.

Analytical Framework

When applying van Dijk's schemata analysis, the influence of ideology becomes a focal point. Schemata, originally conceptualized by Bartlett (1932), are not static constructs but are dynamically formed in the present. They are influenced by situational factors, current attitudes, and the cumulative knowledge acquired from past experiences. Van Dijk (1991) underscores the intricate relationship between schemata and ideology, noting that ideological frames are flexible and often adapt to integrate challenges to their dominance.

This adaptability of ideological frames is particularly significant in the analysis of news discourse. Carragee & Roefs (2004), key scholars in propaganda studies, support this view, arguing that ideological frames adjust to maintain their status as the prevailing worldview. In the context of news reporting, the selection of material and its presentation are inextricably linked to the social, political, and historical context of the discourse. This study leverages these concepts, applying van Dijk's schemata analysis to dissect and understand the ideological underpinnings of news coverage on Ukraine's far-right factions, thereby revealing how these narratives are shaped by and reflect broader societal and political dynamics. Van Dijk's (1991) schemata analysis dissects discourse into three structures: macrostructures, superstructures, and microstructures. This comprehensive approach aids in identifying schema systems in the news, unraveling their construction, and revealing potential ideological implications.

The macrostructure of discourse, rooted in the overall meaning of the text, is expressed through the headline and lede paragraph, housing crucial information (Abbas, 2020). Analyzing the macrostructure unveils underlying beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies shaping the news.

The superstructure, or textual schemata, pertains to the overall organization of the text (van Dijk, 1991). As news presents information by order of importance, discerning the superstructure unveils the underlying beliefs of the newsmakers. Beyond summarizing main

events, the superstructure involves choices that may manipulate topical organization and harbor ideological implications.

The microstructure assesses a text's semantic, syntactic, stylistic, and rhetorical aspects, focusing on words and sentences that imbue a story with meaning. Van Dijk (1991) identifies various aspects, such as presuppositions, implications, inferences, concealments, euphemisms, disclaiming denials, blaming the victim, negativization, and the combined strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (p. 177).

Black's (2001) propaganda typology will complement van Dijk's schemata analysis. Derived from the perspectives of propaganda analysts, media critics, social psychologists, and semanticists, Black's typology includes six categories. These encompass *the reduction of complex situations into simplistic cause-and-effect relations*, *the use of abstract language and physical representations*, *heavy reliance on authority figures*, *a fixed view of in-groups and out-groups*, *a time focus with an under or overemphasis on the past, present, or future*, and *a greater emphasis on conflict rather than cooperation* (Black, 2001, p. 133-134). Together with van Dijk's schemata analysis, these frameworks will aid in unraveling self-interested claims and contextualizing them within the realm of propaganda.

Data Collection and Dataset

Articles from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* were collected from two different periods of the Russia-Ukraine conflict using the ProQuest database. This study focuses on a total of four articles, with one for each publication following the Euromaidan protests in 2014 and the prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine nearly a decade later.

Findings

Euromaidan

The following analysis begins with an article for the *Washington Post* on February 25, 2014, followed by the *New York Times* on February 23, 2014. Both articles discuss the opposition that transpired following the ouster of President Yanukovych during Euromaidan and end with a look toward the future of Ukraine given the polarization of Ukrainian politics. All examples are copied directly from the text, and therefore, use the exact grammar and punctuation.

Macrostructure

The *Washington Post* headline *Russia decries shift in Ukraine,* while vague is nonetheless ridden with underlying implications. The topic of the article is Russia's "decree," which is regarded with doubt. This word choice cultivates a negative perception of Russia by implying that this "shift" triggered an emotional response. Implicitly, this may signal to the reader that Russia's decree does not come from a logical place, but a state of anger that could impact its credibility without the need for further evidence. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the word "shift" does not accurately represent the situation as a change in leadership obtained by violent methods.

The *New York Times* headline *Power Shift Inspires Joy in Kiev, Fury in East* also describes the situation as a shift in power but includes the reaction of those who favored the shift as well. Thus, the overall theme could be summed up in one word: polarization. Both articles use similar words such as "decree" and "fury" to characterize those who oppose Ukraine's interim government. This signals the authors' understanding of the dissent to be an emotional reaction. The *New York Times* takes it one step further, however, by including the positive reaction of pro-Maidan voices, which alludes to the polarization of Ukrainian politics and creates tension.

Superstructure

When looking at the topical organization of the *Washington Post* article, the overall schema promotes the idea that although Russia is upset, everything in Ukraine is fine. It begins

by outlining the Russian leaders' sentiments following the removal of Ukraine's president, Viktor Yanukovych, then delves into more specific facets of Russia's assertions and a sequence of verbal responses from authoritative figures. This arrangement subtly unveils an oppositional dynamic, casting doubt on the credibility of the outgroup. Consequently, the article takes on the tone of a dispute between two factions rather than directly addressing the claims made by Russian officials.

The *New York Times* article highlights the contrasting perspectives of different civilian political groups in Donetsk, creating a sense of polarization. This structure points to an underlying schema, which aims to provide a positive image of pro-Maidan activists in Donetsk subtly disputing the claims of facism made by Russian officials following the violent Euromaidan protests in Kiev. The article begins by illustrating distinctive visual representations of the two groups, followed by a contextual overview. A significant portion is dedicated to Yanukovych, including details about him, his potential whereabouts, and diminishing support post-Euromaidan. The article concludes by presenting verbal reactions from pro-Maidan demonstrators, emphasizing positive social aspects to address concerns about fascism indirectly.

Table 1

Washington Post Microstructure

Semantics	The example below challenges Russia's assertion using ridicule instead of evidence, presupposing it's unlikely that a peace deal could lead to terrorist actions. As the lede, it is also where in-groups and out-groups are established. "Russia questioned the legitimacy of Ukraine's interim leadership, charging that it used a peace deal brokered by Europe to make a power grab and to suppress dissent in Russian-speaking regions through 'terrorist methods.'"

Syntax	In this example, several syntactic techniques are employed to depict the West as a victim of Russian aggression. These strategies connect the West's positive actions with the negative responses of the opposing group, implying that these reactions are unjustified without evidence. Catherine Ashton, the European Union's top diplomat, arrived in Kiev on Monday, and U.S. Treasury Secretary Jack Lew held a phone conversation with Arseniy Yatsenyuk, a leader of the protests. But Medvedev, the Russian premier, heaped scorn on the West for what he called its 'aberration of consciousness' for endorsing the toppling of Yanukovych's democratically elected government.
Stylistics	The word "harsh" is used to introduce a quote from Russian Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, which refers to the interim government as "Kalashnikov-toting people in black masks who are roaming Kiev." Interestingly, this implies there is truth to Medvedev's assessment of the situation, yet it still attempts to discourage readers from drawing such conclusions by labeling the belief as unfair or cruel.
Rhetoric	The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is euphemistically described as "having a spat," implying that Russia's actions, such as those by its sanitary service, are not valid but rather petty punishments.

Table 2

New York Times Microstructure

Semantics	President Yanokvych is first introduced with negative background information that shapes readers' perceptions of him and his allies early in the article: "Mr. Yanukovych hails from the mean streets of Donetsk, where in his youth he was twice imprisoned for assault." This negativization of the outgroup negates the need to explain their point of view in the conflict because it implies they are untrustworthy.
Syntax	This sentence structure, ending with the attribution to a news source, bolsters the credibility of the claim, thereby favoring the pro-Maidan protesters.
	During the wreath-laying ceremony, activists announced their intent to neither storm administrative buildings as seen in Kiev nor demolish memorials, contrasting with the recent toppling of 16 Lenin statues across central and eastern Ukraine, as reported by Ukrainian media."
	The following paragraph then uses temporal sequencing to criticize the anti-Maidan protesters:
	Merely an hour later, a contrasting scene emerged. Hundreds of boisterous individuals—predominantly young men, many masked and armed with clubs—congregated near the memorial, separated by various police units. Their chants of 'glory' were not in tribute to the Kiev protesters but in support of the Berkut, the police force widely blamed for the violence against demonstrators.
	This syntactic arrangement deliberately places a peaceful depiction of pro-Maidan activists ahead of a more negative portrayal of anti-Maidan

	protesters, thereby amplifying the critique of the latter group beyond what is explicitly stated in the text.
Stylistics	The article consistently portrays Donetsk negatively using terms like "hard-scrabble coal mining city" and "mean streets of Donetsk," which casts its residents in a certain light. In contrast, members of the ingroup are depicted positively, described as "well-dressed" and acknowledged for their roles in society, such as doctors, nurses, and teachers.
Rhetoric	The first article dramatizes the Maidan demonstrations as a theatrical event: 'It was the final act in an elaborate, two-hour drama carefully managed by the police.' This portrayal starkly divides protagonists from antagonists, shaping reader perceptions of the conflict.

The Prisoner Swap

The following analysis uses articles from the Washington Post and the New York Times on September 22, 2022, and September 21, 2022. Both reports were written in response to the prisoner exchange between Ukraine and Russia that happened nearly a decade after the political turmoil that transpired during Euromaidan in early 2014.

Macrostructure

The *Washington Post* headline *Prisoner swap freed Putin's friend, Azov commanders and U.K. fighters* places emphasis on Viktor Medvedchuk's release from Ukraine. While the article acknowledges Medvedchuk's status as a prominent pro-Kremlin politician, highlighting his potential role as one of Ukraine's most significant prisoners, the headline foregrounds his personal connection to Putin. This focus on Medvedchuk's relationship with Putin suggests its

paramount importance in the situation. This angle sets the stage for a broader discussion about the strategic implications of Medvedchuk's capture and subsequent release in the prisoner swap.

In contrast to the previous headline, the *New York Times'* headline is formulated concerning the number of Ukrainian prisoners released by Russia: *Russia releases 215 fighters, including Mariupol commanders, in a prisoner exchange*. This prioritization may be schematic since they are members of the ingroup and victims of outgroup aggression in this context. It becomes clear after the lede that "Mariupol commanders" is describing the commanders of the Azov Regiment. This vague attribution may have been chosen to conceal the negative association the Azov Regiment has incurred over time. However, it was still singled out in the headline for a reason the newsmakers considered significant.

Superstructure

The *Washington Post's* coverage of the prisoner swap begins by delving into the who, when, and total headcount involved. At first glance, it appears to be a straightforward analysis of the prisoner swap, spotlighting the freed captives. Yet, beneath the surface, a celebration emerges for the brave Ukrainians who stood firm against months of Russian aggression. Following the summary, Verbal Reactions unfold, starting with criticism directed at Putin from Russian "pro-war nationalists." Subsequently, accolades pour in from the governments of the liberated foreigners once held by Russian soldiers. The structure then branches into five sections, each centering around the released prisoners. The headings delineate the captives' names and their group affiliations. The sequence begins with Viktor Medvedchuk, followed by two batches of foreign fighters categorized by nationality: two U.S. military veterans and five British nationals. The final two sections showcase Ukrainian commanders from different branches, Denys Prokopenko of the Azov Regiment and Sergey Volynsky of the 36th Brigade. The most detailed

discussions revolve around Putin's confidant and the two Ukrainian commanders. Medvedchuk

is scrutinized for his outgroup status, consistently painted in a negative light throughout the

discourse. In stark contrast, the Ukrainian commanders receive ample positive attribution and

commendation for their valor against Russian forces. Sergey Volynsky's gratitude towards the

defenders of Azovstal is highlighted as a concluding note.

The *New York Times'* topical design also frames the prisoner swap as a triumph for

Ukraine. The initial summary sets the tone, emphasizing Ukraine's success in various aspects.

However, the focal point shifts to the release of Azov commanders, a narrative choice attributed

to their celebrity status among the Ukrainian populace. Notably, the article delays mentioning

their neo-Nazi affiliation until later, opting instead to underscore their positive public image and

significance. The release of Medvedchuk is presented as a noble sacrifice by Ukraine,

reinforcing the elevated status of Azov fighters. President Zelensky is commended for his role in

securing the prisoners' release, with a quote emphasizing his leadership. The article navigates the

complexities of the Mariupol struggle, spotlighting Russian brutality while concurrently

highlighting the resilience of the Azov forces. The report wraps up by peering into the future,

outlining Zelensky's mission to secure the freedom of more Ukrainian soldiers.

Table 3

Washington Post Microstructure

Semantics	Extensive description precedes Pushilin's statement, implicitly challenging his credibility. Pushilin's association with Russia is emphasized first, highlighting its importance. His leadership status is mentioned secondarily, and terms like "Moscow-backed" and "self-proclaimed" subtly undermine his authority. This

	narrative strategy encourages readers to critically evaluate his statements that suggest compromise is possible.
Syntax	The introduction of the Azov commander emphasizes his accomplishments, with the contentious nature of the Azov Regiment mentioned only in the final sentence. This deliberate structuring, which concludes with the statement that "Russia's parliament is moving to officially label Azov as a terrorist organization," likely aims to foreground the commander's positive qualities and achievements, while minimizing the group's controversial aspects.
Stylistics	The use of the term "mercurial" carries negative connotations, offering a subtle but impactful stylistic choice that reflects the newsmakers' perspective. While others might interpret Medvedchuk's actions as a sign of flexibility or diplomatic skill, the chosen word suggests a negative view of his character. "In an indication of Medvedchuk's mercurial role, he was working for Kyiv during those previous prisoner-exchange negotiations."
Rhetoric	The term 'hard-liners' is used metaphorically to describe Russian critics of the prisoner exchange, suggesting their unreasonableness and extreme positions. This favors the ingroup by trivializing the significance of releasing Azov members and presenting the dissent as inconsequential. Furthermore, it frames their discontent as a sign of Ukrainian success. However, the portrayal overlooks the legitimate concerns about releasing Azov Regiment members, who are seen as a neo-Nazi threat.

Table 4

New York Times Microstructure

Semantics	In this text, language use clearly delineates an ingroup-outgroup dynamic:
	Ukrainian authorities have secured the release of the commanders of the Azov Battalion, whose defense of Mariupol from within a sprawling steel plant turned them into celebrities throughout Ukraine and made them a valuable prize for the Kremlin when they surrendered to Russian forces in May after an 80-day siege.
	This framing suggests that the Kremlin's capture of Azov forces was motivated by animosity towards Ukrainians, casting the Kremlin as the aggressor and Azov forces as victims. It also generates hostility towards the Kremlin and simplifies the situation by omitting the Azov Battalion's alleged neo-Nazi ties. The focus on portraying the Azov Battalion solely as defenders and victims advances a specific viewpoint, leading readers to adopt a one-sided understanding in line with the ingroup's perspective.
Syntax	The prominence and structure of this quote article implicitly supports and reinforces the ingroup's perspective, contributing to a narrative that emphasizes the heroism of the released prisoners: 'President Volodymyr Zelensky gave a clear order to return our heroes. The result: our heroes are free.'
Stylistics	The use of the word "attempted" in the sentence, "Russian propaganda has attempted to paint as neo-Nazis," introduces an element of skepticism, creating a sense of doubt about the accuracy of the claim. Additionally, attributing the claim

	solely to "Russian propaganda" carries a presupposition that it is false by framing it as part of an outgroup's misinformation efforts disregarding assessments from esteemed organizations in the United States (CISAC, 2022; SITE, 2022).
Rhetoric	The article metaphorically refers to the released prisoners as "prizes."

Discussion

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

The Washington Post

The *Washington Post* distinctly categorizes figures associated with Russia, like Yanukovych and Putin as members of the outgroup. This is a common strategy linked to propaganda that also reinforces ideologies aligned with American power structures. As a result, in situations where the outgroup is mentioned, conflict is emphasized over cooperation. These two propaganda strategies shape public perception towards a confrontational approach in international relations with Russia.

In its portrayal of Russian responses to Ukraine's political shifts, the *Post* subtly downplays Russia's concerns as overstated, limiting understanding of Russia's position and fueling the conflict narrative. For instance, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's comment, 'If you consider Kalashnikov-toting people in black masks who are roaming Kiev to be a government, then it will be hard for us to work with that government,' is contrasted with a defiant Ukrainian response. Parliament member Yuriy Derevyanko's remark, 'They can take it or leave it. It's not their business,' serves as a firm ingroup closure, hinting at ideological bias and illustrating the newspaper's reliance on authoritative statements over empirical evidence to establish conclusions.

In the article that follows, the *Post* undermines Viktor Medvedchuk's role as a potential mediator. Despite acknowledging his contributions to the Minsk process, as stated by Pushilin, 'more than a 1,000 of our guys have been freed with Viktor Medvedchuk's help,' the newspaper describes him as 'mercurial.' This label casts doubt on his loyalty and mediation effectiveness. Contrastingly, the article minimally addresses the Azov Regiment leader's controversial status, mentioning it briefly and without context. This disparity in treatment between Medvedchuk and the Azov leader illustrates the newspaper's distinct approach to ingroups and outgroups based on their affiliations.

The New York Times

The *New York Times* distinctively highlights the ingroup-outgroup dynamic in its coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, utilizing vivid, embellished language. While this style creates impactful narratives, it's also an element of propaganda. Furthermore, the choice of words reveals the newspaper's perspective on the different groups involved in the conflict, subtly linking social status with ideas of respectability and rationality, and therefore, accentuating conflict over cooperation.

The first article's lede distinguishes in-groups from out-groups by implicitly ridiculing the actions of anti-Maidan protesters. Simultaneously, pro-Maidan are shown as the victims:

> About 500 yards away, a few hundred pro-democracy activists, harangued by hundreds of counterdemonstrators, laid wreaths for the victims of last week's bedlam in Kiev at a memorial to one of Ukraine's most revered figures, the 19th-century poet Taras Shevchenko.

Furthermore, the significance of the Shevchenko monument to counter demonstrators is concealed. The choice to gather there in a predominantly Russian-speaking territory can be

viewed as antagonistic, given that Shevchenko is credited as the father of the Ukrainian language and the status of the Russian language was downgraded by the interim government just days prior. However, this context lacks clarity in the lede, potentially shaping readers' perceptions of anti-Maidan actors unfairly.

The article uses a metaphor to depict the conflict in Donetsk as a play: "It was the final act in an elaborate, two-hour drama carefully managed by the police." While this dramatization may serve entertainment purposes, it can also, less innocently, influence support or opposition for actors on different sides of the conflict (Entman, 2003). At the same time, the article consistently portrays Donetsk negatively using terms like "hard-scrabble coal mining city" and "mean streets of Donetsk," which casts its residents in a certain light.

In contrast, members of the ingroup are depicted positively, described as "well-dressed" and acknowledged for their roles in society, such as doctors, nurses, and teachers. Meanwhile, the outgroup is only described as wearing masks and carrying clubs. In culmination, these details create harmful stereotypes against people from Donetsk as a way to suppress their point of view.

In the second analysis, the *New York Times* employs the metaphor of 'prizes' to depict the Azov commanders and Medvedchuk in the context of the prisoner exchange. The first instance suggests that the commanders of the Azov Battalion, by virtue of their celebrity status in Ukraine, became a valuable capture for the Kremlin. This framing casts the Kremlin as the aggressor and the Azov forces as victims, simplifying the conflict and omitting their alleged neo-Nazi links.

While such engaging narratives may attract readers and boost financial gains, they carry harmful implications. This playful language trivializes the conflict's gravity, shifting focus from the human and ethical aspects of the prisoner swap to its strategic, transactional, and

entertainment prospects. Furthermore, the continuous negative portrayal of Eastern Europeans and Russians in the *New York Times'* coverage contributes to the creation of a biased perception of these groups based solely on their geographical origins. This negativization often manifests in the use of stereotypes or negative descriptors, which can reinforce prejudices and perpetuate a one dimensional view of these populations.

Research Questions. Returning to the research questions this study sought to answer, regarding the propagandistic features of news reports about neo-Nazi militias in Ukraine, we can see that multiple propaganda techniques from Black's (2001) have been used by both publications during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. While establishing ingroups from outgroups is the most prominent, the emphasis on the conflict over cooperation ultimately advocates for the West's continued involvement as tensions rise and more innocent lives are lost in the crossfire.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the effort to improve the quality of media that this country dearly depends on by engaging with it critically and challenging popular belief. To that end, the analysis successfully identifies the most prominent propagandistic elements in reports from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* on two selected dates of the Russia-Ukraine conflict using van Dijk's schemata analysis and Black's propaganda typology. The findings also indicate the publications' endorsement of far-right groups in Ukraine that several organizations have linked to neo-Nazi ideology (CISAC, 2022; SITE, 2022).

The narrative surrounding the Azov Movement's far-right characterization is subject to two contrasting explanations in the articles. The first challenges the classification, dismissing it as a fabrication fueled by Russian propaganda. However, this counterargument lacks concrete facts to substantiate its claim and relies on leveraging historical perceptions of Russia as

unreliable. The second explanation, predominant in the second dataset, emphasizes the role of the Azov Movement in Mariupol, suggesting that their actions in that context overshadow concerns about their alleged association with Nazism. As pointed out in the discussion, these are deceptive techniques commonly used in the practice of propaganda.

Moreover, the study uncovers a lack of nuances in the information presented by both news outlets, with implicit biases favoring the Western stance and portraying opposing perspectives negatively. While recognizing the challenges of wartime reporting, including limited information access and heightened polarization, the study acknowledges the present-day speculation about the prevalence of neo-Nazism in Ukraine. Despite these limitations, the study contends that mainstream news media, even at its most progressive level, falls short in providing the diverse information essential for a functioning free society.

Media outlets have a responsibility to provide balanced and nuanced reporting, especially in the context of international conflicts or political tensions. Failing to do so can contribute to the spread of misinformation and deepen cultural misunderstandings, hindering constructive dialogue and international relations.

To that end, if the triumph of an American foe is seen as the worst possible outcome, then collaborating with neo-Nazi militias can be justified. However, the deployment of propaganda methods in the articles seek to obscure this rationale, hindering the public's ability to independently arrive at such conclusions.

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