

THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA DISCOURSE IN THE FIRST WEEK OF THE UKRAINIAN WAR (24 FEBRUARY 2022)

As Lippmann's says in his famous book "Public Opinion" one hundred years ago media construct the pictures inside our heads for everything which is "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind." The choice of words and phrases made by the media forms images, messages and attitudes that not only influence public opinion, but also construct a reality, a mediated reality. And for international events, this reality often remains the only one to all who cannot be direct witnesses, much less participants in them.

The subject of this study is the coverage of the full-scale attack on Ukraine by the mainstream western world media. The scope of the study includes the first seven days of the war - from February 24, 2022 to March 2, 2022.

The object of the study are interpretive publications (communication units) related to the Russian invasion in Ukraine of four western media published on their websites during the first week of it. The media – the online American "Los Angeles Time" and "The Washington Post", the Spanish "La Vanguardia" and the French "Le Figaro", are selected according to the traffic to them, measured by Alexa.com - Rank in global internet traffic, as of March 1, 2022.

The empirical base includes all two hundred and eighty seven interpretive communication units published by the four media in the specified period.

The methods for data processing and interpretation of the empirical base are documentation, monitoring and qualitative content analysis. The study aims to answer these three main research questions:

1. What are the features and trends of media coverage?
2. How are the individuals and groups affected by the conflict represented in the reflection of the world media?
3. What are the whole media messages and suggestions?

As it is turned out "The Washington Post" reflects the first week of the war in Ukraine with the highest intensity of the publications – 635. There is a polarization of the participants in the conflict into good and bad, victim and aggressor, as well as in the decisions - into right and wrong. The phrases are very expressive. The event reportage is the main genre used to convey a sense of tension and empathy with the situation, fear and confusion, suggesting that the Russian military's aggression is predominantly directed against civilians. Used key words for Putin are these: „crazy“; „liar“; „villain“; „deluded“; „shameless“; „irrational“; „unstoppable egomaniac“; „paranoid sociopath“; „little cowardly man“; „a dangerous symbol of tyranny“; „a person with a distorted perspective“ and the war is called: „Putin's war“, „Putin's aggression“, „Putin's attack“.

Used key words for Zelensky are: „hero“; „unshakable“; „international idol“; „an unexpected champion for Ukrainians and the world“;

The whole media message and suggestion of “The Washington Post” is that anyone should support Ukraine, and those who see Russia's actions as provoked and its entry into Ukraine as a self-defence is terribly wrong.

“Los Angelis Times” intensity of publications is significantly less – their number is 70 in total. Unlike “The Washington Post”, the “Los Angeles Times” does not use such expressive phrases. The main interpretive genre is articles and analyses, reportages are rarer. While “The Washington Post” turns the reader into a participant in the events – everyone could feel the tension at the scene of the event, the “Los Angeles Times”, on the other hand, is more of a bystander who comments on what is happening. In its interpretations, Putin is alone against the world, he is also presented as perhaps crazy, while Zelensky is supported by everyone. Used key words for Putin are “crazy”; “a solitary figure”; “looks like a villain”; “rough talking boss” and for Zelensky: “the Ukrainian George Washington”; “a new type of Ukrainian patriot”; “a tough, young leader”. Ukraine is presented as a victim who, however, retaliates, and Russia as an aggressor. The whole media message of the “Los Angeles Times” is to call for an end to the war, emphasizing its civilian casualties.

In the Spanish “La Vanguardia” Putin also is presented as an aggressor, as a “crazy imperialist” who made an error in his judgment, but the media calls at the same time for empathy with the Russians, who “are not to blame for having a president like Putin”. Their disapproval of the war, as well as their resistance, is also reflected. Ukraine is presented as a victim, Zelensky as a hero, and the war as “unjustified”. Used key words for Putin are: „mad imperialist“; „tyrant“; „megalomaniac“; „autocrat“; „little man“; „dictator“; „unscrupulous paranoid“ and for Zelensky: „symbol of resistance“; „hero“; „a true leader“

In the media coverage, rational rather than emotional interpretations predominate, with a noticeable criticism of the USA, NATO and the EU, with accusations of insufficient determination – “neither the United States teaches a lesson, nor the European Union does anything”. However, the overall media message is focused on the main cause of the war – “Putin's obsession with restoring the Soviet Union or returning Russia to imperial times”.

The French “Le Figaro” also strongly condemns Putin's decisions, even questioning his mental health. Ukrainians are presented as victims, but the media also describes them as fighting and strong people. Zelensky is presented as a hero who opposes Putin. Putin and Zelensky are opposed on the moral-ethical axis of good and evil - Putin is a dictator, and Zelensky - bold and brave. Europe and Western countries are represented as “passive” and “sleepy”. Most frequently used key words for Putin are: „a dictator with paranoid determination“; „who wants revenge“; „small Kagebist“; „brutal“; „with an unstable mental state” and for Zelensky „young” „the epitome of combativeness“; „daring“; „bold”.

The media coverage uses emotional personal stories to create reader sympathy for the Ukrainians, but lacks information about the Russians' point of view. The whole media message is both a condemnation of the Russian president's war madness, which has been compared to Afghanistan, and the passivity of Europe.

As a whole we could conclude that the choice of words and phrases of the four media form images, messages and attitudes that greatly guide the evaluation and reaction of the audience. In the media narrative, Russia is turned backwards, to the past, in which Putin looks nostalgically to Soviet power, and Ukraine forwards, to the future he heroically defends. Russia is presented in the enemy image of an aggressor violating international agreements, as an Orwellian side of propaganda, and Putin as a dictator obsessed with messianic fixed ideas to restore the former power of Soviet Russia. Putin is being demonized, presumably to legitimize the strength of the pushback against him. Ukraine is presented as a victim, as an object of invasion, as a scene of fierce fighting and a humanitarian crisis, but also as a country giving heroic resistance to Russian aggression.

Despite its world authority as a quality and independent media, when covering the Ukrainian crisis, online publications on “The Washington Post”, “Los Angeles Times”, “La Vanguardia” и “Le Figaro” represent certain US and EU policies at the level of the words. Dramatization and polarization with the aim of “engineering of consent” is far more common. In most cases, even the choice of the titles points to the formation of a sustainable “anti-Putinism”. So sometimes it is hard to distinguish journalism and activism. As we all know war can’t have different opinions – it’s black and white. It’s always the aggressor and the victim – nothing in the middle. But the information war of interpretations is becoming part of the new hybrid war, in which it is important whose global leadership will be. And control over the interpretation of what is happening can also become control over the future.