From media spectacle to personal witness.War reporting during Russian aggression against Ukraine

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Streszczenie

Artykuł jest poświęcony nowym aspektom relacji wojennej na przykładzie rosyjskiej agresji przeciw Ukrainie. Autorzy dziennikarskich relacji o wojnie prezentują rozmaite jej aspekty, zdarzenia oraz rozmaitych bohaterów, ale w różnorodnych przedstawieniach konfliktów zbrojnych pojawiają się podobne składniki narracji – antagoniści (sprawcy), protagoniści (herosi lub ofiary), fizyczne lub emocjonalne konsekwencje zdarzeń. Odpowiednio skonstruowane relacje między tymi elementami stanowią osnowę dobrego opowiadania rozumianego jako narracja scalona zdarzeniami, których przedmiotem są ludzie, ich czyny i zmagania. Sztuka opowiadania, umiejętność prowadzenia narracji i wplatania w nią zdarzeń oraz zdolność odnajdywania odpowiedniej struktury są niezbędne, aby przekazywane przez nas treści były zrozumiałe dla innych. Kreowany w ten sposób obraz wojny, a raczej opowieść o niej, wchodzi w interakcję z naszym codziennym życiem, co prowadzi do przenikania się dwóch sfer: rzeczywistości mediów oraz sfery realnego świata. Widownia mediów przeistacza się z obojętnej masy w zaangażowaną społeczność, a zmianę te można postrzegać nie tylko w kategoriach afektywnych (od obojętności do empatii), ale także w sferze logos, tj. transformacji od ignorancji do wiedzy. Współcześnie, nawet jeśli w dyskursie o dziennikarskim wojnie dominuje zainteresowanie cywilnym wymiarem cierpienia, to przecież zainteresowanie bohaterami ze świata militarnego nigdy całkowicie nie zanikło, a w ostatnich latach przeżywa prawdziwy renesans.

Mediosfera XXI wieku to złożony i zaawansowany system różnorodnych mediów w każdej skali, od mediów sublokalnych do globalnych, który obejmuje gazety, czasopisma, nieperiodyczne wydawnictwa drukowane, elektroniczne media emisyjne oraz nowe media w sieci, w tym osobiste media społecznościowe. Podczas wojny XXI wieku ogromną rolę odgrywają media społecznościowe, takie jak Twitter, Facebook i Instagram, Reddit czy Telegram, które stanowią swoistą piątą władzę. Dziennikarstwo obywatelskie nowych mediów umożliwia kontrolę funkcjonowania – w tym pokonywanie ograniczeń – korespondencji wojennej w tradycyjnych mediach korporacyjnych. Rosyjska wojna hybrydowa przeciw Ukrainie i Zachodowi oraz narastające problemy Rosji, zarówno na arenie międzynarodowej, jak i w kraju, doprowadziły do intensyfikacji wojny informacyjnej – na długo przed inwazją na Ukrainę w 2022 roku – którą należy postrzegać jako kontynuację radzieckich technologii politycznych, skutecznie wykorzystywanych od wielu lat. Media społecznościowe są wykorzystywane jako platforma kontrpropagandy oraz środek wizualnej dokumentacji dowodów rosyjskich zbrodni w Ukrainie.

Słowa-klucze: [słowa-klucze]

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Abstract

From media spectacle to personal witness. War reporting during Russian aggression against Ukraine

This article is devoted to new aspects of war coverage using the example of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Authors of journalistic accounts of war present various aspects of war, events, and various protagonists, but in the various representations of armed conflict similar narrative components appear - antagonists (perpetrators), protagonists (heroes or victims), physical or emotional consequences of events. Properly constructed relationships between these elements form the warp of a good story understood as a narrative fused by events whose subjects are people, their actions and struggles. The art of storytelling, the ability to narrate and weave events into the narrative, and the ability to find the right structure are essential if the content we convey is to be understood by others. The image of war created in this way, or rather the story of war, interacts with our everyday lives, leading to an interpenetration of two spheres: the reality of the media and that of the real world. The media audience is transforming from an indifferent mass to an engaged community, and this change can be seen not only in affective terms (from indifference to empathy), but also in the realm of logos, i.e., the transformation from ignorance to knowledge. Nowadays, even if the journalistic discourse on war is dominated by an interest in the civilian dimension of suffering, after all, the interest in heroes from the military world has never completely disappeared, and in recent years has experienced a real renaissance.

The 21st century mediasphere is a complex and sophisticated system of diverse media at every scale, from sublocal to global, which includes newspapers, magazines, nonperiodical print publications, electronic broadcast media, and new online media, including personal social media. In the wars of the 21st century, social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, Reddit, and Telegram, play a huge role as a kind of fifth power. Citizen journalism of new media enables the control of the functioning - including overcoming the limitations - of war correspondence in traditional corporate media. Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine and the West, and Russia's growing problems, both internationally and domestically, have led to an intensification of information warfare, long before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which should be seen as a continuation of Soviet political technologies that have been used effectively for many years. Social media is used as a platform for counterpropaganda and as a means of visually documenting evidence of Russian crimes in Ukraine.

Keywords: [keywords]

I. INTRODUCTION

Authors of journalistic accounts of war present various aspects of war, events, and a variety of heroes. However in various depictions of armed conflict there are similar narrative components – antagonists (perpetrators), protagonists (heroes or victims), physical or emotional consequences of events. Properly constructed relations between these elements constitute the warp of a good story understood as a narrative integrated by events, the subject of which are people, their actions and struggles[1] .

The media create a sense of co-presence[2], make us – as recipients of news content – witnesses of distant events[3]. The image of war created in this way, or rather the story of war, interacts with our daily lives, which leads to the interpenetration of two spheres: the reality of the media and the sphere of the real world[4]. In a word, the key to understanding the drama of journalistic war reporting – as with any story – is transformation. Here are the characters in the story facing conflicts and choices that change them, making them winners or losers. At the same time, the change also affects us as media consumers. We will never be the same as we were before learning the harrowing story, because the emotions it evokes change us. The audience transforms from an indifferent mass into an engaged community. This change can be seen not only in affective terms (from indifference to empathy), but also in the realm of *logos*, i.e. the transformation from ignorance to knowledge.

War is a full-length media spectacle. As Ulrich Keller argues, the first media war in history was the Crimean War of 1853-1856, when modern institutions – the mass press, visual journalism, lithographic printing technology combined with the metropolitan cultural industry – created a whole new image of war. Reports of warfare, in the form of new genres

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[1] The art of storytelling, the ability to narrate and weave events into the story, and the ability to find the right structure are essential for the content we convey to be understood by others.

[2] D. Boden, H. Molotch, *The Compulsion of Proximity*, in *NowHere: Space, Time and Modernity*, ed. by R. Friedland, D. Boden, London 1994, pp. 257-286.

[3] Which also produces certain ethical consequences. The mediatization of wars and human suffering makes us entangled in certain ethical and political relationships. Today, it is already difficult to say that we were unaware of tragic events, and thanks to the media, we become co-responsible for the fate of the world; cf. A. Hoskins, B. O'Loughlin, *War and Media. The Emergence of Diffused War*, Cambridge 2010, Kindle Edition, Location: 1520.

[4] R. Silverstone, *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*. Cambridge 2007, pp. 108-111.

such as war correspondence and photojournalism – were turned into a spectacle, i.e. a dramatically structured presentation in which the arena of military action, like a theatrical stage complete with actors, parties to the conflict and fast-paced action, attracted the audience of mass communication media. Suggestive images of war, literally and figuratively, became the most important means of its perception; and in this way, from the mid-19th century to the present, the collective historical memory of violent and tragic events has been consolidated[5].

II. WAR CORRESPONDENCE AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF ARMED CONFLICTS

The coverage of warfare has a long and complex history. Narratives about war have evolved with the development of media and communication technologies, reflecting not only the changing nature of armed conflicts but shaping public perceptions of combat, which, according to Paul Virillo, is a key transformation in the realm of warfare. The first accounts of war were usually oral or written accounts by historians or participants in the conflicts. These narratives often focused on glorifying the achievements of prominent military commanders and promoting heroic narratives. The advent of newspapers and the widespread literacy of the public allowed accounts of the war to reach a wide audience. However, these accounts were subject to censorship and political control, often serving the purpose of propaganda and social mobilisation in wartime. The Crimean War (1853-1856) marked a turning point in mediatisation, as the pioneers of war correspondence – William Howard Russell and Roger

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[5] Here we can recall the concept of *memory* generations (*memory booms*), according to which the transformation of media reality creates a new media environment, which in turn influences the formation of a new historical memory environment. In other words: what, how and why individuals, groups and whole collectivities, etc. remember (or forget) is shaped not only by political, social or cultural, but also by communicative changes. This is because transformations in communication technology affect both the sphere of collective memory and individual memories, affect creators and historical archives, as well as the consciousness of those who deny certain historical narratives. An important concept in this process is the generation of memory precisely, that is, a series of changing public (including academic) discourses and mass transformations of social time horizons and components of the past. A crucial factor in successive generations of memory and the popularization of specific narratives about the past is the commemoration of traumas and triumphs associated with armed conflicts. Jay Winter points to two generations. The first – from the 1890s to the 1920s, when memory was central to the formation of national identities, which centered around the commemoration of World War I victims. In contrast, the memory of World War II and the Holocaust (from the 1960s and 1970s) marks the second *boom*. We are currently dealing with the third generation of memory.

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Fenton of The Times, provided detailed and often critical accounts, revealing the harsh reality and mismanagement of the conflict. Their coverage had a huge impact on public opinion[6]. The American Civil War (1861-1865), on the other hand, revolutionised war journalism, as advances in telegraph technology made it possible to transmit news from the battlefields instantly. What is more, photojournalists such as Timothy H. O'Sullivan became the authors of iconic "death toll" images – repeatedly reproduced in subsequent wars[7]. Accounts of the Spanish Civil War and the world conflicts of the 20th century contributed to the development of war reportage, especially photographic reportage, although censorship by state authorities and the army was widespread at the time, especially during World War II. There was also a new phenomenon during the period in question, i.e. correspondents located (*embedded*)[8] in the structures of the army. This made the coverage of battles tremendous from the perspective of an ordinary soldier, and the method under discussion was developed to perfection by David Douglas Duncan during the Korean War in the 1950s. The Vietnam conflict (1955-1975) was another period of transformation of journalistic coverage. Many reporters[9] challenged official narratives and revealed the true face of the war, which sparked public opposition in the United States against interference in Asia[10]. With the advent of television and satellite communications, coverage from conflict areas took on a new dimension in the late 20th century. Live broadcasts and abundant video footage (from Saigon to Baghdad, to Mogadishu

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[6] U. Keller, *The Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War*, Taylor & Francis 2002.

[7] *A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania* is the title of one of O'Sullivan's most famous Civil War photographs.

[8] War correspondents should keep a professional (and personal) distance from the people they write about, and present the differing viewpoints of the parties to the conflict. And although representatives of so-called *advocacy journalism* disagree with this assumption, this is how the procedurally defined objectivity of a reporter's account has been understood for decades. Meanwhile, *embedded journalists* staying with soldiers during combat and facing the same dangers, establish strong bonds with them, thus losing the necessary distance, which has an enormous impact on the way they report on the difficult aspects of war. Journalists who are "close" to soldiers are reluctant to cover topics that may portray the army in a negative light. In addition to the signalled problem of self-censorship of journalists located in the structures of the army, there were later – after the terrible experience of Vietnam – increasingly limiting restrictions by military censors.

[9] For example, David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan.

[10] Not everyone agrees with this. The author of an excellent work on the role of the media in the Vietnam War, *The Uncensored War* Daniel C. Hallin subjects this view to a thorough critique.

in Somalia, to Pristina in Kosovo) brought the horrors of war directly into our homes, shaping a new public perception of it, which still has a huge impact on the political sphere today.

War reporting, as a journalistic genre faces numerous challenges and ethical dilemmas. Journalists work in dangerous and hostile environments, risking their lives to report news from the front lines. They have to deal with issues such as impartiality and objectivity, and at the same time make difficult decisions when there is conflict between their duty to inform the public and their concern for national security.

In recent years, the development of citizen journalism and social networks has further changed the way war is reported. Ordinary people can document events and share their experiences in conflict zones, providing alternative perspectives on coverage, bypassing traditional media and political gatekeepers.

The historical transformation of war coverage reflects the evolving relationship between journalism, technology, and the public's demand for accurate and timely information about conflicts. The media play a key role in shaping public opinion, exposing atrocities, and holding governments accountable for their actions in war[11].

Journalistic documentary narrative enormously shapes how the collective remembers and conceptualizes complex, long-standing armed conflicts. It is worth remembering the impressive diversity of journalistic storytelling about war: from critical attitudes (from the very beginnings of war correspondence) to objectivity in reporting, to a fascination with war and even its aestheticization. The dominant actors in the media representation of wars and armed conflicts also varied in historical development: from heroes of the military world, especially officer cadres (e.g., in the press photography of R. Fenton, M. Brady or T. O'Sullivan) and ordinary soldiers (in the photographs of R. Capa, D. D. Duncan or L. Burrows), to a focus on ordinary people in the face of war (e.g., in the works of J. Nachtwey)[12]. Nowadays, even if the discourse on journalistic war is dominated by interest in the civilian dimension of

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[11] P. Knightley, *First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, Baltimore 2004.

[12] N. Rosenblum, *Historia fotografii światowej*. Bielsko-Biała 2005; J.G. Morris, *Zdobyć zdjęcie. Moja historia fotografii prasowej*, Warszawa 2007; A.H. Hoy, *Wielka księga fotografii*, Warszawa 2006; *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Photography*, red. L. Warren, Nowy Jork–London 2005; and the documentary film *War Photographer*, directed by Ch. Frei, 2001.

suffering, after all, interest in heroes from the military world has never completely disappeared, and in recent years has experienced a real renaissance[13].

III. MEDIA TEMPLATES IN WAR COVERAGE

Reporting on war has always been dangerous and requires great resourcefulness in gathering and reporting information. Almost everyone agrees that war correspondents cannot unreflectively (let alone consciously) conform to the goals, ideologies and perspectives of either side, and should present the conflict from a broader perspective, breaking the information monopolies imposed by state authorities or the army.

Another danger is that traditional news media often fall into a kind of recursive trap, because – within media institutions – there are established rhetorical structures, language patterns, discursive and genre strategies. Commonly used are established *media templates*, i.e. fixed patterns that serve to narrate current events in terms of well-recognized/familiar (by the media and their audiences) events of the past[14]. In other words: media templates transcend the barriers of actuality, they are not reduced to a singular story, reported within the framework of media news, and this is done even though they are used precisely as tools for interpreting current events. They become a kind of proof of the existence of a current issue and they nest a single dominant sense in the consciousness of the audience, so they do not allow for a variety of interpretations. Even if the use of a particular template can be discussed, the event from which the template draws (the source of the template) is extremely rarely subject to any transformation of meaning or new interpretation.

So, the media communicate about certain events using familiar categories on similar issues. The proponents of these solutions assume that the similarity has been memorized by the audience and in some way fixed, so everyone knows and understands the reported story. Critics of this strategy, on the other hand, claim that in this way we lose sight of the

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[13] One might mention Tim Hetherington's excellent 2010 documentary *The Restrepo War*.

[14] For example, in the argumentative figure that "aggression against Ukraine will be a second Afghanistan for Russia."

peculiarities of the reported events[15], as the media replicate a system of self-referential references, and the validity of each news item depends on previous configurations, to which the next news item is added. Thus, truth in the media is increasingly the product of a closed autopoietic system[16], in which credibility replaces truth[17] .

This has profound consequences. Simplifications that lead to distortions and cognitive errors operate in the traditional mainstream media, as proven patterns simultaneously obscure important and unique aspects of specific issues, thereby removing contradictory (to the template) or alternative testimonies and facts from public cognition and interpretation.

At the same time, however, we are dealing, as already mentioned, with a fundamental technological transformation of the communications landscape, which means that the signalled limitations are increasingly being overcome, if only by innovative strategies within *grass-roots journalism*, civic[18] or alternative[19], of which innovation is probably the most overpowering feature.

IV. THE 21ST CENTURY MEDIASPHERE IN TIMES OF WAR

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[15] This problem is exacerbated by the widespread adaptation of narratives among journalists and the media to "*news* value factors" (*news value*); cf. J. Galtung, M.H. Ruge, *The Structure of Foreign News. The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in four Norwegian Newspapers*, "Journal of Peace Research", vol. 2 (1965), no. 1, pp. 64-91.

[16] N. Luhmann, *Ecological Communication*, Chicago 1989, p. XII.

[17] W. Merrin, *Baudrillard and the Media: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge 2005, p. 71.

[18] It was in Ukraine in 2004 that new citizen journalism and new network media became effective tools of protest that led to political changes. The Orange Revolution was the first such event organized primarily through the Internet. New media and grassroots journalism became one of the foundations for building a civil society whose determination amazed the world first in 2004 and then during Euromaidan in late 2013 and early 2014. See P. Płaneta, *Dziennikarstwo obywatelskie na Ukrainie wobec rosyjskiej wojny informacyjnej*, „Studia Politologica Ucraino-Polona", 2015, nr 5 s. 24-44.

[19] Alternative journalists' (or independent journalism present in the media outside the mainstream) distinctiveness is primarily related to the subject matter covered, overlooked in other media, often considered niche or radical. Unlike professional journalism, alternative journalism uses different editorial principles, does not adhere to the professional requirements of sourcing, gathering and producing information, abandoning standards of impartiality and objectivity (in favor of *advocacy journalism*). This type of journalism uses content provided by media users. Citizen journalism has flourished with the massification of the global communication network, especially social media; see T. Harcup, *Alternative Journalism. Alternative Voices*, London 2013; and P. Płaneta, *Dziennikarstwo…*, op. cit.

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Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, Reddit, and Telegram, constitute a kind of fifth power, and citizen journalism of new media makes it possible to control the functioning – including overcoming the limitations – of war correspondence in traditional corporate media. Indeed, new media on the web enable ordinary people to share real-time information in a variety of forms from conflict zones.

This has led to faster content dissemination, allowing people around the world to have immediate access to information about ongoing conflicts. Social media has created citizen journalism, in which people on the ground can report on events in real time. It has provided alternative perspectives and first-hand accounts that may not have been covered by traditional media.

The amplification of minority voices is another characteristic of social networks, which provide a platform for communicating marginalised viewpoints, including war zones. People can share their experiences, humanise the impact of conflicts and highlight humanitarian issues that may not be present in the mainstream media. Social media platforms are also an effective tool for engaging the global community, as they enable debate, activism, as well as fundraising and support for peace and human rights in the world.

At the same time, citizen journalism, without editorial oversight, especially in terms of fact-checking, which is the foundation of professional journalism – can contribute to the spread of fake news or become a means of propaganda and manipulation[20]. The vivid nature of social networks can also result in the dissemination of graphic content without adequate warnings or context, raising ethical concerns about the potential psychological impact on viewers, especially when violence or war-related images are involved.

The paradox of the new situation is that online media users – especially social media – have tremendous opportunities to break the patterns and mistakes of traditional mass media,

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[20] Propaganda should be understood as a deliberate and politically motivated persuasive action that – by means of a selected image of reality (events, phenomena, people and their characteristics) – acts on the social consciousness of addressees and appeals to their emotions in order to control (form, perpetuate or change) the attitudes of the collective, with the aim of forming desired opinions among its members or inducing intended behavior. Social media can effectively spread images, videos and narratives – both true and false – in times of war. This can lead to the viral spread of propaganda or disinformation, influencing public perception and shaping narratives around conflicts.

while at the same time, unfettered by any professional constraints, they can – sometimes unwittingly – serve a bad cause.

Social networks provide instant access to information, however, verification of its authenticity is difficult, so lies and unverified news spread easily; therefore, the global communication network is an excellent tool for disinformation and black propaganda[21]. Participants in the 21st century mediosphere must critically evaluate the sources and credibility of the information they receive.

Using social networks in war zones can expose people to surveillance and pose security risks. Governments and other actors can monitor social media platforms to gather intelligence or attack individuals based on their views or actions. Therefore, new communication technologies are weapons in modern warfare.

The phenomenon of the Internet is that it is a complex chaotic structure that develops in unusual ways. Previous experience with network solutions often proves to be unsuitable for explaining new communication situations. Emerging ventures, models of operation and regulation, as well as their functioning, are developing almost in real time, so essentially communication in the global network is a certain abstraction, consisting of actual computers and network components, architecture, and institutions. The elements of the technical design of the network are known, we can describe the mechanisms and algorithms of its operation, and yet we cannot predict the behavior of the system, especially in the long term. Thus, we are dealing with a system that behaves in an erratic manner, and the behaviour of both the whole system and its parts can be explained within the framework of deterministic chaos theory, which describes the non-linear behaviour of dynamic systems[22].

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[21] This is when the source of the message is not disclosed or is falsely stated.

[22] Undoubtedly, in the 20th century, the revolutionary agents of change in the world of science were Einstein's theory of relativity (which changed the concept of time and space), quantum physics (which changed the views of matter and energy), but also chaos theory, which revolutionized the concept of predictability and the universal validity of natural laws in Newtonian terms. Reductionist methods of explanation, which involve decomposing a system into its component parts and then examining the parts so separated, which is supposed to make it possible to explain the functioning of the system as the sum of the components examined, cannot be useful in describing dynamic, variable, unstable and unpredictable systems. Chaos theory takes a different research perspective, and its foundation is a holistic sensibility, according to which the system should be studied. Therefore, chaos theory is useful in explaining the mechanism of modern communication networks. While linear statistical models have

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The Internet is not a collection of separately functioning communication channels, nor is it merely a synthesis of digital and traditional media, a community of its users, or a collection of specific resources. The Internet is first and foremost a system in which conditions of chaos can exist. The irregular periodicity of the Internet is a result of the variable and varied periodicity of online communication. The sensitivity to initial conditions is determined by a huge number of components, which increases with the number of users, messages, and available communication channels. The unpredictability of its behaviour is due to its irregular periodicity, its sensitivity to input conditions, and, above all, to the fact that, as a transmission system for any information that can take digital form, the Internet is particularly susceptible to noise and interference and the phenomenon of emergence.

The phenomenon of spontaneous emergence, as another example of the spontaneous and chaotic nature of the 21st century mediosphere, is that a single message – footage, a photograph, a witness's account – can emerge from the content available online, from a vast pool of data, fundamentally changing the previously established or hegemonic (i.e. imposed by traditional institutions of power) narrative (e.g., about a particular war). This is not to say that power, especially totalitarian power, which is what we face in Russia, does not have the capacity to use new media for its own political purposes.

Modern media create an amorphous symbolic space and, in ways previously unknown, enhance human experience and expand the scope of knowing and experiencing the world, as manifested in the media overproduction of competing aesthetic systems, discourses, narratives, and social images of the world. The 21st century mediasphere is a complex and sophisticated system of diverse media at all scales, from sublocal to global, which includes newspapers, magazines, nonperiodical print publications, electronic broadcast media,

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been successfully used in empirical analyses in the social sciences for many years, there is no obvious reason, intuitive or otherwise, for believing that human actions are more linear than phenomena observed at least in the natural world. Communication among people through an information network depends on the complex interactions of the components of the system, but at the same time it is more than the sum of the action of its parts, the network system is a non-linear system (in which the principle of superposition does not apply, it cannot be described by a linear equation), in which the phenomenon of chaos can be observed in certain situations; cf. C. Brown, *Chaos and Catastrophe Theories*, Thousand Oaks 1995 ("Quantitative Application in the Social Sciences"); P. Płaneta, *Chaos w globalnej sieci perswazji*, „Zeszyty Prasoznawcze", 2002, no. 3-4.

and new online media, including personal social media. This constant sociodynamic circulation of informational, persuasive, and entertainment content creates a network of diverse cultural codes, and consequently a space of competing social knowledge systems, leading to expressive culture wars.

V.   RUSSIA'S HYBRID WAR AGAINST UKRAINE AND THE WEST

Russia's growing problems, both internationally and domestically, have led to an intensification of information warfare, long before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which should be seen as a continuation of Soviet political technologies that have been used effectively for many years. Traditional psychological warfare operating with simplistic mental constructs is clearly referred to in contemporary Russian information geopolitics. It is a peculiar imperative of modernity that Moscow's political persuasive activity today considers the latest media and network tools, and these innovations mainly concern the organisation of action in the environment of new technologies. The main tool of information warfare remains propaganda, understood as centrally administered, systematic, and planned influence on the psyche of the mass of people in the direction of stimulating them to act or not to act.

The main components of the information warfare are, on the one hand, blocking hostile (including external) influences, and, on the other, exerting pressure on the targeted addressees. In the Russian reality of state control over television, radio, and the press, internal propaganda activities do not face significant barriers. The news disseminated in the mass media is moderated by political technology specialists who decide what information is useful for achieving certain goals and what should be blocked as harmful. The mass communication system within the Federation is subject to effective selection mechanisms and effective imposition of narratives on international affairs.

At the same time, there is a new Russian theory of warfare, which involves behind-the-scenes influence on the enemy's society. This is a vision of total war, and nonmilitary actions are not just a form of support, but the primary method of achieving victory – they are de facto warfare. Thanks to the Internet and social media, it is now possible to do things that the former Soviet specialists in psychological warfare could only dream of – changing the internal policies of other countries using information and disinformation alone. Chaos is the strategy used by

the Kremlin and its idea is to achieve a state of permanent unrest and internal conflict, a kind of dilution in the opponent's society.

Contrary to popular belief, Russian aggression is not limited to actions against Ukraine. It is a war against the West. Before the Kremlin's image troubles began, the Russian narrative had been quite successful abroad for many years. Russia initially benefited from a media network influencing international opinion, which it expanded after the success of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine[23]. The Kremlin's media offensive continued over the following years[24]. In 2013, for example, the RIA-Novosti news agency, which had been operating since 1941, was renamed Rossiya Segodnya and linked to the Sputnik portal[25]. In addition, the Kremlin in its *soft power* strategy – aimed at the Western audience – used proven means of political propaganda technology, but in a new form, i.e., an army of network activists (e.g., bloggers or Facebook likers), digital agitation posters and Internet memes.

For many years – although it may seem astonishing to the Polish reader – Russian propaganda was effective abroad and, even more surprisingly, reached a wide variety of seemingly completely different communities.

As it is well known, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the global left looked to the East with genuine faith in the realisation of the Soviet ideal. Now, in the third decade of the twentieth century, the economic recession of the West, experiencing a deep crisis of values on top of that, has opened new prospects for Russia, and Putin is targeting a wide variety of audiences with his message. Still susceptible to the Russian narrative are some leftist circles, especially those that frame reality in an antifascist interpretation of events. This is why Russia

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[23] For example, Russia Today, which began broadcasting in 2005 (renamed RT in 2009), quite quickly became one of the most popular TV channels in the world. The source of this popularity was a supposedly "independent" view of world affairs, an "alternative" message to the mainstream Western media. In the first decade of the 21st century, RT was watched by up to 2.5 million people in the UK alone, and in 2011 it was the second (after BBC World News) most popular foreign TV station in the US, the most-watched foreign broadcaster in the five most urbanized US areas.

J. Kocik, *Medialna ofensywa Rosji. Tak działa propagandowa machina Kremla*,

http://www.tvp.info/17816632/medialna-ofensywa-rosji-tak-dziala-propagandowa-machina-kremla [2015.04.15].

[25] The target audience was outside the Russian Federation, which is why in 2015 alone the channel received a subsidy of more than 260 million euros from the Russian government and, according to some estimates, reached 600 million people worldwide.

refs to the fight against fascism extremely effectively – and falsely in the case of Ukraine. Putin is also a saviour and a revelation to some of the right-wing nationalists fighting the European Union. The Kremlin's ties to some political organisations, such as Jobbik in Hungary and the National Front in France, provide evidence that there is more to this symbolic interaction – a discursive or narrative community[26].

Through cynicism and persuasive effectiveness, Russia was able to reach out to the European left and right. This was possible by appealing to axiological generalities and using a rich repertoire of contradictory messages, which made it possible to build exotic alliances of originally ideologically contradictory groups, such as online discussion groups and social networks. Such discreetly sympathetic for Russia (or even overtly supportive) circles appeared before 2022. The Kremlin's message was in the past (and still is) also addressed to broad sections of society, especially to those German intellectuals who invariably hold dear the idea of the special bond between Germans and Russians, the similarity of the two nations' mystical spirit. In addition, Moscow skilfully played up the anti-American resentments of the former imperial states. Diplomacy between former European powers, a new concert of powers over the heads of Ukrainians or Poles, constituted a kind of confirmation of France's and Germany's own superpower image.

The Russian cause has also been fostered by circles for whom economic interests with Russia are (still, though this is now hidden) a priority. *Business as usual* – despite the numerous bloody wars, aggressive actions of the Kremlin from Chechnya to Georgia to Ukraine – a peculiar imperative guided by Russia's trading partners, which leads to the breakdown of political unity of EU member states on the Eastern issue[27].

Russia's current war against Ukraine has several distinctive features that separate it from other conflicts. It is a **hybrid war**, combining conventional military tactics with unconventional methods such as cyberwarfare, propaganda, and the use of irregular forces. This approach, used by Russia, blurs the lines between civilian and military targets and makes effective

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[26] J. Rogoża, *Kreml „zagospodarowuje" europejską skrajną prawicę*, http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2015-03-25/kreml-zagospodarowuje-europejska-skrajna-prawice [2015.04.15].

[27] P. Płaneta, *Dziennikarstwo…*, op. cit.

defence difficult. The target of Russian hybrid warfare has also been the Ukrainian economy for many years[28].

The war in Ukraine is a long-lasting **conflict** without a clear solution[29]. It has degenerated into a stalemate, characterised by sporadic ceasefires and sporadic fighting, particularly in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, before turning into a full-scale war in 2022. Previously, it was seen as a **proxy conflict in** which Russia – prior to the 2022 aggression – supported separatist groups in eastern Ukraine, while Ukraine received support from western countries. This has led to a complicated geopolitical situation and increased tensions between Russia and the West. Russian propaganda accuses the United States of waging a proxy war against Moscow, using Ukrainians as "cannon meat." This narrative may seem convincing to a part of the global public opinion, but a thorough verification of the facts reveals the truth – in fact, Ukraine is fighting for freedom from Russian imperialism, fighting for the right to exist, to preserve not only its own state, but also its language, culture, national distinctiveness[30].

The watershed event in the conflict was Russia's **annexation of Crimea** in 2014. The move was widely condemned internationally and led to the conflict turning into a full-scale war eight years later.

Russia's aggression in February 2022 led to a major **humanitarian crisis**, displacing millions of people in Ukraine alone (internal refugees), but also forcing many to seek refuge in other countries. There have been media reports of attacks on **illegal targets**, including indiscriminate shelling and sniper attacks targeting civilians. These actions result in civilian casualties and are considered a violation of the basic principle of *ius in bello* (law in war), which requires parties to a conflict to distinguish between civilians and combatants. Russia uses **prohibited weapons**, such as cluster munitions and landmines. The latter are decimating the

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[28] Ukraine's economy is another victim of Russia's 'hybrid war', AP, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-entertainment-business-economy-kyiv-6c93f4964cd9d26438dfd4e9c38fe76c [2023.07.03].

[29] For example, efforts to resolve the conflict with Ukraine were made through diplomatic negotiations, resulting in the Minsk agreements in 2014 and 2015. However, implementation of these agreements was challenging, and despite repeated ceasefires, the conflict continued until it escalated into a full-scale war in 2022. For more on this topic, see *Conflict Barometer 2022*, Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, https://hiik.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CoBa_2022_00_01.pdf [accessed 2023.07.03].

[30] M. Fornusek, *America's proxy war? No, Ukraine's liberation war*, Euromaidan Press. News and Views Form Ukraine, https://euromaidanpress.com/2023/04/14/us-ukraine-proxy-war/ [2023.07.03].

civilian population and will continue to pose a huge threat even after the conflict ends. On Ukrainian territory, there are massive **attacks on civilian infrastructure,** on residential areas, hospitals, schools, critical infrastructure and public utilities, such as water supply and power plants. There have also been **reports of torture**, in violation of the international prohibition of any form of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Russian occupation forces use **forced displacement of thousands of people**, often accompanied by violence and intimidation, in violation of the rights of internally displaced persons and refugees. Numerous testimonies of **sexual violence, including rape** and other forms of sexual abuse, committed by Russians have been documented[31].

We are thus witnessing serious violations of international law, including numerous **war crimes** committed by Russian forces, as well as, unseen in Europe since the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, **acts of genocide** in the towns of Bucza, Borodzianka, Hostomel, Irpin and others. All this has led to enormous tension on the international stage, between Russia and the allies that support it, openly or covertly (such as Iran, China and some African or South American countries) and the West, which has managed to build a global coalition for diplomatic and economic sanctions against Moscow.

Currently, the war on Ukrainian territory is attracting the **attention of the global media and international public opinion**. We are facing a global **information war** in which Russia is using media manipulation and disinformation campaigns to shape public opinion and promote its own narrative. Russia's global propaganda offensive is being countered, with varying degrees of success, by the traditional media of the world's democratic states.

Perhaps the most salient feature of the conflict on Ukrainian territory – especially from the perspective of media and media studies – is that this is the first **information battle in** history, in which – as RAND analysts predicted as early as the 1990s – Mars, the brute force-

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[31] The listed acts constitute serious violations of international law and are war crimes or crimes against humanity. These allegations require thorough investigation and should be dealt with through appropriate legal mechanisms. International bodies, such as the International Criminal Court, have launched investigations into the situation in Ukraine and have decided to hold accountable those guilty of war crimes, including the President of the Russian Federation. It should be noted that the above examples are not an exhaustive list, and the full scope of war crimes committed during the conflict is still being assessed. Documenting and prosecuting them are essential steps toward achieving justice, accountability and promoting peace in the region.

using god of war, must yield to Athena, the armed goddess of wisdom[32]. Applying these words to the conflict at hand, it can be concluded that the Russian pattern of military operations (dating back to the era of massed field armies) is losing out to the effective model of Ukrainian military operations, following the C4I rule, i.e., efficient command (*command*) and effective control (*control)*, which – thanks to effective communication *(communication)* with the use of computers (*computers)* – use information *(information)* in the broadest sense as a key element of victory.

The above rule applies primarily to cyber warfare (*cyberwar*), i.e., military actions through information networks and communication devices, but some elements of it are also found in the sphere of network warfare (*netwar*), involving clash of words and symbols, propaganda activities, and narrative competition in the 21st century mediosphere, a strategic component of which is distributed (*diffused*) media, including new social media.

VI. Social media in Ukraine's online war

Social networks, such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and Facebook, play a huge role during the war in Ukraine as a platform for sharing information, real-time updates, and creating public discourse. They are a valuable **resource** as journalists, activists and people on the ground use social media to share information, first-hand accounts, photos, and videos, providing real-time coverage of events and developments.

YouTube, for example, as a platform for the dissemination of audiovisual content, allows media institutions and independent journalists to disseminate numerous and varied videos, from informative reportage to analysis and commentary. YouTube is a particularly effective channel for the distribution of first-hand news coverage in areas of armed action. The platform is now a global **repository of war footage**, especially **direct**, **raw** (i.e., unedited in any way) **videos of combat** – accounts of skirmishes and major military operations, bringing viewers closer, in a way never seen before, to the conflict. This is a new type of coverage in which soldiers as direct participants in the operations convey a hyperrealistic picture of the war.

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[32] J. Arquilla, D. Ronfeldt, *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*, Santa Monica 1997.

Of course, cameras of this type do not serve this purpose exclusively. According to the C4I rule described earlier, devices – often mounted on helmets – are usually an essential component of a personal command and observation system that extends the situational awareness of the individual soldier on the modern battlefield, making it possible, for example, to independently direct precision-guided cruise munitions (among other drones). And it is for this reason that the war on Ukrainian territory can be remembered as the first in history to be seen from the first-person perspective, from the point of view of a soldier's personal camera (the "GoPro camera war") and as the "drone war"[33].

Instagram – like YouTube – is being used as a **platform for visual documentation of the war** in Ukraine, as its users, including journalists, activists, and people on the ground, share photos and videos showing the impact of the conflict, featuring scenes of destruction, protests, and daily life in the affected areas.

Also, **TikTok**, a popular platform for sharing short-form videos, has a large share of coverage of the Ukrainian conflict, **although its share is rather smaller than other platforms**. However, TikTok has made history in this war in a peculiar way. Indeed, the ironic term "Kadyrov's Tiktok army" has emerged in the global discourse, referring primarily to the controversial phenomenon associated with Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and the use of TikTok to promote the leader and his policies (successful sponsorship prompted a group of young Chechen influencers and celebrities to create videos on TikTok to demonstrate their loyalty and support for Kadyrov). The term "TikTok army" also functions to refer to Chechen

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[33] It is worth mentioning a new phenomenon, *drone journalism*, which refers to the use of drones equipped with cameras in journalistic and reporting work to get a unique perspective of events. This is a new dimension of coverage and credibility in journalism. "Sky cameras" are particularly applicable during coverage of warfare, riots, protests, natural disasters, catastrophes and sporting events. They are also used in the process of gathering information for the media, real-time reporting or during the shooting of documentaries. Both professional journalists and representatives of citizen or participatory journalism use the technology. Materials obtained from drone coverage influence the editorial process in television and digital media, favoring the minimization of editorial interference. They play an increasingly significant role in social media communications. The use of flying, unmanned vehicles in journalistic work raises many legal and ethical controversies. These include issues of security, privacy and protection of state security information. The ability of journalists to use drone technology in the process of gathering, processing and reporting information is also controversial; see *Responsible Drone Journalism*, ed. A. Gynnild, T. Uskali, London 2018; M. Tremayne, A. Clark, *New Perspective from the Sky. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles*, "Digital Journalism", 2014, no. 2.

troops on Ukrainian territory who boast – via social media – of non-existent combat successes. It is worth mentioning that most of these "heroic feats" are successfully exposed by both Internet users and citizen investigative journalists from the Bellingcat projects, Central Intelligence Team or Ukrainian Slidstvo.info[34].

Social networks strengthen **citizen journalism**. Ordinary people, bypassing traditional media channels, can share news and opinions directly with a global audience. Social media users, in Ukraine or anywhere in the world, use social media to report on the conflict, share personal stories, and document events as they unfold[35].

The new media function as a platform for **activism and engaged journalism** (*advocacy journalism*). Ordinary people, groups, organisations, and institutions use the new communication channels to spread awareness of the conflict, share human rights concerns, but also to call for action and campaign in support of the various parties to the conflict.

Social media – especially Twitter and Facebook – are used by diplomats, government officials, and international organisations to convey official positions, express concerns, and engage **in public diplomacy** related to the war in Ukraine.

As with any global event, they also witness the spread of **disinformation and propaganda**. Various actors, including international ones, use social networks to spread misleading information, shape the narrative, and influence public opinion regarding the conflict in question. The case of the Telegram service is particularly interesting here.

Telegram is a popular instant messaging service that has become an important coordination tool for various parties involved in the war, including Ukrainian government forces, separatist groups, and activists. Its message encryption feature ensures secure communication, making it popular among individuals and organisations operating in conflict zones. Telegram's information dissemination and exchange channels are used to share news, analysis, and first-hand reports. They provide an alternative source of information, often

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[34] R. Wąsik, *Ukraińcy szydzą z wojsk Kadyrowa: Armia tiktokowa walcząca z pustymi budynkami*, https://www.tysol.pl/a82485-ukraincy-szydza-z-wojsk-kadyrowa-armia-tiktokowa-walczaca-z-pustymi-budynkami [2023.07.03].

[35] Hashtags play a key role in organizing and categorizing discussions related to the war in Ukraine. The hashtags: "#Ukraine," "#Donbas" or "#Crimea" are used to follow and contribute to specific topics; they make it easier for users to find and engage with relevant content.

bypassing traditional mainstream media channels, allowing news to be spread immediately. At the same time, Telegram is used as a platform for spreading propaganda and disinformation. Both Ukrainian and Russian actors have created channels and groups to promote their narratives, shaping public opinion, and influencing perceptions of the conflict.

The use of Telegram in the war in Ukraine has raised cyber-security concerns, and that is because the end-to-end encryption of communications that provides privacy to users can also be used by the enemy to coordinate attacks, spread false information or engage in cyberwarfare. Telegram has therefore faced pressure from governments, including Russia, to control, censor, or block certain channels and groups related to the conflict. This has led to a tug-of-war between political power and users seeking to maintain open communication and access to information.

Telegram's impact, like other social media, on the war depends on the actions and intentions of its users, not on the technology per se. It is important for users to critically evaluate the information they receive, verify sources, and be aware of the potential risks of engaging in discussions or sharing confidential information.

A good summary, I think, of the issue of the functioning of new media (personal, social, etc.) as tools used during Ukraine's "war on the net" could be an analysis of the content available on the **Reddit** platform.

Reddit is a popular social media platform which – crucially – is managed by the users themselves and collects content from a variety of media, both traditional and new social media, messages from private and public sources, information and opinions (but also entertainment messages). This content – available in various forms (text, images, audio and video) – is evaluated by community members[36]. Reddit plays an important role in the discussion and exchange of information on the war in Ukraine as an open platform, allowing users to create communities (subreddits) based on specific topics of interest.

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[36] Daily, Reddit's pages receive an average of 52 million active users, which is obviously not an impressive number compared to Facebook or Twitter.
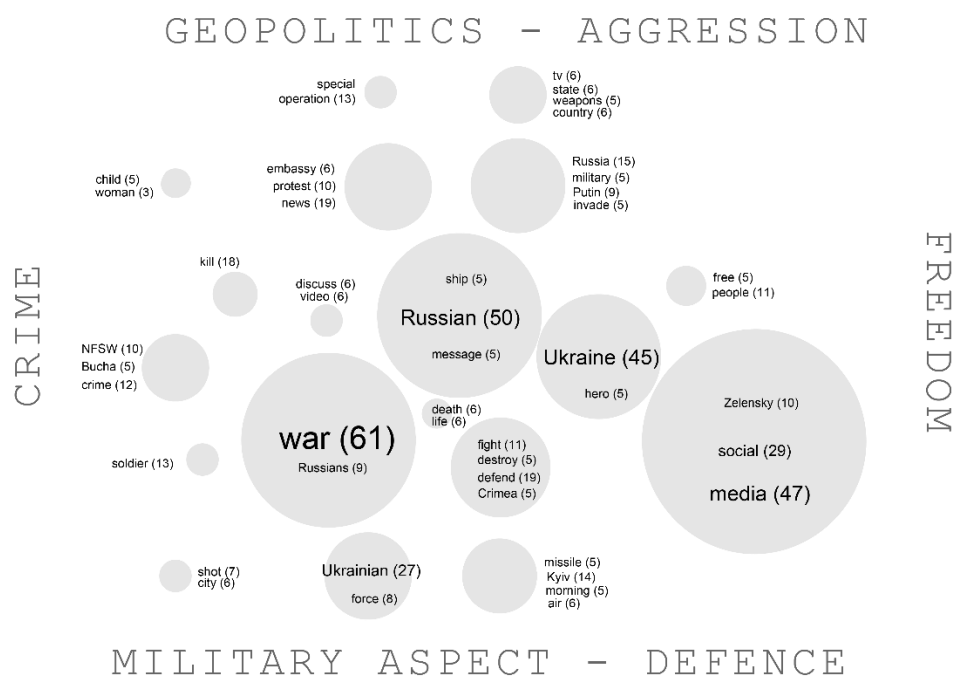
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There are several subreddits dedicated to discussions, news updates, and analysis related to the conflict in Ukraine[37]. The guiding principle of the site is that any of its users can submit a link, which is rated in the form of a vote by other members of the Reddit community. Adding and subtracting points (votes), combined with the criterion of the time of appearance of a given link on the platform, serves to build popularity and, consequently, a democratically constructed hierarchy of importance[38]. Content analysis of the 150 most popular threads published in the r/ukraine subreddit served to reconstruct the main thematic threads of the discourse on the war in Ukraine. To reconstruct the overall picture of the discourse studied, the collected research material was subjected to the statistical multivariate inference[39].

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[37] For example: r/UkrainianConflict is a subreddit serving as a hub for news, analysis and discussion related to the conflict in Ukraine, where users share articles, videos and personal viewpoints, fostering dialogue and raising awareness about the ongoing war; r/Ukraine focuses on broader discussions about Ukraine, covering not only the war, but also other aspects of Ukrainian culture, politics and history; r/ConflictNews, while not exclusively about the war in Ukraine, covers conflicts and crises around the world; r/worldnews covers global news events, including the war in Ukraine.

[38] Links are submitted to separate categories (subreddits), and each can be commented on. Importantly, comments are also subject to a voting system, and those that meet with an extremely negative review from the community are automatically hidden.

[39] For more on this topic, see P. Płaneta, *Komputerowa analiza tekstu w dyskursach medialnych*, w: A. Szymańska, M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, A. Hess (red.) *Metody badań medioznawczych i ich zastosowanie*, Kraków 2018, s. 67-90.

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FIG. 1. MAP OF THE DISCOURSE ABOUT THE WAR IN UKRAINE IN THE MESSAGES OF THE REDDIT PLATFORM

GEOPOLITICS - AGGRESSION

special operation (13)

tv (6)
state (6)
weapons (5)
country (6)

child (5)
woman (3)

embassy (6)
protest (10)
news (19)

Russia (15)
military (5)
Putin (9)
invade (5)

CRIME

kill (18)

discuss (6)
video (6)

ship (5)

free (5)
people (11)

FREEDOM

NFSW (10)
Bucha (5)
crime (12)

Russian (50)

message (5)

Ukraine (45)

hero (5)

Zelensky (10)

social (29)

war (61)

Russians (9)

death (6)
life (6)

fight (11)
destroy (5)
defend (19)
Crimea (5)

media (47)

soldier (13)

shot (7)
city (6)

Ukrainian (27)

force (8)

missile (5)
Kyiv (14)
morning (5)
air (6)

MILITARY ASPECT - DEFENCE

Source: compiled, own, based on key lexemes in the headlines of 148 materials with the highest reach published on https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/ from February 2022 to July 2023.

The analysis identified seven of the most prominent streams. The largest area – with a total coverage of 71% – is the material devoted to **deaths because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine**[40], e.g.:

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[40] The area represented by such lexemes as 'war' (61); 'Russian' (50), 'Ukraine' (45), 'kill' (8) and 'invade', 'invaders', 'invaded' (5).

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- Russian invaders killed civilian family and dogs, and they will pay for these crimes. Also: The Russians killed and tortured civilians and destroyed the town of Kamyanka in the Kharkiv region. They also branded dogs with the letters „V" and „Z";[41]
- In Memoriam: Yulia Zdanovskaya, a 21-year-old mathematician, was killed on 8 March 2022 during a Russian attack on Kharkiv. In 2017, Yulia represented Ukraine at the European Girls' Mathematical Olympiad and won a silver medal[42].

Another – by the criterion of coverage (36%) – distinguished area of discourse about the war is formed by messages from **official sources or mainstream media** (but also **social media**, especially Twitter), dedicated to the **political activity of President Zelenski**[43], e.g.:

- President Zelensky is on the cover of Time Magazine! (Media);[44]
- President Zelensky and government officials recreate iconic outdoor video from late February 2022 to mark 100 days of war (Social Media);[45]
- How President Zelensky's speech in Poland began. Someone in the crowd shouts: „Glory to Ukraine", and everyone responds: „Glory to the heroes." This happened three times. Then, Pres. Zelensky says: „We can stay like this until morning." (Social Media). [46]

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[41] https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/y9ytqi/russians_killed_and_tortured_civilians_and/ [2023.07.03].

[42] https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/tdp82w/in_memoriam_yulia_zdanovskaya_a_21yearold / [2023.07.03].

[43] It includes lexical units such as 'social' (29), 'media' (47), 'president' (12), 'Zelensky' (10) and 'message'.

[44]https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/udsa1c/president_zelensky_is_on_the_cover_of_time/ [2023.07.03].

[45]https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/v3vduo/president_zelensky_and_government_officials / [2023.07.03].

[46] https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/12eng5a/how_president_zelenskys_speech_in_poland_began/ [2023.07.03].

The third area (with a total coverage of 24%) is made up of **battlefield accounts**, **not infrequently from the perspective of ordinary Ukrainian soldiers as witnesses to the war**[47], e.g.:

- The Ukrainian soldier talks about the irony of life during times of war (WAR);[48]

- A Ukrainian soldier survived several bullets. The armour is Turkish (WAR);[49]

- 23-year-old Nazar Nebozhenskii saved 20 fellow soldiers by drawing fire from 3 Russian BTRs to himself and destroying 2 of them, being mortally wounded in the process. Remember his name. (Social Media);[50]

- Ukrainian soldier who made TikTok's to show his daughter that he was fine, disappeared for 2 days and speculated that he was dead, and for everyone's happiness he posted again and is still fighting. (Russian-Ukrainian War).[51]

Messages about the **drama of the civilian population in the face of the tragedy of the war (euphemistically called a "special operation" by the aggressor)**[52] are the fourth area of the analysed discourse (total coverage – 19%), in which **echoes of Russian propaganda and disinformation resound** , e.g., The **Russian propaganda and disinformation.**

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[47] 'Ukrainian' (27), 'soldier', 'soldiers' (13), '(un)confirm' (8), 'life' (6).

[48] https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/tjyzsq/ukrainian_soldier_talks_about_the_irony_of_life/ [2023.07.03].

[49] https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/u8x70d/a_ukrainian_soldier_survived_several_bullets_the/ [2023.07.03].

[50] https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/twx369/23yearold_nazar_nebozhenskyi_who_saved_20_fellow/ [2023.07.03].

[51]

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/t6sa5g/ukrainian_soldier_who_made_tiktoks_to_show_his/ [2023.07.03].

[52] E.g., 'people' (11), 'country' (6), 'operate', 'operation', 'operator' (8), 'special' (5), 'state' (6), 'tv' (6), 'weapons' (5).

- The new morning routine for so many people: 1. Wake up, 2. Check on Zelensky, 3. Coffee (Social Media);[53]

- 20-year-old Dmytro Zhukov of Kharkiv did not leave the city. In the basement, even under shelling, he bakes 300 rolls a day and prepares 200 hot lunches for the military, people with disabilities and lonely retirees. The volunteers then deliver food to those who need it;[54]

- „The Germans did not mock people like that." CNN correspondents accompany Ukrainian military personnel in the Mykolaiv region. Forced evacuated old men say that today's actions of ruZZians are worse than fascism (Media);[55]

- Russian state TV: host Vladimir Solovyov threatens Europe and all NATO countries, asking whether they will have enough weapons and people to defend themselves once Russia's „special operation" in Ukraine comes to an end. Solovyov adds, „There will be no mercy." (Media)[56]

Defence of Kiev, **but also the effects (destruction) of air strikes and missile attacks against Ukrainian cities,**[57] is the next stream of discourse (coverage – 18%). Here you can also find material **about Ukrainian missile attacks** – e.g., on military bases in Crimea – in response to Russian aggression, e.g., The Defence of Kiev.

53

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/tcr9oa/the_new_morning_routine_for_so_many_people/ [2023.07.03].

54

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/un7v7s/20yrs_old_dmytro_zhukov_from_kharkiv_did_ not/ [2023.07.03].

55

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/tko9ia/the_germans_did_not_mocked_people_like_that _cnn/ [2023.07.03].

56

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/uatoqa/russian_state_tv_host_vladimir_solovyov_threat ens/ [2023.07.03].

[57] It is formed by lexemes such as 'defend', 'defenders', 'defending', 'defense', 'defender', 'defenses' (18) | Kyiv (14) | 'air' (6) | 'missile', 'missiles' (5), 'destroyed', 'destroying', 'destroy' (5).

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- The night of 8 March in capital Kyiv was the first night since the war began when the Ukrainian air defence intercepted and destroyed all Russian cruise missiles. No impacts were registered in Kyiv that night. (Social Media);[58]

- Officials in Ukraine are doing their best to spread the expected word about the imminent air raid in Kyiv. Take shelter NOW! SHELTER NOW IN KYIV! UPVOTE THIS SO PEOPLE SEE IT! UPVOTE ALL WARNINGS ABOUT AIR RAID ON KYIV! PEOPLE NEED TO GO TO SHELTER;[59]

- Russian tourist cries as she flees Crimea after yesterday's Ukrainian missile strike on a Russian airbase in Sevastopol. „I don't want to leave Crimea. It is so cool here and it is like being at home. *sobs*" Time for Russians to realize they started a war (Social Media).[60]

The most shocking accounts – not infrequently labelled-warning "NSFW"[61] – form the sixth focus of the analysed discourse. These are **graphic materials** (photos or videos), uncensored **images of death and suffering (both population**, **civilians and soldiers)**, providing **shocking evidence of crimes** in Ukraine, often including **acts with the hallmarks of genocide,** symbolised by the crime in Bucza (range – 15%)[62], e.g.:

- This image of Zelensky's face while visiting Bucha today says it all (WAR CRIME);[63]

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[58]

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/t99yul/the_night_of_march_8_in_capital_kyiv_was_the/ [2023.07.03].

[59] https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/t27rxp/officials_in_ukraine_are_doing_their_best_to/ [2023.07.03].

[60]

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/wktcbt/russian_tourist_cries_as_she_flees_crimea_after/ - Original source: Twitter; [2023.07.03].

[61] NSFW (English) *Not safe for work* – an acronym or phrase in English-language Internet slang used to designate content (e.g., text, video, a site to which an uploaded link leads) as "unsuitable for viewing in the workplace." Content referred to as NSFW may contain violence, pornography, vulgarity, nudity or pejorative terms. For example, the administrators of the Reddit platform publish the following warning: *Take care of your mental health and don't watch NSFL/NSFW videos and images out of curiosity*.

[62] E.g., 'crime(s)' (12), 'NSFW' (10), 'shot' (7), 'city' (6), 'Bucha' (5).

[63]

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/tw3mvi/this_image_of_zelenskys_face_while_visiting_bucha/ [2023.07.03].

- The whole world should see the war crimes committed by the Russian army in Olenivka near Mariupol. Russians shelled Ukrainian POWs from Azov regiment and Ukrainian Marines at night, murdering dozens of them in the concentration camp. Unmitigated evil;[64]

- [Severe NSFW] Mariupol 1 year ago. All Russians should see it, as all Germans should have seen such in 1945!; [65]

- [NSFL] So let's summarize this. Russians cut off Ukrainian soldier's balls, put it in his mouth, then shot him, tied to the car and dragged. Several hours after this video got leaked they bombed a POW prison (over 50 dead) to hide more torture facts;[66]

- Russian soldiers shot an old Ukrainian couple who were driving home. I've never been so ashamed of my country's actions in my life. (War Crimes | NSFW);[67]

- Reuters published photos of the bodies of those died in the occupied Hola Prystan (Kherson region) The city was flooded after the disaster at the Kakhovka Dam. (10 photo) NSFW.[68]

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[64]

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/wb949s/the_whole_world_should_see_the_war_crimes/ [2023.07.03].

[65]

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/124zl2d/severe_nsfw_mariupol_1_year_ago_all_russians/ [2023.07.03].

[66]

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/wbah1i/nsfl_so_lets_summarise_this_russians_cut_off/ [2023.07.03].

[67]

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/t3pa8y/russian_soldiers_shot_an_old_ukrainian_couple_who/ [2023.07.03].

[68]

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/14dfad0/reuters_published_photos_of_the_bodies_of_those/ [2023.07.03].

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FIG. 2. BUCZA CRIME

Source: Reddit, Ukrainskaya Pravda, Ronaldo Schemidt/AFP

The last area identified during analysis of materials disseminated on the Reddit platform (reach – 15%) contains content relating **to the situation of Ukrainian children during the brutal aggression and later partial occupation of Ukraine, their death, suffering, but also their abduction and deportation deep into Russia**[69], e.g.:

- Japanese TV anchor Yumiko Matsuo breaks down when reading the news of Putin bestowing honors on the brigade that committed atrocities in Bucha. She had just shown clips of children hiding in the bunker of the Mariupol steel mill and was overcome with emotion. (News);[70]

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[69] Key lexemes for this group of messages are, for example, 'news' (19), 'children', 'child' (5), 'show' (5).
[70]
https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/u8bcah/japanese_tv_anchor_yumiko_matsuo_breaks_d own_when/ [2023.07.03].

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- Ukrainian mothers are writing their family contacts on the bodies of their children in case they are killed and the child survives. And Europe is still discussing gas, Anastasiia Lapatina, Ukrainian journalist (WAR);[71]

- Brazenly and on camera, the Russians kidnap orphans from the occupied territories of Ukraine and say that it is „for their good." The Russian terrorists commit more war crimes by kidnapping Ukrainian children and scattering them across 13 regions of Russia. Reminiscent of Hitler's Germany. (Media).[72]

FIG. 3. UKRAINIAN CHILDREN DURING THE WAR

Source: Reddit

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[71] https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/twaj6n/ukrainian_mothers_are_writing_their_family/ [2023.07.03].

[72]

https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraine/comments/xgfsm1/brazenly_and_on_camera_the_russians_kidnap/ [2023.07.03].

VII. Soldiers as witnesses of war

Accounts of the war in Ukraine and, one would think, of subsequent armed conflicts of the 21st century as well, take a variety of forms, but a hallmark of contemporary discourse on war is the growing importance of direct testimony, which has two dimensions: passive (i.e., experiencing certain events) and active (related to communicating about events). Bearing witness in this way is a complex combination of experience and discourse, and this account can legitimise or undermine certain actions or inactions in the military, diplomatic, or humanitarian spheres. What is more, the different roles of different witnesses – journalists and documentary filmmakers, humanitarian workers, soldiers, and ordinary people in the face of war – can clearly be contradictory. It is worth taking a closer look at a phenomenon that, in my opinion, is a peculiar feature of the modern battlefield: soldiers in the role of witnesses to war.

The issue of soldiers speaking publicly about military life and policy became prominent as early as the 2003 Iraq war. New technologies allow military personnel to share their combat experiences, frustrations, and hopes, which helps soldiers overcome trauma and uncertainty.

During the conflict in Ukraine, soldiers have become key witnesses who provide accounts from the battlefield. As individuals directly involved in the conflict, they provide valuable insights – from the perspective of the media and the public – into various aspects of the war. Soldiers, especially on the front lines, are **eyewitnesses to** military action. They can, for example, report on the course of specific incidents they observed, including battles, bombings, troop movements, and other military operations, and their first-hand accounts help establish a clear picture of events and often provide invaluable evidence in cases of lawbreaking. Soldiers are thus often **witnesses to war crimes and human rights violations**, such as **indiscriminate** attacks on civilians, torture, illegal detentions, or the use of prohibited weapons. Their accounts can help bring perpetrators to justice and victims to seek justice. Soldiers document events through photographs, videos or written testimony. These records help establish the sequence of events, identify those involved, or verify specific incidents. For example, during a "special operation" in Ukraine, Russian aggressors film their own actions with cell phones en masse and treat the recordings as a war trophy of sorts, which

usually, when the owners of these recordings are taken prisoner, provide crowning evidence of their numerous crimes.[73]

The military often collects **intelligence** during missions, including information on enemy positions, tactics and strategies. This intelligence is crucial for assessing the overall situation, developing military strategies, and informing decision-making processes. And because soldiers have specialised knowledge of military operations, weapons systems, and tactics, it can be used by analysts and decision-makers (and, in the long run, polemologists) to gain **expert** insight into the course of the war, assess its impact, or evaluate the effectiveness of certain military strategies.

The testimony of soldiers can shed light on the **psychological toll of war**, including posttraumatic stress syndrome and other problems associated with the trauma of armed conflict. The experiences of direct combatants can help develop programmes and policies to promote the well-being and facilitate their reintegration into society after war. Posttraumatic stress disorder and the displacement mechanism can be a barrier to accurate accounts of postwar events, especially during trials or investigative activities. In other words: the trauma of war may be the biggest obstacle to a soldier's testimony about war.

As in many modern conflicts in Ukraine, soldiers use modern technology to document and share their experiences. The most spectacular video reports have come from personal cameras (e.g., GoPro) and drones.

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[73] A 12-second video that appeared on the global web, for example, has gained huge resonance. It shows an unarmed soldier in a Ukrainian uniform. The man blows smoke from a cigarette and says: "Glory to Ukraine." At that moment, a burst from a machine gun is heard and the man falls to the ground dead. The Security Service of Ukraine has finally confirmed the identity of the man. The release stated that investigators determined that the Ukrainian soldier who was shot was a sniper of the 163rd Battalion of the 119th Independent Territorial Defense Brigade of the Chernihiv region, Oleksandr Ihorevich Maciyevsky.

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FIG. 4. UKRAINE 2022: DRONE WARS (THE 'FAMOUS' BAYRAKTAR)
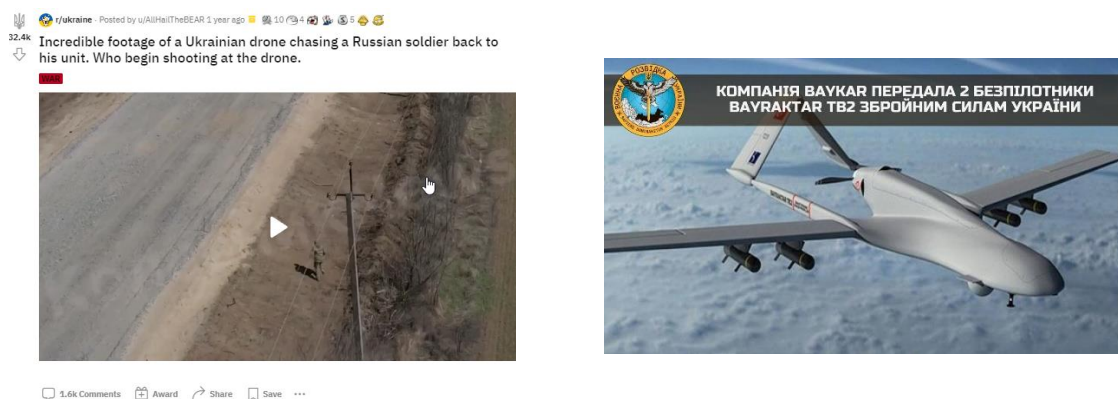
Source: Reddit

GoPro cameras are small, handy and easy to install, allowing soldiers to record footage from a **first-person perspective**. It provides a unique and immersive view of combat situations, offering a more authentic and personal description of the realities of war[74].

Personal cameras are used by soldiers to **document combat operations**, including battles, patrols, and other military activities. They are most often attached to helmets, vehicles, or other equipment, giving them the ability to record events in real time, and the footage can later be analysed, studied or used as evidence.

GoPro footage can potentially serve as **evidence in investigations of war crimes or human rights violations**. The cameras can capture instances of illegal activities, such as attacks on civilians or the use of prohibited weapons. This evidence is a valuable resource for international organisations, legal experts and human rights advocates seeking to hold perpetrators accountable.

Footage from personal cameras and drones on the battlefield is **made available to the public and the media**, providing unprecedented insight in terms of authenticity. This kind of

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[74] It is worth mentioning that GoPro cameras are widely used in the military training process. Recordings of training processes give trainers and commanders the opportunity to evaluate training results, identify areas for improvement, and refine tactics and strategies. The footage can also be used for after-action reviews, enhancing the learning process.

footage can increase awareness of the situation on the ground, and thus provide a more comprehensive understanding of the realities faced by soldiers and civilians affected by war.

As witnesses in conflicts, soldiers can face various **ethical risks**. They are exposed to risks to their **personal safety**, their accounts may provoke retaliation from opponents. These risks can discourage soldiers from revealing key information, fearing for their lives or the safety of their families.

Soldiers have a sense of **loyalty and duty** to their comrades and the military organisation. This loyalty can give rise to ethical conflicts in situations where soldiers witness, record, or report incidents that involve their colleagues or superiors. A moral dilemma then arises – a conflict between the duty to provide truth for the sake of justice and loyalty to colleagues or the chain of command. Military officers who choose to testify against their peers or superiors may face social ostracism or stigmatisation within their own unit. The culture of camaraderie and the risk of breaking loyalty exert intense pressure and force silence, making it difficult for soldiers to act as witnesses.

The testimony of soldiers as witnesses must be subject to scrutiny, as their involvement in the conflict may lead to questions about the **bias**, **reliability, or accuracy of their observations**. Their credibility can be questioned, especially when there are allegations of misconduct or violations committed by their own side. It is crucial to establish comprehensive support systems, including legal protection, counseling services and anonymous reporting mechanisms, to mitigate the ethical risks soldiers face as witnesses. These measures can help ensure their safety, psychological support, and promote a culture that values truth, justice, and accountability in times of conflict. The testimonies of soldiers – as a source of information and knowledge about the war – must be critiqued internally, to verify their authenticity, and externally, that is, compared with other sources. The context and authenticity of the recorded events must be carefully evaluated to ensure the accuracy of the accounts and to avoid disinformation or manipulation.

VIII. IN CONCLUSION: *"PREDATOR" IN THE TRENCHES*, OR THE HYPERREALISM OF THE NEW WAR COVERAGE

It is worth considering what the **peculiarities of direct testimony as one form of war reporting in the 21st century** are. We are undoubtedly dealing with a crude representation of events, both in the visual and auditory layers, with such a depiction of reality, which is clearly associated with pure documentary, understood as a message of maximum factuality, undisturbed by excessive formal interference.

This is served, among other things, by 100% (i.e., unedited) sound – the hum of engines of combat machines, the crackle of military bunkers being opened, the sounds of explosions and gunfire, the shouts of soldiers. In the numerous film recordings, experts – and perhaps increasingly ordinary viewers – recognise the sounds made by the various types of weapons and ammunition remaining on the equipment of the armed forces of the conflicting armies.

An amazing realistic effect on the part of the viewer is produced by the extensive use of the military perspective. The recipient of these accounts feels the atmosphere of a cramped vehicle filled with combat equipment or observes the world through the eyes of a participant in trench warfare. A good example is the footage taken by a soldier from the 22nd Kharkiv Mechanised Battalion of the 92nd Mechanized Infantry Brigade, a formation that was particularly active during the Kharkiv counteroffensive. Using a GoPro camera mounted on the side of his helmet, he recorded the defence of his trench against the Russian army's attack.

FIG. 5. FIGHTING IN THE TRENCHES. UKRAINE 2023

Source: Predator/Telegram

An excellent synthesis of the aforementioned recording was provided by a "Gazeta Wyborcza" journalist:

> This is what combat looks like from the perspective of a soldier. A Russian soldier misjudges the situation and is immediately wounded and then killed. Overhead, shells from cannons and rifles fly, turning the remains of trees previously ground by artillery into splinters. Chaos, adrenaline, and death. This is what it looks like on the front line. The line between life and death in such realities is very thin and there is nothing heroic or romantic about war. This is shown very well by footage from the frontline trenches, recorded by a Ukrainian[75].

Shots from military cameras, including night vision, reveal a mysterious world where nothing looks as expected. The colours and shapes of objects are deformed, and jittery images dissected by a tangle of tracer bullets, infrared tracers, laser target beams, and bullet bursts dazzle the viewer, thus experiencing – in an almost sensual way – the battlefield experience. The sense of telepresence and immersion is enhanced by shots filmed through binoculars, sniper's optical sights, giving an effect of varying depth of field. This is an electrifying "documentary effect" (maximum faithful reproduction of real battlefield conditions) and, at the same time an innovative "film effect."

For soldiers, a kind of remedy for the chaos and trauma of war is the ubiquitous humor – sometimes light, endearing, at other times, unfortunately, sneering and cynical, politically incorrect and heavily infused with sexist and racist content. Perhaps this kind of soldierly testimony may shock most[76].

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[75] M. Kucharczyk, *Skupisz się na złej części okopu i już nie żyjesz. Tak wygląda walka z perspektywy żołnierza*, https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114881,29530961,skupisz-sie-na-zlej-czesc-okopu-i-nie-zyjesz-brutalna-walka.html [2023.07.03].

[76] Maciej Pieczynski writes on this subject in the weekly „Do Rzeczy" – „*Zabić śmiechem"* (44/2022, s. 64) and *Rozrywka w okopach* (26/2023, s. 60).

Hyper-realistic, first-person battlefield footage allows us – the viewers – to break out of the trap of the ubiquitous precession of simulacra obscuring the reality we face in this age of communication ecstasy, and thus see a gritty picture of modern war.

The key question about today's young men (and increasingly women) in every army of the world, which remains invariably true of every generation sent to war, is "Is the young generation willing and able to fight?" The answer to this question in the case of the heroic defenders of Ukraine is unequivocally yes. First-person, realistic, strikingly authentic accounts by Ukrainian soldiers of their battles in defence of their homeland are irrefutable proof of this, while the Kremlin dictator's bullish announcements in February 2022 about taking Kiev in three days and all of Ukraine in a week are today an inexhaustible source of Internet memes.

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