Narrating "Their War" and "Our War" – the Patriotic Journalism Paradigm in the Context of Swedish and Ukrainian Conflict Coverage

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Abstract: "Patriotic journalism," a deviation from objectivity, has become an important paradigm and well-documented phenomenon in the analysis of conflict coverage. However, studies rarely focus on the link between journalists' perceptions and narratives. We investigated how journalists from two countries, one involved in a conflict (Ukraine) and the other observing it from a distance (Sweden) relate to the objectivity norm in sourcing and narrating seven conflictive news cases in Ukraine (2017 to 2018). We found pragmatic commitment to objectivity in both countries, which was not always reflected in the content produced. For Swedish journalists, our results hint toward a value-based ally loyalty, which seems less stable than a tribe-based bond. In Ukraine, official Ukrainian perspectives were undisputedly disseminated; however, we did not find that they were generally positively laden, as one would expect for patriotic journalists. Trust in public institutions might be a deciding factor over the extent of patriotism.

Keywords: Patriotic journalism; Ukraine; Sweden; conflict coverage; reconstructive interviews.

INTRODUCTION

"Patriotic journalism" has become an increasingly important area in the study of conflict coverage, making this type of journalism a "worldwide, cross-cultural, and well-documented phenomenon" (Ginosar, 2015, p. 289). The term was coined to describe conflict journalism that departs from the objectivity norm, i.e., journalism "in which journalists—whether consciously or not—take a side in the conflict, their side, and their professional work is affected by this" (Ginosar & Cohen, 2019, p. 8). Framing and rhetorical analyses (e.g., Ginosar & Cohen, 2019; Liebes, 1992; McGlynn, 2020; Wolfsfeld, Frosh, & Awabdy, 2008), as well as studies on journalists' professional ideals and ideas behind conflict news narratives, exist (e.g., Budivska & Orlova, 2017; Hoxha & Hanitzsch, 2018). However, work on patriotic journalism rarely focuses on the link between journalists' perceptions and narrations, i.e., their sourcing and framing practices. These practices are highly challenged in conflict reporting that operates under dangerous conditions in unpredictable, rapidly evolving situations on inaccessible grounds (e.g., Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013; Hoxha & Hanitzsch, 2018). Hoxha and Hanitzsch (2018), for instance, illustrate how in conflict news, "the selection of facts and quotes to be included and emphasized in a news account travels behind the construction of the story narrative" (p. 60). Consequently, conflict coverage cannot present an impartial picture overall (e.g., Nygren et al., 2018).

However, we "know surprisingly little about the realities journalists face on the ground and the processes of conflict news production" (Hoxha & Hanitzsch, 2018, p. 48). This paper stems from a comparative research project investigating journalistic practices in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (before it evolved into the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022). In applying an adaption of the "face-to-face reconstruction interview method" (Reich, 2016) we sought to find out:

RQ1: How do journalists in a country directly involved in this conflict (Ukrainian journalists) relate to professional ideals of objectivity in the sourcing and narrating of conflict news?

RQ2: How do journalists observing this conflict from a distance (Swedish journalists) relate to professional ideals of objectivity in the sourcing and narrating of conflict news?

Thus, the study used qualitative content analyses of Swedish and Ukrainian news covering conflictual events between Russia and Ukraine and interviews with the Ukrainian and Swedish journalists behind the news.

PATRIOTIC JOURNALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON CONFLICT NEWS PRODUCTION

Patriotic journalism manifests through coverage that is loyal, solidary, sympatric, and empathic with the "own" nation or ethnic community (Ginosar & Cohen, 2019, p. 4; Ginosar, 2015; Schudson, 2002). At least in times of immediate danger or grief, and before there was time for reflection, the perception of those affected is inward-looking, and journalists are no exception (Schudson, 2002; Zandberg & Neiger, 2005). As such, and depending on the perspective, patriotic journalism can be judged "as a deviation from 'professional (good) journalism,' while other models of journalism and other approaches toward objectivity might consider patriotism in journalistic coverage as a natural part of professional journalistic work" (Ginosar & Cohen, 2019, p. 4). Overall, then, it is not surprising that most of the research on patriotic journalism used to be "descriptive or normative, rather than analytical" (Ginosar 2015, p. 289).

Patriotic journalism is said to be most prominent when covering "our war" or "our news," while reporting on "their war" or "their news" comes with the personal and professional distance that makes detached observation and balancing most likely (Liebes, 1992; Nossek 2004). Whether it plays a role when the "journalists' side" is the aggressor or the victim in a conflict is not yet clearly settled (Ginosar & Cohen, 2019; Wolfsfeld et al., 2008). In addition to such "tribal patriotism," Ginosar (2015) also acknowledges "global patriotism," a stance that expresses loyalty toward "humanity and the human society as a whole" (p. 290). We would even go so far as to place an entity between: a value-based patriotism beyond one's own ethnicity/nationality, i.e., a bond of loyalty due to shared values and conflict lines.

While much empirical work focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (e.g., Ginosar & Cohen, 2019; Wolfsfeld et al., 2008; Zandberg & Neiger, 2005) or 9/11 (e.g., Waisbord, 2011), recent studies also applied the concept of patriotic journalism to the context of Ukraine (Budivska & Orlova, 2017; Nygren et al., 2018). We continue on this path, aiming to advance the concept by applying it to domestic and foreign news on the pre-war conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Theoretically, Ukrainian coverage would represent "our" side of the conflict, and the Swedish coverage the detached observer position, reporting on "their conflict." However, things are, as often in the empirical world, not as binary. Russian fighter jets have entered Swedish airspace multiple times; they have also acted aggressively against Swedish signals intelligence planes. Only recently, Russian warships sailed close to Gotland in the Baltic Sea (Duxbury, 2020). In the light of these "deteriorating relations with Russia" (Simons, Manoylo & Trunov, 2019, p. 335), "Sweden's centuries long policy of neutrality/non-alignment" (p. 335) has been increasingly challenged, leading Sweden to apply for NATO membership together with Finland in May 2022 as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Sweden

is thus distant, but not completely detached, making it a particularly interesting case for investigation. With this study, we delve deeper into journalists' patriotic behavior in a "their conflict" versus "our conflict" versus what we would term the "the conflict of our ally" constellation.

Based on the available literature, it is possible to theorize how patriotic journalism would materialize in coverage through sourcing practices. Journalists experience crises as professionals *and* individuals (Ginosar, 2015). As individuals, journalists may be emotionally moved, affected, and concerned. The experience of circumstances as uncertain or out-of-control can easily shape perceptions. For instance, a known phenomenon is "tunnel vision," a state of fear causing a narrowed attention at the expense of missing out on information in the periphery. Sentiments triggered may be powerful enough to override institutionalized professional behavior, which is why journalists may, in their professional roles, rally around the flag, discard viewpoints that threaten the political consensus, follow patriotic audience demands, and thereby depart from professional standards (i.e., the objectivity norm). In the case of a crisis—specifically when time is scant and perception narrowed and inward-bound—journalistic sourcing processes cannot be expected to remain unaffected and effective. Tunnel vision might affect (1) journalists' source selection and (2) engagement with the sources, as well as (3) the presentation of their narratives (see also the set of indicators for patriotic journalism in Ginosar & Cohen, 2019), which in extreme forms may find its reflection in "media panic" (Waisbord, 2011, p. 282).

For instance, Waisbord (2011, p. 280) observes how patriotism seems to inhibit critical, investigative behavior. In addition, he notices that sources suspecting or charging "foreign parties with the [anthrax attacks after 9/11] were prominently quoted," even though "reporting showed that sources did not agree on the origins of the attacks" (p. 284). Conflict and crisis situations induce uncertainty, in which experts usually still need to learn (p. 283). Since the management of such situations lies in the hands of official sources, journalists strongly depend on the information they provide (p. 283). At this stage, journalists are also less likely to have the distance to think analytically—for this, they need time to reflect (Zandberg & Neiger, 2005). These observations fit findings on journalistic sourcing in general. Studies have shown how sources dominate the formation of the news product in the discovery phase, while reporters take over the lead in the phase of further information gathering (Brüggemann, 2013; Reich, 2006).

Sourcing depends on journalists' choices and decisions and will materialize in the content they produce. Access to these decisions requires the verbalization of thoughts, while the results can be assessed through content analyses. Therefore, we applied an adaption of the "face-to-face reconstruction interview method" (Reich, 2016) to find out how Ukrainian and Swedish journalists relate to professional ideals of objectivity in the sourcing and narrating of conflict news on Ukraine.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative content analyses investigating news cases have been fruitfully used to investigate patriotic journalism (e.g., Ginosar & Cohen, 2019; Nossek, 2004; Zandberg & Neiger, 2005). As a first methodological step, our content analysis focused on seven cases of news coverage on Ukraine in 2017–2018. The following events selected evoked conflictive narratives among sources, which technically would have allowed journalists to balance: (1) The premiere of a documentary on the Ukrainian filmmaker and writer Oleg Sentsov—sentenced to 20 years for plotting acts of terrorism—and follow-up reporting on his hunger strike; (2) Arkady Babchenko, a Russian journalist, staged his murder in Ukraine together with the Ukrainian Security Service, as announced at a press conference; (3) The coup d'état in Luhansk in late 2017; (4) The Joint Investigation Team (JIT) report on the crash of Malaysian Air Flight MH17; (5) Stories on the treatment of the Jewish population and (6) the treatment of Crimean Tatars in Ukraine, featured in Swedish news; (7) The "Kerch Strait incident," in which three Ukrainian navy vessels were captured by the Coast Guard of the Border Service of the Russian Federal Security Service as they passed through the Strait of Crimea.

We analyzed the coverage of these cases in Swedish and Ukrainian media. Our sample included 34 Swedish news pieces published in the four national daily newspapers, public service radio and TV, as well as 115 Ukrainian news pieces from two online news outlets, two major TV channels, and two daily newspapers (see annex, Table 1).

The analysis was based on questions about sources and the framing of the events. Hence, we coded sources mentioned in the articles and applied Entman's (1993, p. 52) four "framing devices" (problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, treatment recommendation) to detect narratives of a situation covered. The objectivity norm is not only about balancing but also about the separation of facts and opinions. To capture this separation in relation to balancing, we distinguished two types of "moral evaluations:" (A) A *normative evaluation* to code how the issue was assessed, i.e., whether—according to the journalist's or actor's narrations—the article's main issue was rendered in a positive light, a negative light, or without any evaluation. (B) A *political evaluation* was coded thereafter to understand whether a journalist appropriated a narrative (i.e., took a side in the conflict) or tried to balance accounts.

In a second step, we conducted 18 *guided interviews*. Building on the content analyses, we explored with the journalists the decisions behind the sourcing and balancing steps for their content (reconstructive questions), general sourcing and source-checking routines, and reflections about objectivity overall (general questions). Almost all 7 interviews in Sweden and 11 in Ukraine were

conducted with the authors of the content we analyzed and happened face-to-face in Stockholm or Kyiv (see annex, Table 2). Transcripts were analyzed using a deductive category scheme covering the areas explored by our guideline.

FINDINGS

NARRATING "THEIR CONFLICT" AND THE "CONFLICT OF OUR ALLY" – SWEDISH COVERAGE

All three Swedish news pieces, on the 'imprisonment of Oleg Sentsov', conveyed his narrative: While Russia claims Sentsov was a terrorist, he was imprisoned for political reasons—therefore, the imprisonment was unjust. Sentsov was even seen as "a symbol for Ukraine's fight against the Russian occupation—not to say a martyr." Furthermore, all articles were written in an authoritative (evaluative) style. One was published in the culture debate section, a beat in which authors' views are prominent. Another article was published in the regular news beat, where the separation of facts and opinions is considered the norm. The third one—by a Moscow correspondent—remained more balanced and gave space to the other side: According to Putin's press secretary, there was an openness to negotiate with Ukraine, but it was up to Sentsov to start this process.

For the 'Arkady Babchenko' case, we focused on 31 May 2018, the day after a press conference at the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), at which it was announced that Babchenko's murder was staged. The narrative in the Swedish news was that the SBU, with the help of the Russian journalist, "orchestrated [his murder] to expose Russian agents who had planned to kill Babchenko" (a quote by Vasyl Hrytsak, SBU). Unlike the Sentsov case, the Ukrainian officials' and the Swedish journalists' perspective fell apart: Although some articles provide Babchenko with space for apologies ("I had no choice"), the Swedish journalists' criticism of his engagement and the methods applied dominate. The threat this action posed to the trust in democratic institutions and journalism is a common theme. Even if the articles were not as critical ("Even if the cause was good"), journalists agreed that the stakes were high: "Ukraine has (…) spent a part of their trust-capital (…) the Kremlin is sure to use the whole story as a validation that the Ukrainian government is not to be trusted." Since the focus remained on the critique of the actors involved, covering the other side was largely omitted. Exceptions were visible, however, usually with a similarly clear evaluative standard: The Russian government was not siding with the morally good either. The Foreign Minister was quoted in two articles with statements such as "it has become a trend to constantly accuse Russia before investigations have even begun." Similarly, an article disseminated a Facebook

comment by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson: "The best news is that Babchenko is alive. That this story was about achieving a propaganda effect is obvious." Expressen, a tabloid contextualized the reactions accordingly: "(…) the Kremlin can point to a fake news the whole world believed. (…) It will undoubtedly be easier for Moscow in the future to flatly deny and question everything coming from Kyiv." This angle was also supported by the quality press, i.e., *Dagens Nyheter* articles, one of which cited Swedish defense experts: "This is about discrediting Russia." We found that making the authors' names (sometimes their roles) as well as their pictures prominent seemed to serve as a strategy to frame the articles' authoritative styles if they were not explicitly labeled as commentary. Citing relevant sources such as Reporters Without Borders (the operation was a "pathetic trick") contextualized their opinions as a common, shared perspective.

Three articles were published on the 'coup d'état in Luhansk', written by two correspondents in Moscow and one reporter partnering with a Russian exile journalist. As seen previously, the articles were opinionated and authoritative. The reporters' article was published in the culture section, the other two as analysis and news. The articles represent the diverse sides engaged in the conflict, focusing on Luhansk actors (mainly Igor Plotnitskij, the head of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic; and Igor Kornet, the head of the so-called Ministry of Internal Affairs of Luhansk People's Republic). The articles' main theme was a critical discussion of the situation in the breakaway republic of Luhansk (also in connection with the separation of Donetsk) along with a critical reflection of the actors' roles. The articles outlined that this case was not only a conflict between the governments of Ukraine and Russia but also a "fight between Plotnitsky and Kornet" (which "dates back to 2014 and was about land and property"). Along these lines, the alliance between the actors in Luhansk and Russia was portrayed as an unstable one of unequal power, even though the former were portrayed as being in line respectively with Russian and Soviet Union narratives. Igor Kornet, according to one article, "accuses all of being Ukrainian spies, an example of classic Soviet rhetoric. One looks for enemies, one denigrates, discredits and undermines." One article elaborates, however, how "in the beginning more peaceful protests developed into civil war when Kyiv sent soldiers trying to suppress the independent movement, at the same time as Moscow backed the rebels with weapons and military technical know-how," a point also highlighted by another article. "The violence between separatists and the government in Kyiv has prevented a plan of peace being introduced." Thus, we saw reporting patterns similar to the Babchenko case, in which actions by both Ukrainian and Russian actors were critically assessed.

The analyzed reporting on the shooting down of 'Malaysian Air Flight MH17' was different compared to the cases discussed. While we did find a solid number

of news pieces published (seven in sum), only two were authored by correspondents. The coverage was briefer and mostly produced by "nameless" journalists. We assume that we found these differences because the cases discussed earlier circled around people, while this case represented an investigation. Central themes were the responsibility for the crash, and Russia was pointed out as having caused this incident. The short news flashes in the print outlets were relatively free of evaluations, and one of the longer pieces gave a quite substantial amount of space to the accused parti: "(…) 'Russia has not had a single new air defense missile of the brand Buk in Ukraine since the dissolution of the Soviet Union,' stated the Russian Defense Department." The TV reports, however, ranged from being somewhat to clearly more evaluative. While one correspondent's article remained to some extent balanced (though with the same "Russia denies" angle), the other followed an explicit "Russia will never admit" narrative and made a case for why Russian actors must have caused the incident. The argument ends with, "One thing is clear—there was no intention behind the shooting-down of a civilian plane that caused the death of 283 people. It was a mistake. A catastrophic mistake they will never admit." In sum, the news authors attributed high levels of trustworthiness to the investigators and findings, rendering Russian actors in a dubious light while Ukrainian actors were freed of any charge, if mentioned.

While none of the Ukrainian news outlets engaged with this topic explicitly, we found one article in Swedish news media that took up the 'situation of the Jewish population in Ukraine'. It was published in *Svenska Dagbladet* and written by two reporters. The journalists let the interviewed protagonist and main source, the president of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee UJC, set the scene and narrate: The anti-Semitic currents in society are, again, gaining momentum ("during recent years I have been forced to counteract the government's glorification of the people who took part in the mass murder of Jews"). The protagonist's everyday life experiences were not only tied to the context of Ukraine's problematic relation with Russia but also used to illustrate a Western turn to be a positive thing: "As a Ukrainian and a Jew, I want to talk about a growing economy, about what can bring Ukraine closer to the EU." Although the protagonist's narrative was not questioned, one public incident was mentioned, in which people had been shouting at him: "He is an agent of the Kremlin, Moscow is paying him, get him out of here." This critique, however, can be used to render him even more credible: The other side would not try to delegitimize him if what he has to say was irrelevant. The article was published in the news beat; therefore, the objectivity norm would have suggested hearing the other side as well. However, no comments by people and institutions that the protagonist criticizes for being anti-Semitic, such as the Ukrainian government, were included. We found that the protagonist was also not commonly cited or referred to in the Ukrainian media in general.

Google searches showed that he was frequently mentioned on some pro-Russian Ukrainian websites, such as the controversial news portal ukraina.ru, where he regularly publishes opinion pieces critical of post-Euromaidan Ukraine. Also, outlets in other countries reported on the claim of anti-Semitism and suspected this narrative of being used for propaganda (e.g., Fritz, 2019).

Swedish coverage of the 'situation of Crimean Tatars' followed a similar pattern, but with more favor toward the Ukrainian government. Two of the three stories were written by correspondents, and one was produced by a reporter. All coverage presented events in Crimea and the situation of the Tatars from a legal perspective: from international law to freedom of speech and human rights. It was unlawful for Russia to annex Crimea; Russia did not meet legal requirements for the restoration of cultural heritage, and Tatars' and dissidents' lives were at risk. Independent journalists were sued for political reasons, "(…) and non-governmental organizations, as well as independent media—such as the Crimean Tatars' own TV channel ATR—were closed down." In two stories, the journalists clearly follow the narratives of the Tatar protagonists: Russia was destroying Tatar heritage and torturing Tatars. While *Dagens Nyheter* "has tried to reach the museum's management for a comment but has not received any answer to repeated inquiries via phone and email," *Swedish Television* does not report such attempts to obtain more perspectives. The Tatar sources were clearly assessed to provide truthful information, and quoted accounts by lawyers and governments added weight to their accounts.

Mirroring our sampling strategy in the Babchenko case, we collected all stories published the day after the actual event of the so-called 'Kerch Strait incident' (on 26 November 2018). In summary, many articles covered a wide variety of perspectives and reactions to the incident, especially the longer articles (with a source range from 2 to 13 mentioned sources). We found that most articles presented both sides (even three sides, if one was to include the reactions of the Western collectives such as the EU, UN, and NATO). Most of the reports served to inform the Swedish audience about the event. They read along the lines of a news agency report: Russia placed a large merchant ship under the bridge that crosses the Strait to stop three ships from accessing the Sea of Azov from the Black Sea. A Russian tugboat rammed one of them; two crew members were hurt, and the three Ukrainian ships were seized. *Swedish Television* reports added that Ukraine's President declared martial law for 30 days. An *Expressen* article does not mention the blockade but adds that the Ukrainian fleet considers the event a "clear aggressive action" (a quote from *The Guardian*). This perception of Russia being aggressive (a quote from the Ukrainian President Porosjenko on *Swedish Television*) or provocative (a tweet by the former Swedish Prime Minister, Carl Bildt, cited by *Aftonbladet*) was advanced in other news stories. However, the *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet* articles, as well as a TV report, give credit to the fact

that the two countries accused each other of provocations. Although another Television report mentions an earlier incident that Ukraine initiated, Russia being the first-and-foremost aggressor was, if not explicitly stated, a perceivable undertone in the articles analyzed. This undertone was supported by sources, for instance, the EU and individual member states, criticizing actions by Russian actors. Russia's counter was described as being offended ("Russia is right, and the rest of the world is wrong, and (…) this is a plot by which Ukraine—supported by the US, EU and others—tries to increase the pressure to possibly introduce new sanctions") and even suspected of being a secretive sensor ("to see if Ukraine has the international support that they say and the answer to that question is, so far, that Ukraine has the support of NATO").

NARRATING "OUR CONFLICT:" UKRAINIAN COVERAGE

In total, 11 stories were devoted to *Oleg Sentsov's case* in the selected Ukrainian media—most of them short news items produced at the desk. Typically, they covered small developments such as new information about his health or progress in his case. A good example is a report by *Inter*. It consisted of five sentences and did not explain why the Ukrainian filmmaker was imprisoned in Russia. Instead, the only description by the journalist, "a political prisoner," explained everything for the Ukrainian audience. Also, this immediately indicated the position of the author and the appropriated narrative. Another story produced by *LB.ua* contained a claim that charges against Sentsov were falsified. This claim was presented in a background paragraph and not linked to a particular source. In general, Ukrainian journalists linguistically questioned the verdict and accusations of Sentsov in Russia, and doubts about the justice of Russian courts were a part of the journalists' language. Russian authorities were rarely mentioned as a source; however, if information from Russian sources was obtained, it was usually questioned or scrutinized, whereas this was not the case for information from Ukrainian sources. Despite explicit partisanship toward Sentsov, the material rarely included any direct appeal for release.

In our sample, the Arkady Babchenko case was one of the cases most extensively covered by the Ukrainian media. Most of the items provided various bits of information related to the staged murder rather than a comprehensive picture of the story, which could be explained by the rapid developments in the case. Representatives of the SBU and other Ukrainian law enforcement agencies were most often cited or referred to. A significant share of the material described the events without questioning the actors' claims. Some of the analyzed pieces were nuanced in that they contained questions about the relevance of this special operation, mostly voiced by quoted experts. For instance, a *TSN (1+1)* reporter referred to the "Babchenko casus" in one of the video stories—with the term "casus" containing connotations of dubiousness. In the same report, the journalist

softly criticized how the operation was communicated and mentioned that "Ukrainians perceived it as political self-promotion" of the Ukrainian government. It was also relatively common for the media to mention critical reactions of international actors such as OSCE, Reporters Without Borders, Pentagon officials, and others. On the whole, and consistent with the analyzed Swedish news, Ukrainian media challenged the appropriateness of the staged operation and its possible impact on the attitude toward the media. However, Ukrainian journalists mostly did not question the official version of the attempted murder and so-called "Russian trace" in hiring a contract killer to assassinate Babchenko (as announced by the SBU). The journalists did not try to dig deeper at this stage to find out what kind of evidence the police had for this trace. Such a reporting pattern was particularly typical for the newspapers and TV channels, whereas online media covered a wider variety of positions and reactions, providing more critical and challenging viewpoints. For example, *Pravda.com.ua* presented reserved and challenging reactions of several professional journalistic organizations and Western think tanks. It is also notable that no attempts to report Russian reactions to Ukraine's official version of the Russian trace were mentioned.

One of the most striking peculiarities of the coverage of the 'coup d'état in Luhansk' was a notable lack of sources. Sometimes journalists used phrases like "as it is known," "it is reported," "according to media reports," or "according to Ukrainian intelligence." In some cases, journalists referred to other Ukrainian media, which quoted anonymous sources or unnamed social media accounts. This pattern merits special attention, given that Luhansk is hardly accessible for Ukrainian journalists. It is also notable that Ukrainian media barely mentioned local separatist media. One of the reports by *Inter TV* contained video footage from Luhansk; however, there was no source for the video, and all logos were blurred. Another crucial pattern identified through the analysis of both Ukrainian and Swedish coverage concerns the wide employment of linguistic tools to delegitimize separatist-controlled territories and their leaders. One of *Inter's* journalists used numerous metaphors, among them "puppeteer in the Kremlin," "fake republics," "marionettes of the pseudo-republics," "spider derby" (for the political process in Luhansk), "green men" (for former Russian soldiers or even regular army), and "ukrop" (a slang word for a Ukrainian patriot, literally "dill"). Such a news style is typical for Ukrainian TV channels, whereas the press and online media were reserved.

In general, Ukrainian media provided comprehensive coverage of the JIT report on 'Malaysian Flight MH17'. In total, we found 26 pieces, of which 20 items were produced by the two online outlets, *LB.ua* and *Pravda.com.ua*. The online media coverage was most comprehensive since they managed to report on various angles of the news story. For instance, online media paid more attention to international reactions, that is, statements of various international

actors, including Russian officials. In contrast, TV channels and the newspaper *Segodnya* omitted the Russian position, and *Gazeta po-ukrayinsky* did not have any story on the JIT report. While *Pravda.com.ua* and *LB.ua* had several news items completely devoted to the Russian position—that is, comments by Vladimir Putin, his spokesperson, and Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs—this position was generally not found to be an essential element of news about the JIT report. If there was some reaction from the Russian side (e.g., disseminated by the international news agencies), journalists would make separate news pieces on that, but if the position was missing, it did not look like the journalists would seek it. In general, the tone of the coverage was quite neutral; journalists largely refrained from evaluative comments and focused their narrative on the official findings. However, one of the reports by *TSN (1+1)* contained the caption "Chronicle of lies," referring to official Russian versions. This video story did not precisely refer to Russia's position; however, the caption conveyed journalists' evaluation and challenged Russian actors' statements.

The 'situation of Crimean Tatars' was covered the least by Ukrainian media. We could only identify four stories during the period under investigation, all of them produced by online media. The material represented a rather routine type of news, with no major change or significant development. All four stories dealt with the violation of Crimean Tatars' rights by the Russian authorities in Crimea. Three out of four stories reposted news from *Krym.Realii* (translated as *Crimea. Reality*), a special project of *Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe*. One of the stories published by *LB.ua* was written by one of its reporters. In the three stories, every statement was based on only one source from the Tatars' community. The authors did not mention any attempt to crosscheck the provided information, leaving an impression that the voices of Crimean Tatars are considered trustworthy by default. It was also notable that Ukrainian journalists seemed unwilling to obtain information from Russian authorities, even though all analyzed stories linked reported tribulations of Crimean Tatars to Russian authorities. For example, one of the news stories on both *LB.ua* and *Pravda.com.ua* reported about two missing Tatars. The reports did not mention political activism; however, the background paragraphs contained a claim that "after Russia's annexation of Crimea, prosecution of Crimean Tatars aggravated on the peninsula," which implicitly connects the reported cases to a broader trend.

Given the emergency of the 'Kerch Strait incident' and its implications for Ukraine, most media coverage on the analyzed date was dedicated to this case. Due to the large amount of content, we had to reduce the sample for this case. Because neither *Segodnya* nor *Gazeta po-ukrayinsky* publish on Mondays (and our sample was limited to Monday, 26 November 2018), we analyzed only TV and online news. The researched media appropriated and reproduced the official Ukrainian narrative; there were no attempts to challenge the Ukrainian version

of the incident. There was some criticism of the Ukrainian president's decision to introduce martial law, but it was mostly concerning the possibility of postponing the presidential election planned for March 2019. The attack was given critical importance in the coverage, but the Russian position was scarcely present. Russian sources were mostly mentioned in cases when they were the sources of information about the wounded Ukrainian soldiers, but Ukrainian media did not adhere to the Russian version of the events. One might expect the emergence of critical stances toward the official Ukrainian narrative during later dates, while the coverage immediately after the attack was very much in line with the official framing of the incident.

SWEDISH JOURNALISTS' ASSESSMENT OF OBJECTIVITY IN SOURCING AND NARRATING

Our content analysis indicated that Swedish coverage was authoritative and opinionated, favoring the Ukrainian side when the Russian side was perceived as aggressive or morally wrong. This alliance broke when Ukrainian actors violated morals, e.g., professional (Arkady Babchenko) or humanitarian norms (e.g., anti-Semitism). In Ukraine, we found less opinion, yet a tendency to omit scrutinizing one's own position and omitting the other side. In the following, we investigate the journalists' assessments of their sourcing and narrating practices: How many sides are heard and disseminated, and how do they reflect on the separation between fact and opinion?

As a general mindset, the Swedish journalists we interviewed upheld the objectivity norm and sourcing requirements that come with it. An illustration:

> We did a very advanced trip to Ukraine: Kyiv, Odessa, and Charkov. We met a lot of people which we interviewed, from different perspectives, both Ukrainian nationalists and pro-Russian politicians. I prefer those fully objective ask-two-sides articles; this is what I usually do in Swedish journalism…. But this [article] is a sort of analysis. An opinion piece, so it should be this way. [Interviewee at *Aftonbladet*]

The Swedish journalists mentioned two key external reasons why they strive for objectivity in conflict reporting. First, they perceived objectivity as an expectation of their audience. Our interviewee at *Swedish Television* mentioned regular reactions and even death threats from "shall we say, the Putin lovers?" He reasoned:

> [S]ometimes me and my colleagues, too, become a little cowardly. And when it comes to Swedish Television, the review board is there. And when you report on Israel, you get indicted very often… you are aware that someone

is watching… Ukraine, Russia, and Venezuela are the areas where I usually get indicted because it's so polarized there. [Interviewee at *SVT*]

Sweden's increased cooperation with NATO is another area where journalists are under attack from several sides, accused of biased reporting:

> I mean, it has not affected my reporting, but attacks, Twitter attacks and things like that, suddenly you are portrayed as a CIA agent due to this polarization. Either you are a radical leftist or radical right-winger, and people say that I hate US imperialism. In these situations, you get confused: Have I failed in my own reporting because people don't understand it? [Interviewee at *Swedish Radio*]

Second, departing too much from objectivity increases the risk of becoming persona non grata. Journalists could endanger their relations and future interactions with sources but also their privileges:

> And when you do not have balance, you can assume that you end up on a Russian list somewhere. There are lists of journalists, those who sometimes write along the line, 'you who are the worst' and so on … and of course, we want to give both sides the chance to say theirs. [Interviewee at *Dagens Nyheter*]

Accordingly, this interviewee's colleague at *Dagens Nyheter* assumed that the reporting style could have been a reason why he did not manage to get an accreditation to areas controlled by separatists, while the public service broadcasters did.

In addition, limited resources and time pressure make striving for objectivity harder. One interviewee's average workload, for instance, was between 8 and 11 articles a night. In addition, in less open and transparent political systems, it was perceived as a challenge to get access to and reach trustworthy sources that could represent the different sides of a conflict:

> This is some kind of 'Kremlin-ology.' That you sit there and see the power positions from a distance, with no insights, so you must guess what has happened… And even if you would have been to Luhansk, you couldn't get the right answers from these persons. [Interviewee at *Aftonbladet*]

Apart from screening the pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian news flow, a workaround to tap into harder-to-get information on the ground was to contact foreign correspondents. One of them was our interviewee at *Swedish Television*, who saw his role in mediating the Russian official stances, the Russian media

discourse, and the voice of "a person on the street" to the audience back home. However, he did "not have access to the presidential administration and [I] do not know the spokesman Peskov and so on, but I go for what is official and public."

Following up on that, for one of our interviewees at *Dagens Nyheter*, source problems seem to appear mainly in original or investigative reporting, while desk reporting and analyses were less challenging. The interviewed desk reporters had never talked to any of the involved actors, such as Babchenko or Pasetjnik. Our interviewee at *Expressen* even disclosed that he had not followed the case too closely. Changing the presentation mode from "fact" to analyses or "opinion" even seemed to be a way to circumvent verification requirements (Springer et al., 2022). Both factors—the dependency on correspondents and the tendency to shift the narrative mode to avoid issues with and unnecessary time investment in verification—may explain the authoritativeness of the conflict coverage we analyzed. Our interviewee at *Swedish Television* also thought it is possible for a journalist to report factually about opinions, even if sources were not always truthful in their claims. In a similar vein, our interviewee at *Expressen* said that "democrats are the ones you tend to trust, and the authoritarians are the ones you are more skeptical against." However, Swedish journalists did use untrustworthy, partisan sources, either for sourcing diverse opinions on controversial issues or as proof of how media institutions such as RT (former Russia Today) were entangled with political power and acts of propaganda.

Thus, adhering to the objectivity ideal seems to be a pragmatic decision. If objectivity is journalistic pragmatism rather than ideology, it is easy to understand why it would not be defended against all pressures. The content analyses of the minority groups' treatment suggest that the objectivity ideal recedes when an advocacy role gains importance. Such a motivation can be assumed to impact journalistic routines (e.g., Tandoc, Hellmueller & Vos, 2013; Zeng, 2018). Even for professionals, it can be tough to discard personal emotions and watch their values being neglected:

> The reason for this [article] was a bad conscience because we have not sufficiently followed what has happened in Crimea after Russia annexed… [T]he starting point is really that they have opened this bridge and that it is perceived as a stink by Crimean Tatars. So, the combination with the triumph in Russian TV media… there was very much upset among the Crimean Tatars, of course. They have quite a lot of media too. [Interviewee at *Swedish Radio*]

The same holds if a journalist had been personally threatened, as was the case for one reporter in our content analytical sample. However, our interviewee also observed that there was a shared stance in Swedish journalism:

"(…) there's a general position among many journalists that what Ukraine does is always correct because Russia is always evil. It is so black and white. But I think we must question both sides because both have their interests." One interviewee at *Dagens Nyheter* sees the same tendency of coverage negativity:

> Often, we write very negatively about Russia, and sometimes I feel can we really write yet another article? But we do write what we believe is true and worth publishing. Of course, I cannot say that I am unaffected—because you are, absolutely. I can understand that certain countries we often report about negatively, that they also perceive it negatively. I rarely report positive news. [Interviewee at *Dagens Nyheter*]

His colleague also supports the stance that no party involved can be free of charges:

> When we talk about the severe situation of 2014/15, the Ukrainians were not as skillful as the Russians, producing fake story after fake story. But the Ukrainians were notoriously discreditable when it came to the actual war… That's why we were there with teams nearly all the time… to see with our own eyes what was going on. [Interviewee at *Dagens Nyheter*]

Our interviewee at *Swedish Radio* even believes that the dissemination of cold war stereotypes about Russia is something the Russian government gladly sees in Western media—to strengthen the country's discursive power internationally;

> I don't think that it affects my way of reporting on Ukraine. I would put it differently and say that what happened in Ukraine has made us increasingly aware of something that has been going on for a long time, but no one has listened to: that Russia can say one thing but mean something else, that you cannot always be sure about what they will do. I am not writing in my reports that Russia is dangerous to us… because it is what Russia wants us to do. It is part of their relatively successful information warfare. They want to be seen as a bigger threat than they really are. It is part of their rhetoric, that they have attained a stronger position in the world. [Interviewee at *Swedish Radio*]

Finally, our content analysis, as well as the interviews, illustrated that political sources are often referred to through national metonyms such as "Moscow" or metaphors such as "Russia." While journalists see this as a standard linguistic variation, it implies a consensus within a society. It equates the acts of those in power with the broader citizenry, even though the connection between the

political and the public agenda can be very weak in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian societies. Our interviewee at *Expressen* emphasized that this practice is particularly suitable for headlines where information must be brief to attract readers: "[I]t has been like that for quite a long time… you just sort of think that your reader will understand that you are talking about the Russian government." All journalists noted that nation-states or capitols refer to governmental sources and never to members of parliament or the opposition. However, the interviewee at the news agency said that abbreviating would go against their policies and routines.

UKRAINIAN JOURNALISTS' ASSESSMENT OF OBJECTIVITY IN SOURCING AND NARRATING

As with the Swedish journalists, Ukrainian journalists generally commit to the objectivity norm: All interviewed journalists asserted that they try to balance their stories. However, as one of our Swedish interviewees described the media landscape in Ukraine was characterized by substantial diversity:

> You can find all sorts of angles and opinions in Ukrainian press and television, but there seems to be less free and more the type of journalism that, in someone's interest, is trying to throw dirt at someone who in turn tries to throw dirt… So, there are a little more of such oligarchs and self-interests that bump into each other. In Russia, there are, indeed, organizations that try to tell us in general quite well 'this is what happens.' They are not that many, and not many people watch or listen and read. [Interviewee at *Swedish Television*]

In Ukraine, TV channels are owned and controlled by oligarchs with various political stances and interests. Online media have more independent voices, and the press is in critical decline nationwide. In general, Ukrainian journalists were quite reserved in discussing how to secure balance in coverage on those issues that touch upon the interests of their media owners.

> That's a sensitive question. I can say that I work in the news program and that's different from other information programs that we have on our TV channel. But I think and I'm convinced that at TSN, we try to adhere to the standard of balance. And it usually works out well. I personally often make stories on such sensitive topics. But in my stories, I still try to get the opinion of the second part, or the third. Maybe it will not be represented as vividly, as the opinion of the first part. But still… [Interviewee at *1+1*]

In terms of editorial policies, the daily newspaper *Segodnya* seems to stand out among the analyzed media. There are stringent rules concerning the balance

and representation of the other side in their materials. One journalist there described the situation in the following way: "I was taught that there should be a balance of positions. If there is not, there would be a lawsuit. And nobody wants a lawsuit. We never give a one-sided [story]." Sometimes, the only way to get balanced news is to get balance in time:

> We should write that we called [the other side] even if we failed to get the other side's comment, to push the other side to give us a comment and to show to the reader that we have not forgotten about the other side. [Interviewee at *Ukrayins'ka Pravda*]

Our content analysis suggested that the issue of balance was most acute in cases that concerned Russian actors or relations. The journalists noted that there were no specific editorial decisions to omit Russian positions. In one case, the journalist explained the lack of Russian positions with the time pressure for the video story she had been working on. Another journalist said that Russian positions were hardly accessible: If available, they were covered, if not, journalists would not seek them. This was the same pattern we noticed for Swedish journalists (see above). Keeping up balance was especially challenging when it came to news on the occupied territories since this was hardly an accessible area for Ukrainian journalists. When information was taken from the separatist media on the ground, the source of information might be omitted, something we noticed while analyzing the Ukrainian content. We learned through the interviews that such sources were not cited because of the possible reaction from the audience: It could lead to accusations of propagating the separatist media. There could also be security concerns for the sources from the Ukrainian army or Ukrainian intelligence services.

Another interviewee freely suggested that the lack of Russian positions in some material could be the result of the individual patriotic view of particular journalists. Similarly, an interviewee at *Ukrayins'ka Pravda* explained:

> It might be a result of the situation that Russia is an aggressor, and there is an attitude that their right of reply is diminished to some extent. But this is my personal feeling. [Interviewee at *Ukrayins'ka Pravda*]

It is notable that some journalists admitted that Russian positions should be present to satisfy a standard of balance, but there was significant skepticism toward positions voiced by Russian officials or other actors representing the Russian political mainstream. For instance, the freelance reporter covering issues related to Crimean Tatars for *LB.ua* described this dilemma when covering political persecution in Crimea: "I see how they lie. In their statements, testimonies.

[Y]ou see a guy who says that everything was another way around. It's hard to provide his viewpoint as a balance."

The issue of morally improper behavior of sources brought up by Swedish journalists thus was also observed by our Ukrainian interviewees. In addition, journalists on the ground can have personal relations with sources. A freelance journalist reporting for *LB.ua* and *Inter TV* explained: "There are my sources, some of them are already like my friends. But I verify everything, because there were cases when people were lying." In general, the interviewed journalists expressed critical opinions on and general skepticism toward Ukrainian politicians and officials as sources of information. This mistrust could also be a consequence of situations when politicians used their connections with journalists to share insider information with them. Very often, this was not insider information but a so-called leak the politicians used to spread specific messages for their political purposes. One interviewee said journalists should always understand that political sources were trying to use them, and all information provided by politicians should be verified carefully. Thus, the interviewed journalists noted that there should be a critical attitude toward all sources of information by default. Nevertheless, and similar to their Israeli colleagues (Godler & Reich, 2017; Reich, 2011), Ukrainian journalists largely treat official statements as credible information. One of the *1+1* reporters noted:

> In any case, if it's an official statement of some official—that is a source of information. Even if they later reject that information, they have already published it. And they as an authority are responsible for this information. Therefore, even if this information is not true, we can say 'they said so, but then repudiated.' [Interviewee at *1+1*]

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to investigate how journalists from a country involved in a conflict (Ukraine) and observing it from a distance (Sweden) relate to the objectivity norm in sourcing and narrating seven conflictual news cases in Ukraine (2017 to 2018).

Regarding Ukrainian journalists' work products (RQ1), we found that most of the Ukrainian material was the product of desk journalism. Unattributed statements were also common. The bulk of Ukrainian content was news, and journalists tended to avoid opinionated pieces. Instead, the coverage was mosaic-like: It was difficult to find one fully balanced story with the positions of all key actors. Moreover, some of the researched media seemed to disregard the

other side's position as an essential element of the stories—a phenomenon Liebes (1992) labeled "excising."

Swedish journalists' articles (RQ2), by contrast, were most characterizable as opinionated and authoritative. Many articles would have deserved the caption "commentary" or "analysis." Sources and their information were often woven into the journalists' narratives, so it was tough to discern whether journalists provided their own interpretations or referred to accounts of others—that is, actors with their own agendas. We found that taking a protagonist's perspective happened more often in cases that centered around a victimized person or group. The point of departure, however, differs: In the case of Sentsov, the coverage followed his narrative, while in the case of minorities (Jewish and Tatars), journalists structured the stories and made good use of protagonists that then stood prototypically for the respective situation they wanted to illuminate. Here, we saw how advocatory role perceptions materialized in the content.

On the one hand, our interviews corroborated the content analytical finding of quite opinionated Swedish conflict narratives (RQ2). On the other hand, Ukrainian journalists often worked for media owners with political interests. They were aware of the risk of being used for interests by sources and tried to avoid this with a critical perspective. However, they also might not have had access to versions from both sides, and sources in separatist areas were not trusted or possible to use openly due to audiences' attitudes. Patriotic attitudes were mentioned as well (RQ1).

We also found some common perspectives. According to our interviewees in both countries, the Russian government regularly went beyond the line of what is acceptable due to its aggression and mistreatment of values such as being truthful and humane. Russian actors were not usually approached for a comment; their statements were disseminated if available but mostly compacted and often evaluatively framed. In the Swedish coverage, Ukrainian perspectives usually received considerably more space and benefit of the doubt, as long as they adhered to these values. However, our results indicated that a value-based ally loyalty is less stable than a tribe-based bond: Mistreatment of religious minorities in an allied country, for instance, is unacceptable and breaks this figurative bond. In addition, while we could see that Ukrainian official perspectives had been undisputedly disseminated in Ukraine, we could not find that they were generally positively laden, as one would expect when patriotic journalists rally around the flag. We assume that differences in trust in public institutions could moderate the levels of patriotic behavior and, thereby, patriotic journalism. According to the World Values Survey (2017–2022) and the Israel Democracy Institute, these levels are high in Sweden and comparatively low in Ukraine. The US is somewhat in the middle, and Israel is quite divided, depending on the respective institution. This assumption would be for future studies to test.

The results also show a relation between the degree of geographical closeness to the conflict, the autonomy of a media system, and whether objectivity as a norm is followed. Contrary to what one would expect theoretically, the Swedish coverage from a distance is more opinionated in favor of Ukraine against Russia. For Ukrainian journalists, the situation is more complicated in the cases studied in this article due to different powers within the society, such as media owners, oligarchs, government, and military/security. Ukrainian journalists in the middle of the conflict tended to be closer to traditional objectivity and fact-reporting, probably as a strategy to defend their integrity against these external influences.

In the present situation of war (Spring 2022), analyses like this one might come to different results. When society unites against a common enemy, the prerequisites for journalistic objectivity, i.e., "hearing both sides," change dramatically (Nygren et al., 2018). How this materializes in the ongoing war is still to be studied.

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ANNEX

Table 1. Sample Overview (content analysis, number of articles in news outlets)

Case	News outlets (SWE)	SUM	News outlets (UKR)	SUM
1: Oleg Sentsov	2x *Dagens Nyheter (DN)* 1x *Svenska Dagbladet (SvD)*	3	4x *Ukrayins'ka Pravda* 2x *1+1* 1x *Gazeta po-ukrayinsky* 1x *Inter* 3x *LB.ua*	11
2: Arkady Babchenko[1] (1 day)	2x *Aftonbladet* 2x *Expressen* 3x *DN* 1x *SvD* 1x *Swedish Television (SVT)* 1x *News agency (TT)*	10	5x *Inter* 10x *Ukrayins'ka Pravda* 1x *Segodnya* 5x *1+1* 1x *Gazeta po-ukrayinsky* 7x *LB.ua*	29
3: Luhansk	1x *Aftonbladet* 1x *DN* 1x *SvD*	3	3x *Inter* 3x *1+1* 6x *Ukrayins'ka Pravda* 2x *Segodnya* 1x *Lb.ua*	15
4: MH17 report	1x *SvD* 1x *DN* 1x *Expressen* 2x *SVT* 1x *TT/Aftonbladet* 1x *TT/AFP*	7	3x *Inter* 10x *Ukrayins'ka Pravda* 1x *Segodnya* 2x *1+1* 10x *LB.ua*	26
5: Jewish population	1x *SvD*	1	-	0
6: Crimean Tatars	1x *SvD* 1x *DN* 1x *SVT*	3	1x *LB.ua* 2x *Ukrayins'ka Pravda* 1x *LB.ua*	4
7: Kerch[2] (1 day)	1x *DN* 1x *Aftonbladet* 1x *Expressen* 1x *SR* 2x *SVT* 1x *TT/AFP/Reuters*	7	10x *Ukrayins'ka Pravda* 5x *Inter* 5x *1+1* 10x *LB.ua*	30

We thank Emma Andersson for her assistance with the qualitative content analysis of the Swedish material.

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1 We selected in total 29 items on Babchenko's case, although the total number of news stories was 46 in Ukrainian media. We had to reduce the sample for online media and TV channels. For online media, we selected the ten longest and densest news for each day, and for TV channels, we took the first five stories from the bulletin. We assumed (based on the theory of priming) that the first items are considered to be the most important ones for the TV-bulletins.

2 We missed two stories broadcasted by the Swedish Radio on the Kerch case due to de-publication, thus only seven of nine published stories were available for our analysis.

Table 2. Sample Overview (guided interviews)[3]

Case	Journalists (SWE)	Journalists (UKR)
Case 1	-	1x *Ukrayins'ka Pravda*
Case 2	1x *DN* 1x *Expressen* 1x *SR*	2x *Segodnya* 1x *Inter* 1x *Ukrayins'ka Pravda* 2x *1+1*
Case 3	1x *Aftonbladet*	1x *Inter*
Case 4	-	1x *Ukrayins'ka Pravda* 1x *1+1*
Case 5	-	-
Case 6	1x *DN*	1x *LB.ua*
Case 7	1x *SVT* 1x *TT*	-

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3 Almost all interviews were conducted with the authors of the content we analyzed. We first contacted the most important journalists who had written several news stories in our content analytic sample. If the request was declined, we contacted additional authors of the respective media, depending on the relevance to our content analytical material. If the authors were not mentioned in the news we analyzed (*SVT, TT*), we searched the Ukraine coverage of the respective channel for relevant authors.