



**Title: A Comparison of Online News Media Framing of the 2022
Russia-Ukraine Conflict in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. & China.**

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Dissertation Abstract

The 2022 conflict between Russia and Ukraine that ensued after the former invaded the latter has received extensive media attention around the world. The news media's framing of the war ultimately has an impact on how its audience views the actions of the conflicting countries, their respective allies as well as other issues pertaining to the conflict. The online news media, due to its relatively easy and broad access, plays a key role in how the war is covered and framed. This study compares how major news websites in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China have framed their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict between from December 2021 when Russia began to amass troops on its border with Ukraine, and the end of April 2022, when the war was still raging in Ukraine. The findings of this study indicate that the online news media's framing of the conflict within each country largely mirror their respective government's stated geostrategic interests regarding the war, particularly in terms of security, economics, energy supply and geopolitics. The comparison of each country's online news coverage is presented with respect to four key indicators, which are *emphasis*, *sentiments expressed*, *volume of coverage* as well as *phrasing & terminology*. By combining Artificial-Intelligence based Topic Extraction and Sentiment Analysis models on 24,422 online news article headlines pertaining to the conflict, this research project identifies, examines and compares the inherent frames present in the news headlines with the aim of avoiding much of the subjectivity and idiosyncrasy that often besets manual methods of frame analysis.

Keywords:

2022 Russia-Ukraine Conflict, Online Media, News Framing, Frame, Analysis, Content Analysis, Artificial Intelligence, Sentiment Analysis, Topic Extraction, War, NATO, Ukraine, Russia, China, U.S.

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1. Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has received significant media coverage and drawn substantial public interest globally (De Witte, 2022). In addition, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine resulting from the invasion presents a myriad of geostrategic challenges including inter alia humanitarian crises, threats to food and energy, disinformation and information warfare (Wither, 2016). This research project compares the main differences and similarities in the framing of online news article headlines about the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war by major news websites in Ukraine, Russia, the United States (U.S) and China.

The findings of this study indicate that the online news media's framing of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict within Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China has been consistent with their respective government's geostrategic interests especially vis-à-vis security, economic, energy and political considerations. This correlation within the research data indicates potential editorial synchronization, a situation whereby a news agency's reporting closely mirrors the sentiments of its national government regarding a specific issue or topic. Contrary to the research hypothesis however, the overall framing of the conflict by news websites in Ukraine and the U.S. on one hand and Russia and China on the other, were not as similar within each allied group as expected at the beginning of this project. Although there were some similarities in online news' framing of aspects of the conflict within each sets of allied nations, there were significant differences as well, particularly in terms of the emphasis and sentiments expressed.

Although there is a significant body of academic literature on Russia-Ukraine conflict following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the more recent conflict following the former's large-scale invasion of the latter lacks as much available research largely due to the fact that is quite recent and still ongoing. This research project seeks to help fill the gap in the academic literature on the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict by shedding some light on how the

online news media within the belligerent countries and their major allies are framing the conflict for their respective audiences.

The findings in this study are based on the frame analysis of 24,422 online news article headlines related to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict published between the buildup of Russian forces along Ukraine's borders in December 2021 and April 2022 when Russian and Ukrainian forces were still engaged in full-scale conflict within Ukraine after the former invaded the latter. In order to limit the subjectivity and idiosyncrasies that frequently often limits the reproducibility of research based on frame analysis (Matthes and Kohring, 2008), this study opted to rely on identifying the embedded frames within the online news sample data using Artificial Intelligence based Topic Extraction and Sentiment Analysis software. This approach ensured that the process of identifying the elements of the media frames was both consistent and reproducible as well as scalable to include much larger dataset compared to the alternative manual methods.

While the scope of this study was restricted to focus on just a partial duration of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict and the research data was only sampled from a limited number of major news websites chiefly due to time and resource constraints, the research methodology employed supports an expansion in scope regarding both the time frame and the sampled data size which is potentially beneficial to future research on this topic.

1.1. Research Question

The main research question for this project is “what are the differences and similarities between the online news media's framing of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict in Ukraine, Russia, the United States and China”?

Aims & Objectives

This research project aims to combine both quantitative and qualitative empirical data about online news reporting on the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict in order to compare how the conflict has been framed within on websites predominantly viewed by the respective audiences in Ukraine, Russia, the United States and China. The quantitative data comprises the news stories and their corresponding metadata while the qualitative data consists of academic literature, government, news reports and organizational publications on Russia-Ukraine relations prior and during the conflict. This project examines online news reports from 1st December 2021 when warnings of a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine started to emerge in international news to 30th April 2022, an end date chosen purely chosen for practical reasons to allow adequate time to meet this project's deadline.

This project seeks to:

- i. Identify empirical differences and similarities in the framing of 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict by the online news media within Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China through the use of Artificial-Intelligence based Sentiment Analysis and Topic Extraction software.
- ii. Compare and contrast the online news media's framing in terms of the emphasis, sentiments expressed, phrasing and terminology used as well as the volume of the reporting.
- iii. Interpret the identified empirical similarities and differences in the online media framing through the lens of post-soviet Russia-Ukraine relations along with the other major geostrategic actors like the U.S. and China.

Research Hypothesis

This research question is based on the hypothesis that the framing of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict within Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China will reflect each country's geostrategic

interests regarding the war particularly in terms of each country's security, economic, energy and political considerations. Since Ukraine and Russia are the primary conflicting parties, this project assumes there will be major differences in how the online news media in either country frames the conflict. In addition, the online media coverage in the U.S. and China is expected to mirror the framing of the Ukrainian and Chinese media respectively to a large extent based on their strategic alliances.

1.2. Chapter Overview

This research project comprises eight chapters, each providing insights into various aspects of the project's planning, implementation and findings among others. This introductory chapter, Chapter One, presents research question and its underlying hypothesis as well as the research objectives and explains the relevance of the chosen topic to the fields of strategic and security studies. Chapter Two delves into media framing, the role of the media in conflicts and specifically looks at the news media's coverage of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Chapter Three provides a summary of the various aspects of Russia-Ukraine relations, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and highlights key events that have contributed to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This chapter also covers the involvement of other geostrategic actors like the U.S., China, NATO, the European Union (E.U.) and their respective interests in the conflict. Chapter Four explains in detail the research methodology employed for this study including the research design as well as the data selection, collection and analysis processes.

Chapter Five outlines the research findings on how the online news media in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China frame their reporting on the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict between 1st December 2021 and 30th April 2022. The research findings in this chapter are presented in four

parts, each with a specific media framing indicator. These parts are emphasis of the media coverage, sentiments expressed, volume of the coverage and the phrasing & terminology used. Chapter Five then concludes with an assessment of the research findings vis-à-vis the main hypothesis underlying the research project.

Chapter Six highlights the limitations of the research project and explains the main challenges faced during the project's implementation. In addition, this chapter puts forward suggestions on how future research on the subject can avoid similar challenges in order to obtain more accurate and representational findings. Chapter Seven concludes the research project by recapping the research objectives, methodology and findings.

1.3. Relevance of Research Topic

While there is extensive academic literature on media framing of past conflicts across different time periods and geographical locations, there is currently comparatively little research on how the news media has framed the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict. Therefore, the unique merits of this research project lie in its focus on the media framing of a conflict that is still very much unfolding. In addition, this research project offers a comparison of the differences and similarities in concurrent media framing on the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict from multiple points of view, namely from major Ukrainian, Russian, American and Chinese online news medias' perspectives. Although there is considerable research on media framing of Russia's 2014 annexation and occupation of Crimea, there is gap in the literature on the conflict following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine due to the contemporary nature of the latter.

The news media outlets, especially the ones with online channels are critical to shaping the opinion of their audiences on critical issues. This phenomenon can be seen with the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war (Oleinik, 2022) just as it has with other past major conflicts around the world.

In addition, the war has caused a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and had a major negative effect on the global economy leading to reduced supply of several commodities and products (Tooze, 2022). Considering these regional and global ramifications of the war, the way the news media frames the conflict will likely influence how people in the conflicting countries, their allies and around the world think about the war. This research project seeks to shed some more light on how the media is framing the conflict in the countries critical to the conflict.

2. Media Framing & Conflicts

2.1. Media Framing

Framing, also referred to as frame analysis or framing theory, is a very vague and scattered concept which often lacks a clear definition but rather relies chiefly on context-specific applications. The concept of framing conjures up a variety of meaning within different social science disciplines, largely due to the concept's dual origins, one in psychology and the other in sociology (Entman, 1993). The genesis of framing within psychology places a greater emphasis on the micro level by understanding how individuals' perceptions are formed regarding specific points of reference. The sociological roots of framing on the other hand focuses more on the macro level by seeking to recognise how groups of people collectively respond to information presented to them via some form of media in terms of their perception and interpretation of that information (Oliver et al, 2019: 12).

While definitions of frame analysis vary from one discipline to another, Matthes (2009) defines it as “a multi-disciplinary social science research method used to analyze how people understand situations and activities”. Matthes further explains that frame analysis examines how factors such as images, stereotypes, actors, messages inter alia are used to create a specific frame about an issue within an audience and how important each of these factors are. Media framing, a subset of frame analysis, within communication studies fuses both the psychological and sociological approaches to framing theory to analyse “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987). In assessing the interaction between the news media and its audience, frame analysis provides a very useful conceptual model with which to understand the format, impact and implications of that interaction (Altheide, 1997).

Beyond the obvious direct relationship the news media has with its audience, the influence of the former can also extend into realm of government policy. Research by Robinson (Robinson,

1999) indicates the news media can impact the formulation and execution of government policy, especially when the policy on the specific issue in question is unclear, weak or lacking a consensus among policy makers. This phenomenon of the news media's influence on policy making is referred to as "The CNN Effect" in political science and international relations (Gilboa, 2005). In such instances, the way the news media frames its reporting on such policy issues can also significantly influence and shape the perception of its audience about a particular government policy. According to Robinson (Robinson, 1999), a critical framing of a policy issue by the news media can turn public sentiment against that policy. Conversely, a positive framing of the policy can build public support and reduce policy opposition.

Given the partly amorphous nature of frame analysis, there is the need to root the process within a more practical and tangible foundation in order to render it useful. Content analysis provides an effective solution for this challenge (Saraisky, 2016). Proponents of content analysis emphasize its reliability and reproducibility provided the accompanying coding scheme is designed and implemented properly (Krippendorff, 1989: 403-409).

Methods of Content Analysis

Media frames are typically identified through some form of content analysis of the media reports. Matthes and Kohring (Matthes and Kohring, 2008) identified the five (5) common content analysis methods employed by researchers as the hermeneutic, linguistic, computer-assisted, manual holistic, and deductive approaches respectively. The methodology of this research project mostly combines elements of the syntactical and semantical processes of the linguistic approach together with the software based computer-assisted approach to identify the innate frames of the online news articles about the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war.

The hermeneutic approach of using content analysis to identify media frames relies on small samples of media reports that represent the dominant discourse of a particular issue or event.

This approach relies heavily on broad generalizations and widely perceived cultural elements of a given audience (Boni, 2002). Although most studies that rely on this form of content analysis tend to be well documented and thorough, it is usually difficult to objectively determine how the researchers extracted the frames due to the method's highly subjective nature (Matthes and Kohring, 2008). As a result, there is a risk of the researcher identifying frames arbitrarily hindering the likelihood of reproducibility and verification of research findings very low (Reese, 2001).

The manual holistic approach to content analysis is a procedure-based strategy that first requires the identification of the embedded frames through a qualitative analysis of the text. The identified frames are coded as holistic variables which are subsequently used as the basis for a more detailed but manual content analysis of the text corpus (Matthes and Kohring, 2008). This method bears many similarities to the hermeneutic approach and suffers from comparable disadvantages too. The manual holistic approach's process of identifying the frames in a given text is also prone to subjectivity which poses significant risks to the reliability and the validity of its research findings.

Frame analyses based on the linguistic approach involves the identification and examination of the syntactical structures within a given text corpus (Esser and D'Angelo, 2003). According to the choice, placement and arrangement of specific words, phrases and sentences, the linguistic-based approach captures the multilayered frames and concepts and provides insights into the relationships between them (Vicari, 2010). While this method provides a thorough and systematic process for analysing news text, its complexity makes it difficult to implement on large text samples (Esser and D'Angelo, 2003) without combining it with the computer-assisted approach.

The computer-assisted approach to content analysis uses software or computer-based models to find particular meaning embedded in the text being analysed. Very often, this process is done using Machine Learning (ML) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) based software programmes (Burscher et al., 2014). The ML and AI based systems used for content analysis perform complex syntactic and semantic computations on the content to identify the frames and often provide quantitative measures of the frames as well (Yan, et al., 2014). The computer-based strategy to content analysis is well-suited for examining large amounts of text since it allows researchers to automate the frame coding process, therefore ensuring consistency and reliability of the results (Burscher et al., 2014). For instance, Shah et al (2002) were able to extensively analyse 19,085 electronic articles using on the computer-based approach. Despite the consistency and scalability of this approach to content analysis, its efficacy ultimately depends on the accuracy of the software models being employed.

As its name suggests, the deductive approach to content analysis relies on the use of deduction in order to recognize frames within a given text. This is contrary to the four other methods of content analysis which attempt to identify the inherent frames in the text through induction (Matthes and Kohring, 2008). An example of how the deductive approach can be used for frame analysis is the research by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) titled "*Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News*". In this study, the researchers sought to confirm the presence of their preconceived frames within the news based on their own hypotheses by analyzing each news story with a series of 20 "yes" or "no" questions. The primary requirement for this approach is that the frames are proposed a priori to the actual research process. However, the obvious drawback is that a wrong hypothesis of the frames present in the analysed text would result in very little valuable academic insights if any at all.

This research projects mostly relies the computer-assisted approach to content analysis to examine the headlines of online articles related to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict from major

news websites in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China with the aim of identifying and analyzing how the online news media in each country frames the conflict. The specific tools for this process are Artificial Intelligence based software for Topic Extraction and Sentiment Analysis. Further details on this approach are provided in the Research Design & Methodology section of this study.

2.2. The Role of the Media & Framing in Conflicts

According to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, the media plays three main roles in a conflict. These roles are critical observers, adversarial journalists and an actual extension of the battlefield within which the conflict can also be fought between the adversaries (Szwed, 2016: 15).

The first role of critical observer requires journalistic professionalism and objectivity in order to make critical judgements on the events and actors of the conflict while remaining immune to the influence of the parties to the conflict as well as third parties with vested interests (Szwed, 2016: 15). The media as a critical observer of the conflict is a vital role for establishing the facts of the conflict with as little political bias as possible. In the second role, the media carries out adversarial journalism whereby journalists and media sources take a clear position on the conflict sacrificing their objectivity in the process. Journalists engaging in adversarial journalism within the context of a conflict often do so in an attempt to further the position of their chosen side and or to counter the position of the opposing side (Szwed, 2016: 15).

In the third role according to NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, the media becomes a domain within which the conflicting parties battle each other in an attempt to dominate the space in pursuit of particular strategic objectives akin to how they would engage

on the land, in the sea and the air (Szwed, 2016: 16). Despite the clear distinctions of these three roles in theory, the ubiquity of the internet and associated technologies like social media have increasingly made it difficult and complex to confidently make these differentiations in practice.

First applied by Swedish researcher Kent Asp, the concept of *Mediatization* implied that “a political system to a high degree is influenced by and adjusted to the demands of the mass media in their coverage of politics” (Hjarvard, 2008). Even though Asp’s initial application of the concept was based largely on political systems, Mediatization has also been shown to be equally relevant in conflicts and wars by Hjarvard (2008) as well as Cottle (2006). Cottle for instance explains that the role of the media within a conflict constitutes an “active performative involvement” within the conflict.

The audience size and scale of operations of certain major media sources enable them to play unique roles in shaping the narratives of certain conflicts. Due to their global reach, international media sources like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Cable News Network (CNN), Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera often have an “agenda-setting” and “policy-setting” effect, especially regarding conflicts (Bajraktari and Parajon, 2022). Such media sources can diminish or exaggerate the scale, impact and intensity of a conflict, effectively deciding what kind and level of attention their audiences pay to the conflict in question. Research by the United States Institute of Peace indicates that the assumption that the media pays more attention to conflicts the greater the number of deaths and scale of destruction is false. According to the institute, there is no correlation between the death and destruction of a given conflict on one hand, and the corresponding level of media attention given to that conflict (Bajraktari and Parajon, 2022).

The news media has been a present component of warfare at least since the late 19th century with major changes in technology often marking an epoch in the relationship between the news agencies, the public within the warring nations as well as the combatants. Leveraging the nascent medium of photography between 1853 and 1856, journalists were able to publish their articles in print with pictures from the fronts of the Crimean war to their audiences across Europe (Parker, 2020). Radio news broadcasts were a regular source of information during World War II (Arnold et al, 2019: 173). From 1955 to 1975, the Vietnam War would become the first major televised conflict with video footage of the fighting broadcast to American televisions (Mandelbaum, 1982). Many people around the world followed the 2003 Iraq invasion on news websites, getting regular and frequent updates as the ensuing war progressed (Fox and Fallows, 2003). Social media, as the latest information medium, has become a frequently used channel for providing conflict-related updates to audiences online (Suciu, 2022).

For almost two centuries, the news media has provided coverage of conflicts around the world to some extent. Undoubtedly, the news coverage of each conflict came with its own set of associated media frames. As a contemporary conflict, the news coverage of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict has included all mediums, television, radio, print, online and social media. News media coverage of future conflicts will certainly also come with their inherent frames as it has been in the past.

2.3. Media Coverage of Russia-Ukraine Conflicts

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict has received extensive media coverage around the world (De Witte, 2022) with many international news agencies embedding their journalists in Ukraine to provide up regular updates (Eddy and Fletcher, 2022). Months after Russia invaded Ukraine,

the subsequent conflict has remained a mainstream news top story due to a range of reasons including the obvious geostrategic significance and humanitarian impact of the war as well as its implications for the global economy, food and energy security (Zurawik, 2022). The Western news media's coverage of the war in Ukraine has noticeably outweighed its attention to other ongoing conflicts like the civil wars in Yemen and Ethiopia for example (Gharib, 2022).

Indicating the substantial interest in news about the war in Ukraine, several news websites even created special tabs on their navigation menus dedicated to news about the conflict. Such tabs are often created on websites to make it easy for visitors to identify and located popular content. Some websites also had keyword tags related to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict. A detailed analysis on the volume of media coverage of the war in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China is provided below in the Research Findings section of this study.

However, as the war drags on, there risk of audience fatigue of hearing about the fighting and casualties increases while media interest may also decline (Sabbagh, 2022). A study by Eddy and Fletcher (2022) at the University of Oxford's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism show that the news audiences in some countries have gradually began to either lose interest in news regarding the war in Ukraine or are actively avoiding it.

Double-Standards of Media Coverage

Following the Russia's invasion on Ukraine in February 2022, several major media sources have been widely accused of systematically different reporting of invasion and subsequent conflict between Russia and Ukraine compared to other conflicts in regions like the Middle-East and Africa. "Compared to other conflicts, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has generated wall-to-wall news coverage, resulting in criticisms of Western bias and racism" (De Witte,

2022). For instance, CBS News foreign correspondent Charlie D'agata was heavily criticized by social media users for implying that the war in Ukraine was surprising because it was in a civilised country unlike Iraq or Afghanistan (Al Lawati and Ebrahim, 2022).

In a similar vein, many social media users condemned the BBC reporter Ross Atkins for the racist tone of his interview with Ukraine's former deputy prosecutor, David Sakvarelidze. During this interview, Sakvarelidze complained that "It's very emotional for me because I see European people with blonde hair and blue eyes being killed every day with Putin's missiles and his helicopters and his rockets" to which Atkins replied, "I understand and of course respect the emotion" (Al Jazeera, 2022a).

Satirist and comedian Trevor Noah also accused Al Jazeera reporter Peter Dobbie of double standards and discrimination when Dobbie sought to distinguish between Ukrainian refugees displaced by the Russia-Ukraine conflict and refugees fleeing conflicts in North Africa. In Dobbie's report, he stated that "These (the Ukrainians) are prosperous, middle-class people... these are not people trying to get away from areas in North Africa" (Carras, 2022).

D'agata (2022) and Atkins (2022) apologized following the widespread condemnation they received for their disparaging remarks during their reporting. Al Jazeera issued an apology for Dobbie's "...unfair comparisons between Ukrainians fleeing the war and refugees from the MENA region". (Kilani, 2022). Such remarks from D'agata, Atkins, Dobbie and many other reporters clearly demonstrate some of the differences in racial and geographical framing of the Russia-Ukraine conflict compared to other conflicts in the Middle-East and Africa by certain major media sources like CBS News, the BBC and al Jazeera.

The media's discriminatory coverage of conflicts along racial, geographical and socio-economic lines are however not a recent phenomenon. After researching four decades of news media's framing of wars across Africa and Europe from the 1970s to the early 2000s,

Sommerville (2017) concluded that there were stark differences in the way the conflicts in either continent were generally framed. According to Sommerville, European conflicts in places like Bosnia, Serbia-Croatia and the Basque region of Spain were largely presented by the media as forms of nationalism and an intrinsic component of a more developed and civilized form of societal development. Conflicts in African countries like Rwanda, Kenya and South Sudan on the other hand were depicted using simplistic, primitive and racist tones analogous with the attitudes of the colonial era (Somerville, 2017).

Press Freedom & Media Bias

In order to carry out honest and unbiased reporting, the news media must operate in an environment that promotes press freedom (United Nations, 2016). In addition, the news agencies' ability to present the news to their audiences with objectivity is directly dependent on how well the agencies are able to control and minimize the biases, especially when reporting on polarizing issues and topics (Klein, 2020). Often referred to as the defacto 4th estate of government (Webster, 2001: 15), after the executive, legislature and judiciary, the news media is crucial for keeping the citizens of a state aware of the actions of their governments. The news media's ability to effectively carry out this civic necessity is however predicated largely on the degree of press freedom enjoyed as well as the degree to which journalistic and editorial bias can be kept under control (Druckman and Parkin, 2005).

According to the World Press Freedom Index (WPF), an annual global ranking of countries based on their press freedom performance by Reporters Without Borders, the media in the U.S. and Ukraine enjoyed more freedom compared to Russia and China. The index assesses 180 countries and territories considering a quantitative tally and a qualitative analysis of press abuses and subsequently assigning each country a score ranging from 0 to 100, with 100 being

the best possible score. The WPFI 2022 report assigned the U.S. and Ukraine with a score of 72.74 and 55.76 respectively while Russia and China on the other hand received lower scores of 38.82 and 25.17 respectively.

Several Western governments and international organisations have accused the Russian government of censoring the reporting of the conflict in Ukraine by Russian news outlets (Reuters, 2022). Russia's communications regulator, the Federal Communications Agency under the country's Ministry of Digital Development, Communications & Mass Media, ordered media sources in Russia to avoid using words and phrases like "invasion", "assault", "declaration of war" in their reportage on the conflict in Ukraine (Agence France-Presse, 2022). Instead the agency encouraged the Russian media to use the state-approved euphemism, "special military action" (Nechepurenko and Troianovski, 2022). Similarly, the news media in China has been subjected to systematic censorship for several decades. Xu and Albert (2022) have described the situation in China as "the world's most restrictive media environments, relying on censorship to control information in the news, online and on social media".

However, external government suppression is not the only structural issue that can hamper effective media reporting. The news media also often has to contend with forces of internal bias attempting to influence its reporting on certain issue. A good example of such an internal force is what Herman and Chomsky's (2002) dubbed "Manufacturing Consent". The concept of Manufactured Consent primarily argues that the news media "are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, and without overt coercion". Such internal influences within the news media ranges from the need to amass a greater audience, catering to advertisers and special interest groups all of which can result in self-censorship and diluted reporting. Such biases can skew reporting and in certain instances is

much more pervasive and harder to detect compared to the often overt government censorship (Eberl et al., 2016).

Growing political polarization particularly within countries with democratic political systems has become another source of bias which percolates into the news media. The 2022 World Press Freedom Index (WPFPI) characterizes this problem as a “new era of polarization set against a backdrop of information chaos with deepening divisions within countries but also between countries at the international level” (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). The WPFPI came to this conclusion by analyzing the political, economic and socio-cultural contexts, legal framework, and security situations around the world. Reporters Without Borders’ (RSF) Director of Operations and Campaigns, Rebecca Vincent attributed a significant cause of the polarization to what she calls the “Fox News Model” of opinion media, a reference to the U.S. news corporation The Fox News Channel. Christophe Deloire, RSF’s Secretary General also added that the “Fox News-isation of Western media poses a fatal danger for democracies because it undermines the basis of civil harmony and tolerant public debate” (Joshi, 2022). It is important to note that news articles from Fox News’ website was included in the study’s research data.

It is likely that the online news data analysed in this study was subject to some degree of the previously mentioned phenomena such as editorial synchronisation, mediatization and biases that often influence the news production, dissemination and digestion cycle. However, the determination of whether and to what extent these phenomena are present within this study’s data as well as their impact on the research findings is outside the scope of this project.

2.4. Geopolitical Interests Manifested in Media Coverages

The conflict in Ukraine has had several major geostrategic ramifications. Beyond the more obvious deaths, displacement and destruction of infrastructure in Ukraine, the war has also

adversely impacted several aspects of the global economy. In addition, the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict has the makings of becoming the start of the “New Cold War” that would pitch the dominant West against the emerging revisionist powers China and Russia (Abrams, 2022) with much of the rest of the world caught in the middle. The governments of many regional powers like India, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Turkey and Indonesia have remained largely neutral, refusing to condemn Russia for the invasion of Ukraine and some even avoiding overtly declaring support for Ukraine in order to protect their respective economic and strategic interests (Depetris and Menon, 2022).

Demonstrating this phenomenon was the voting pattern at the 2nd March 2022 UN General Assembly resolution calling for Russia to end its offensive in Ukraine (United Nations, 2022). Despite the major support from many Western countries for the resolution, 40 countries, mostly from Africa, the Middle East and Asia either openly opposed the resolution or refused to support it largely due to their reliance on Russian energy, weapons as well as other geostrategic considerations (Adeoye, 2022).

While reporting on conflicts, some news sources, particularly government-affiliated media agencies are not always immune to the political influences of the governments of the countries they operate in and this is evident in both liberal democratic countries as well as authoritarian ones. Nelson (Nelson, 2019) found indicators of “*Editorial Synchronisation*” between the framing of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and NATO’s intervention in Libya in 2011 by Russia Today (RT) and the Russian government’s statements. Nelson also identified a similar phenomenon with the Voice of America (VOA) and the United States’ government. In addition, the symbiotic relationship between the news media and the government of the country it operates in during times of war undoubtedly influences the media’s coverage of the conflict in question (Badsey, 2014).

News Media Reporting on the 2022 Russia-Ukraine Conflict in Ukraine

As the victim of the invasion, the Ukrainian news media has been compelled to shed light on the fighting on the battlefield as well as counter the propaganda campaigns by Russia (York, 2022). The news on the invasion and war within Ukraine has largely consisted of both the reporting and analysis by journalists and personal accounts provided by Ukrainian citizens who have been affected by the conflict (Al Jazeera, 2022b). In addition, the Ukrainian government has also used both the news media and social media platforms to implement a communication strategy aimed at building morale among Ukrainians, generating international support for Ukraine as well as publicizing the impact of Russia's aggression on the Ukrainian people and economy (Bubich, 2022). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has personally given regular domestic and international addresses using both the news media and social media platforms to provide updates on the conflict (Turp-Balazs, 2022).

The Russian government has however accused the Ukrainian media of falsifying and exaggerating conflict-related casualties and the victories of Ukrainian forces against the Russian military as well as the extent of damage to infrastructure caused by Russia. For instance, Russian officials contested the Ukrainian media's reporting on the Russian military's shelling of a maternity hospital in Mariupol in March 2022 (Sadeghi, 2022) as well as a June 2022 missile attack on a shopping centre in Kremenchuk. Both incidents were fact-checked independently by several international media agencies and deemed to be true. As is often the case, the true extent of casualties and destruction as well as the actions of each belligerent's forces will not be fully understood until the conflict ends and the fog of war is lifted (Andreas and Greenhill, 2011).

News Media Reporting on the 2022 Russia-Ukraine Conflict in Russia

The news on the war in Ukraine within Russia has been subject to significant censorship by the Russian government to the extent that, the government has actively sought to prevent the reporting from containing words like “war” and “invasion” but rather use the less harsh-sounding “Special Military Operation” (Sangal et al., 2022). Unsurprisingly, the heavily controlled Russian news media has consistently downplayed scale of the conflict in Ukraine as well as understating losses while exaggerating gains by the Russian military there (Thompson, 2022). In addition, the Russian news media has largely reflected the numerous and occasionally conflicting justifications for the Russian invasion of Ukraine including to prevent the threat of NATO’s eastward expansion, the “De-Nazification” of the Ukrainian government and even retaking Ukrainian territory which is historically Russia’s by right (Mateo, 2018).

Shortly after it invaded Ukraine, the Russian government moved quickly to establish control of the narrative regarding the ensuing conflict and its numerous consequences including the unprecedented range of sanctions against Russia by Western countries. In what has widely been condemned as censorship, the Russian government’s Federal Service for Supervision of Communication (Roskomnadzor) issued a directive on the 24th February 2022, the day the invasion commenced, demanding that all news media agencies and social media companies to avoid disseminating false information in accordance with Russian laws (Roskomnadzor, 2022). However, this reference to false information would prove to mean anything that runs contrary to the Russian government’s position and account of events (Kharpal, 2022).

News Media Reporting on the 2022 Russia-Ukraine Conflict in U.S.

The US news media has shown unparalleled interest in the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war. In March 2022 for instance, three major U.S. news broadcasters ABC, CBS and NBC collectively spent more time covering the war in Ukraine than any other month of any other conflict over the past

three decades, including the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq (Heuvel, 2022). The mainstream media and political commentators in the United States have framed Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an "earth-shattering violation of international norms" (Aleem, 2022) which according to the President of the Council on Foreign Relations Richard Haass, has the potential to decide if the world will continue to operate by "rules or whether anarchy will prevail" (Haass, 2022). In addition, the US news media has systematically demonized Russian President Vladimir Putin and sought to blame him personally for the conflict in Ukraine with much less emphasis on the nuance and context pertaining to the conflict (Al Jazeera, 2022c). In addition, reflecting several senior U.S. officials' comments, a significant theme of the U.S. media has blamed Russia's invasion of Ukraine for both domestic and global inflation as well as high energy prices, commodity shortages and the risk of a global financial recession (Luscombe, 2022).

News Media Reporting on the 2022 Russia-Ukraine Conflict in China

In the state-controlled Chinese news media landscape, the West is largely portrayed as the root cause of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict due to Western provocations and meddling in Russia's sphere of influence, compelling Russia to respond in order to protect itself from the Western threat (Cheung, 2022). In wording mirroring the Russian government's official labelling of the war in Ukraine, the Chinese state news agencies, Xinhua and CCTV frequently call the conflict the "Special Military Operation" (Cheung, 2022). In China, the government leverages its control on the news media to simultaneously enhance the public perception of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and disseminate propaganda against the West as part of the Chinese government's strategy to counter what it perceives to be the globally dominant Western narrative (Kumar, 2022). To this end, the Chinese government is investing heavily to establish Chinese controlled news media outlets with international reach to assert greater

control on the narrative about China as well as other major globally relevant events and issues (Albert, 2018).

2.5. Disinformation & the Media

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict is unfolding online like no other war in history, providing real-time information online and social media platforms, making the role of these online news and social media platforms a key factor in shaping the framing of the conflict. This phenomenon not only creates the ideal situation for disinformation, but also brings about a digital fog of war (Duffy and Metz, 2022). Like many modern conflicts, there have been numerous instances of “manipulated photos, false statements, state propaganda and deep-fake videos” in the 2022 Russia-Ukraine (Deutsche Welle, 2022).

NATO defines disinformation as the “deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information with the intent to deceive and/or mislead” (NATO, 2022). Although disinformation is often used interchangeably with misinformation, the latter is defined as the spreading of false information unintentionally. As these definitions suggest the key difference between disinformation and misinformation lays more with the intent of the propagator and less with the actual content being propagated.

The EU DisinfoLab, a European NGO that focuses on researching and tackling disinformation campaigns targeting EU member nations, states that the news media is a crucial actor in the propagation of disinformation. The EU DisinfoLab indicates that both mainstream news brands as well as small websites with questionable authenticity posing as news publishers have been implicated in the spread of Fake News (EU DisinfoLab, 2021). Shedding more light on this trend, research by Tsfati et al (2020) further indicates that although much disinformation may originate from what they termed fake news websites, the reach of such websites is relatively

limited. The spread of this fake news however grows significantly when the mainstream media outlets begin to report on the disinformation material.

In recent times, “Fake News” has become amorphous and vague term connoting a wide and varied range of poorly defined concepts centred on spreading false and or misleading information (Johnstone, 2018). As a response, the British government in 2018 officially banned civil servants from using the phrase “Fake News” in any official government documents or communications. Instead, the UK government has instructed the government workers to opt rather for either the more definitive deliberate “disinformation” or the unintentional “misinformation” (Palmer, 2018).

While disinformation is often associated with authoritarian countries like Russia and China (Bandurski, 2022), it is increasingly becoming common in other countries, even Western liberal democracies. A 2019 report by the Oxford Internet Institute found evidence of organised online disinformation and manipulation campaigns by political parties, private industry, civil society organisations and fringe movements in 70 countries including Western nations like the U.S., U.K., Australia, Sweden, Germany and Spain (Bradshaw and Howard, 2019). The report indicates that while the groups behind the disinformation activity largely used social media platforms, the groups also exploited the news media in a variety of ways. For instance, the report found that several disinformation actors used fake news stories and in some cases, even fake news websites as part of their disinformation tactics (Bradshaw and Howard, 2019: 15).

According to the Oxford Internet Institutes, state actors use disinformation as a tool for information control as well as a strategy for foreign influence operations. Countries like China, Russia, Cuba, Angola, Eritrea and Turkey use disinformation as a means to suppress dissent, discredit critics and drown out opposing views. In addition, political actors in China, Russia,

India, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela opted to employ disinformation as a part of foreign influence operations as a foreign policy tool (Bradshaw and Howard, 2019: 4-5).

Within Russia's military circles, the concept of "*Information Confrontation*" serves as the guiding principle for Russian disinformation and propaganda efforts both during war and in peacetime (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Information Confrontation also constitutes a major aspect of Russian Active Measures, a wide variety of tactics and techniques that include propaganda, forgery and assassinations (Abrams, 2016). According to the US State Department, "Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem is the collection of official, proxy, and unattributed communication channels and platforms that Russia uses to create and amplify false narratives" (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Russia's disinformation ecosystem is underpinned by five main pillars; "official government communications, state-funded global messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media, and cyber-enabled disinformation" (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Falling under the state-funded global messaging and cyber-enabled disinformation pillars of Russia's Information Confrontation, the online news media will most likely continue to play a critical role in Russia's overall strategy in its war with Ukraine as well as other subsequent conflicts.

3. Post-Soviet Russo-Ukrainian Relations

The relationship between Ukraine and Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union has been “strained, unstable and indeed, abnormal” (Solchanyk, 2001). Various points of contention between both countries including territorial disputes over the Crimea region (Frederick, 2014) and Ukraine’s potential ascension to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) have been at the heart of the tension between both countries over the past three decades (Houeix, 2022).

Officially known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the Soviet Union was a federal union of fifteen countries sprawled across much of Eurasia that existed between 1922 and 1991. The member states of the Soviet Union were Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Ukrainian Socialist Republic or simply Soviet Ukraine, was a significant part of the Soviet Union. Soviet Ukraine was the most economically important country in the Soviet Union after Russia and was responsible for more than a quarter of entire Soviet agricultural output. Due to this substantial agricultural contribution of meat, milk, grain and vegetables, Soviet Ukraine was nicknamed the bread basket of the USSR (Central Intelligence Agency, 2022).

In December 1991, the leaders of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (U.S. State Department, n.d.). Soon after this announcement, tensions between Moscow and Kiev started to simmer over a range of economic issues, ownership of Crimea and nuclear weapons with concerns these problems could result in an armed conflict (Huntington, 1993). Following the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union, Ukraine possessed approximately 1,800 strategic and 4,000 tactical nuclear weapons on its territory effectively making it the world’s third largest nuclear power after the United States and Russia (Gomez, 2022). This meant that

Ukraine possessed more nuclear warheads than the U.K., France and China combined at the time (Vaski, 2022). Newly independent states Belarus and Kazakhstan also inherited nuclear weapons and associated delivery systems from the Soviet Union (Pifer, 2011: 4).

Considering the significant role played by nuclear weapons in geostrategic considerations during the cold war, the possession of such weapons by Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan raised major security concerns for Russia and other global powers like the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.). Despite the almost five decade-long adversarial Cold War dynamics between the Western powers and Moscow, both sides achieved a consensus on the need to remove the nuclear arsenals from ex-Soviet states (Pifer, 2011).

Following a concerted multilateral effort, the U.S., Russia and the U.K managed to convince Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan to ratify the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and surrender their nuclear weapons to Russia under the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances. The memorandum was signed at an Organization for Security & Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) conference in Budapest on 5th December 1994 and the signatories were Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and the U.K. (United Nations Security Council, 1994). In return for surrendering the nuclear weapons in its possession, Russia, the U.S. and the U.K. guaranteed that it would respect Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and its existing borders. In addition, these countries pledged not to apply force or economic coercion against Ukraine. Finally and perhaps most importantly, Russia, the U.S. and the U.K. committed to providing assistance to Ukraine in the event that it was victim to an act of or threat of aggression (United Nations Security Council, 1994).

Russia violated its assurances when it annexed Crimea in 2014 and invaded Ukraine in 2022. Despite many Ukrainians feeling betrayed by their Western allies following the invasion (Elassar, 2022), countries like the U.S. and the U.K. have responded by asserting that they (the

U.S. & the U.K.) did not promise unlimited support and that the Budapest Memorandum contains “assurances” of coming to Ukraine’s defence but not “guarantees”. In addition, the Memorandum does not provide specific details on exactly how the other signatories would respond in the event Ukraine was attacked, leaving the nature, scope and scale of the response open to interpretation (Pifer, 2019). As a result, Ukraine’s Western allies, most of them being NATO members, have opted to provide military aid to help Ukraine’s defences rather than get directly involved in the conflict with Russia.

Ukraine’s fate has been inextricably tied its Western allies willingness to expand NATO eastward towards Russia’s traditional sphere of influence. The decision to admit new Central and Eastern European states into NATO has been a contentious issue even within top policy voices within the alliance’s member states. For example, seasoned former security policy officials and scholars in the U.S. have divergent views on the subject of NATO expansion. Former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (2009) and former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (1997) strongly advocated for the expansion of NATO after the fall of the Soviet Union as a means of maintaining and even growing Western military dominance globally. Prominent international relations scholar John Mearsheimer (2022) on the other hand has asserted that Russian aggression against Ukraine and Georgia over the past decade has been a direct result of NATO’s enlargement. Mearsheimer argues that Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine are in response to Russia’s perceived threat of NATO’s encroachment on its doorstep, a sentiment shared by several major U.S. politicians including senior senator Bernie Sanders (Cole, 2022).

3.1. Ukraine's NATO Aspirations & Russia's Objections

Ukraine has repeatedly expressed its aspiration to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). “In June 2017, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted legislation reinstating membership in NATO as a strategic foreign and security policy objective. In 2019, a corresponding amendment to Ukraine’s Constitution entered into force” (NATO, 2022). However, Russian President Vladimir Putin has described the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO as a major threat to Russia’s security and interests. In addition, President Putin has repeatedly expressed his regret about Russia’s “loss” of Ukraine and other countries due to the collapse of the Soviet Union (Bilefsky et al, 2022).

According to President Putin, Western powers reneged on their promise to Russia not to expand NATO eastward towards Russia’s sphere of influence. This promise refers to the statement made by former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III to the last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev during negotiations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the build-up to the collapse and dissolution of the latter. Baker’s words to Gorbachov were “there would be no extension of NATO’s jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east” (Baker, 2022). While the weight and implications of Baker’s statement has become a contentious issue in recent Western-Russian relations, several senior U.S. officials including former National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have claimed that upon realizing the likelihood of his statement being misinterpreted, Baker sought to backtrack on his remarks (Baker, 2022).

Since 1999, 14 Central and Eastern European countries have joined the NATO alliance. In 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland became members of NATO with Albania and Croatia joining in 2009. Montenegro and North Macedonia also become NATO members in 2017 and 2020 respectively. As of April 2022, NATO has 30 member states (NATO, 2022). Following the large scale destruction of World War II, NATO was created in 1949 as a defence

alliance between Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States (NATO, 2022).

According to NATO, the organisation maintains an open-door policy based on Article 10 of its founding treaty. According to Article 10, "The Parties (NATO members) may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty" (NATO, 2019). Countries that wish to join NATO must participate in a Membership Action Plan (MAP) which consists of programmes for individual aspiring countries' preparation to obtain NATO membership. The MAP covers political, economic, defence, resource, security and legal requirements of becoming and remaining a NATO member (NATO, 2022).

In 2008, after a series of democratic reforms, Ukraine together with Georgia applied for a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to join to NATO and the initial response from the allies appeared to be promising. At a summit in Bucharest that same year, NATO allies announced that they welcomed both Ukraine and Georgia's application and supported both their aspirations to join the alliance (NATO, 2008). However, cracks began to emerge in existing NATO members' views on the fate of Georgia and Ukraine. Despite strong support from the U.S., other NATO states like Germany and France were reluctant to welcome Ukraine and Georgia into their fold over concerns of antagonizing Russia. Instead of making a clear decision on Ukraine and Georgia's application, NATO rather opted to make a vague pledge to admit both countries into the alliance in the future, while conspicuously omitting a specific timeline (Brunnstrom and Cornwell, 2008). In spite of NATO's repeated declarations that Russia had no influence on its membership, the alliance's ambiguous response to its hopeful members indicated the exact opposite.

To the disappointment of many Ukrainians, NATO decided not to intervene directly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 for fear of escalating the conflict further. Despite pleas from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (Lewis and Melander, 2022) to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine to nullify Russia's air power, NATO leaders declined over fears that any direct involvement in the conflict would lead to World War III (Wingrove, 2022). Instead, NATO has chosen a combination of enhancing its regional presence and capabilities in Eastern Europe as well as providing military aid packages to Ukraine. NATO's allies have delivered an assortment of defensive and offensive weapons to Ukraine including inter alia at least 17,000 antitank weapons, 2,000 stinger anti-aircraft missiles (Sanger et al., 2022). In addition, NATO has positioned an Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) of four battle groups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland (U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2022).

Despite Ukraine's explicitly expressed desires to become a NATO member, and the alliance's vague assurances that membership will be granted in the future, concerns over Russia's disapproval are likely to remain an impediment to this plan. Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, annexation of Crimea in 2014, and invasion of Ukraine in 2022 shall doubtlessly factor into NATO's risk calculus of having members on Russia's doorstep. Considering NATO's Article 5 on collective defence which obliges all member countries to come to the defence a member country under attack, the prospects of being drawn into a conflict with a nuclear Russia shall remain a very undesirable scenario for the current NATO members.

3.2. Ukraine's Dilemma: East or West?

Although Ukraine initially showed much promise of becoming a model and stable liberal democratic country emerging out from the shadow of the USSR, the subsequent three decades proved to be politically and economically turbulent for the country. Ukraine was the first Post-

Soviet country to experience a peaceful transfer of power through election in 1994 with Leonid Kuchma replacing Leonid Kravchuk as president (Burke, 2014). In 1996, Ukraine adopted a new constitution that signalled the promise of political, economic and social reforms. The country's leadership however struggled to implement these reforms and the ensuing economic stagnation of the late 1990's and early 2000's would sow the seeds of disaffection towards the government among many Ukrainians.

Over the last decade and a half, the inclination of Ukraine's political leadership has swung from the West, to Russia and back to the West again. Two mass protests against pro-Russian policies and interests, one in 2004 and the other in 2014, saw the removal of Victor Yanukovich as President of the country on both occasions (Gulf News, 2016). Dubbed the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity respectively, both protests clearly highlighted how Ukraine was caught in a dilemma of its geopolitical orientation, with the West on one hand and Russia on the other.

The Orange Revolution erupted in late 2004 with mass protests against the election of Kremlin-backed Victor Yanukovich who was accused of winning the Ukrainian presidential polls through electoral fraud and voter intimidation (Dickinson, 2020). The Orange Revolution involved a combination of general strikes, civil disobedience and sit-ins by millions of Ukrainians which succeeded in ousting Yanukovich and the election of Victor Yushchenko as the President of Ukraine (Karatnycky, 2005). Despite suffering this setback, Yanukovich remained a major figure in Ukrainian politics and would stage a comeback after Yushchenko's term. Yanukovich ran for president of Ukraine again in 2010 and won, although the results of the polls were heavily contested and were even appealed by Yanukovich's main rival and then prime minister of Ukraine, Yulia Tymoshenko (Gabbatt, 2010).

Ultimately, the choice of whether or not Ukraine would seek to deepen its ties with the European Union (E.U.) through a political association and free trade agreement, would play a decisive role in the political fate of President Victor Yanukovich. Officially known as the European Union Association Agreement, the deal was bilateral arrangement between the E.U. and Ukraine to improve political and economic relations by both parties through the establishment of a free trade area (de Deugd, 2012). The Association Agreement with the E.U. had been mostly negotiated before Yanukovich's term. However, Yanukovich sought to undermine the work done by his predecessor in his quest to draw Ukraine away from the E.U. and closer to Russia. In a surprise move to many involved in the Association Agreement negotiation, Yanukovich suddenly ordered the suspension of preparations to enter the pact in November 2013 (Traynor, 2013).

President Yanukovich's decision to abort plans for Ukraine to enter the Association Agreement with the E.U. was largely due to pressure from Russia (Pifer, 2013). The announcement to terminate preparations with Brussels came just weeks after Yanukovich had a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg. According to Mykola Azarov who was the Prime Minister of Ukraine at the time and party to the meetings in St. Petersburg between Presidents Yanukovich and Putin, the Russian government made it clear that Ukraine's ratification of the Association Agreement with the E.U. would make it impossible to continue trade and economic relations with Russia (Grytsenko, 2013). Considering that Russia bought about USD 7 billion of Ukrainian exports at the time, the prospects of a Russian retaliation to the deal with the EU would have been economically problematic for Ukraine, especially in the short to medium term. These economic considerations notwithstanding, President Yanukovich's decision to cancel the E.U. ultimately contributed to his political downfall.

Although Yanukovich's second stint as President would last much longer than the first time round, he would eventually be ousted again before the end of his term by protests in 2014 bearing a stark resemblance with the Orange Revolution a decade earlier. The Revolution of Dignity, sometimes referred to as the Maidan Revolution, started in February 2014 when thousands of Ukrainians took to the streets to protest against the Yanukovich government. The protestors' grievances included the government's management of the economy, widespread corruption, abuse of power and President Yanukovich's gravitation towards pro-Russia policies (Novakova, 2017). After several days of intense protests and rioting, President Yanukovich was forced to flee Ukraine and was subsequently impeached by the country's parliament (Walker, 2014).

Subsequent Ukrainian Presidents Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelenskyy have sought to deepen Ukraine's ties with the rest of Europe, much to the Kremlin's irritation. President Proshenko who was President of Ukraine from June 2014 to May 2019 expressed the country's aspirations to become an E.U. member state (Stern, 2017). President Zelenksyy who took office in 2019 also echoed similar sentiments. President Zelenskyy even submitted an application for Ukraine to join the E.U. on 28th February 2022, just four days after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of his country (Reland, 2022). Ukraine's gradual pivot towards the European Union and the wider West following Victor Yanukovich's ouster has happened amidst growing Russian objections. Moscow's objections would however grow into the naked aggression which eventually culminated in the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

3.3. 2014 Annexation of Crimea

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022 was not the first time the former had invaded another country for its ambitions to obtain NATO membership. Similar to Ukraine, in

2008, Georgia fell victim to Russian aggression following inter alia Georgia's attempt to forge alliances with Russia's Western adversaries (Dodman, 2022). Almost a decade and a half later, Ukraine would fall victim to much of the same strategies and tactics Russia employed in Georgia.

Before annexing Crimea, Russia demonstrated its willingness to counter what it perceived as the threat of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) eastward expansion by engaging in a brutal albeit short conflict with Georgia in 2008 (Kenez, 2016). Following the 2003 Rose Revolution which swept Mikheil Saakashvili to power in Georgia, Russia grew increasingly concerned about Saakashvili's simultaneous pro-Western and anti-Russian stance. This situation was further exacerbated by NATO's seeming willingness to admit Georgia and Ukraine into the alliance while dismissing Russia's security concerns (Brunnstrom and Cornwell, 2008). Similar to Russia's pretext of protecting ethnic Russians used for invading Crimea, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed Russia's excursion into Georgia was at the behest of Russian separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions seeking independence from Georgia (Gedmin, 2014). The invasion of Georgia would become a precursor for Russia's actions in Crimea six years later.

Following the removal of the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich as President of Ukraine in February 2014 following months of violent protests across the country, Moscow took advantage of the turmoil in Ukraine to annex the Crimea (Magen et al, 2014). Ignoring widespread international condemnation, Russian Special Forces units without any insignia rapidly moved into the Crimea region of Ukraine and quickly started establishing control over the area (Treisman, 2016). After initially denying its involvement in the annexation of Crimea, the official rhetoric and tone from the Kremlin gradually changed over time. Within a few weeks, Russian officials began to claim that the seizure of Crimea was initiated in order to

defend the region's ethnic Russian population from Ukrainian nationalists and fascist groups seeking to oppress them (Dickinson, 2018).

In a manner reminiscent to Russia's 2008 attack on Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea involved a combination of disinformation operations on social media and cyber-attacks against government and commercial infrastructure (Weedon, 2015). Russia's strategy in both 2008 and 2014 included targeting Ukrainian critical infrastructure with large scale cyber-attacks. During the operation to annex Crimea, Russian hackers targeted "Ukraine's power grid, disabling control systems used to coordinate remote electrical substations, and leaving many people in the capital and western part of the country without power for several hours" (Kostyuk and Zhukov, 2017). In addition, Russian-backed groups carried multiple disinformation and information campaigns regarding the annexation of Crimea, often portraying the annexation as an act to protect the ethnic Russians in the region (U.S. State Department, 2022). Russia's repeated and continuous use of disinformation and cyber-attacks would eventually come to form the basis of its hybrid warfare strategy in the 2022 war in Ukraine (Tidy, 2022).

Between 2014 and 2021, approximately 14,000 people have been killed as a result of the conflict that followed Russia's annexation of Crimea (Mellen, 2022). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) officially a total of 3,393 conflict-related civilian deaths between 14th April 2014 and 30th September 2021 (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2021). According to the OHCHR, most of the civilian deaths occurred in territory controlled by rebel forces. This death toll includes the 298 passengers and crew on board the Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 which was shot down on 17th July 2014 in Donetsk region of Ukraine near Crimea (Corder, 2022). As of December 2021, three Russians, Igor Girkin, Sergey Dubinskiy and Igor Pulatov and a Ukrainian, Leonid Kharchenko are on trial in the Netherlands for shooting down flight MH17 (Voice of America, 2021).

Both Russia's National Security Strategy (NSS) documents in 2009 (Office of the President of the Russian Federation, 2020) and 2021 (Guler and Shakirova, 2021) clearly articulate the Russian government's objection to NATO's expansion and increased role in international security matters. In addition, the Russia's latter NSS document asserts that NATO's attempt to endow itself with a global security function and place its military infrastructure close to Russia's borders are not only unacceptable to Russia but also contradict the norms of international law. The sentiments expressed in the Russian NSS about NATO have been consistent with Russian President Vladimir Putin's remarks about the alliance over the past decade (Ignatius, 2022). In several remarks on various occasions, President Putin had stated that there would be grave consequences of any further NATO expansion, especially into Eastern Europe. President Putin's warnings gradually evolved into more tangible threats over time.

3.4. Build-up to the February 2022 Invasion

In December 2021, Ukrainian and U.S. government officials announced that Russia had amassed approximately 175,000 troops along the Russia-Ukraine border (Harris and Sonne, 2021). According to both Kyiv and Washington, Russian President Putin was preparing to order Russian military forces to invade Ukraine (Mirovalev, 2021). In January 2022, Russia sent an additional 30,000 troops to Belarus. Based on the U.S. intelligence assessments, the large number of Russian troops, artillery and armoured vehicles stationed along the Ukrainian border with both Russia and Belarus were an indication of an imminent invasion of Ukraine (Harris and Sonne, 2021).

Initially, both Moscow and Minsk's dismissed Western concerns about the threat of invasion to Ukraine by repeatedly insisting that Russia and Belarus were merely engaged in a joint

military exercise (Gramer and Mackinnon, 2022). However, the evidence provided by the U.S. intelligence and defence officials were inconsistent with the Russian and Belarusian governments' claims. For instance, according to two senior U.S. Defense officials, there was evidence that the amassed Russian forces had stockpiled blood and other medical supplies as well as fuel (Bertrand et al, 2022). Such stockpiling is inconsistent with a military exercise, but rather an indication that the Russian forces were getting ready for a major military operation. While referring to the Russian military build-up along the Ukrainian border, Mike Quigley, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives Intelligence Committee, said he believes Russia is positioned to invade Ukraine when wanted and given Russian military capabilities, the invasion "would be equivalent to a modern-day blitzkrieg" (Sciutto and Bertrand, 2021).

Amidst Russia's build-up of its military forces along Ukraine's eastern and northern borders, Moscow continued to send contradicting signals regarding Russian intentions. While several senior Russian government and military officials initially denied any plans of invading Ukraine, President Putin continued to warn NATO that there would be significant consequences if the alliance admitted Ukraine as a member (Mirovlev, 2022). In a speech to top Russian military commanders in December 2021, President Putin declared that there would be a strong response from Russia if NATO failed to present Russia with security guarantees of not admitting Ukraine as a member of the alliance (Roth, 2021). The mixed messages from the Russian government would continue up until the invasion. On 15th February, 9 days before Russia's military forces invaded Ukraine, the Russian Ministry of Defence announced that it was pulling back the troops amassed on the Ukrainian border (Taylor and Macias, 2022). A week and a half later, these claims would prove to be false.

From the announcement of the Russian military build-up along its border in December 2021 to the invasion in February 2022, the Ukrainian government's response was that of cautious ambivalence. While calling for calm in a seeming attempt to play down the risk of the invasion,

the Ukrainian government aggressively sought to secure military aid to shore up its defences. Whether due to an attempt to avoid panic or born out of a genuine hope that the chance of invasion was lower than stated, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy asked his citizens to “take a breath” and “calm down” (Bostock, 2022). In video messages posted on an official government websites and social media channels, President Zelenskyy asked Ukrainians not to give in to panic and fear and reminded them that Ukraine had been living under the shadow of Russian aggression since the latter’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. Consistent with his other statements prior to the invasion, President Zelenskyy had repeatedly stated that he was not convinced that the Russia’s invasion of his country was imminent (Bostock, 2022).

Despite his repeated calls for calm, President Zelenskyy together with other Ukrainian government officials continued to request for military assistance and lethal aid from allied countries (Brewster, 2022). Before Russia’s invasion, the U.S. alone supplied Ukraine with USD 200 million of weapons and other forms of military aid. Other NATO members like the U.K, Canada, Poland and the Czech Republic also supplied military hardware to bolster Ukraine’s defences in the event of a Russian invasion (Forrest, 2022). In addition to building up its defences against kinetic Russian capabilities, Ukraine also made efforts to improve the cyber security of its critical infrastructure against potential cyber-attacks (Financial Times, 2022).

After the leaders of NATO countries like the U.S., U.K., and France ruled out the possibility of the alliance intervening directly in the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, it became apparent to the government in Kyiv that Ukraine’s military forces would have to defend the country without any direct foreign support. After Russia invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022, President Zelenskyy was very critical of Western countries for failing to defend Ukraine from Russia’s aggression. In a broadcast addressed Zelenskyy said “we (Ukraine) are left alone

in defense of our state. Who is ready to fight with us? Honestly — I do not see such. Who is ready to guarantee Ukraine's accession to NATO? Honestly, everyone is afraid" (Baker, 2022).

The tone of the response by Western governments, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and other international organisations like the United Nations (UN) to Russia's troop amassment gradually grew in intensity and severity in the lead up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Weeks before Russian invaded Ukraine, the U.S. and other major Western countries threatened unprecedented sanctions against Russia if it decided to invade Ukraine. In a statement by U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, she said "Let me be clear, I can say with absolute certainty: If Russia further invades Ukraine, the United States, together with our allies and partners, will impose significant, and unprecedented economic costs" (The Associated Press, 2022). In anticipation of this outcome, the Russian government had gradually been restructuring its economy over the past several years in preparation to mitigate the impact of such Western sanctions (Fisher, 2022). In addition to drastically reducing its reliance on the U.S. dollar in favour of the Chinese Renminbi, stockpiling currency reserves and finding alternative to many Western imports (Morris, 2022), Russia has also started supplying more its oil and gas to major Eastern markets like China and India as alternatives to its traditional European customers (Aizhu, 2022).

3.5. The February 2022 Invasion & Its Aftermath

On 24th February 2022, Russian military forces commenced an invasion of Ukraine by attacking from multiple fronts. In a speech given that morning, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his decision to order to invade Ukraine in what he called a "Special Military Operation" with the objective to protect people in Ukraine who are being suppressed by the Ukrainian government (Lister and John, 2022). According to President Putin, the goal of the operation was "to protect people who have been subjected to abuse, genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years, and for this we (Russia) will strive to demilitarize... as well as bring to

justice those who committed numerous bloody crimes against peaceful residents, including citizens of the Russian Federation” (Simmons, 2022). Soon after the announcement, Russian military forces began attacking several parts of Ukraine.

Casualties & Displacements

Large scale conflicts typically result in major casualties and the displacement of large sections of the affected population. Unfortunately, the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict is not an exception to this phenomenon. As of 22nd April 2022, 57 days into the conflict, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) had recorded 5,381 civilian casualties in Ukraine consisting of 2,435 deaths and 2,946 injuries (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2022). However, civilian casualty estimates from the Ukrainian government around the same time were significantly higher than the numbers reported by the OHCHR. For instance, the Mayor of Mariupol, a Ukrainian city, estimated that about 21,000 civilians in the city alone had be killed as of 11th April 2022 (Child et al., 2022). Similar estimates have been made by local government officials in other parts of Ukraine affected by the conflict.

Due to the fluid and fast evolving nature of the war, it is extremely difficult to obtain precise numbers of casualties and refugees at any point in time. International observers have faced challenges in getting accurate statistics about the impact of the conflict and have had to rely largely on estimates which vary significantly in most instances depending on the source (Khurshudyan and Witte, 2022). In addition, conflicting parties in major wars often have vested interests in either dramatically exaggerating or under-estimating the actual impact of the conflict, especially in terms of casualties and refugees (Andreas and Greenhill, 2008). Both Ukraine and Russia have repeatedly accused each other of falsifying the civilian casualties and refugee numbers as well as the troop casualties on either side (Meyer, 2022). Higher Ukrainian

civilian casualties, lower Ukrainian military casualties and higher Russian military casualties are likely to support Ukraine's self-portrayal as a victim of Russian aggression that has managed to put up a strong defence. On the other hand, lower Ukrainian civilian casualties and lower Russian military casualties will create an image of a well-planned and executed Russian offensive that is cognisant of Ukrainian civilian safety.

As of 8th May 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that 5,890,875 Ukrainians had fled Ukraine to other countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). According to the UNHCR, the bulk of the Ukrainian refugees had moved to Poland, Romania, Russia, Hungary, Moldova, Slovakia & Belarus. In addition, a survey conducted by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2022) between 24th March and 1st April 2022 indicate that over 7.1 million people have been internally displaced in Ukraine as a result of the conflict. The majority of the displaced persons had to flee from their homes to other relatively safer parts of Ukraine due to the fighting. Despite the fact that the war is still raging in several parts of Ukraine, in mid-April 2022 the United Nations Aid Coordination Office estimates that about 30,000 Ukrainians that had fled the country earlier were returning to Ukraine daily (United Nations, 2022). Also, since the conflict has been largely confined to the east and south parts of Ukraine, many Ukrainians from those regions of the country have opted to move to the west and north for safety.

International Response

While many countries around the world condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the response from some sections of the international community was more varied and nuanced. Inferring from a United Nations (UN) General Assembly vote on a resolution demanding a cessation of the Russian offensive in Ukraine held on 2nd March 2022, 141 countries voted in favour of the

resolution. However, 35 countries abstained from the vote altogether while 5 countries voted against it (United Nations, 2022). The support of majority of UN member countries notwithstanding, the 40 countries unwilling to openly condemn Russia and demand an end to the invasion of Ukraine indicate the complex geostrategic interests at play regarding the conflict in Ukraine.

Much of Europe, North and South American nations voted in support of the resolution. Russia together with its allies Eritrea, North Korea, Syria and Belarus voted against the resolution. Nuclear powers China, India and Pakistan together with 32 other countries mostly in Africa, the Middle East and Asia opted to abstain the vote largely for geostrategic, military and energy security reasons (Gardner, 2022). For instance, China and Russia have entered announced their strategic alliance just weeks before the latter's invasion of Ukraine. President Putin of Russia and President Xi of China described the alliance between their countries in a joint statement saying "Friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation" (Munroe et al., 2022). On the other hand, India together with several South-Asian and African countries that abstained from the UN General Assembly resolution vote are heavily dependent on Russian weapons supplies (Adeoye, 2022).

Sanctions against Russia & Aid to Ukraine

Beyond the other countries' official position on the conflict, there is also the more complex issue of how they should respond. Western countries like the U.S., U.K., Canada and the European Union (EU) were quick to apply an unprecedented range of sanctions against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. These sanctions against Russia's economy, military, manufacturing, financial and technology sectors as well as individuals were designed to disrupt Russia's economy and cut Moscow off from major global financial institutions (Funakoshi et

al., 2022). However, the heavy reliance of many European countries on Russian oil and gas not only seeks to undermine the efficacy of these sanctions but leaves these countries open to retaliatory actions from Moscow. Russia has sought to mitigate the effects of the sanctions by demanding payments for its energy supply in Russian Roubles, in an attempt to shore up the Rouble after its sharp decline following the initial announcement of the Western sanctions. In late April 2022, Russia halted energy exports to Poland and Bulgaria for their refusal to pay the Russian energy company Gazprom in Roubles (Race, 2022).

Many countries have also provided various types of aid to Ukraine following Russia's invasion. Ukraine's Western allies like the U.S., U.K., France, Netherlands, Germany, Canada and other EU members have supplied Ukraine with several billion U.S. dollars (USD) worth of offensive and defensive weapons as well as financial support through loans and humanitarian aid like food and medicine (Al Jazeera, 2022d). In some cases however, decision by certain countries to send military aid to Ukraine required grappling with complicated foreign policy considerations. For example, Germany had to reverse its long-standing policy not to send weapons to conflict zones, a policy born out of the country's attempt to avoid repeating its role in World War II (Herszenhorn et al., 2022). Israel on the other hand has opted to only send humanitarian aid instead of weapons to Ukraine over concerns of provoking Moscow, given Russia's significant military presence in Syria since 2015 (Daoud, 2022).

Adverse Economic Impact & Destruction of Infrastructure in Ukraine

The fighting in Ukraine has adversely affected the country's economy and caused significant damage to infrastructure. While the exact loss of economic activity and estimated cost of the damage varies and is constantly evolving as the conflict rages on, the consensus among major international organisations is that the impact has been substantial. In mid-March 2022, the

International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that the Ukrainian economy would contract by 35% in 2022. On 10th April 2022, less than a month later, the World Bank announced that it expected the Ukrainian economy to shrink by 45% in 2022 largely due to the conflict (The World Bank, 2022). In mid-March, the UN calculated that the conflict in Ukraine had destroyed or damaged over USD 100 billion U.S worth of infrastructure and that number was certainly going to rise as with continued fighting (United Nations, 2022). Considering Ukraine's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2020 was USD 155 billion, this estimated cost of the damage by the U.N. alone represents almost two-thirds of the country's productivity.

Global Ramification of the Conflict in Ukraine

With the global economy slowly beginning to emerge from the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has compounded the existing economic problems facing many countries around the world. Given that Russia and Ukraine together produce significant amounts of the global supply of natural resources like oil, natural gas, wheat, barley, nickel, palladium as well as fertilizers and a host of other products, the conflict between both countries has simultaneously caused disruptions in the supply of these products and dramatic price increases (Domm, 2022). The global markets began to feel the impact soon after Russia started amassing its forces on Ukraine's borders and the threat of invasion grew more and more likely (Strohecker, 2022). Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022 and the ensuing Western sanctions against the former, coupled with the economic disruption of the latter, the global markets were not spared the shocks (Benton et al., 2022).

Strategic Blowback for Russia

Russia's decision to invade Ukraine has resulted in major unintended adverse political and security consequences for Russia's stated interests and security concerns. Not only did the invasion appear to face unexpected stiff opposition from Ukraine leading doubts about Russia's military capabilities, but other countries geographically close to Russia have expressed their wish to become NATO members to Moscow's dismay (BBC, 2022).

Before and even during the early stages the invasion, many military analysts around the world including several U.S. officials predicted that Russia's superior military would easily overrun Ukrainian defences (Dewan, 2022). However, the reality of the ensuing conflict has diverged significantly from this prediction. Possessing one of the most powerful armed forces in the world, Russia spent an estimated USD 65.9 billion on defence in 2021 according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) (2022). Ukraine on the other hand only had a defence budget in 2021 of only USD 5.9 billion, less than 9% of Russia's defence spending for that same year. In addition to having a larger and better equipped military compared to Ukraine (BBC, 2022) (Dewan, 2022), many Russian troops had been battle-hardened from Russia's involvement in the war in Syria. These reasons doubtlessly contributed to the predictions that Ukraine would be unable to put up a meaningful defence to a Russian invasion.

All Russia's perceived military advantages notwithstanding, Russian troops have sustained heavy losses in Ukraine with less than proportionate gains to show for it. According to U.S. intelligence estimates from late March 2022, about 20% of Russian troops sent into Ukraine have been killed, wounded or captured. NATO's estimates around the same period suggest that up to about 15,000 Russian soldiers may have been killed by Ukrainian forces, several senior Russian officers among them (Seldin, 2022). Lethal aid packages to Ukraine from its allies like the U.S., UK, France and Germany have bolstered defences against Russian forces and kept them from taking or holding much Ukrainian territory (Cohen, 2022).

Following the invasion of Ukraine, Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Finland that have traditionally been neutral to Russia's long-standing competition with the West have expressed their interest in becoming members of NATO (Stubb, 2022). Considering one of the major reasons for the invasion according to the Russia government was the risk of Ukraine's membership of NATO to Russian interests, the prospects of having two other countries in close proximity joining the alliance must be of grave concern to Moscow (Kirby, 2022).

4. Research Design & Methodology

This study examines the framing of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict by the web-based news media in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China through an exploratory sequential mixed method approach of content analysis performed on the news article headlines from selected websites from each country. This chapter provides an overview of the research design, data collection and analysis processes as well as explains the rationale underpinning the selection of the specific choices in each of these aspects of the research.

4.1. Research Design

The overarching research design strategy for this project is the exploratory sequential mixed method content analysis approach with the aim of identifying media frames present in the sampled online news data in an objective and quantifiable manner. Often referred to as the ‘third methodological orientation’ (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008), the mixed method draws on aspects of both qualitative and quantitative research techniques (Berman, 2017). According to Creswell et al (2011), the mixed method involves collecting and integrating both qualitative and quantitative strands of data pertaining to the research question and analysing both strands either sequentially or concurrently. The analysis in this project was done sequentially, by first examining the qualitative characteristics of the online media report data, then evaluating the quantitative aspects.

In more specific terms, this project employs the computer-assisted approach to content analysis using Artificial Intelligence-based Sentiment Analysis and Topic Extraction software models for identifying the frames within the online news articles followed by a statistical analysis of the data. The statistical analysis in the latter stage was largely based on frequency analysis. As demonstrated by Matthes and Kohring (2008), much of the content analysis techniques used by researchers for identifying and assessing media frames are often arbitrary and fraught with subjectivity. In order to reduce the degree of subjectivity, the research design

of this project relied on AI-based software models to objectively identify the elements that constitute the media framing of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. These elements being the emphasis, volume, sentiments expressed as well as the phrasing and terminology of the online media coverage of the war.

Focus on News Story Headline

This research project's emphasis on online news article headlines as opposed to the entire articles is based on the disproportionately critical role the headline plays as a framing device for the news story. According to Pan & Kosicki (1993), "a headline is the most salient cue to activate certain semantically related concept in readers' minds; it is thus the most powerful framing device of the syntactical structure", making the headline the most important component of a given framing device. According to research by Allport and Lepkin (1943) in the 1940's, the "headlines are the part of newspapers which is most universally read; frequently, they are the only part which the busy reader sees." This observation from the pre-internet era is just as relevant in contemporary online context. A 2016 study by Gabelkov et al (2016) found that 6 out of 10 people even share news stories on social media platforms after only reading the headlines. This phenomenon is a contributing factor to the propagation of online-based disinformation and misinformation (Sparks, 2020). In addition, a news article's headline does not only serve as a means of attracting readers to the story, but it can serve as a key influencing factor in how the readers interpret the story in question. As a result, news headline writers often seek to create a specific effect of a particular story among their audience

by the way that story's headline is framed (Tannenbaum, 1953). It is due to these reasons that this study focused on the online news headlines as opposed to the full news articles.

Sentiment Analysis & Topic Extraction:

Sentiment analysis, also referred to as opinion mining, is a field of study for analysing opinions expressed in a text using a lexicon-based algorithmic model (Alam and Yao, 2018). The sentiment analysis computations on the news article headlines analysed in this project was conducted by using the MeaningCloud sentiment analysis software. This sentiment analysis software detected the polarity contained in each news article's heading (MeaningCloud, n.d.). The polarity output of the software for a given text, in this case a news article headline, is classified into six results: positive (P) and negative (N), very positive (P+) and very negative (N+), neutral (NEU) and none (NONE). The polarity of the text is determined through what MeaningCloud describes as 'Advanced Natural Language Processing' that evaluates all aspects of the text including the morphology, syntax and semantics (MeaningCloud, 2015). For the purposes of this study, some of the sentiment polarity output were combined to facilitate analytical expediency. Specifically, *Very Positive (P+)* was combined with the *Positive (P)*, while *Very Negative (N+)* was combined with *Negative (N)*. Finally, *None (NONE)* was combined with *Neutral (NEU)*.

To practically demonstrate each sentiment polarity's rating, a news story with the headline with a positive polarity according to the MeaningCloud Sentiment Analysis algorithm is "*G7 countries have announced more than \$ 24 billion in aid to Ukraine*". The headline "*Lt. Col. Oleksiy Bashev (Beck) killed in battle against Russian occupiers*" would be classified as having negative polarity. "*Howitzers, drones and field equipment: Pentagon told what assistance will be sent to Ukraine*" has neutral polarity while "*Regional Military Administration: janitor*

appointed “deputy mayor” in occupied Berdiansk” is categorized as having no polarity by MeaningCloud’s Sentiment Analysis software.

Topic extraction is the process of using software to automatically identifying the underlying elements and concepts contained in a document or text corpus (Jiang et al., 2018). This is done by using Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning based linguistic and thematic models to identify the composite topics within the given text. The identified individual topics are further classified into either entities or concepts based on the model’s pre-configuration and the nature of each identified topic. For example, the result of a topic extraction output for the news article headline “Britain will provide additional military aid to Ukraine - Johnson” would be the entities “Ukraine”, “Britain” and “Johnson” as well as the concept “military aid”. Such an automated identification process for the news headline topics help to minimize the arbitrary tendencies that often plague many media frame identification research projects as previously highlighted by manual and hermeneutic approaches to Content Analysis.

4.2. Data Selection Process

In order to ensure that this study was able to answer the research question, the data selection process took into account deciding which news websites from the countries of interest would be sampled as well as the time frame to which the sampled news articles would be limited to.

Online News Sources

The criteria for selecting which news websites to collect articles relating to the 2022 Russian-Ukraine conflict was based on three main criteria. Firstly, the news website had to have the majority of its audience traffic coming from one of the countries of interest. This was verified by checking website analytics reporting companies like Alexa Analytics and SimilarWeb. Secondly, the news website had to have news stories relating to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war

which were either searchable using the relevant keywords or had a dedicated section of the website for the war as was evident in many Ukrainian news websites. Lastly, the website had to technically and legally permit the download of its content for academic research purposes, or at least not explicitly prohibit the latter. Based on these criteria, three news websites were selected each from Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China. The limit to three website per country was due to practical reasons associated with the quantity of data, cost of data extraction and time involved in processing and analysing the data.

Time Frame

The choice to restrict the timeframe of online news articles relating to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war from 1st December 2021 to 30th April 2022 was informed largely by practical considerations concerning this research project's submission deadline. The earliest warnings that Russia was planning to invade Ukraine started appearing on major international news websites like the BBC (2021), the Washington Post (Harris and Sonne, 2021), Al-Jazeera (Varshalomidze and Child, 2021) and the Associated Press (Madhani et al., 2021) in the first week of December 2021. While the full-scale conflict commenced after Russia invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022, there was significant news media interest in the build-up to the invasion from early December 2021. Although the war in Ukraine was still raging at the end of April 2022, with no clear indication of when it would cease, the end point for the news articles' publication date was set to 30th April 2022 to ensure ample time to process and analyse the research data before this research project's submission deadline.

4.3. Data Collection

The data collection process involved using the OctoParse web content extraction software to download the metadata on the selected news websites. The metadata collected included the

headline of the news article, publication data, source Uniform Resource Locator (URL), the publishing website's primary domain name and the language the article was originally published in. The data collection sequence was as follows:

- i. Search for articles on the website related to the 2022 war in Ukraine by sequentially entering terms such as “War + Ukraine” or “Russia invasion + Ukraine” into the website's search bar and proceeding to the results page. Some news websites however, had sections dedicated to the 2022 war in Ukraine which displayed all news articles related to the war, effectively making it easier to find the relevant news articles.
- ii. The search results were then filtered by publication date to ensure the news articles were between the desired time period, i.e. from 1st December 2021 – 30th April 2022.
- iii. The web address of the final search results page was then parsed to the OctoParse software for the metadata extraction.
- iv. The metadata of news articles extracted from non-English language websites were then translated into English using the Google Translate software. The news source languages that required translation into English were *Ukrainian*, *Russian* and *Mandarin (Chinese)*.
- v. All the news article headlines were run through the MeaningCloud Sentiment Analysis software to identify the polarity of the words the terms and phrases that constitute each news article title. Subsequently, the MeaningCloud Topic Extraction software identified the individual entities and concepts within each news article's title.

Overview of Sampled Data

A statistical overview of the data collection results can be seen in Table 1.1 below;

Countries	Article Count	Percentage
Ukraine	5,861	24.00
Russia	12,009	49.17
USA	5,762	23.59
China	790	3.23
Total	24,422	100

Table 1.1: Number of online news articles per country

The sampled news articles about the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict consisted of 24,422 stories obtained from 12 news websites from Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China. 24.00% of the stories were published by Ukrainian news websites while 49.17% were posted on Russian News websites. 23.59% were from American news websites and only 3.23% from Chinese news websites. The stories were published between 1st December 2021 and 30th April 2022. While 38.29% of the news articles were originally published in English, 10.17%, 49.40% & 2.15% were originally published in Ukrainian, Russian and Mandarin respectively and needed to be translated into English using the Google Translate language translation software.

4.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected web-based news metadata for this study was conducted in four main phases, each examining an indicator of frame alignment processes as stated by Snow et al (1986). The selected indicators were emphasis on specific issues and topics, sentiments expressed, volume of media coverage as well as the phrasing & terminology used. Together, these indicators form a robust framework for constructing the different aspects of the media framing of the conflict within the sampled news article dataset.

Analysing the emphasis of the online news reporting on the war, largely through frequency analysis of the extracted entities and concepts from the news article headings, was key to identifying and understanding the various aspects of the media framing that received the most focus from the news publishers. Assessing the sentiments expressed within the news headlines using the process of Sentiment Analysis enabled this study helped to establish the viewpoint of the news websites on the specific stories published and thus providing another aspect of the media framing process.

Examining the volume of online media coverage was critical for gauging the degree of frame amplification which Snow et al (1986) describe as the clarification and invigoration of an interpretive frame that bears on a particular issue, problem, or set of events". Finally, by analysing the phrasing and terminology of the news headlines relating to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict identified which aspects of pre-existing notions and concepts the online news media drew upon to construct the framing of their coverage of the war, deliberately or inadvertently. The research findings contained in this study are therefore based on an aggregated analysis of the aforementioned indicators of the frame alignment process.

4.5. Methodological Assessment

While this research approach was designed to limit the subjectivity of the identified frames and ensure that the results of the content analysis process together with the identified frames are reliable and reproducible, the accuracy of the research findings are heavily dependent on the accuracy of the Sentiment Analysis and Topic Extraction AI-based models used. However, evaluating the accuracy of the Sentiment Analysis and Topic Extraction models employed in this study requires significant technical assessments beyond the scope of this research project.

As a result, it is extremely difficult to provide an objective and accurate methodological assessment at this time.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Overview of Findings

Summary of Research Findings

The findings of this study partly confirmed the research hypothesis that the framing of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war by the online news media in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China are mostly consistent with each country's government's declared foreign policy and geostrategic interests regarding the conflict, especially in relations to security, economics, energy supply and politics. However, the research assumption that the online media framing of the war would be mirrored within Ukraine and the U.S. one hand, and Russia and China due to their respective aligned interests was inconsistent with the research findings. The research findings into the online media framing of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict are grouped under four main categories, namely emphasis, sentiments expressed, volume of coverage and phrasing & terminology. As explained in the Research Methodology section prior, each of these categories were selected as an indicator for one or more of the processes of frame alignment identified by Snow et al (1986).

In terms of emphasis, the online news media in each country focused largely on the topics, issues and aspects of the conflict that were aligned with their government's position on the conflict. The phrasing and terminology of the web-based news reporting within each country also mostly reflected that national government's professed views on the war to a large extent. The volume of online news media coverage of the conflict also positively correlated with the expected level interest of that country regarding the conflict. The distribution of sentiments expressed in each country's news websites however was more nuance and although there was some direct correlation with each media agency's country's official stand regarding the war, there were also some noticeable contradictions.

5.2. Emphasis

According to sociologist Todd Gitlin (2003), media “frames are principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters.” The focus or emphasis of the media’s coverage on an issue constitutes a critical aspect of how that issue is framed and conveyed to the audience. Following this logic, the emphasis of the media reporting can be deemed an indicator of the media’s focus of constructing its frame. Frequency analysis of the individual words and phrases used in the online news headlines about concepts and entities identified the highest focus of the headlines based on the occurrence of those words. While certain aspects of the each country’s sampled online news media’s emphasis bore similarities with one or more other countries, there were also several noticeable differences as well.

The online media in all four countries placed much emphasis on the incidents of fighting as well as the actions of Presidents Zelenskyy and Putin. These similarities notwithstanding, the news websites in each respective country did highlight some aspects more than the others. For instance The Ukrainian and U.S. news websites focused significantly more on the casualties and humanitarian impact of the conflict than the Russia and Chinese online media. In addition, the Russian and Chinese online headlines dwelled more in the West including the U.S., Germany, NATO and the EU more than the Ukrainian and American online reporting.

News on the fighting featured significantly in the online news from all the four countries, albeit in varied degrees. The Ukrainian and Russian online news headlines’ focus on the fighting, 3.94% and 3.35% respectively, which was comparatively more than in the headlines from the U.S. and China news which was 1.82% and 1.53% respectively. Similarly, a sizable portion of the online news headlines were about Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy although the Chinese news websites' headlines neglected to mention President Zelenskyy. While the news websites in Ukraine, Russia and the U.S. referenced Putin and Zelenskyy in 1.68%, 1.70% and 1.41% of their headlines respectively, the Chinese news websites referred to Putin in 1.63% of their headlines with only no mentions of Zelenskyy.

Regarding the differences in emphasis of the online news headlines, the websites in Ukraine and the U.S. placed much more emphasis on the casualties and humanitarian impact of the conflict on Ukrainians than the Russian and Chinese online media. 2.26% and 1.29% of the Ukrainian and American news websites' headlines were about inter alia deaths, injuries and displacements caused by the fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces and its impact on the people of Ukraine. Mentions of casualties and humanitarian-related issues within the Russian and Chinese news headlines was however negligible.

The Russian and Chinese online news headlines on the other hand referenced Western countries and international organisations like the U.S., Germany, NATO and the EU in their reporting much more than the Ukrainian and American news websites. While the Russian and Chinese online news made references to the West in 2.16% and 2.75% of their headlines respectively, the Ukrainian and U.S. online news referred to the Western countries and organisations in less than 0.50% of their coverage each.

The mutual focus of the online news reporting from the four countries on the fighting as well as on the leaders of both belligerent countries is unsurprising and is very likely consistent with general media coverage of previous major conflicts. Additionally, the key identified differences are consistent with this research project's hypothesis that the media reporting within each country would be consistent with that country's geo-strategic interests in the conflict. While Ukraine and the U.S. have an interest in highlighting the human-cost of the conflict to reinforce

the portrayal of Russia as an aggressor nation, the Russia and China as allies benefit from highlighting how Western expansionist policies have led to the conflict in Ukraine.

5.3. Sentiments Expressed

Overview of Sentiments Identified

Within sociology and political science, Sentiment Analysis can be a useful tool to explore the attitudes, feelings and expressed opinions about issues and topics. The analysis presented in this section of the study is based on the sentiment polarity determined through a process of computer-assisted Sentiment Analysis based on an Artificial Intelligence models explained in the previous section. Table 1.2 below shows the sentiment polarity distribution across the online news media in the 4 countries of interest.

Sentiments Identified	Ukraine	Russia	USA	China
Negative Polarity	56.02%	37.69%	42.38%	30.90%
Neutral / No Polarity	25.68%	39.92%	37.96%	35.02%
Positive Polarity	18.29%	22.39%	19.66%	34.08%

Table 1.2: Online news headlines sentiment polarity per country

Sentiments of Ukrainian News Websites

Unsurprisingly, the headlines of news stories about the conflict from the Ukrainian news websites contained the highest proportion of negative sentiments and the lowest share of positive sentiments compared to the Russian, American or Chinese news websites. This finding is consistent with the view of many Ukrainians that Russia’s invasion as an unprovoked attack on their country and a blatant act of aggression (Reuters, 2022). More than half (56.02%) of

the sentiments identified within the Ukrainian news websites' headlines were negative and only 18.29% were positive. The remaining 25.68% were neutral or had no clear sentiment polarity.

Sentiments of Russian News Websites

22.39% of the article headline from Russian news websites expressed positive sentiments about various aspects of the conflict in Ukraine, a percentage second only to the Chinese news websites and marginally higher than the Ukrainian and American news websites. The strategic alliance between Russia and China as well as the stringent media control in both countries could explain why their news agencies express a higher proportion of positive sentiments in the reporting of the conflict compared to Ukraine and the U.S.

37.69% of the Russian website's articles on the war expressed negative sentiments which was lower than the percentage of negative sentiments found in the Ukrainian and American news websites but higher than the Chinese online news agencies. Once again, the state control of the media in Russia and China could be causing editorial synchronization of the narrative about the war with the Russian and Chinese governments, resulting in the suppression of negative sentiments expressed in the reporting. At 39.92%, the Russian news website articles' headlines about the war had the highest share of neutral sentiments in comparison to the news websites of the other countries.

Sentiments of U.S. News Websites

The proportion of negative sentiments identified in the news headlines from U.S. websites was 42.38%, second only to the negative sentiments found in the Ukrainian news website headlines and higher than both the Russian and Chinese. The share of positive sentiments from the U.S.

websites stood at 19.66%, marginally higher than those in the headlines from the Ukrainian websites, but lower than the positive sentiments found in the headlines of the Russian and Chinese news websites. Approximately 38% of the U.S. news website headlines were neutral or had no clear polarity which was similar to the proportion of neutral sentiments identified in the Russian and Chinese websites' headlines but much higher than the Ukrainian news headlines.

Sentiments of Chinese News Websites

At 34.08%, the positive sentiments detected in the headlines about the conflict from the Chinese news websites was higher than the other countries' online news, surprisingly even higher than the Russian news websites. The share of Chinese news website headlines with negative sentiments was 30.90% which was the lowest compared to the other countries while the neutral sentiments identified was 35.02%.

Focus of Negative Sentiments

The focus of the sampled news headlines with negative sentiments from Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China respectively were concentrated on a broad range of varying issues and topics regarding the conflict in Ukraine. Among the most striking findings was the fact that the negative Russian media headlines barely mentioned the casualties of the conflict in sharp contrast with the Ukrainian media which placed significant emphasis on those killed and wounded by the fighting. In addition, the negative headlines from the Ukrainian online media barely touched on the economic impact of the war in contrast with the online media in the three other countries.

The bulk of the negative sentiments found within the Ukrainian news headlines focused on the fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces, the Russian government and Russia with

limited mention of casualties and destruction of infrastructure. 33.83% of the negative headlines were about combat-related events while 16.03% were about Russia and its government. Despite the devastating impact of the war on Ukrainians, only 12.23% of the negative headlines of the Ukrainian news websites focused on the casualties of the fighting and the immense destruction of the country's infrastructure. The Ukrainian news headlines also had the

The focus of the Russian news headlines with negative sentiments were less concentrated around specific topics as observed in the Ukrainian news headlines. Only 4.4% of the negative headlines related to the Ukrainian government and its senior officials with limited references President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Just 3.72% of the negative headlines from the Russian news was related to the fighting in Ukraine. Surprisingly however, in spite of the unprecedented economic sanctions imposed on Russia by Western countries following the invasion of Ukraine, only 1.43% of the negative Russian news headlines related to the economic impact of the war, while a negligible 0.29% covered the sanctions and just 1.17% were about the West. Given the level of media control exerted by the government in Russia, it is very likely that lack of emphasis on the sanctions and economic impact by the Russian media might be a result of censorship.

The highest concentration of negative headlines among the American news websites sampled were on Russia and Russian activity relating to the conflict in Ukraine. 5.20% of these headlines focused on Russia, its government and military forces. 4.52% of the negative headlines from the U.S. news websites centred on the fighting in Ukraine with 0.12% specifically on the casualties of the conflict. 3.80% of the U.S. headlines with negative sentiments were about the economic effects of the war in Ukraine and its impact on the energy sector. The negative U.S. headlines had the highest focus on economic impact of the war than the negative headlines from Ukrainian, Russian and Chinese online websites.

The greatest focus of the negative news sentiments from the Chinese news website headlines were about the West. 5.23% of the negative headlines referenced the countries like the U.S. and Germany as well as Western organisations like the EU and NATO. Interestingly, this share of negative headlines referencing the West was more than four times more present in the Chinese online media than the Russian. Only 1.20% of the negative headlines from the Chinese websites focused on the economic and energy-related impact of the conflict, which was lower than in the sampled U.S. & Russian online news headlines but more than the Ukrainian online media.

Focus of Positive Sentiments

Overall, the focus of the positive headlines from the sampled online media in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China were generally less concentrated on specific issues compared to the negative headlines. Nonetheless, a few topics received significant attention within the positive headlines from the individual countries. For instance, both the Ukrainian and Russian online media expressed substantial positive sentiments in the reporting about their respective governments. 6.56% of headlines from the sampled online news in Ukraine expressed positive sentiments toward the Ukrainian armed forces' efforts to defend the country. In addition, approximately 6.47% Ukrainian online news headlines with positive sentiments referenced the Ukrainian government and politicians, most prominently featuring President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Many of these articles expressed positive sentiments about the Ukrainian government's performance in response to the Russian attack. Similar positive sentiments about the Ukrainian government were present in about 4.44% of the sampled U.S. online news.

Within the Russian online news media, a significant share of the positive sentiments in the sampled news headlines were mostly referenced the Russian government directly or was about

the performance of the Russian military in the state-dubbed “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine. 5.50% of the positive headlines involved stories about the Russian government officials like President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov as well as government agencies like the Ministry of Defence and the Kremlin. 4.97% of the positive stories referred to the Russian military directly or referenced their involvement in combat in Ukraine.

The U.S. online news media’s positive headlines dwelt largely on the surprisingly robust performance of the Ukrainian military in defending their country from the Russian attacks as well as the humanitarian and lethal aid provided to Ukraine by the West and other countries. 4.44% of the positive headlines made reference to how well the heavily outmatched Ukrainian armed forces were fairing against the much larger and better equipped Russian military. In addition, about 1.53% of the positive online news titles focused on the humanitarian aid and the weapons sent to Ukraine by other countries like the U.S., U.K., Germany, Canada, Poland etc.

In a somewhat contradictive manner, the sampled positive headlines within the Chinese online news media were about Russia and Russian actions in Ukraine, as well as international efforts to de-escalate the conflict through dialogue and cooperation. 6.26% these positive headlines referenced the Russian government, military and senior government officials while 2.13% of them focused on the wide ranging efforts by several unilateral and multi-lateral parties to broker a ceasefire in Ukraine.

5.4. Volume of Coverage

The extent to which the news media focuses on a particular issue constitutes a key aspect of how the media frames that particular issue to its audience (Downs, 1972). The volume of media coverage serves as a factor in how the media deliberately or inadvertently propagates its formed

framing of a given issue through the process of Frame Amplification. Frame Amplification refers to "the clarification and invigoration of an interpretive frame that bears on a particular issue, problem, or set of events" (Snow et al., 1986). As a result, the more the audience is presented with news about a particular topic, the more susceptible that audience is likely to be to the way the narrative of that topic is framed (Entman, 1993).

Based on the volume of articles found on the sampled news websites during the period between 1st December 2021 and 30th April 2022, the Russian and Ukrainian websites together had significantly more articles relating to the conflict in Ukraine than news websites in the U.S. and China combined. Unsurprisingly, out of the 24,422 news stories about the war in Ukraine, as the two conflicting nations, the sampled news websites in Ukraine and Russia had 73.17% of the captured articles. The Russian news websites had 12,009 articles (49.17%) while there were 5,861 articles (24.00%) from the websites in Ukraine.

The online news in the U.S. and China however collectively only accounted for 26.83% of the sampled articles about the war in Ukraine. The U.S. news websites had 5,762 articles related to the conflict in Ukraine representing 23.59% of the total sampled news articles. The Chinese news websites published 790 articles relating to the war in Ukraine making up just 3.23% of the total sampled news stories.

The volume of news coverage on a particular topic alone does not always provide an accurate measure of the level of media interest, due to other important factors like the size of the media organisation, its resources and the frequency of publications (Yeshambel and Bayable, 2016). Due to the increasing ease of web publication, the latter factor might be less of an issue these days. All these factors notwithstanding, the volume of coverage does give a fairly good indication of the level of news publishers' focus about a particular subject.

Given the major direct impact the conflict has on Ukraine and Russia in terms of casualties, economic impact, financial cost inter alia, it is therefore expected that the online news media in both countries would focus substantial attention on reporting on the war. As evident within the sampled data, both countries' online media focused on conflict-related stories significantly more in line with this research project's hypothesis. Interestingly however, the volume of coverage on the war by the U.S. online media was almost as much as in the Ukrainian web-based news. The volume of coverage from the Chinese news websites was significantly lower than all the other countries which may indicate a generally lower level of interest within the Chinese online news media. However, a detailed assessment of the likely causes and implications of the varying volume of online news reporting on the conflict falls outside the scope of this research project.

5.5. Phrasing & Terminology

The choice of phrasing news headlines while referring to specific subjects offer useful insights into the general narrative the publisher seeks to portray about the subject in question (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). For instance, differences in the way the online media within the respective belligerent countries of the conflict often refer to each other in their reporting provides a good sense of their desired framing objective as well as their sentiments towards each other. Many of the Ukrainian online media headlines about Russian troops referred to them in disparaging terms such as “occupiers” (0.65%), “invaders” (0.43%) and “enemy” (0.30%). On the other hand, a notable proportion of the Russian online news headlines labelled the Ukrainians as “Nazis” (0.29%) and “nationalists” (0.15%) very much in line with the Russian government's language used to describe the Ukrainian government (Troianovski, 2022). This choice of labelling is a clear attempt by the media on each side to portray the other in a negative frame.

Beyond the name-calling by the respective online media in each conflicting country, the sampled data indicates a more glaring disparity in the way the news from the different countries tended to describe Russia's attack. The predominantly term used to describe Russia's attack on Ukraine within the Ukrainian (0.25%) and U.S. (0.39%) online media was "invasion". The Russian news websites however, mostly used the Kremlin approved euphemism "special military operation" (0.77%) and in certain instances, shortening it to just "special operation". Similar to the Ukrainian news media, the U.S. news websites also used "invasion" (0.39%) more than any other word to describe Russia's attack on Ukraine. While the news websites in China also used word "invasion" (0.15%) to describe Russia's incursion into Ukraine, the phrase "special military operation" (0.23) appeared more in the headlines.

The phenomenon of conflicting parties demonizing and branding each other with negative connotations during a conflict is not unique to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict. For instance, following the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, American troops often referred to the Iraqis as "Sand Niggers", "Camel Jockeys", "Hajjis" and "Towel Heads" (Martin, 2022). Though this derogatory name-calling had racist undertones, it was also a means by which the U.S. troops demeaned and denigrated their Iraqi adversaries. In a similar vein, it is very like that parts of both the Russian and Ukrainian online news media are seeking to vilify their respective opponents for propaganda purposes.

5.6. Implications of Findings

The media has tremendous power in influencing the perceptions of their audience on important issues, and this ability is especially potent during times of war (Stafford, 2013). The 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict has become a flashpoint of Western ideological differences with the revisionist powers, Russia directly and China indirectly (Courtney and Wilson, 2022). This

study's findings confirm that the framing of the conflict by the online news media in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China each mostly aligned with their respective government's position on various aspects of the conflict. This phenomenon of Editorial Synchronisation was as present in Ukraine and the U.S. where both countries score relatively high on the World Press Freedom Index (WPFI) as it was in Russia and China although they score much lower on the WPFI (Reporters Without Borders, 2022).

Surprisingly however, barring a few exceptions, the framing of the conflict by the online news media within each country generally varied significantly from that of their corresponding ally. This study's findings suggest that the framing of the war by the news websites in each country tended to be more in line with that country's interests regarding the war rather than follow the collective interest of the coalition. This dynamic proved to be equally present between the Ukrainian and the American online news media as it was with the Russian and Chinese.

While the fighting between Russia and Ukraine has been geographically limited to Ukrainian territory, the world has felt the impact of the conflict in several ways particularly through the direct regional and global security calculus by several countries as well as indirectly through its impact on the economies and energy security of countries around the world. As a result of the pervasive and diverse implications of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict, it is crucial for governments and policy makers to take into account how and what kind of information is propagated about the war in their strategic assessments. Evaluating how the war is framed, especially by the news media presents a practical and viable way to understand how the war is presented to audiences around the world.

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict presents a direct risk to Ukraine's national security as well as the regional security of Europe. In response to these threats, Western countries and defence organisations including the U.S. and NATO have committed to increasing their force size and

capabilities, especially within Europe to counter any escalation of Russian aggression (Pszczel, 2022). Also, Finland and Sweden have expressed their interest to join NATO, a move which the alliance has welcomed and has completed accession talks with both countries (NATO, 2022). Beyond Europe, other countries especially in Asia where countries like Japan (Buddhavarapu, 2022) and Taiwan (Grossman, 2022) have stated the need to boost their defence capabilities largely in response to their long-standing territorial disputes with China. How these issues are framed by the news media in such countries particular within the affected European and Asian countries will doubtlessly influence the nature of the policy response by their citizens.

The war in Ukraine commenced just as many countries were beginning to emerge from the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, compounding to the daunting challenge for national governments especially in terms of their macro-economic stability as well as food and energy supply (Kammer et al., 2022). As a major global producer of agriproducts like maize, wheat, sunflower, the fighting in Ukraine has disrupted the supply of such products and led to hikes in global prices (World Trade Organisation, n.d.). On the other hand, the unprecedented Western sanctions imposed on Russia for invading Ukraine have contributed to a surge in global energy costs since Russia is one of the world's largest exporter of energy (J.P. Morgan, 2022). As result, many national governments around the world have sought to blame Russia's aggression for much of their recent economic, energy and food problems. The news media's framing of these claims within individual countries is also likely to play a determining role in whether their citizens accept or reject the narrative.

Given these first and second order effects of the war in Ukraine, coupled with the aforementioned media-related phenomena like the CNN Effect, Editorial Synchronisation and Mediatisation, media framing of the conflict especially by news agencies has the potential not just to inform the audiences of national and multi-lateral responses to the conflict, but also

inadvertently and indirectly influence the policy direction of governments and international organisations towards the conflict. The findings of this study clearly demonstrate how complex and nuanced the online news media's framing of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict has been within the 4 countries. In addition, considering the quest for narrative control during war by conflicting parties and their allies, media framing will continue to be a key factor in shaping both public perception towards the conflict among audiences as well as indirectly influencing how those audiences view their governments' policies towards the war.

6. Limitations of Research

6.1. Overview of Project Limitations

While the research processes and techniques employed in gathering and analysing the data presented in this study sought to be as robust as possible, there were certain limitations inherent to the project by virtue of the nature of topic. For example, since the conflict was still raging in Ukraine during the course of this research project, there was limited academic literature on the conflict, resulting in some of the literature review in Chapter 3 being based largely on news reports. While both academic literature and news reports can provide valuable insights into the research topic, the latter often suffers from widely varied discrepancies and biases which the former mitigates to a large extent through the scholarly peer review process.

In addition, certain potentially important factors may have been overlooked or disregarded due to time and other resource constraints. For instance, the volume of news stories reviewed was limited by the ability to search for and extract relevant articles from the news websites while the results of the analysis was often restricted to just a few striking findings within the data. Finally, despite the fairly high reliability of the language translation software as well as the AI-based Sentiment Analysis and Topic Extraction models used to process and analyse the data for this project, they are not entirely accurate. These identified limitations ultimately affected the quality and accuracy of this project's findings and any future research related to this topic should endeavour to address these challenges in order to improve the quality and validity of its findings.

6.2. Heavy Reliance on News Material

Although previous conflicts between Russia and Ukraine have been well documented and researched, with significant academic literature available on the issue, especially over the past

decade, the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war lacked as much research chiefly due to its contemporary nature. As a result, certain aspects of this project benefited from the pool of existing academic literature, while other sections had to rely much more on recent media reporting. For instance, the assessment of media framing, post-Soviet Russia-Ukraine relations and the role of the media in conflicts was deeply rooted in the wealth of available academic research. On the other hand, the aspects concernin Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the ensuing sanctions and assessment of global media coverage relied mostly on news articles.

Lacking the often higher standards of academic publications, the news media does not always conform to the expected journalistic standards (Waters, 2022). This problem is particularly heightened within the online news industry where the barrier of entry is relatively low and the publishers have to compete aggressively to obtain and sustain their audiences amidst the increasing options of web-based news sources. Very often, this dynamic leads to inter alia the lowering of journalistic standards in lieu of poorly verified stories and sensationalized reporting (Frampton, 2015). As a result, this project's heavy reliance on news articles effectively means its findings may be subject to the associated shortcomings inherent in the referenced news media sources.

6.3. Sampling Limitations & Access Restrictions

Despite careful research design and planning for this project, the data sampling and collection process was complicated by the lack of a clearly defined population size of news websites to sample from. Mostly due to the sprawling nature of the internet and the low barrier to entry for online news publishers, this project was unable to objectively and accurately estimate the number of news websites predominantly operated in the countries of interest, namely Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China. In addition, restrictions on access to certain websites by specific

governments increased the difficulty in finding and accessing certain news websites. For example, In March 2022, the European Union ordered the removal of Russian-State owned media like Russia Today (RT) from search engine results and social media re-shared links (Schechner, 2022).

As a result of the inability to objectively determine the population of online news publishers within Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. & China, it is difficult to accurately state this research project's confidence level, confidence interval or standard deviation. Therefore, the lack of these indicators make it difficult to extrapolate or generalize the findings of this project. As a result, these findings may therefore only apply to a narrow segment of the sampled news websites and it is impossible to confidently determine or contradict this without further research.

6.4. Accuracy of Language Translation & AI-Based Models

The use of language translation software as well as Artificial Intelligence based Sentiment Analysis and Topic Extraction models for the analysis of the research data was doubtlessly beneficial for examining a large amount of data. It is very likely that the accuracy of these tools had some impact on the findings of the research. However, the nature and extent of this impact is very difficult to objectively ascertain within the scope of the project.

This research project's focus on media reports from four countries each with its own predominant language required the translation of the news headlines into a common language, English in this case, in order to facilitate effective analyses. The Ukrainian, Russian and Chinese article titles and meta-data were translated into English using machine-assisted translation software. The software used in this project, Google Translate, has varied accuracy levels depending on the specific source and translated languages in question. For instance,

research by Groves & Mundt (2015) found that Google Translate was on average about 80% accurate when translating Romance and Germanic languages, a rate higher than the other language translation pairs. These varied accuracy levels may have had an adverse impact on the research findings due to the changes in meaning faulty translation can bring about.

The AI-based Sentiment Analysis and Topic Extraction models used to categorize the news headlines' sentiments as well as identify the entities and concepts inherent in the article titles also have varied accuracy based on how well those models have been trained and their level of general applicability. For example, the accuracy of Sentiment Analysis and Topic Extraction models general vary depending on the learning classifiers they upon which they are based as well as the text corpus they are applied on (Alam and Yao, 2018). However, the technical assessment of the accuracy of these models falls outside the scope of this research project.

6.5. Future Research

Any further research into the media framing of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict would benefit greatly from avoiding or compensating for the identified limitations mentioned above. In addition, an increased scope of media types, media sources in more countries would most likely provide a more generalized understanding of how the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict is framed by the media. Finally, future work conducted after the end of the conflict will also have the benefit of providing a more holistic assessment of how the entire conflict was framed by the news media.

7. Conclusion

This project sought to compare how the online news media in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China framed their coverage of the war that proceeded from Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The main objective of this study was to answer the research question "what are the differences and similarities between the online news media's framing of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict in Ukraine, Russia, the United States and China"? The timeframe of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict-related online news analysed in this study spanned the period from the beginning of December 2021 when U.S. government started sounding the alarm about Russia's intention to invade Ukraine till the end of April 2022 by which time the fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces was raging in several parts of Ukraine.

This study's findings confirmed the first aspect research hypothesis that the differences and similarities in the framing of online news related to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China were mostly consistent with each country's government's geostrategic interests particularly in terms of their respective security, economic, energy and political considerations. However, the findings of the research did not confirm the research assumption that the online news media's framing of the war within Ukraine and Russia would be very similar to the framing in the U.S. and China respectively based on their alliances. Surprisingly, there were some notable similarities across the opposing countries on framing on certain aspects of the conflict like the humanitarian impact of the fighting as well as the wars economic ramifications.

The emphasis of online news media coverage relating to the conflict in Ukraine was mostly centred on issues that affected the respective media agencies' country and the framing of the specific issues were often aligned with the stated position of that country's government. The phrasing and terminology employed by the sampled news websites in their reporting of the conflict mirrored to a large extent the policy positions echoed by the publishers' respective

governments as well. The distribution of positive, negative and neutral sentiments within the online reporting within each country was however much more nuanced and even though some of these sentiments were in line with the respective national governments', some contradictions were also present within the research data. Finally, the volume of online news media coverage of the conflict within each country mostly indicated a positive correlated with the expected level geostrategic, economic, political and security interest of that country regarding the war in Ukraine.

This study was conducted using an exploratory sequential mixed method content analysis approach with the primary aim of identifying media frames within the sampled online news in an objective and quantifiable manner. To avoid the subjectivity that often plagues content analysis which results in idiosyncratic and unreproducible research findings, this project employed Artificial Intelligence-based Sentiment Analysis and Topic Extraction software for identifying the frames within the gathered online news data related to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict. Using this computer-assisted method of content analysis greatly increased the consistency in frame identification compared to other manual methods as well as enabling this study to analyse 24,422 articles from 12 news websites.

Due to the fact that this research study only focused on comparing the online news media's framing of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war over a limited period, it is possible that its findings are not consistent with the framing of the conflict over its entire duration. In addition, logistical and time constraints of this research project allowed for assessing only a narrow segment of the news websites within the countries of interest. Therefore, any future studies into this research question shall greatly benefit from analysing the conflict over its entirety as well as a significantly larger dataset of news articles not just from online sources, but also other media channels like print, television and radio. Making such adjustments in future studies will provide more holistic insights into the framing of conflict by the media.

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