

Katarzyna E. Derlatka

University of Lodz

email: katarzyna.derlatka@filhist.uni.lodz.pl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8120-6478>

The Evolution of the Role of Mass Media in Wars – Media as a Tool, a Threat and a Side of the War

Summary: Released information can lead to the outbreak of war, such as ‘The Ems Telegram’. It can also cause changes in the actions of the ‘great and the small’ of this world, influence the perception of reality and lead to a reversal of events. The examples of the media’s involvement in the history of wars described in this article demonstrate its use by conflicting parties as an instrument of warfare. Furthermore, they also make it clear that the media can be a threat and even a war party. During war, it is necessary to control the media space, understand the role of the media, pay attention to their presence in war, their technological capabilities, and their power to influence audiences and developments. Skilful and planned use of the media for political and military purposes can influence the success of operations.

Keywords: war, media, disinformation, propaganda, information warfare

Introduction

War has led to the creation and spread of many technological inventions, including communication technologies, e.g. radio in WWI, radar in WWII, and the Internet in the latter half of the 20th century. Modern IT has become widely accessible, not only to journalists, intelligence and the military, but also to citizens. Due to the possibility of continuous event transmission, media have become an integral part of military operations, making their role crucial to analyse both during preparations and throughout the conduct of war.

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Technologies that revolutionised how conflicts are communicated enable planning and coordinating image-related actions of all parties involved, as well as interfering with the perception of non-participants by, e.g. replicating and modifying the message within the information network. Media are used to present positions of different conflict parties, conduct information warfare and also gather and disseminate intelligence. Furthermore, war reporting attracts audiences, driving market demand and profits for media companies. It should be understood that the power of communication and information is as destructive as weapons. Published information can trigger war (e.g. the Ems Dispatch), cause changes in the actions of the 'small and great' of the world, influence the perception of reality but also lead to positive changes in events.¹ Researchers studying media influence on recipients emphasise their freedom in shaping information.²

This article concerns war characterised today by hybrid warfare, in which a combination of political, diplomatic, military, informational, economic and cultural means aims to achieve intended effects.³ Such a war involves cooperation or a combination of conventional and unconventional forces and means, synchronised to exploit the opponent's weaknesses. Therefore, the purpose here is to raise awareness that the role of media evolves with each war and to pay special attention to their presence in conflicts, the technological capabilities they possess, their influence on recipients and their impact on event development. This article highlights three issues:

1. Use of mass media by conflict parties as tools for defensive and offensive actions.
2. Attention to threats to the success of military operations stemming both from treating media as tools and from their participation by reporting events. Does media presence during war threaten only directly involved parties, or a broader group of states and audiences?
3. Presentation of media as a potential conflict party.

Due to the nature of this study, a detailed analysis cannot be provided; thus, the article focuses on key issues.

Media as a Tool in War

The armed forces and state administrations are aware of the importance of the media and the role they play in the global flow of information. For this reason, numerous tools of strategic communication exist to disseminate desired content through the

1 Derlatka K.E. 2016, 28.

2 See: Aronson E. 2000; Aronson E., Wilson T.D., Akert R.M. 2012; Goban-Klas T. 2006; Goban-Klas T. 2009; Netwig W. 1995; Mrozowski M. 1991; Pisarek W. 1995; McQuail D. 2007; Graber D.A. 1990; Condry J., Popper K., Król M. 1996; Reeves B., Nass C. 2000; Reeves B., Rivers W.L., Mathews C. 1995.

3 The concept of 'hybrid warfare', which includes information operations as one of its elements, was presented in Russian military journals in 2013. Analysts' and media interest in this topic increased following the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine in 2014. See: Derlatka K.E. 2021, 59; Bilal A. 2021.

media. If the media space is not brought under control during wartime, it can disrupt established operational strategies. On the other hand, the skilful and planned use of media for political and military purposes can contribute to the success of operations.

Among the historical examples of mass media participation in warfare, one must mention the American Civil War (1861–1865), during which the military, aware of the need to control media activity, implemented censorship of the press, telegraph lines, mail, logistical data and information shared with journalists. Nevertheless, information leaks still occurred.⁴

Another example is the Spanish-American War in Cuba in 1898. William R. Hearst,⁵ in the “Morning Journal,” openly called on the U.S. government to engage in the ongoing Spanish-Cuban conflict on the island. A correspondent and illustrator were sent to Cuba, and the illustrations were accompanied by editorial commentary matching the desired narrative, aiming to convince the American public that the Spanish were the enemy and the Cubans the victims. When, on February 15, an explosion occurred on the American armoured cruiser USS *Maine* in the port of Havana, Hearst’s newspapers strongly suggested that the ship had been destroyed by Spanish actions.⁶

British efforts to control the media space during the First and Second World Wars provide further examples. Through the Ministry of Information, British politicians coordinated communication regarding military progress, maintained public morale and conducted propaganda abroad.⁷ Similarly, in 1942, the United States established the Office of War Information (OWI) to promote patriotism and warn against enemy subversion using press releases, radio programs, photographs, posters and even films.⁸ During the Cold War, in 1953, the United States created the United States Information Agency (USIA) to conduct public diplomacy, promote the country’s image and influence societies in the Eastern Bloc. The USIA coordinated and supervised institutions such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.

Another example is the Vietnam War (1965–1975), during which television reports from the front lines led to a decrease in American public support for the war. It is often said that this was the first ‘media war.’⁹

4 Idzik J., Klepka R. 2020, 30.

5 William Randolph Hearst, an American media tycoon of the late 19th century, contributed to the rise of so-called yellow journalism – based on false, sensationalist reporting, moral scandals and crime stories.

6 The causes of the war included expansionist tendencies in American foreign policy, as well as economic and strategic interests. The anti-Spanish uprising that began in Cuba in 1895 and the atrocities committed by the Spanish during its suppression — widely publicised by the press empires of William Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer — led the American public to demand the removal of the island from Spanish control. The sinking of an American warship and the blaming of Spain for the incident (despite the likely cause being spontaneous coal combustion) resulted in the United States declaring on April 25, that it had been at war since April 21.

7 Wolska-Zogata I. 2012, 39.

8 Ward B.M., Jones F. 2003, 3–6.

9 Mortensen M. 2013, 328.

During the American invasion of Grenada in 1983, the media were controlled by barring journalists from entering the conflict zone. American television networks aired only footage provided by the military. Following protests from journalists and the emergence of foreign media coverage from the battlefield, a trusted media team of selected reporters was allowed access to the war zones.

The U.S. government also managed war communication during the First Gulf War in 1991. A strategy was developed to justify the war as a fight for freedom. The Pentagon eliminated critical press commentary by accrediting press team members, verifying, and censoring transmitted information.¹⁰ During the bombing of former Yugoslavia in 1999 (NATO's Operation 'Allied Force'), a U.S. F-117 stealth attack aircraft was shot down and its pilot rescued after several hours.¹¹ The Pentagon quickly summoned accredited journalists to inform them of the event before the news could reach them through other sources. Similarly, during the war in Afghanistan in 2002, journalists' access to information was strictly dependent on the armed forces.¹²

Faster access to information is crucial for either accelerating or halting journalists' reactions to military actions — to respond accordingly, to prevent the dissemination of incorrect information, or to intentionally release disinformation. This method of 'disinformation' is also a form of communication. Reporting from areas occupied by the military is strictly linked to the activities of journalists who are not allowed to move independently. If a journalist were to report something not approved by the military, they would lose access to information. A journalist accredited to a military contingent is directly subject to military authorities. Only selected journalists are allowed into areas of conflict and military operations — those who understand the principles of information disclosure managed by military command. A permanent 'press corps' exists at the Pentagon and the State Department.¹³

NATO also uses the full range of available communication channels in its strategic communication — traditional media, internet media, and direct public engagement. These actions are conducted using NATO's communication capabilities, such as information operations, public diplomacy, press and information activities, military

¹⁰ Esser F. 2009, 710.

¹¹ See: Mijajlović M.S., Aničić D.S. 2022, 318–456.

¹² Media correspondents operating in NATO areas were required to obtain accreditation, which provided them with means of transportation, accommodation, access to information and communication tools. Journalists working within the Alliance's area of operations were not allowed to approach secured zones without an escort. The information they reported could not contain classified material. In situations involving threats or within threatened areas, specific topics were subject to prior approval before publication—known as the 'Stop List/Ground Rules.' These included intelligence information and its sources, assessments of that information, the composition and exact locations of ships, units, and aircraft, methods and means of camouflage, details concerning troop movements, defensive positions, armaments and their deployment, operational orders, plans or intentions, casualty data (both NATO and enemy), applicable tactics, personal data of soldiers and operational mistakes made by allied or enemy forces. NATO Standard AJP-01. Allied Joint Doctrine AJP-1(A). 1999.

¹³ Cabaj K.E. 2006, 125.

public affairs and psychological operations.¹⁴ NATO's communications are intended to directly and positively contribute to the success of operations. This requires message consistency at all levels of command, active engagement in the information environment (including social media), speed and responsiveness. Communication through media enables planned narrative and action management within the Alliance.

After the Russian Federation attacked Ukraine in February 2022, this kind of orchestrated, planned and media-driven messaging by NATO has become particularly important for purposes such as deterrence, strategic communication, debunking of false information, as well as inspiration and disinformation. The goal is to achieve a specific psychological effect: a change in attitudes, beliefs, or behaviour of individuals and social groups. Therefore, all communications published by NATO — even those perceived as 'uncontrolled media leaks' — should be regarded as intentional. The likelihood of an 'uncontrolled information leak' is minimal. However, it can be an element of information warfare. Such actions are ongoing in the conflict in Ukraine, despite the fact that Ukraine is not a NATO member. The nature of the conflict and the active use of various forms of warfare — not only kinetic — create a situation in which the war is being fought, to some extent, between the Russian Federation and the countries supporting Ukraine, most of which are NATO members. It is important to emphasise the dominance of information operations that mask military actions.

Narrative control is also clearly visible in the work of Russian propaganda centres, which continuously disseminate the same ideological and manipulative messages. While these may appear primitive or naive to audiences outside the Russian Federation, they are not aimed at convincing Western or Ukrainian audiences. Instead, these narratives are intended for domestic Russian and Belarusian audiences, as well as populations in the occupied territories of Ukraine.¹⁵ In response, the West adopts symmetrical strategies toward the aggressor. The Russian Federation has been employing hybrid warfare in its aggression against Ukraine since 2014. Propaganda is a fundamental instrument in its information operations. The state exerts control over the majority of traditional media (television, radio, newspapers), with messages curated by specialists in political technology. Social media presents a challenge for Russian propaganda due to the presence of independent information with global reach. In response, the authorities attempt to limit citizens' access by implementing blocks in order to sustain indoctrination and restrict the flow of information regarding Russia's military operations in Ukraine. Information-psychological

¹⁴ NATO Strategic Communication Policy, 2009.

¹⁵ Examples of the most frequently repeated narratives include: the armed forces are surrendering without a fight; chaos and widespread panic prevail in Kyiv and Kharkiv; the Ukrainian population in the occupied territories is welcoming the Russian liberators with open arms. See: Piekut B. 2022, 77; Sijer M. 2023.

and network warfare are ways of conducting conflict and exerting influence without engaging in open combat.¹⁶

The use of media as a tool in the conflict in Ukraine since 2014 became widely recognised due to footage showing the so-called ‘little green men’ (Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms), recorded by smartphones and shared online. In 2022, Russia again utilised such content to reinforce propaganda narratives.¹⁷ War footage shared on social media by direct participants has been and continues to be amplified by global media. Russia’s strategic goals — such as attaining global power status, expanding its territorial sphere of influence, weakening NATO and increasing its network of allies — are pursued through all available communication channels, on a large scale, and with high levels of information aggression.¹⁸ Russia’s messaging seeks to intimidate and discourage Ukrainian citizens from joining the military, undermine trust in their leadership, and frighten Western nations with claims that supporting Ukraine will result in energy crises. This narrative is promoted in print, radio, television and on the internet. Russian media and political figures portray Ukraine as ruled by ‘Nazis,’ ‘Banderites,’ and ‘nationalists’ in order to dehumanise the enemy. This tactic is intended to motivate Russian soldiers and society and maintain support for the war — or, as the Kremlin frames it, the ‘special operation.’ At the same time, they promote the image of Russia as a victim, attacked by the West, NATO and the European Union.¹⁹

The Ukrainian response to the Russian media offensive has been unprecedented in its use of media, primarily social media, as a defensive tool and additional communication channel offering an informational advantage. Digital technologies allow soldiers to produce and distribute information worldwide through blogs and social media.²⁰ This form of communication provides an alternative to traditional media, making it possible to show the war from a desired perspective, in real time, and serves as a counterweight to enemy propaganda and disinformation. Ukraine demonstrates how its military and defence institutions are prepared to repel aggression. The videos published in this context are used as tools in information operations. The impactful imagery presented enhances public opinion engagement worldwide, and observers of military operations — at least to some extent — become participants in the war.²¹

Ukrainians also use chatbots based on encrypted messaging applications, which have proven highly resistant to cyberattacks. Through them, the military and intelligence services can receive real-time information about enemy troop movements and activities. The transmission of information, as well as Ukraine’s own war narrative,

16 Wojnowski M. 2017, 31; Darczewska J. 2014, 26.

17 Mazzoleni G., Schulz W. 1999, 249.

18 Darczewska J. 2015.

19 Wojnowski M. 2015, 34–35.

20 Wall M. 2005, 162.

21 Derlatka K. 2019, 213; Derlatka K. 2023, 225–240.

relies primarily on the internet and social media. These channels are vital because the internet is less vulnerable to being disconnected by the enemy and underscores the role of non-state actors and information technology in warfare.

Live reports from the front, published by global media outlets, the documentation of events and war crimes and the search for their perpetrators support both physical defence (by providing additional information beyond intelligence sources) and the shaping of the country's image. These reports have significantly influenced the solidarity of Western states in providing aid and exerting pressure on their governments. The information technologies used by the Ukrainian side have also become a platform for organising fundraising campaigns for military equipment, food and other resources. Media coverage exposes war crimes, publishes disturbing recordings of Russian soldiers' conversations and reveals how manipulated the Russian public is — many refuse to acknowledge that Russia is the aggressor, causing destruction and killing Ukrainian civilians.

The media highlight the power of propaganda but also serve as a tool for informing the public about the war, especially in the context of Ukraine. Satellite imagery of crime scenes and images of war published globally could, in the future, provide a basis for holding perpetrators accountable for crimes and destruction.

Media as a Threat in War

The main role of the media is to inform, but taking into account issues of their ownership, the question arises not about the reliability, but about the objectivity of the information presented. There are no free media, because regardless of the political system, they always belong to someone; the owner has their own interests, represents someone's interests, and is a participant in political life, economic processes, financial matters, etc. Therefore, when considering the role of the media in war, one must bear in mind the factors that determine the non-objective nature of the conveyed information. Such actions can be defined as disinformation, inspiration, propaganda, or manipulation. How harmful these will be depends on the client commissioning such modified messages. If it is the military, this constitutes a factor in warfare. If it is politicians, they may conduct their own game in international relations. If it is the financial establishment, it realises its business objectives in this way. Anyone who influences the media through ownership systems, lobbying, or political arrangements can use them to their own advantage.

A threat from the media side in war can also be the lack of responsibility and balance in reporting war-related information. Every statement made by an expert, an officer, or a politician is analysed and divided into individual theses, so that from each sentence new information, insinuations and inspirations are created, which can escalate the situation and complicate existing actions by governments, international

organisations and parties involved in the conflict. Mainly for mercantile reasons, editorial offices compete to invent sensational headlines, maintain audience interest and publish various statements and information that are sometimes denied later. Viewership, financial profits, high rankings on the most popular media lists and owners' satisfaction are what matter most.

Media cannot be seen solely in the context of information transmitters. Mass media can be a tool of disinformation by duplicating information that contradicts national interests, including by users of social media (such as trolls), and even popular editorial offices and widely-reaching radio and television stations. They can disseminate and replicate propaganda content and fail to provide complete information, which may lead to informational deficits. A threat can also arise from the interference of individuals or entities in the content of internet portals, distorting the message and introducing logically false content into information systems. Media can be used by hostile information-propaganda structures, intelligence services and information entities of other states. This can affect the loss of the ability to distribute information as well as trigger and deepen social and political divisions.²²

The problem also lies in the media space dominated by global media corporations, which own the most popular titles, radio and television stations and internet portals. Another threat is the uncontrolled development of the information market, for example, the emergence of various types of internet portals of an informational nature that are not owned by large media corporations. These portals publish information that is interesting from the perspective of the audience and the international situation, but is not always covered by mainstream media, making it more difficult to verify the credibility of the content and the author.

Another threat posed by the media is the premature publication of military-related information, for example, concerning the intention to transfer weapons to a fighting party (such as the topic of the possibility of Poland transferring fighter and multi-role aircraft to Ukraine). For the media, this is great 'news' but prematurely releasing it may ruin potential defence plans and even lead to an escalation of the conflict. Publishing conspiracy theories is also a problem. Social media, in particular, are especially susceptible environments for this purpose. The instigators of such information can also be editorial offices, which, in search of sensation and aiming to increase their audience reach, try to engage public opinion by creating controversial theses, headlines and event analyses. Social media do not guarantee verification of the information conveyed. Creating and spreading so-called 'fake news' on social media is an effective tool for exerting influence, manipulating public opinion and can impact political processes.²³

²² Derlatka K.E. 2021, 119–121.

²³ Lewandowsky S., Cook J. 2020.

Media as a Side of the War

Can the media be perceived as a party in war? The media as an entity cannot be a part of war, but due to the personal ambitions of journalists, ownership structures that, for example, favour the aggressor or have an interest in interfering in internal and international processes, they can be perceived as such. Contemporary media organisations are primarily engaged in generating profits. From this point of view, war presented in the media is a commodity.²⁴ Media corporations during an armed conflict may pursue their financial goals because the subject matter results in high audience ratings and a large number of internet views, which then generate advertising revenue. This causes self-interest (which also includes the interests of third parties financially connected with a given media outlet — these may be individuals linked to political or business groups) to become more important than objectivity and reliability of information, which can influence the international situation and the development of the armed conflict. For their own interest, the media become a part of the war.

Attention should also be drawn to the ‘freedom of speech’ in the media, which can disrupt the planned military strategy. This mainly concerns the constant disclosure of confidential data in the name of access to information and freedom of expression. Therefore, the reporting of wars by the media should be taken seriously due to its broad range of influence on knowledge, social behaviours and the reputation of states and individuals presented in the media.²⁵ During war, a conflict arises between the media and the narrative conveyed by armed forces. When the media obtain interesting information, they publish it immediately, which can complicate the planned actions of allied military forces. Such information may be inspired by the armed forces as part of information operations or deliberately disclosed by politicians acting in favour of the aggressor, or they may do so out of their own ignorance, stirring international confusion and attempting to destroy mutual trust among coalition partners, or they may simply be unprofessional.

The personal interests of war reporters, editors-in-chief, or publishers, as well as other factors, may also cause the media to be perceived as a party to the conflict. The long-known statement: ‘When war is declared, Truth is the first casualty’²⁶ remains a central problem of modern informational media, which, competing with others and trying to fill airtime with attractive news, seek sensation, tragedy and death, often creating a false image of the world. It should be remembered that the shaping of media war coverage is influenced by the political interests of one’s own country, the political environment and the media system as a whole. The responsibility for how the

24 Carruthers S.L. 2011, 5.

25 Bryant J., Oliver M.B. 2009; Kepplinger H.M. 2015, 349–351.

26 Ponsonby A. 1928, 10.

media present war lies with both military and civilian decision-makers. Often, the media censor information about the war, select certain aspects of the reality being presented and increase emphasis in the communicated material to promote a specific definition of a given issue.²⁷

An example of media influence on transforming and shaping public opinion and policy is the phenomenon called the ‘CNN effect.’ Through their impact on events, the media position themselves as a party, becoming yet another actor.²⁸ This phenomenon assumes that televised broadcasts of human suffering may cause public opinion to demand the launch or cessation of military intervention. An example is Somalia in 1992, when the administration of the American president George H.W. Bush sent troops to initiate a humanitarian intervention following media reports regarding starving and dying Somalis, and in 1993 the cabinet of his successor, President Bill Clinton, withdrew American forces after the deaths of eighteen soldiers and the desecration of their bodies in the streets of Mogadishu, which the media presented to the public.²⁹ The ‘CNN effect’ can also be observed in the war in Ukraine. Here, media pressure combined with the purposeful communication by the Ukrainian government seeks to exert pressure on the international community to join in defending Ukraine against Russian aggression and increase military and civilian aid. However, due to the ongoing conflict, it is not possible to clearly and comprehensively assess the effects of these actions.

Conclusion

Each side engaged in an information war compensates for negative informational actions by conducting counterattacks using information. Therefore, it should be remembered that during war, the media become a tool of waging combat that must be controlled. Due to their impact and global reach, they can pose a threat not only to ongoing military operations but also to the stability of the international environment — political, economic and social. It should be kept in mind that the ownership, political and personal interests of entities connected with the media, who exert indirect and direct influence on their functioning and the narrative they present, cause the media to potentially become a party in the war.

In the three identified areas of media use in war (as a tool, a threat and a party), similar actions are observed. Each action can be used for different purposes and affects the perception of the image of war. A recurring element is the presence of influence agents — deliberately placed, selected individuals who control the media such as

27 Entman R.M. 1993, 51–55.

28 The broadcasting of images of human suffering in the media led to post-Cold War military interventions carried out by the United States, including in Iraq (1991), Somalia (1992), Rwanda (1994), Bosnia (1994–1995), and Kosovo (1999). Pratkanis A., Aronson E. 2003, 31.

29 Wheeler N.J., Bellamy A.J. 2005, 564–565.

owners, journalists and sponsors. Such individuals can serve as tools or threats and may even turn the media into an active party in the conflict. They will conduct deliberate disinformation, manipulation and shape the narrative for their own benefits or to prolong the conflict. In all scenarios — media as a tool, a threat, or a party — disinformation, manipulation and propaganda are employed. In these variants, the media influence the surrounding reality and the future. This is facilitated by the media-enhanced sense of realism among recipients — the impression of witnessing events firsthand. Hence, it becomes easier to present a manipulated message to the audience, as contradictions are more difficult to detect. This is aided by the simultaneity of events, which happen simultaneously in reality and are transmitted in the media. The intention of those commissioning such actions is crucial. These actions are perceived differently depending on whether they are controlled by an anti-war coalition, NATO or the European Union or if they represent a harmful narrative leading to threats or death and destruction, such as those perpetrated by the aggressor, in this case, Russia.

The power of information causes events to happen simultaneously in the real and virtual worlds, being transmitted through television and the Internet. An attack on the opponent's information systems primarily aims to weaken their will or physical capacity to fight. It is worth noting that real events like a war within one or several states now have a global scope precisely due to the participation of states and societies through media that utilise full technological potential and rely mainly on live broadcasts. To maintain viewer interest, the same reports — for example, on television — are also published on social media. For the media, war is a prolonged event that fills programming schedules.³⁰ Therefore, they strive for participation in the event as long as possible, carefully monitoring transmissions, controlling the narrative and the information reaching and emanating from journalists, which are essential means of conducting war as well as repelling aggression.

It must be strongly emphasised that there is no such thing as 'free media.' The media have their owners, and those owners have their own interests. This freedom is merely an illusion. The art lies in using this 'freedom' in the name of world security.

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³⁰ Dayan D., Katz E. 1994, 14.

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