

American News Coverage of the War in Ukraine: The Attack on the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol

*By Margaret Cassidy**

This paper provides a western viewpoint on how the American news media have covered the War in Ukraine. In particular, it considers the assault on the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol. Through an exploratory content analysis, it found patterns in the diverse sources used in covering of the incident, word choice, photos and video.

Keywords: Mariupol Theatre, American news media, Ukraine, war

Introduction

Long before historians dig into the archives and construct well-researched narratives about past events, journalists are in the thick of those events as they unfold, trying to figure out what is happening, what is worth knowing, and how to report what they have learned to their readers or viewers. This is always difficult work to do well, but reporters in conflict zones have the vastly more challenging task of working in chaotic and dangerous settings, trying to determine what is accurate and what is misinformation and how best to construct a coherent, truthful, thorough narrative for their audiences. News coverage is often the primary way that people outside a conflict zone know what is going on, so it can shape public perception of the conflict and influence the type of support the people affected by the conflict receive. With so much at stake, it is essential that journalists take great care in the way they gather information and in the choices they make about what to report, and how.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 is a crisis that has global significance and that is extremely challenging for journalists to cover. Reporting in regions that are under siege in Ukraine is obviously extremely dangerous. At times, communication with people inside conflict zones has been limited or entirely cut off, so access to any information, much less verifiable information, has been limited. New media platforms have provided valuable access to important information, but misinformation and disinformation on those platforms threaten to obscure or suppress the truth. And then, once journalists have gathered whatever information they have been able to obtain, they have faced all the critical decisions they always face about which events to cover, and how. Every element of a story—for example, word choice, the type of images or video footage to include or exclude, the use of sources—shapes how readers and viewers will perceive the events being reported.

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This project examined mainstream American news coverage of the war in Ukraine. In particular, it focuses on two of the organizations with the largest audiences and how they covered one specific event in March, 2022—namely, the bombing of the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol. Hopefully this small-scale project will serve as an introductory case study to help direct more expansive research moving forward.

Method

This project was a small exploratory project to get a sense of how mainstream American cable news organizations have been covering the war in Ukraine. The first step was to look at the Facebook posts of CNN, FOX News, and the Associated Press (a kind of “left, right, and center” approach) from February to July, 2022 to see what they chose to post; out of all of the possible stories to tell, which events or moments were chosen for coverage?

Although there was some variation across news organizations, there was a great deal of similarity in the topics they chose to cover. Some examples of the stories they all reported are:

- The initial invasion in February, 2022.
- Ukrainian President Zelensky’s virtual addresses to the European Parliament and the U.S. Congress in March, 2022.
- The Russian attack on a maternity hospital in Mariupol on March 9, 2022.
- The Russian attack on the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol on March 16, 2022.
- The war crimes trial and conviction of Russian soldier Vadim Shishimarin in Ukraine in May, 2022.
- The crises at the Zaporizhzhia power plant—first in the early stages of the invasion and again in September, 2022.

All of these events (and more) deserve attention, and hopefully future research will look carefully at the news coverage of each of them. This project focused on one of these events, namely, the bombing of the Mariupol theater on March 16, 2022, looking at the coverage the bombing received on the CNN and FOX News websites, two of the most-visited news websites by American news consumers (Watson, 2022).

A search of the CNN and FOX News websites produced multiple stories on the bombing of the Mariupol theater, beginning on the day of the bombing and continuing for several weeks. Each of these stories was analyzed for key elements of the coverage, such as the use of sources, word choice, and the content of photos/video.

Findings

Both CNN and FOX News posted stories on March 16, 2022, the day of the bombing, and then followed up with additional coverage over the days that followed. It was clearly difficult for reporters to know exactly what had happened or how many people had been harmed. As FOX News reporter Bryan Llenas reported on March 17 (from New York), “we’re having a hard time assessing the casualties” (in O’Neil, 2022). His report includes a brief amateur video of the smoldering theater from a distance, and he was able to declare, “it’s pretty clear that something has been destroyed there of some magnitude,” but that was as much information as he was able to verify. A full nine days later, on March 25, CNN reported that “information about the full extent of the attack has been slow to emerge due to the almost complete breakdown of essential services in the city, including communication networks” (Carey et al., 2022). The situation in Mariupol was chaotic; Russian forces continued to shell the city and people in Mariupol struggled to access the theater, rescue the wounded, and identify the dead. Communication with people in Mariupol was limited and difficult or impossible to verify. Under the circumstances, journalists did what they could. They talked to Mariupol and other Ukrainian officials when possible, they interviewed civilians in Mariupol if they could, and they relied heavily on social media posts—in particular, Telegram, Facebook, and Twitter—for information and updates.

Sources

Although there was very little overlap in the specific individuals used as sources by CNN and FOX News, there was some similarity in the *type* of sources they used. In particular, both CNN and FOX News used statements by local and national government officials and spokespeople. For example, FOX News quoted Mariupol Deputy Mayor Sergei Orlov, Ukrainian Parliament member Serhiy Taruta, the Ukraine Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (O’Neil, 2022; Pagonis, 2022). CNN quoted Mariupol government official Maxim Kach, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Irina Vereshchuk, “local authorities” in Lviv, and Mariupol “officials” (Lister et al., 2022).

Some of these sources appear to have been interviewed by CNN or FOX News reporters, while some information was obtained less directly. For example, CNN used the term “told CNN” in reference to Peter Andruishchenko (advisor to the Mariupol mayor) and the Mariupol Deputy Mayor (Lister et al., 2022) Kateryna Erskaya, a journalist who was at the Mariupol theater, “talked to CNN” about what she witnessed (Macintosh & Ochman, 2022). This language suggests that these sources were in direct contact with CNN reporters. However, reporters also relied heavily on social media posts for information. CNN used the Telegram channel of the Mariupol City Council (Lister et al., 2022), and FOX News cited Telegram information from Ukraine’s ombudsman Ludmyla Denisova (Pagonis,

2022) and “officials representing Mariupol” (Conklin, 2022). CNN used the Facebook posts of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (Carey et al., 2022) and head of the Donetsk region administration Pavlo Kyrylenko (Lister et al., 2022), and FOX News cited a Facebook post by Ukrainian Parliament member Sergiy Taruta (Pagones, 2022). FOX News shared the Twitter post of UK Foreign Affairs Minister Dmytro Kuleba (O’Neil, 2022) and a statement by the Mariupol Deputy Mayor to the BBC (Conklin, 2022), and CNN used the televised message of Irina Vereshchuk (Lister et al., 2022).

CNN sometimes used civilian sources in their reporting. One CNN story describes the experience of several civilians. One is “Serhii,” a Mariupol man whose wife and two daughters were in the theater (Mackintosh & Ochman, 2022). A second civilian source in this story is Anna Kotelnikova, an anesthesiologist who escaped Mariupol just before the theater bombing; CNN used several of her photos in this story. Another CNN report features CNN reporter Ivan Watson talking with Maria Kutnyakova, a civilian who had survived the theater attack (CNN, 3/30/22). Overall, however, civilian sources were relatively rare in CNN’s and FOX News’ reporting.

Word Choice

A reporter’s choice of words can shape a reader’s perception or interpretation, direct their sympathies, and invite them to identify with one or another person or group in the story. Word choice can portray someone as a hero or a villain; it can obscure events in euphemistic phrases or lay them bare in graphic terms. In the case of the Mariupol theater attack, both CNN and FOX News were unambiguous in their presentation of Russia as the villain. Both organizations acknowledged the Russian claim that it was Ukrainian soldiers, not civilians in the theater, as well as the claim that Ukrainian forces bombed the theater. However, both organizations gave no credence to these claims, and proceeded to report this story as an act of depraved and unjustified Russian aggression. CNN referred to the attack as a “brazen” act by Russian forces (Macintosh & Ochman, 2022), quoted President Zelensky calling it a “war crime” (Carey et al., 2022). Similarly, FOX News called the attack a “horrendous war crime” (Conklin, 2022) and quotes the Mariupol City Council describing Russian forces as “fascists of the 21st century” (Conklin, 2022). FOX News described how civilians had “sought refuge” in the theater (O’Neil, 2022), one of the last intact large structures in Mariupol, and while acknowledging the Russian explanation for the bombing, commented that “somebody’s not telling the truth here” in the context of speaking of the “horrific atrocities” committed by Russian troops (O’Neil, 2022). CNN reported the hope that “evacuation corridors” could be established for civilians to escape Mariupol (Carey & Alkhaldi, 2022), and FOX News reported that some civilians had managed to escape through a “humanitarian corridor” (O’Neil, 2022). FOX News anchor Bill Hemmer likened the situation in Mariupol to the “humanitarian disaster” in Rwanda in the 1990s (FOX News Network, 2022). CNN also suggested a parallel to historical events by quoting Serhii, a Ukrainian civilian, who described the situation in Mariupol as a

“holodomor;” coming from the Ukrainian words for “hunger” and “extermination,” “holodomor” refers to a 1930s famine, allegedly engineered by Joseph Stalin, that killed millions of Ukrainians (Mackintosh & Ochman, 2022). CNN also quotes Serhii’s comparison of the destruction caused by Russian forces in Mariupol to the destruction caused by the Nazis in World War II; Serhii says, “the destruction now is greater than the Nazis did during World War II. This is a historical remake, this is another war crime (in Mackintosh & Ochman, 2022). Whether Americans followed the CNN or the FOX News coverage of this attack, they were encountering language that encouraged them to perceive the event as an appalling, merciless act by Russian forces against Ukrainian civilians.

Photos and Video

Just as word choice can be powerful, the subject matter of photos and video footage can be very compelling. Decisions about what images or footage to use can be extremely difficult, particularly when these decisions involve how much carnage or death to reveal. In the first days of reporting the bombing of the Mariupol theater, it appears the challenge for news organizations was not which images to use, but whether they had any images at all. Much as reporters had very little access to sources in the conflict zone, they also appear not to have had photos or video. Neither CNN nor FOX News had footage from their own reporters in Mariupol. On the day of the bombing, CNN used two photos of the damaged theater that they had obtained from Telegram (Lister et al., 2022). The next day, FOX News had a very short amateur video of the smoldering theater from a distance that they had obtained from the Telegram channel of the Mariupol City Council (O’Neil, 2022). FOX News used a number of photos in their reporting the day after the bombing, but they were from other parts of Ukraine and they were presented in a broader context than just the attack on the theater (O’Neil, 2022). Some of these photos were very graphic, showing civilian corpses in the streets and people grieving or tending to the dead.

Nearly two weeks later, on March 29, CNN posted a video story by anchor Jonathan Berman from Lviv in which CNN shared newly-obtained video footage posted on the Telegram channel of the Mariupol City Council showing people leaving the bombed theater in March 16 (CNN, 3/29/22). FOX News included “photos released by the city council” of Mariupol (Pagonis, 2022). As mentioned earlier, CNN’s March 21 report includes photos taken by Mariupol resident Anna Kotelnikova before the bombing. These photos show people outside the theater, as well as destruction throughout the city.

One photo stands out as particularly powerful, in spite of the fact that at first glance, it might not strike a viewer as all that interesting or informative. A Maxar satellite image (used by CNN and FOX News) shows a grainy aerial view of the theater before the bombing with the word “дЕТИ” (Russian for “children”) painted in white on the ground on opposite sides of the theater. Later reporting by the Associated Press would confirm that a set designer for the theater painted this word outside the theater to signal to Russian forces flying overhead that there were

children sheltering inside, as a plea for them to spare the children's lives (Lori Hinnant, 2022). Although typically one might think of close-up images of wounded or grieving civilians as the most heart-wrenching subject matter, this image was horrifying and heartbreaking in its capacity to evoke a sense of horror in those who see it. Perhaps more than any other reporting, this one image served as proof that there was no possibility that this attack was a mistake; instead, Russian forces were clearly capable of knowingly and deliberately slaughtering Ukrainian children. This image may very well endure as one of the most memorable, iconic images of the conflict.

Discussion

One aspect of the coverage of the Mariupol theater bombing that stands out is the challenge of obtaining any information at all. As CNN reported on March 21, "Mariupol has become a black box, with information only beginning to trickle out as residents escape" (Mackintosh & Ochman, 2022). CNN captured civilians' anguish over not knowing what was happening:

For days, family and friends of those inside [the theater] have waited on tenterhooks for news of their fate, posting in local Telegram channels and Facebook groups asking if anyone has seen their loved ones. Posts from some of those who have managed to escape the city haven't instilled much hope, describing basements turned into tombs, and streets littered with dead bodies (Mackintosh & Ochman, 2022).

This quote reveals one of the key features of information gathering during this crisis: the use of social media to obtain information when it was nearly impossible to access sources directly. In particular, the messaging app Telegram has been used extensively in this conflict and has become "the go-to place for unfiltered live war updates for both Ukrainian refugees and increasingly isolated Russians alike" (Allyn, 2022). Although there are legitimate concerns that Telegram can also be a source of propaganda and disinformation (Bergengruen, 2022), it has provided many individuals and groups, from civilians to local officials to President Zelensky, with the means of reaching a wide audience.

The "black box" of Mariupol was illuminated two months after the theater attack when the Associated Press released the results of a careful investigation they conducted that constructed a more detailed and accurate account of the bombing and its aftermath than CNN, FOX News, or other news organizations had been able to provide (Lori Hinnant, 2022). The AP reporters drew from a wide range of information sources for this investigation, including detailed eyewitness accounts of Ukrainians who sheltered in the theater, cell phone videos, photos, satellite images, drone footage, theater floor plans and a 3-D model of the theater that they constructed for the investigation. This investigation enabled AP reporters to revise earlier estimates of the death toll, which tragically doubled from 300 to 600. The report includes the AP's methodology to estimate casualties; for example, they compiled and compared eyewitness accounts of how many people were sheltered in different areas of the theater, which exits were blocked by

rubble, and what they saw as they escaped (Ritzel, 2022). The AP report highlights the value of investigative journalism and the way this type of reporting takes the time to explore issues very deeply and comprehensively, thus providing insights that are unavailable when events are first unfolding.

Another interesting feature of the CNN and FOX News reporting of the Mariupol theater attack is the similarity in the tone of reporting of the two organizations. At a time when American society is so severely polarized, and when American news media are among the institutions that exhibit (and perhaps contribute to) that polarization, it is very interesting to see a case where there is such alignment in the approach to a news story. If presented with an “anonymized” report on the Mariupol theater bombing, one would be hard-pressed to identify whether it came from CNN or FOX News. This is rather extraordinary, considering the way these organizations have taken opposite sides from each other in so much of their reporting in recent years.

This alignment of U.S. news media mirrors Gregory T. Papanikos’ study of Greek news coverage of the initial Russian invasion of Ukraine (Papanikos, 2023). Although the three Greek newspapers included in his study spanned a variety of political perspectives, and “Greek public opinion is highly divided on any issue” (Papanikos, 2022, p. 12), all three newspapers were “unequivocally against the Russian-Belarus invasion. Papanikos notes that coverage of the war in Ukraine “was more neutral and less controversial than other areas of political conflict in Greece”. These findings in Greece are very similar to those of this study of American news.

Conclusion

Clearly, there is much more work to do to more fully examine the American news coverage of the war in Ukraine. It would be interesting to see if similar patterns of reporting hold for other events in the war, and if news organizations that tend to skew in different directions on political issues continue to align so closely in their approach to stories about Ukraine. The AP report also reminds us of the extremely important work of careful, detailed investigative work over time and the value of the reporting that comes out of that work. As this conflict enters its second year, one can hope that more of this type of investigative reporting will emerge to help people around the world make sense of this crisis.

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