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## Media Coverage of Mediation: Before and During the Russian–Ukrainian War\*

### *Abstract*

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** This study's objective is to examine how mediation is presented in the news media stories before and during the outbreak of war.

**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The research problem is an attempt to answer the question if in stories, whereas their headlines introduce the word “mediation” or “mediator,” respond to the concepts of mediation, peace, or war journalism. This documentary research analyzes 100 news published in Spanish, where we examine how the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is presented to the readers. In addition, three experts in culture of peace (from Spain, Mexico, and Colombia) were interviewed regarding the media portrayals of war and mediation.

**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** This investigation begins with a recapitulation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine; before and after the outbreak of the war, different personalities offered intervention as a possible mediation. Despite the intentions to mediate, the war broke out, and the international community continued to search for a mediator. Thus, the influence of the media using specific words like “mediation” deserves to be explored.

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**RESEARCH RESULTS:** The study's findings reveal that 85% of the analyzed media used a vocabulary whose style responds to war journalism and contradicts the idea of mediation in the bodies of the news stories. As a result, four categories emerge: self-proposed mediators, requested/expected mediators, mediating countries, and mediation experts.

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**CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:** This research demonstrates that the sense of mediation in media does not provide clarity but rather confusion. Even if the intention of mediation is covered, mostly, it is accompanied by a binary perspective of the conflict, which is the opposite of what mediation implies. The findings indicate a need to create spaces for training on culture and peace-building in the newsrooms to improve journalistic practices about armed conflicts.

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**KEYWORDS:**

mediation, media, war, Russia, Ukraine

## INTRODUCTION

After months of tensions and unsuccessful negotiations, on 24 February 2022, war broke out between Russia and Ukraine, and at the time of the production of this study continues. This armed conflict has become Europe's worst security crisis since the end of the Second World War (European Parliament, 2022). Faced with this, the search to put an end to the war has led to an intense search for mediators that have been disseminated through the media at a global level. Not only have readers been able to follow the conflict, and the escalation of violence reported in the news, but they have also become witnesses of the mediations proposed in this war scenario.

In this sense, the feeling that society develops – toward or against the idea of war – turns out to be a key variable, which can be synthesized as two main subjects regarding how the audience reacts and how the feeling of getting information sent 24-hours a day is fed. The media have a preponderant role when it comes to the social development of attitudes towards a conflict (Fisas, 1998): aggressive behaviours, justifying war-related actions, stereotyping, and picturing the enemy and its demonization. Tortosa (2003) examined the media's influence on war propaganda. Several investigations focused on Rwanda's genocide and how the role of 'hate speech' and 'hate media' exposed the ability the media have when it comes

to influencing the audience in violent times (Frère, 2007; Thompson, 2007). During a conflict, the media play an active and relevant role, acting as “sources of information, combatants, weapons, objectives, and battlefield” (Hackett, 2007, p. 48). According to Seethaler (2013) the relationship between war, media, and public could meet a delicate balance between freedom of opinion and patriotic needs, for Chaudhary et al. (2022) the interaction between media and conflict is complex and diverse; because media can be not only the adversary of conflict, but also the initiator, facilitator, mediator, organizer and escalation environment of conflict (Budka & Brauchler, 2020). In that sense, reporting (and developing) conflicts determined by the media, on the one hand, contributes to social development and the establishment of a new consensus model; on the other hand, may also cause serious consequences to society (Лабуш & Пью, 2019; cited in Vartanova et al., 2022). For some authors, by representing conflict in media could intensify (Hart et al., 2020) or reduce the social polarization at multiple levels (Barbera, 2014). However, several studies present different components related to the media coverage of conflicts related to geopolitical implications. Siraj’s (2008) study, a content analysis of the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*’s coverage of the Kashmir conflict, concluded that geopolitical implications were also important when framing stories in terms of war and peace, as these U.S. newspapers often portrayed Pakistan as the enemy. Fahmy and Eakin’s (2014) research based on the 2010 Israeli-Palestinian incident of Mavi Marmara concluded that the Israelian newspaper (*Haaretz*) used more war journalism narratives than the two non-Israeli papers (*The Guardian* and *The New York Times*).

Other studies demonstrate the presence of peace journalism framed in media coverage, such as the Sri Lanka and Philippines internal conflicts, which encouraged peace journalism in 2001 during the ceasefire agreement (Lee et al., 2006). In that sense, Zesatti-Ávila (2017) notes that

peace journalism is not, as many believe, the reporting of good news, but a follow-up of our past and current reality from another perspective, with another perspective and with different motivations (p. 28)

Given that our selection of analyzed news comes from Spanish-language media published in Spain and Latin America, it can be seen

that in these geographical points, different mediation experiences were implemented in the face of conflicts, among which the following stand out: Argentina and England on the Malvinas/Falklands in 1982 mediated by Alexander Haig (Youssef & Jalil Al-Harbieh, 2021); Argentina and Chile conflict on Beagle Channel mediated by the Vatican (Garrett, 1985); Colombia and FARCS mediated by Cuba and Norway during 2010-2016 (Rocha, 2021); Spanish government and ETA mediated by different leaders (Jiménez-Yáñez & Ricardo-María, 2022). For this study, based on the media portrayals of mediation during and after the war between Ukraine and Russia, our aim is to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1: Do the news with the word mediation or mediator in the headline address the concept of mediation?*

*RQ2: Do the news that have the word mediation or mediator in the headline respond to what is known as peace or war journalism?*

## METHODOLOGY

To determine how the role of alleged mediators – before and during the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine – has been presented and reported, we analyzed news stories published in Spanish-language media. Following D’Angelo and Kuypers’s (2010) method, we utilized news framing – one of the most used theories in communication – for the process of headline selection, exclusion, elaboration, and emphasis that organizes information according to some salient principles that convey a specific story angle to create meaning and convey a specific version of reality (Entman, 1993). The search was the headline, focusing on the war between Russia and Ukraine; the period of examination was from November 27, 2021, to December 2022. This period is significant because the need for mediators is considered and exposed by the media months before the war outbreak – to prevent a conflict escalation – and almost one year before its start.

As a result, 100 news stories published in global press outlets were obtained using Google’s search engine containing the word “mediation” or “mediator” in their headlines were chosen. The news content was manually analyzed under the basis of content analyses

operationalizing Galtung's (1958, 2000) classifications' on mediation, peace, and war journalism. To gain better insight, in-depth interviews were also carried out with three culture of peace experts from Colombia, México and Spain.

The sampling unit corresponds to news published in Spanish-language media whose registration units respond to the news. This sampling is intentional and systematic since the news stories titled with the word "mediation" or "mediator" are chosen to analyze their content and systematize it. This allows us to establish mixed categories that respond to previously established categories and have been expanded with the advancement of research. An example of an expanded category is the "Self-Proposed Mediators" (SPM) that emerged from different news stories as stated in corpus-driven methodologies (Biber, 2009) and is detailed in the results report.

This selection of categories finds its justification in that the details of the events and violence

conform as signs of a discursive universe that acts as a mediator with the events and adds a new impact to the information that will be offered in the media (Veres-Cortés, 2021, p. 11).

Content analysis was used to investigate how mediation is portrayed following the recommendations of Taylor and Bogdan (1990) to work at three levels: *discovery* (if the mediation was also present in the story), *codification* (how the mediation is personified by a leader, country), and *relativization* (how the idea of mediation is sustained if the news responds to war or peace journalism). To analyze the new stories and in-depth interviews, Ratcliff (2002) recommends working "from codes, categories, and subcategories: these should be checked and linked to the topics as progress is made in the research" (cited in: Scribano, 2007, p. 138).

Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with three experts who were chosen for their technical and professional experience in the field of culture of peace from sectors such as non-governmental organizations that operate in areas of conflict, teachers and journalists trained in the culture of peace and academics. The interviews were carried out through a closed pattern of questions regarding the role of mediators in the media, based on categories elaborated from

the analysis of the news. The approach for analyzing the three interviews' transcriptions followed the grounded and inductive methods proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1994).

## CONFLICT AND MEDIATION IN THE NEWS

The theoretical approach presented in this study – related to conflict as a concept – is based on Galtung's (1958) conflict theory as follows:

(...) a social system of actors with incompatibility between their goal-states. In the process, it happens that they stand in each other's way, or so they may believe, and this is where the system becomes a conflict system (p. 35).

It is noted that the actors in a conflict do not always come together in two closed sides, that is, in a war. Thus, the intensification of social polarization is a key risk factor, and intensifies conflicts, including professional journalism practices and journalists' working methods in conflict environments, as well as their challenges and risks (Jamil, 2021; Jamil & Sohal, 2021).

In terms of journalists' practices, "peace journalism," as it is known today, was coined in the 1970s by Johan Galtung (Galtung & Ruge, 1973). Galtung emphasizes how the conflict is reported and formulates an alternative to what he presents as "peace journalism," as opposed to war journalism. Regarding mediated conflict, Galtung (2000) describes an inability [among journalists] to distinguish between conflict and violence – if they have this incapacity, they will not detect the conflict that causes this violence because they do not have the conceptual tools.

From the journalistic side, experienced war correspondents established the Reporting the World network and stated: peace journalism is a new form of journalism that analyzes how journalists can be part of the solution and not part of the problem (McGoldrick and Lynch, 2000); following Lynch (1998, 2002, 2003), journalists are presented as observers-participants in war zones where the news plays a role in the sequence of cause and effect since the people involved in the stories adjust their actions based on estimates of the possible effects of media coverage.

## MEDIATION

Mediation refers to

a process by which a third party helps two or more parties – with their consent – to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict by helping them reach mutually acceptable agreements (United Nations, 2012, p. 2).

More precisely, the *United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation* (2012) specifies that mediation is based on the premise that, in the right environment for the parties under conflict, their relations can be improved towards cooperation.

In order to move towards a mediation process between states, certain guidelines must be taken into account such as:

preparation; consent; impartiality; inclusivity; national ownership; international law and regulatory frameworks; coherence, coordination and complementarity of mediation effort; and quality peace agreements (United Nations, 2012, p. 3).

In turn, there are four consolidated mediation models or approaches: *Transformative* mediation focuses on empowering the parties to make their own decisions by improving communication and understanding between them; *Facilitative* mediation focuses on helping the parties identify their common interests and work towards solutions that meet everyone's needs; *Narrative* mediation's goal is to get the parties to detach themselves from the conflict; *Evaluative* mediation involves a mediator who offers opinions or suggestions based on their expertise in law or other relevant fields (Foster, 2003).

Several scholars addressed the issue of media and mediation. Gilboa's (2005) study examines the role of journalists as mediators and their involvement in international conflict resolution. Wallenstein and Svensson (2014) analyze international mediation in armed conflicts on mediation frequency, strategies, bias, and coordination as well as on trends in defining success where they include the media. Pauli's (2007) study confirms that the conflict gives news stories an important plot element and as a result reporters and editors tend to emphasize extreme voices and combative themes and those news stories escalate a conflict more than to pacify it. Vaughan's (2023)

research explores the communication strategies that can be employed by mediators and concludes: “Mediators need to learn to use news media more effectively” (p. 4). On the other hand, Beer and Steyn analyze different models of mediation on the news in South Africa to understand if the media are the mediators or generators of a conflict. In terms of digital media and mediation, Aggestam and Hedling’s (2023) contributions present the roles and impact of technologies, tools and social media platforms and analyze the digitalization of peace mediation.

Regarding the mediator’s role, Galtung (1958) notes that the task of the mediator consists of each actor developing a process based on two steps: the first is that he can conceive reality devoid of his theses, and in this way, his perception of the contradiction of the enemy’s theses with the world disappears or is reduced; the second step begins when the compatibility of objectives of one and the other is sought, or the transformation of the original objectives by new ones, that are compatible with each other and that respond to reality/world. Galtung refers to this process as transcendence because the initial objectives (theses) have gone beyond; that is, they have been transcended. In this way, the initial objectives cease to be starting hypotheses – in its mathematical sense – as parts of the reality that the actors had to address the resolution of the conflict. Thus, Galtung (1958) proposes as the transcendence of contradictions what peace studies have been identifying as part of the keys to resolving or transforming conflicts.

## WAR & PEACE JOURNALISM

War journalism focuses on the field of conflict, understood as a confrontation of the sides. It usually starts from a binary view where there are winners and losers. Since both opponents want victory, they will fight for their goals until the end, even if this is death. Galtung (2000) notes similarities between war journalism and sports journalism, as both are governed by a zero sum principle, where winning is everything for both sides, but victory is only possible for one. His proposal postulates that conflict journalism should adopt features of health journalism, which means that, even though illnesses are discussed, the probability of death as victory or defeat of the patient is



not emphasized. In this sense, the author promotes the idea of being able to elaborate on the disease (conflict), detailing its causes, arguing the capacity for prevention, and giving rise to possible remedies.

Within what is considered war journalism, the actors in the conflict are presented through the news under prejudices. They reproduce stereotypes sustained by a binary perspective: the good and the bad, victims and perpetrators. More precisely, the components that are accentuated in this style of journalism is the use of the story to dehumanize the enemy by presenting it as ruthless, cruel, insensitive, evil, and monstrous. In addition, it is emphasized that their weapons are not only dangerously destructive but that their way of acting is violent, unjustified and attacks innocents, which leads to the conclusion: that they must be killed with total urgency for the good of all due to their dangerousness and for being the guilty/responsible for this armed conflict. Along this lines, Adams (2014) concluded that "the mass media are compatible with the culture of war because they perpetuate the myth of war as an inevitable event" (p. 179).

According to Benedicto-Escajedo (2015), the side that is presented as "ours" is endowed with noble and understandable feelings since they are humans who have families and risk everything to defend their country and fellow citizens; they speak of defense, heroism and not from attacking another human because, after all, the enemy is the others. Thus, it is the other side's fault. By dehumanizing one of the sides or a person, everything that is done against them becomes justified.

On the other side, the term "peace journalism" was introduced in the 1970s by Galtung; emerges as a sort of corrective to the journalism that traditionally works in conflicts that have inherited practices that deserve to be re-evaluated (Galtung & Ruge, 1973). One of the most significant aspects of peace journalism is that it presents the conflict as the problem; it does not need to look for arguments to accuse one of the parties as its cause. This look allows to move, as far as possible, towards a resolution or transformation of the conflict, as Galtung proposes. Tehranian (2002) notes that peace journalism acquires the format of the ten commandments; more precisely, a decalogue that summarizes the type of language, and the contents of the model from its practical and interpretative dimension, among other issues; for Irvan (2006), "a normative theory that establishes that the media

should play a positive role in promoting peace” (p. 34), where the transition to new types of coverage of the conflict seems to be imminent.

## RESULTS

Four modalities of mediation presentation arise from the 100 headlines selected for this analysis. (1) the Self-Proposed Mediators (SPM) and how the media echo this proposal – even if the tone of the news does not always respond to the objectives that mediation sets itself. (2) the Requested/Expected Mediators (R/EM) are those who are mentioned in the news either because of their role in other conflicts or their credibility and interference in international agendas. (3), the presence of the Mediator Countries (MC), where the role of a mediator is not reduced to the recognition of a leader, but rather the historical role of a nation in conflict mediation is discussed. (4), the Expert Mediators (EM), who are interviewed and consulted by the media about mediation between the two nations.

After applying these categories, the selected pieces of news ended up classified as 54% in SPM, 26% in R/EM, 15% in MC, and 5% in EM. In the following pages, several examples from each category are presented. In addition, while examining the 100 stories, it is verified that four articles present chronological or descriptive stories where the term “mediation” occupies a secondary place in the story. The rest (96) correspond to stories, chronicles, or reports in which mediation proposals are presented, the scope of the offers are commented on, or processes of direct requests from one of the parties are detailed to encourage the participation of a mediator. Moreover, it has been quantified that 75% of the chosen headlines include the keyword “war,” and 23% include “conflict.”

An interesting aspect is that the high-level Ukrainian authorities, embodied in the figure of its president, Volodimir Zelenski, have chosen to make mediation requests public being in that study presented as Requested/Expected Mediators (R/EM):

“Ukraine is testing Israel as a mediator in the conflict with Russia,” noting that: “The Government of Ukraine has raised the possibility of Israel that he tries to act as a mediator with Russia to stop the intense offensive unleashed on Thursday” (Europapress, 2022).

On the same day, *RTVE* (Radio Televisión Española) published on its news portal that: “Turkey maintains good relations with Russia and Ukraine. That is why it has emerged as a clear mediator in the war. The Turkish president, who has called for an immediate ceasefire, is the only one who has managed to get the Ukrainian and Russian foreign ministers to sit face to face, although so far without results” (RTVE, 2022). In that story, it can be observed that peace journalism, when referring to the search for a solution, demonstrates that the leader can visit both countries and talk with both presidents. In reference to China and its SPM, it deserves special attention because both Ukraine and Russia reacted positively to the proposal posed by Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the country, during a press conference. “China offers itself as a ‘mediator’ in the war against Ukraine” (El Día & El Mundo, 2022). The SPM of China, then presented by Ukraine and supported by Russia, was portrayed by the media: “China and Russia, both permanent members of the UN Security Council, we are (...) very important strategic partners for each other,” (DW, 2022). However, in this triangle of interests was published: “The three faces of China in Ukraine’s chess game: A necessary mediator, an ally of Putin and a power that is waiting for its moment” (20 Minutos, 2022) where the nation’s positions and advances responded to war journalism.

As noted earlier, the personalities proposed to officiate as mediators in the conflict have varied. On March 7, the *ABC newspaper* specified that the Vatican offered itself as a mediator (SPM): “They travel with a spiritual mission, but it is undoubtedly a diplomatic gesture with the signature of Pope Francis. The pontiff has sent two cardinals from the Vatican Curia to Ukraine as a gesture of closeness” (Martínez-Brocal, 2022).

Following this line, other types of mediators have come from the political arena, such as French President Emmanuel Macron, who has maintained contacts with both.

The French leader is the only one of the major Western countries that has decided to keep a communication channel open with Putin, although, at the same time, he supports tougher sanctions against Russia for its intervention in Ukraine. In his speech last night, he accused Putin of “betting on war” out of a “spirit of revenge,” although he pointed out that “as long as possible, as long as it is necessary,”

he will maintain contact with the Russian leader “to convince him to renounce to the weapons (*Europapress*, 2022a).

Macron’s attitude does not correspond to a mediator figure, according to E3 “since he has made accusations against one of the parties we can’t talk about a possible mediation”. Following the international political arena, a noteworthy mention is the role given to U.S. President Joseph Biden, presented as SPM. Reference is made to peace, but the term is used to highlight the benefits, skills, and personality of the U.S. president: “I am concerned,” and reiterated his support for the “territorial integrity” of Ukraine. He also assured that in “all probability,” a dialogue will begin with Russian President Vladimir Putin, despite the quarrels that exist between them (*Heraldo USA*, 2021).

It is also observed that, although the headlines of the news appeal to mediation, predominant vocabulary was detected : military actions (28 stories), war equipment (26 stories), number of soldiers (18 stories) where the difference between the two opposing sides is reinforced. In that sense, second expert (E2) interviewed for this research argue:

This war has been covered from a binary perspective that we know all too well. Unfortunately, the big media have not shown interest in modifying their journalistic practices in relation to war conflicts up to now. (Personal communication, 2022).

Two issues could explain this contradiction. First, the contradiction between the news headline that contains the word “mediation” while in the development of the text is rather allusive to a position of war journalism. The latter could be explained as part of the inheritance of news production routines concerning an armed conflict. As the second expert (E1) interviewed in this study comments:

There is still a lot of work to be done in the heart of the media; learning in the culture of peace could provide better perspectives to journalists and media (Personal communication, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

Through the news analysis, it is observed that both the media and journalists play a fundamental role in interpreting and characterizing the facts, in this case, disseminating a possible mediation to stop an armed conflict between two nations. In many news items, although the headline emphasizes mediation throughout the text, the idea of conflict is reinforced.

Based on the findings, it is confirmed that the news stories containing the word mediation or mediator in the headline does not address the concept of mediation in the story (RQ1) and that news they respond to in most of the cases are based on the vocabulary and journalistic style of war journalism (RQ2). The four categories presented through this study: Self-Proposed Mediators, Requested/Expected Mediators, Mediator Countries, and Expert Mediators highlights the initiatives of people/nations for a solution. Likewise, the scarce presence of experts in mediation is observed, one of the categories with the lowest representation in the media. We also highlight that the repetition of words such as *military actions*, *war equipment* only deepen the differences and place mediation toward peace in an increasingly distant and intangible space.

These results allow us to conclude that it is necessary to promote spaces for dialogue and training with journalists who cover armed conflicts and wars so that they can broaden their gaze and understand the impact of the vocabulary used in the news stories and its scope for resolution or deepening of the conflict. The procession of mediation throughout this armed conflict deserves to be examined more broadly since this study presents two clear limitations: first, it covers a specific period, but the conflict continues to escalate; the second is that it has focused on news published in Spanish.

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