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Editorial: Mediation and mediatisation of the contemporary warfare

Being a source of constant anxiety, war is an area of discussions and analysis among researchers representing various scientific disciplines. Fear of war is a widespread phenomenon, regardless of where one lives and what social or professional position one occupies. Nowadays, our knowledge of war is provided by the media, in which invited experts often plot scenarios of possible economic and social consequences of ongoing armed conflicts and their further escalation.

This fear management is one of the tools used to control moods and behavior among people. Media-created narratives about wars shape opinions and attitudes toward the parties to the conflict, as well as contributing to the take-up or cessation of assistance to those experiencing the crisis of war.

Media organize our daily reality. For Friesen and Hug, “Media in this sense profoundly influence the realm of everyday, unstructured understandings and activities [...]. Media, in other words, are seen as gradually systematizing and organizing the relatively unstructured realm of the everyday” (FriesenNorm & Hug, 2009, pp. 64–65). Today’s relevance and influence of the media stems from the fact that they are an integral part of the functioning of various institutions, establishing their interactions. Stig Hjarvard (Hjarvard, 2008) speaks directly about the mediatization of society and culture. Hence, reading works on mediatization allows us to notice more and more signals from researchers about the need to pay attention to the far-reaching consequences of interaction with the medium for the lives of individuals and societies.

Russia’s attack on Ukraine has contributed to a growing sense of the threat of war not only among Poles but also Slovaks, Czechs and Hungarians (Maciejewska-Mieszkowska, 2023, p. 220). The geographic proximity of the war in Ukraine heightens the sense of fear

about the limits of the fighting taking place, as well as the type of weapons used by the Russian military. Poland, which has been the target of propaganda attacks by the Russian Federation for years, is now seeing an intensification of disinformation activities (Serwis Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej, 2024). The spread of false information, facilitated by the architecture of social media platforms, is one of the critical tools of warfare today, as well as a factor in the transformations taking place in the field.

From the perspective of the war in Ukraine, which has been going on for more than two years, the growing armed conflicts around the world, and the accompanying dynamic development of media and digital technologies, the question becomes relevant: What is the nature of current armed conflicts? What changes are taking place in them, and how are these changes affected by the presence of the media? What are or maybe the determinants and consequences of contemporary messages about war?

Contemporary wars and conflicts are mediated. Reports from the front, mobile communication of troopers, combatants and victims, wartime political diplomacy using holograms and artificial intelligence are no longer surprising. However, the importance of online technologies, and still broadcasting media, is not limited to presentation or even media interference through manipulation and propaganda. Increasingly, there is a transformation of war as such, in which old and new media technologies play a key role. The aim of the thematic issue is to undergo an empirical exploration of the mediation and mediatization of contemporary warfare and to identify the potential of this research field along with its key challenges.

In this special issue, we aim to examine themes often overlooked in research on mediation and mediatization of war. We begin with a review of the recent literature to examine the status and condition of the research field. The first article (Katarzyna Kopecka-Piech et al.) shows that the field of mediatization research is very rich, incredibly interdisciplinary and with a broad catalog of paradigms and methods. What sets it apart is the dominance of the qualitative nature of research on these issues. The composition of this issue also confirms that mediation and mediatization of war are most often studied with qualitative methods that seek to answer how, why and with what effect the sphere of media-war relations is being transformed.

Anna Jupowicz-Ginalska & Greta Gober examine how media representations of refugees during the Polish border crises of 2020 (with Belarus) and 2022 (with Ukraine) have become polarized. They observe that refugees at the Belarusian border are depicted through political, social, and religious lenses. Similarly, the crisis at the Ukrainian border also displays polarizing dynamics, focusing mainly on assessing or critiquing the authorities and either addressing or overlooking uncomfortable and problematic issues related to the refugees. Thus, the authors highlight that even situations with humanitarian implications can lead to divided media narratives and portrayals of entire communities.

Carolina Escudero explores the portrayal of mediation in news media narratives both before and during the onset of warfare. She analyzes how “mediation” and “mediator” are understood and depicted in media discourse, examining how journalists frame the concept of war for their audience. The researcher observes that instead of offering clarity, the media often generates confusion. While acknowledging the purported aim of mediation, they highlight a tendency to present it within a simplistic binary framework of conflict, which contradicts the essence of mediation itself. The author suggests the establishment of arenas for educating journalists on culture and peace-building within newsrooms to enhance journalistic coverage of armed conflicts.

Erik Bucy & Claire Seigmund delve into Volodymyr Zelensky’s utilization of social media platforms, particularly honing in on the politician’s Instagram account. Drawing on mediatization theory and Goffman’s notions of self-presentation, the authors observe that Zelensky’s political image has been predominantly shaped by media dynamics rather than traditional political strategies right from the outset. Nevertheless, this media-driven persona has seamlessly translated into political effectiveness over time. Notably, Zelensky’s skillful amalgamation of text and imagery has elevated him to the status of a prominent symbol in the struggle for democratic liberties, significantly bolstering his global recognition.

Valentina Marinescu and colleagues analyze the depiction of nuclear threats in Romanian media coverage amidst the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Employing an inductive methodology, the researchers uncover two emerging narrative frameworks concerning

sensitive topics: one focusing on historical perspectives, and the other on future implications. Additionally, they highlight the prevalence of nuclear rhetoric in media discussions since the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Three Ukrainian papers provide a poignant and insightful perspective on the ongoing conflict. Tetyana Viytovych and Nataliia Bilovska delve into materials sourced from Facebook and Telegram, analyzing them in terms of concept substitution. Their study focuses on the scope and methods of Russian propaganda, particularly through disinformation technologies, employed during the war. Their aim is to elucidate the common tactics, technologies, and tools used in concept substitution and propose strategies to counter their dissemination. Similarly, Nataliia Steblyna examines social media platforms, particularly Telegram, to explore how the Russian invasion has been depicted by both professional and amateur news sources. She contextualizes her research within the unique digital media landscape of wartime, noting a lack of explicit references to news sources in popular amateur media. Furthermore, she finds that the most popular sources for both professional and amateur media are largely the same. In the last study, Halyna Lystvak and colleagues discuss the transformations occurring in the publishing sector due to Russian aggression. They observe shifts such as the relocation of publishing facilities to safer territories, changes in infrastructure, adoption of new publication formats, and exploration of new markets. These changes reflect the adaptation of the publishing industry to the challenges posed by the conflict.

The conclusions that appear in the articles often have a pessimistic social, political and ethical dimension (Viytovych & Bilovska). They point out practices that are inappropriate from a peaceful perspective, the danger of mass hysteria (Marinescu et al.), confusion – including at the journalistic level (Escudero), and high visibility of media polarization (Jupowicz-Ginalska & Gober). They uncover low-quality media content and harmful content of dominant platforms (Steblyna). On the other hand, they uncover unique transformations: the media market (Lystvak et al.) and communication strategies (Bucy & Seigmund).

According to the presented studies the research field of mediation and mediatization of war shows a very high potential, which

activates with the ongoing conflict. Communication innovations and hybrid communication-warfare, unveil new areas of communication practices and their consequences, thus generating the need to study new issues. The articles included in this issue show how history, the present and the future overlap and are inseparable, also pointing to the main frameworks of analysis and interpretation. Similarly, professional and amateur media; traditional and digital; textual and visual as well as audio-visual are confronted. War is presented and analyzed multimodally, which accounts for its great potential.

The researchers used various methods in this issue: textual and visual content analysis, bibliographic and statistical analysis, and rhetorical analysis. They were interested in the broadcast and social layers of communication, as they studied primarily traditional media: news agency reports, newspapers, magazines, and books, and social media: Instagram, Facebook, and Telegram. This opens up questions about further elements of the media nexus: audiences, stakeholders, and achieved communication effects.

The challenges of the research field that is the subject of this special issue are primarily located in methodological order. The issue focuses more on the mediation of war and less on mediatisation, although its content shows how multifaceted this cognitive sphere is. There is still a need for a great deal of methodological rigour and research innovation, coming out of computer-based methods (as Steblyna is already doing in her article) and exploring new avenues of interdisciplinarity. Moreover, contemporary war studied from the outside is confronted with study from the inside – by researchers who stayed close to the front lines and imbued with threats, not only academic but, above all, real, physical ones. Giving them the floor, as it was in the case of this special issue, is giving them a space to form a new discourse, which, by the transformation of media-war nexus in real time, continues to shape and change, requiring us to make further attempts at conceptualisation and verification.

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