

Ivana Kovačević Bekić, PhD candidate

PhD candidate at University North, officer in Croatian Army – rank: First Lieutenant,
Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, Cyber Command

ORCID: 0009-0006-3831-8016

Email: ivkobekic@unin.hr

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37458/ssj.7.1.3>

Review paper

Received: February 10, 2025

Accepted: March 16, 2025

ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE ABOUT WAR IN UKRAINE IN CROATIAN MEDIA – INFORMATION VS DISINFORMATION

Abstract: *History teaches us that the victory on the battlefield has always been won by the one who wisely used the available information - information about the opponent, information about one's own forces, information about weather conditions, or spreading misinformation with the aim of deceiving the opponent. It is the same today, not only on the battlefield, but also on the battlefield called the market. The one who most wisely uses the available information and/or outsmarts the opponent or competitor in the market wins. The war in Ukraine is just one more example in a series of examples that confirms this. However, what distinguishes the war in Ukraine from historical wars is the availability of the Internet, the speed of information transmission and the presence of social networks. The biggest advantage of social networks is that most users do not question the veracity of published information - videos, photos and the like. They are an excellent medium for sharing the truth, but also for spreading misinformation.*

Keywords: *war in Ukraine, information, disinformation, misinformation, media*

1. INTRODUCTION

The pen is mightier than the sword—a well-known saying that has proven true throughout history and across various wars. Over time, technologies have changed, and today the pen may no longer hold the same power; however, the internet, the media, and social networks certainly do.

This paper analyses the media in the Republic of Croatia and examines how they have reported on the war in Ukraine from its beginning on February 24, 2022, to the present day.

War represents an extraordinary state for every nation, and consequently, an exceptional situation for all professions within that nation—from politicians, teachers, and doctors to journalists. Although there is an international code that defines the ethical rules of journalistic reporting, including war reporting, it is difficult—almost impossible—to remain fully objective when one’s own nation is among those involved in the conflict. Although the Croatian people are not directly involved in the war, the Croatian public, political leadership, and consequently the Croatian media have, from the very beginning of the war in Ukraine, clearly taken a stance in support of Ukraine. While this may be considered professionally incorrect according to the ethical principles of journalism, it is entirely justified according to moral principles, as it concerns a nation defending its sovereignty and territory—something to which it has an absolute right.

Due to its geographical proximity to Ukraine, the Croatian media have closely followed developments since the beginning of the war, informing the public and engaging expert commentators—military analysts, economic experts, geopolitical specialists, and other relevant voices. The ways in which these actors informed the public and communicated information were analysed in this paper using the qualitative method of content analysis.

2. MEDIA ETHICS, PROPAGANDA AND THE ROLE OF FACT-CHECKING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

According to Kunczik and Zipfel (1998), media science is a social science that studies human action and the social reality resulting from that action. The term social reality encompasses all elements of reality accessible to humans that arise through human participation, mutual interaction, and conflicts among individuals—such as patterns of behaviour, forms of activity, roles, organizations, and institutions of any level of

complexity. The essential characteristic of media science is its integrative nature, as it intersects with numerous other disciplines, including law, economics, political science, sociology, psychology, pedagogy, linguistics, philosophy, and various technical sciences.

Defining media and media science cannot be done without referring to McLuhan's famous thesis - "the medium is the message." According to McLuhan (2008), it is precisely the medium that determines and controls the scale and form of human association and action. Media have become the foundation of both personal and social life; they have transformed public and political communication, culture, and art; influenced knowledge and leisure; altered family and educational structures; and imposed the need to re-evaluate many established values.

Mass communication is a form of communication in which the source is a mass medium (a journalist or media speaker), and the recipient is a mass audience that receives an identical message (Zgrabljević Rotar, 2023). According to McQuail (2010), the functions of mass media in society are as follows:

- They serve specific goals, needs, and purposes in communication.
- They employ technology for public communication with distant audiences.
- They are organizations that produce and distribute media content.
- They manage information in the public interest.

Within this framework, mass media include print, radio, and television, as these are the traditional forms that, in accordance with the law, address a broad public. Alongside them stands the internet, a platform used as an extended medium by many of the aforementioned outlets. Additionally, there are online portals whose primary aim is to inform. Beyond informational portals, the internet hosts a vast range of content—both journalistic and non-journalistic—often consumed and shared as journalistic information.

Social networks such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn were initially created with the goal of enabling communication and connection among people and communities from different parts of the world, quickly and at low cost. Today, however, they are no longer solely tools of interpersonal communication but have also become media through which people obtain and disseminate information—often extending beyond their personal content.

According to the European Social Survey, Wave 11 (ESS, 2024), Croatians spend on average 209 minutes per day online, which amounts to approximately three and a half

hours daily. Generation Z—the population aged between 15 and 28—spends about 4.6 hours per day on the internet, of which only 30 minutes are devoted to obtaining information about political and social events. When they do inform themselves about such issues, 48% of them do so via social networks, according to the Eurobarometer Youth Study 2024 (Burić, 2025).

All these data indicate that, when discussing the influence of the media in informing the public, one cannot disregard social networks, which increasingly serve—and in many respects already function—as a medium that informs the public, particularly among younger generations.

With technological advancement and the development of media, the methods of communication between the military and the public have also changed. For instance, the time between the occurrence of an event and its publication in the media has shortened significantly, while battlefield reporting has become real-time (Tomić, 2016). The war in Ukraine is an example of a conflict in which information from the frontlines is available to the public instantly and continuously. This reality has influenced the military to place greater emphasis on preparing for media relations, both before and during wartime events.

The foundations of professional and ethical journalism, according to Malović (2007), include the following principles:

- Verification of every piece of information through at least two independent sources.
- Avoidance of derogatory language and insults.
- Political neutrality, that is, impartiality toward any political option.
- Reporting without prejudice.
- Providing an opportunity for those who rarely have access to public discourse to express their views.
- Avoidance of unethical methods in gathering news.
- Critical evaluation of sources.
- Accountability for one's own texts and publications.
- Encouraging readers to critically evaluate the media.

A key prerequisite for the realization of all these principles is freedom of the press. Journalism is often referred to as the fourth estate, alongside the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of power. Because of this, journalists bear the responsibility of uncovering hidden mechanisms of politics and public affairs and presenting them to the court of public

opinion without prejudice. The journalist's responsibility to the public surpasses any other form of obligation.

In most developed democratic countries, national journalists' associations independently define ethical codes of conduct for journalists at the state level. Moreover, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), which represents journalists from more than one hundred countries, provides global guidelines and recommendations to ensure adherence to professional ethics and integrity in journalistic work.

Ownership structure plays a significant role in media publications. At the early stages of media development—newspapers, radio, and later television—these outlets were often state-owned. Today, in most European countries, there is usually one public service broadcaster that remains state-owned, while the majority of media outlets operate as privately owned entities. For private owners, ethical journalism and social responsibility are often secondary to profit-making.

Ownership structure directly influences the editorial policy of a media organization. If media owners are market-oriented but simultaneously committed to journalistic quality and public service, they will support an editorial policy that fosters independence and serves the public interest. However, for a medium to remain financially sustainable—beyond the sales of its editions in the case of print—advertisers are essential, and their influence can, to some extent, shape editorial decisions and media content.

When it comes to war, one of the key moral and ethical dilemmas journalists face is whether they should conceal or distort the truth in the interest of their homeland. During the Croatian War of Independence, Croatian journalists often encountered this moral conflict. In her research, Marina Mučalo (1999) found that many Croatian journalists agreed it was extremely difficult during that period to uphold the standards of professional, balanced, and objective reporting.

All the aforementioned issues—ethics in the media and moral dilemmas—apply primarily to the work of professional and educated journalists. However, today, social networks have become platforms where professional journalism is no longer the only voice. Every individual with a social media account now has the opportunity to share their own narrative with the world. While global audiences might not be interested in everyday personal updates, in times of war such content attracts considerable attention. Practically

overnight, social media users became first-hand reporters of the ongoing situation in Ukraine. Their posts were often cited and republished by other, professional media outlets.

On one hand, the ability of the public to access first-hand stories and images in real time is of great value. On the other hand, this environment creates a vast space for manipulation, misinformation, and the spread of unverified claims—information we often fail to question because we trust that it was shared by a victim in despair. Nonetheless, it is essential to cultivate digital intelligence and media literacy, recognizing that most users on social networks are not trained journalists who verify facts through multiple sources, remain apolitical, think critically, and take care to protect victims' identities and privacy in their reporting.

Today, due to the overwhelming amount of information to which we are exposed, it has become increasingly difficult to discern which pieces of information are truly accurate and free from hidden agendas. Consequently, in the past decade, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of fact-checking websites, most commonly operating online. These initiatives have emerged from the desire of experts, journalists, and researchers to demonstrate to the public which published claims are accurate and which are distorted. At the same time, they serve an educational purpose—encouraging the public to approach every published statement critically and to re-verify even those reports coming from traditionally trustworthy media outlets.

According to the American Press Institute (n.d.), the main goal of fact-checking organizations is to increase public knowledge and provide verified information regarding factual claims made publicly by politicians and other individuals whose statements influence the lives and income of et al. Fact-checkers investigate verifiable facts in an impartial manner through rigorous verification and then publish clear information that helps consumers make informed decisions when voting or taking other significant actions.

Amazeen (2015) argues that the fundamental purpose of fact-checking is to educate the audience, improve political behavior, and enhance the quality of journalism. Even in developed democratic countries where freedom of the press is firmly established, it often happens that certain media outlets lean toward a specific political option during election periods. Some authors contend that this tendency was one of the primary catalysts for the rapid growth of fact-checking organizations.

One prominent example is PolitiFact, which during the 2012 U.S. presidential election conducted over 800 fact-checks, attracting more than one million daily visitors to its website. For its contribution to promoting truthful journalism and public accountability, PolitiFact was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. (Amazen, 2015)

Napoleon once stated: “Three hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.” (Napoleon, attributed, n.d.) Ukraine, fully aware of how powerful media influence can be—both positive and negative—has established its own fact-checking organizations to provide truthful information to its citizens and the international community, as well as to counter Russian disinformation campaigns.

According to the doctoral dissertation of Marija Sljepčević (2023), there are four active fact-checking organizations operating in Ukraine:

- Bez Brehni (Without Lies),
- Slovo i Dilo (Word and Deed),
- StopFake, and
- VoxCheck.

Each organization follows its own editorial policy; however, the most successful among them is StopFake. Founded in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea, StopFake publishes its articles in thirteen languages. It analyzes and evaluates various aspects of Russian propaganda directed not only toward Ukraine but also toward the European Union and former Soviet states.

According to its official mission statement, StopFake is a journalistic organization whose primary objectives are fact verification, strengthening media literacy in Ukraine, and establishing a clear boundary between journalism and propaganda. It seeks to achieve these goals through the exposure of false news, the creation of propaganda archives and databases, the training of targeted groups to recognize disinformation, and participation in conferences and seminars on media ethics and data verification. (Sljepčević, 2023)

In Croatia, there exists an online portal called Faktograf, which operates as a fact-checking platform. It analyses political statements, media publications, and public claims on a daily basis, aiming to determine their accuracy and truthfulness. (Fakotograf, n.d.) While its primary focus is on topics related to Croatia, Faktograf also covers other issues of significant public interest.

In addition to Faktograf, the ATENA Association conducts analytical work published both on its website and across various social media platforms. The organization's mission is to counteract anti-democratic and destructive narratives through scientific, professional, objective, and independent analysis. (Atena, Institute for the Research of Hybrid Conflicts, n.d.) Both Faktograf and ATENA contribute to strengthening media literacy and fostering critical awareness among the public by promoting verified, transparent, and evidence-based communication.

What distinguishes the war in Ukraine from historical wars is the widespread availability of the internet and social media. Social networks have become one of the key battlegrounds of hybrid warfare. Their greatest strength—and simultaneously their greatest weakness—lies in the fact that most users do not question the authenticity of the content they consume, such as videos or photographs. These platforms serve as powerful tools for the dissemination of truth but also for the spread of disinformation.

During the war in Ukraine, even professional journalists at times accepted information originating from social media as factual. One example is the widely circulated video allegedly showing a young boy crossing the Polish border alone. The footage was first published by Reuters and later shared by CNN, both regarded as credible sources, after which it quickly spread across media outlets and social networks worldwide. However, the Polish border police later issued an official statement clarifying that the claim was false and that the boy had, in fact, crossed the border accompanied by his parents. (AFP, 2022)

A positive example of using social media in the context of the Ukrainian war is undoubtedly the communication strategy of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Through his public posts, videos, and direct messages to global audiences, Zelenskyy successfully evoked empathy and solidarity with the Ukrainian people worldwide. One of his most notable examples of strategic social media use was a video posted on Facebook, in which he demonstrated that he had not fled Ukraine, contrary to claims spread by Russian media. By appearing alongside government officials in Kyiv, he effectively countered misinformation while simultaneously reinforcing national unity and morale. (Oliver et al., 2023)

Nevertheless, although it is logical that Europe supports Ukraine, one of the most visibly diminished journalistic principles during the coverage of the war in Ukraine is objectivity. Objectivity is one of the fundamental ethical principles of journalism. However, war represents a state in which actions that might be considered immoral in times of peace

can become morally justifiable when serving a greater purpose. As Arthur Ponsonby once stated, “When war is declared, truth is the first casualty.” Indeed, the life of a nation and the survival of its people often outweigh the question of whether political or military institutions are disseminating false information.

One of the most powerful weapons in wartime—alongside conventional weaponry—is propaganda. In the context of the current war in Ukraine, propaganda has played an essential role. Marinac (2015) defines propaganda as a set of one-way communication activities organized by a state to influence the participants of a military conflict, facilitate the achievement of wartime objectives, and support ongoing military efforts.

According to encyclopaedic definitions, propaganda is “any form of paid transmission of messages to consumers and the broader public through mass advertising media such as television, the internet, radio, and print; synonymous with advertising or promotion.” Šiber (2001) emphasizes that propaganda is a planned and intentional act designed to change and control attitudes to create predispositions for particular forms of behaviour.

Propaganda is an integral part of everyday life and should be recognized as such. Its focus lies in altering attitudes and modes of thinking within a target audience, without engaging in dialogue between the sender and the receiver of the message. The goal of such communication is to create behavioural and cognitive patterns aligned with the propagandist’s objectives. Propaganda seeks to shape human perception of people, events, or ideas.

Closely associated with propaganda is the concept of manipulation, defined as the act of managing or influencing others’ actions to make them behave in a way that benefits the manipulator. People often confuse propaganda with public relations, advertising, or marketing. The connection among these concepts lies in their shared function of informing the public; however, the crucial difference is that propaganda is unidirectional, whereas public relations typically involve two-way communication between an organization and its publics. (Šiber, 2001)

Propaganda influences public opinion by seeking to reshape or reinforce it—whether positively or negatively. Chomsky and his collaborators categorize propaganda into three

types: black, grey, and white. Black propaganda manipulates facts, spreads lies, and deceives target audiences; white propaganda relies on truth, believing that facts alone can persuade; while grey propaganda selectively presents favourable information and omits undesirable facts. (Chomsky, 1988)

As Božo Skoko (2012) notes, “Public opinion is a judgment formed and sustained by those who constitute the public, and it pertains to matters of public concern.” The military, as one of the key public institutions, bears the responsibility of informing the public and conveying messages—be they propagandistic, public relations-oriented, or otherwise strategic.

War propaganda serves two primary purposes:(Skoko, 2012)

- To maximize public participation and strengthen group identity.
- To minimize enemy engagement and undermine opposition efforts.
- Military communication theory further divides wartime propaganda into three levels:
 - Strategic propaganda, directed at the entire population, aiming to ensure support for the national leadership.
 - Tactical propaganda, focused on lowering enemy morale.
 - Consolidation propaganda, aimed at civilian populations, particularly in occupied territories.

According to Kunczik and Zipfel (1998), similar argumentative patterns characteristic of war propaganda can be found across various conflicts throughout history, including the following:

- We do not want war.
- The enemy is solely responsible for the conflict.
- The enemy possesses demonic qualities.
- We fight for a just cause, not for selfish interests.
- The enemy deliberately commits atrocities.
- The enemy uses prohibited weapons.
- Our losses are minimal, while the enemy’s are enormous.
- Our cause is supported by artists and intellectuals.
- Our mission is sacred.
- Anyone who doubts our reports is a traitor.

3. UKRAINE BETWEEN EMPIRES: HISTORICAL LEGACIES AND THE MAKING OF A NATION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, represents the culmination of long-standing historical, political, and ideological tensions rooted in imperial legacies and the unresolved collapse of the Soviet Union. Although Ukraine emerged as an internationally recognized state only in 1991, Ukrainian nationhood and aspirations for sovereignty developed over centuries, repeatedly suppressed by external powers. The failed independence of the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1918 and Ukraine's subsequent incorporation into the Soviet Union institutionalized Moscow's dominance while leaving unresolved questions of self-determination (Felshtinsky & Stanchev, 2022).

Soviet rule profoundly shaped Ukrainian political consciousness through repression, forced collectivization, and mass violence. The Holodomor of 1932–1933—a man-made famine resulting from Stalinist policies—killed millions and remains a central trauma in Ukrainian historical memory, reinforcing perceptions of Russian domination as existentially threatening (Snyder, 2010). Despite its economic importance within the USSR, Ukraine's political autonomy remained strictly limited. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, confirmed by a nationwide referendum, marked a decisive break with Moscow, yet Ukraine's post-independence vulnerability was exacerbated by nuclear disarmament under the Budapest Memorandum, whose security assurances were later violated (Felshtinsky & Stanchev, 2022).

Following the 2014 Euromaidan revolution, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military intervention in Donbas signaled a shift from political pressure to open coercion. These actions framed Ukraine's pro-European trajectory as a strategic and ideological threat to Russia. The full-scale invasion in 2022—justified by Kremlin narratives of “denazification” and “demilitarization”—thus constituted not a sudden escalation but a continuation of Russia's revisionist project aimed at reasserting imperial control over Ukraine. The war reflects a fundamental clash between Ukraine's pursuit of sovereign democratic statehood and Russia's refusal to accept Ukraine's independence as legitimate (Snyder, 2018; Felshtinsky & Stanchev, 2022).

4. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this study is content analysis. The research focuses on media publications from the beginning of the war up to the present, within the scope of



Croatian media, with particular emphasis on online news portals. The analyzed texts were selected using a qualitative approach and primarily include the earliest reports on the outbreak of the war, as well as instances that deviate from established journalistic standards. The corpus also encompasses informative texts such as news articles, expert analyses, and selected opinion columns, which together provide a comprehensive insight into the media representation of the conflict.

The qualitative content analysis method was chosen because it enables a deeper interpretative understanding of the meanings, values, and ethical implications embedded within media discourse. Unlike quantitative approaches that rely on frequency and categorization, qualitative analysis allows for the exploration of context, tone, framing, and moral perspective in journalistic reporting. This approach is particularly suited for examining how media narratives shape public perception, reveal ideological positions, and reflect broader social and political attitudes toward the war in Ukraine.

5. ANALYSIS OF CROATIAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE: ETHICS, DISINFORMATION AND INFORMATION WARFARE

The study employs a qualitative content analysis of selected media publications from the beginning of the war in Ukraine, February 24, 2022, to September 2025. According to the works of the authors mentioned in the introductory sections and in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the Croatian Journalists' Association (Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo [HND], n.d.), the fundamental ethical principles of journalism include truthfulness and accuracy, objectivity, independence, accountability, respect for privacy, and transparency.

In addition to evaluating media publications through these ethical principles, the analysis also examines whether elements of information warfare are present. Elements that may appear in media content with the intent to manipulate or influence the public include: emotional appeal (children, border crossings, hunger, wounded civilians, women), ideological framing, emphasis on identity, development of conspiracy theories, manipulation of casualty figures, references to public support, depictions of power and authority, social conformity pressure, and appeals to curiosity.

Most major Croatian media outlets, including Jutarnji list, Večernji list, Nova TV, HRT, and RTL, generally adhere to the professional standards defined by the Code of

Ethics of the Croatian Journalists' Association and international ethical guidelines. These standards emphasize information verification, source citation, and the avoidance of hate speech.

Disinformation about the war has circulated predominantly on social networks and marginal online portals, while Croatian fact-checkers—especially Faktograf.hr—have systematically exposed false claims. Regional analyses indicate that a significant portion of misleading narratives originated from Serbia and various “fringe” websites. Occasionally, certain domestic portals republished viral false content, though corrections were usually issued promptly after verification. Croatian media have primarily cited Ukrainian and Western official sources, international agencies, and field correspondents. Regional studies also note the “import” of disinformation narratives through cross-border media networks, which underscores the need for greater editorial caution when republishing content (ZIR, 2024; Sveučilište u Zagrebu, 2023; Faktograf.hr, 2022).

The most common disinformation narratives in the region—which also reached Croatian audiences—included attempts to discredit President Zelenskyy, accusations of “Nazism,” denial of Russian war crimes combined with victim-blaming, glorification of fabricated “war heroes,” and the connection of the conflict with broader global conspiracy theories. (Veridica, 2023)

In general, Croatian media coverage of the war in Ukraine has respected ethical standards of journalism, particularly those related to the dignity of victims and the avoidance of sensationalism. According to the Code of Ethics of the Croatian Journalists' Association (HND, n.d.), victims must be portrayed with dignity and respect—a principle most mainstream outlets have followed by blurring graphic content or including warnings before distressing images from Bucha, Mariupol, and other war zones. Nonetheless, academic analyses and monitoring of media coverage point to occasional tendencies toward sensationalism and a prevailing “breaking news” logic in some online portals, often relying on emotionally charged headlines and videos sourced from social media before full verification (Sveučilište u Zagrebu, 2023). Such dynamics increase the risk of inaccuracies, although these are typically corrected afterward.

Research conducted between 2022 and 2025 at Croatian universities confirms that Croatian media predominantly maintain a pro-Ukrainian narrative framework, relying on international sources such as Reuters and the BBC (ZIR, 2024). Elements of sensationalism

and “live” dynamics are evident, while more serious disinformation generally originates from social media and fringe sources but occasionally enters mainstream reporting through republication. Overall, Croatian media have demonstrated a high level of professionalism and commitment to accuracy; however, the speed of publication and the pressures of digital competition remain key challenges. The most significant source of misinformation continues to be the social media ecosystem, which spreads unverified and manipulative content more rapidly than traditional media (Faktograf.hr, 2022).

Table 1 illustrates examples of disinformation published in Croatian media, accompanied by factual explanations for each case.

Table 1. Disinformation published in Croatian media

Example of False News	Description of the Claim	Verified Facts
“Ghost of Kyiv”	During the initial days of the Russian invasion in 2022, a narrative emerged claiming that a Ukrainian pilot, nicknamed the “Ghost of Kyiv,” had shot down six Russian aircraft within 30 hours. The story quickly spread on social media and appeared in several news outlets.	Fact-checkers confirmed that the “Ghost of Kyiv” was a myth; no evidence (photos, official reports) substantiates the existence of such a pilot. The Croatian portal <i>Index.hr</i> later listed this case as an example of misinformation that had been widely circulated before verification. (Index, 2022)
“Snake Island — All Defenders Killed”	Early reports claimed that Russian forces had killed all Ukrainian defenders on Snake Island. Later, Ukrainian authorities clarified that the soldiers had been captured alive.	<i>Index.hr</i> identified this as a false claim, and <i>Faktograf.hr</i> noted it as one of the viral unverified stories spread across regional media. (Index, 2022)
“Ukraine Declared the Polish City of Przemyśl as Occupied Territory”	A document published on ZIR listed this claim as an example of disinformation suggesting Ukraine had declared Przemyśl “occupied Polish land.”	The claim has no factual basis and represents a fabricated narrative. (Faktograf, 2023)
“Zelenskyy Pays Western Journalists to Discredit Trump”	A fake website circulated a digitally manipulated letter allegedly proving that President Zelenskyy paid Western journalists to publish anti-Trump stories.	AFP and ADMOHUB determined the letter was forged and inconsistent with official formats from the Ukrainian president’s office. (Faktograf, 2023)
“Russian Army Destroys Biolaboratories in Ukraine”	Based on an interview with Slavko Kulić published in <i>Novi list</i> .	No credible evidence exists of bioweapons laboratories in Ukraine; the claim aligns with Russian propaganda narratives. (Novi list, 2022)
“Presidency of Ukraine Captured”	Russian news agencies reported that Russian troops had captured the presidential office in Kherson; some media misreported it as if Kyiv or the central government had fallen.	The statement referred to a local administrative office in Kherson, not the national presidency. Misleading headlines contributed to public confusion. (Index, 2022)

<p>“Croatia Will Send Soldiers to Ukraine”</p>	<p>Appeared amid domestic political disputes between the president and prime minister. Some portals, such as <i>Index.hr</i>, ran alarmist headlines.</p>	<p>The claim was false and later refuted; it aimed to instill fear and uncertainty among the public. (Index, 2022)</p>
--	---	--

Source: Author’s research

In these examples, false or misleading claims were often first disseminated through social media or fringe portals before reaching a wider audience. In certain instances, mainstream outlets republished these stories without prior verification, though most later issued corrections or clarifications (for instance, *Index.hr*). The majority of such narratives fit within a broader framework of pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation that Croatian fact-checkers, such as *Faktograf.hr*, have documented in their analysis “Global Narratives and Local Actors”, which identified approximately 1,396 manipulative or false claims across the region within the first 150 days of the war.

Through qualitative analysis of media content available on online portals and in daily newspapers—including news reports, expert analyses, and opinion columns—several consistent characteristics were identified:

- a lack of on-site war correspondents,
- predominant reliance on international news agencies and translations from foreign media,
- limited sourcing (often a single source per story),
- extensive, timely coverage of the conflict,
- frequent inclusion of expert commentary, and
- noticeable lack of full objectivity, as Croatian media have clearly aligned with the Ukrainian perspective.

6. CONCLUSION

The analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that Croatian media have largely adhered to the fundamental principles of ethical journalism while reporting on the war in Ukraine, despite operating in a complex and rapidly evolving information environment. Guided by the Code of Ethics of the Croatian Journalists’ Association (HND, n.d.) and international professional standards, most mainstream outlets have shown a consistent effort to verify information, cite credible sources, and report on the war with due respect for the dignity of victims. The application of ethical norms such as truthfulness, accuracy, responsibility, and transparency has helped maintain public trust in mainstream journalism, even amid a flood of misinformation.



However, the research also identifies recurring challenges inherent to digital journalism and the contemporary media ecosystem. The acceleration of news cycles, the dominance of social networks, and the pressure of “breaking news” formats have occasionally resulted in sensationalism, incomplete verification, and emotional framing of stories. Although such errors were generally corrected after fact-checking, they underscore the tension between journalistic integrity and the speed demanded by online publication. In contrast, serious disinformation and manipulative narratives most frequently originated from fringe portals and social media networks, often entering mainstream discourse through republication. Fact-checking organizations such as Faktograf.hr have played a crucial role in detecting and countering these falsehoods, strengthening the resilience of the Croatian media space against external and internal disinformation influences.

The study also reveals that Croatian media coverage of the war in Ukraine is framed predominantly within a pro-Ukrainian perspective, reflecting both geopolitical alignment and moral solidarity with a country defending its sovereignty. While this stance is ethically understandable, it nonetheless presents a challenge to the ideal of journalistic objectivity. The boundary between moral responsibility and professional impartiality remains a central dilemma of war reporting—one that requires constant critical reflection.

In conclusion, the findings highlight that the primary threats to information accuracy today arise not from traditional journalism but from the unregulated dynamics of social media, where emotionally charged and politically motivated content spreads faster than verification mechanisms can respond. Strengthening media literacy, enhancing editorial verification processes, and maintaining ethical awareness are therefore essential for preserving the integrity of journalism in times of crisis. The Croatian case illustrates both the vulnerabilities and the strengths of democratic media systems: a professional commitment to truth on one side, and persistent structural pressures on the other. Ultimately, ethical journalism remains one of the most powerful safeguards of democracy and an indispensable tool in confronting the challenges of information warfare.

References

AFP. (2022, March 23) Video of crying boy at Polish border shared with misleading claim “he fled from Ukraine alone” AFP Fact Check. Retrieved from <https://factcheck.afp.com/video-crying-boy-polish-border-shared-misleading-claim-he-fled-ukraine-alone>

American Press Institute. (n.d.). Fact-checking project: The role and purpose of fact-checking organizations. Retrieved from <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/>

Amazeen, M. A. (2015). Revisiting the epistemology of fact-checking. *Journalism Practice*, 9(6), 682–698. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2014.989415>

Atena, Institute for the Research of Hybrid Conflicts, n.d.. About us. Retrieved from <https://iihs.hr//AboutUs>

Britannica. (n.d.). Ukraine: History. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/>

Burić, I. (2025). Eurobarometer Youth Study 2024: Media Habits of Generation Z. Zagreb: Institut za društvena istraživanja.

Chomsky, N., Herman, E. S., et al. (1988). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Deutsche Welle. (2022). The Budapest Memorandum and its broken promises. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/>

Encyclopedia of Ukraine. (n.d.). Historical development of the Ukrainian state. Retrieved from <http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/>

ESS. (2024). *European Social Survey, Wave 11: Country Profile—Croatia*. London: ESS ERIC Headquarters.

Faktograf.hr. (n.d.). O nama [About Us]. Retrieved from <https://faktograf.hr/>

Faktograf.hr. (2022). Globalni narativi i lokalni akteri: Analiza dezinformacija o ratu u Ukrajini u prvih 150 dana rata. Retrieved from <https://faktograf.hr/2022/08/04/globalni-narativi-i-lokalni-akteri-analiza-dezinformacija-o-ratu-u-ukrajini-u-prvih-150-dana-rata/>

Faktograf.hr (2022, March 2) The Ghost of Kyiv is a myth, not a real person. Retrieved from <https://faktograf.hr/2022/03/02/duh-kijeva-je-mit-ne-stvarna-osoba>

Faktograf.hr (2022, February 28) It is not true that all defenders of Snake Island were killed. Retrieved from <https://faktograf.hr/2022/02/28/nije-tocno-da-su-svi-branitelji-zmijskog-otoka-poginuli>

Faktograf.hr (2023, April 14) False claim that Ukraine declared the Polish city of Poznan an occupied territory. Retrieved from <https://faktograf.hr/2022/04/14/lazna-tvrdnja-da-je-ukrajina-proglasila-poljski-grad-poznan-okupiranim-teritorijem>

Faktograf.hr (2023, June 6) Fake letter claiming that Zelensky paid Western journalists to discredit Donald Trump. Retrieved from <https://faktograf.hr/2023/06/06/lazno-pismo-kojim-se-tvrde-da-zelenski-placa-zapadne-novinare-za-diskreditaciju-donalda-trumpa>

Felstinsky, Y., & Stanchev, M. (2022). *Ukraine: War and the Future of Europe*. New York: Gibson Square.

Felstinsky, Y., & Stanchev, M. (2022). *Blowing up Ukraine: The return of Russian imperialism*. Gibson Square.

Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo. (n.d.). Kodeks časti hrvatskih novinara. Retrieved from <https://www.hnd.hr/kodeks-casti-hrvatskih-novinara>

Index.hr (2022, February 26) Who is the “Ghost of Kyiv” Ukrainians claim he shot down six Russian aircraft, but there is no evidence. Retrieved from <https://index.hr/vijesti/clanak/tko-jeduh-kijeva-ukrajinci-tvrde-da-je-srusio-sest-ruskih-aviona-ali-nema-dokaza/2344213.aspx>

Index.hr (2022, February 25) Ukraine announced that all defenders of Snake Island were killed; it later turned out they were captured. Retrieved from <https://index.hr/vijesti/clanak/ukrajina-objavila-da-su-svi-branitelji-zmijskog-otoka-poginuli-kasnije-se-pokazalo-da-su-zarobljeni/2343856.aspx>

Index.hr (2022, March 3) Russian media claim Ukraine’s government has fallen; Zelensky publishes video from Kyiv. Retrieved from <https://index.hr/vijesti/clanak/ruski-mediji-tvrde-da-je-pala-ukrajinska-vlast-zelenski-objavio-video-iz-kijeva/2345408.aspx>

Index.hr (2022, January 24) It is not true that Croatia is sending soldiers to Ukraine. Retrieved from <https://index.hr/vijesti/clanak/nije-tocno-da-hrvatska-salje-vojnike-u-ukrajinu/2334607.aspx>

Kunczik, M., & Zipfel, A. (1998). *Uvod u znanost o medijima i komunikologiju* [Introduction to Media and Communication Science]. Zagreb: Zaklada Friedrich Ebert.

Malović, S. (2007). *Uvod u novinarstvo* [Introduction to Journalism]. Zagreb: Golden Marketing.

Marinac, G. (2015). *Propaganda i mediji: komunikacijske strategije u suvremenom društvu* [Propaganda and Media: Communication Strategies in Contemporary Society]. Zagreb: Fakultet političkih znanosti.

McLuhan, M. (2008). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London: Routledge.

McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (6th ed.). London: Sage Publications.

Mučalo, M. (1999). *Ratno novinarstvo u Hrvatskoj [War Journalism in Croatia]*. Zagreb: Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo.

Novi list. (2022, March 10) Russian claims about biolaboratories in Ukraine have no factual basis. Retrieved from <https://novilist.hr/novosti/svijet/ruske-tvrdnje-o-bioloskim-laboratorijima-u-ukrajini-nemaju-uporiste-u-cinjenicama>

Novi list. (2022, March 4) Disinformation about the fall of Kyiv spreads through Russian and regional media. Retrieved from <https://novilist.hr/novosti/svijet/dezinformacije-o-padukijeva-sire-se-ruskim-i-regionalnim-medijima>

Olivares, D., Plazas, J. & Olmedo, N. (2023) Selfies and speeches of a president: Volodymyr Zelensky's social media communication during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Social Science Open Access Repository. Retrieved from https://ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/88216/ssoar-mediacomm-2023-2-plazas-olmedo_et_al-Selfies_and_Speeches_of_a.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Ponsonby, A. (1928). *Falsehood in War-Time: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated Throughout the Nations During the Great War*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Reuters. (2022, March 6). Video of child crossing Polish border misinterpreted on social media. Reuters News Archive.
CNN. (2022, March 7). Polish border police refute viral video claim. CNN International.

Sljepčević, M. (2023). *Fact-checking initiatives in Ukraine: The role of media literacy in countering Russian disinformation [Doctoral dissertation, University of Zagreb]*. Repozitorij Sveučilišta u Zagrebu.

Skoko, B. (2012). *Javnost i odnosi s javnošću [Public Relations and Public Communication]*. Zagreb: Školska knjiga.

Sveučilište u Zagrebu. (2023). *Analiza ratnog izvještavanja hrvatskih online medija u kontekstu Ukrajine (2022.–2023.) [Master's thesis]*. University of Zagreb Institutional Repository.

Snyder, T. (2010). *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. Basic Books.

Snyder, T. (2018). *The road to unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Tim Duggan Books.

Šiber, I. (2001). *Politička komunikacija, propaganda i javnost [Political Communication, Propaganda and the Public]*. Zagreb: Fakultet političkih znanosti.

Tomić, Z. (2016). *Odnosi s javnošću: Teorija i praksa [Public Relations: Theory and Practice]*. Zagreb: Synopsis.

Veridica. (2023) War propaganda: Zelenskiy is tied to the Nazi. Veridica – Fact-checking platform. Retrieved from <https://veridica.ro/en/fake-news-disinformation-propaganda/war-propaganda-zelensky-is-tied-to-the-nazi>

Udruga ATENA. (n.d.). Misija i ciljevi [Mission and Goals]. Retrieved from <https://atena.hr/>

Zelenskyy, V. [@zelenskyy_official]. (2022, February 26). Facebook video post: “I’m here” [Video]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/zelenskyy.official>

ZIR – Nacionalni repozitorij završnih i diplomskih radova. (2024). Medijsko izvještavanje o ratu u Ukrajini: Etički i profesionalni izazovi [Undergraduate thesis]. Retrieved from <https://zir.nsk.hr/>

Zgrabljević Rotar, N. (2023). Uvod u teorije masovnih komunikacija [Introduction to Theories of Mass Communication]. Zagreb: Školska knjiga.