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# OBJECTIVITY VS. COMMENTARY ON INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT
## THE ETHICS OF COVERING RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

In the early hours of Thursday, February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladmir Putin announced a "special military operation" to "denazify and demilitarize" Ukraine (Berger, 2022). This moment was the culmination of years of military and scenario planning, and months of anticipation in the media across the globe. Speculation over a range of relevant topics, from the rationale for invasion and how far Russia would take this conflict to Mr. Putin's psyche, had saturated the stories that dominated the 24-hour news cycle for weeks on end. The sheer amount of information being produced by media conglomerates and distributors was astonishing, to say the least. As we inched closer to the reality of a Russian assault on Ukraine, each corner of the media apparatus was scrapping for the best narrative, the best commentary, and the best suited sources to produce a good story. What we did not bear witness to, however, was a hunt for the best, most legible, factual, and objective report on the conflict that would be soon to unfold before us.

This can be demonstrated in the February 5 episode of Tucker Carlson Tonight, about two weeks before the initial attack. In this segment, titled "Biden's Ukraine Policies Reveal How Grotesque Washington's Priorities Are," Carlson discusses intelligence declassified by the White House that alleges the possibility of a Russian "false-flag" operation in Ukraine as pretext for war (Carlson, 2022). Carlson then goes on to explain his position when he accuses *The New York Times* of "devising propaganda for the Ukrainian government" and argues that we "have no idea if *The New York Times* account is true or not" in its report on said intelligence. As Carlson continues his rant, he ends up likening the White House to "Alex Jones and his minions" and asserts that we cannot trust the government (Carlson, 2022). The substitution of facts and reason for ad hominem attacks and strawman argumentation, even in the midst of the truth crashing down around us, reveals that popular media's impulse to pile onto the conversation can sometimes trump its responsibility towards unbiased and objective reporting, which is particularly harmful in the case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. On January 25, 2022, *The Guardian* reported that Rep. Tom Malinowski (D-New Jersey) had been getting phone calls and receiving letters from viewers of Tucker Carlson Tonight voicing concern that the congressman was not "siding with Russia in its threats to invade Ukraine" (Pilkington, 2022). Importantly, Malinowski expressed concern for Carlson's "huge captive audience that is not exposed to... counter-programming elsewhere" (Pilkington, 2022). At the same time, Richard Engel, the chief foreign correspondent for NBC News, tweeted several messages about Ukrainian efforts to defend against Russian invasion, including personalized narratives and photos of combatants. One tweet picturing an elder Ukrainian woman holding a rifle was considered to have put a face on the Ukrainian defense efforts. Despite Engel's noble intentions, Engel's tweets were instead regarded as promotions of the Ukrainian Azov

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Battalion, a controversial unit with some neo-Nazi sympathizers in Ukraine's military, partially referenced by Putin's promised to "de-nazify" Ukraine (Wulfsohn, 2022). As part of the race to create the best narrative, both sides of the media often find themselves in the throes of controversial commentary on events like the Russia-Ukraine conflict when they fail to consider the objective circumstances of what is being reported, such as the dilemma between what intel to report to the public, or even the history of those being platformed by news stories.

As noted by Paul Mihailidis in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, "The media industry is not exempt from profit models and motives in a free-market society… Sensational headlines grab people's attention" (Mihailidis, 2009). Because of this looming drive, it makes sense that these motives would continue to inform decisions made by media companies like *Fox News* and *NBC*, even in the emergence of a conventional conflict that intertwine major powers. In this sense, the Russia-Ukraine conflict is not just a security dilemma – it is a journalistic dilemma too because it forces the media to perform a balancing act of commentary and objectivity. Moreover, this doesn't just represent the issue of commentary alone, but the issue of *too much* commentary not balanced by objectivity. This is especially concerning because media corporations' lack of objectivity may influence average news consumers to be indifferent towards becoming more informed about the world and how to act responsibly within it. While listening to Carlson's rant may be entertaining, images of Ukrainian fighters might inspire confidence, and a *Washington Post* article may sound well-written**,** we must interrogate what is important and truthful when drawing conclusions from news coverage.

On the other hand, perhaps it is the attitudes of news consumers rather than news producers that lead to a less informed public. While conducting focus groups at the conclusion of a media literacy course at the University of Maryland's College of Journalism, Mihailidis found an overwhelming consensus that students believe media outlets "rarely provide relevant information," so they should keep up entertaining commentary that is "relevant to get our attention" (Mihailidis, 2009). For example, one survey response admits to watching an hour's worth of sports and weather, just to hear a story about a deer. In this sense, if many people only tune into news that they enjoy and are entertained by, then there may be little else media correspondents can do but lean into commentary that can attract viewers. Therefore, it may be the audience's responsibility for how they consume and interpret media. Tucker Carlson can question the government and its reports, but he didn't urge anyone to call their congressperson in support of Russia. Similarly, *The Washington Post* can endorse political candidates, but they did not tell you who to vote for, and *NBC* may publish images pertaining to the war, but they are not intentionally painting these people as heroes. In this sense, perhaps commentary –although adding to the noise– is harmless when consumed responsibly.

Alan Sunderland, *ABC*'s head of editorial policy and former journalist, writes that objectivity entails neither betraying impartiality altogether or "handing out undigested facts by the truckload" (Sunderland, 2015). Instead, he argues, it involves gathering information "without fear or favour… where evidence is not misrepresented or suppressed" (Sunderland, 2015). Towards this end, the Russia-Ukraine conflict presents a unique challenge to news outlets across all platforms to provide factual updates on the situation in a digestible manner that can attract viewers without attempting to convince them of any particular interpretation or act in any particular way.

## Discussion Questions:

1. What values are in conflict over the various approaches to the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the news?
2. To what extent do you think commentary might be necessary to adequately inform the public?
3. Can commentary be separated from providing information about the issues of the day? What guidelines or principles ought to guide journalists trying to "just inform?"
4. How does the issue of commentary play into the old debate on whether the news should be "objective?"

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https://www.foxnews.com/media/msnbc-azov-battalion-ukraine-russia-conflict.

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