

ISSA Proceedings 2014 - Western And Russian Media Coverage Of The Ukrainian Crisis: An Emotional Commitment Or Bias?

Abstract: During an international conflict, even otherwise objective journalists frequently display a strong emotional commitment to their government's stance in the crisis. This commitment may cloud rational judgment, turning journalism into propaganda. A journalist's choice to abandon truth-seeking in favor of persuasion makes the journalist a party to the conflict and transforms a critical discussion, based on a cooperative approach, into a persuasion dialogue, based on an adversarial approach.

Keywords: emotion, fallacy, journalism, persuasion, propaganda, reason.

1. Introduction

During an international conflict, even otherwise objective journalists frequently display a strong emotional commitment to the stance of their own country in the crisis. This commitment may cloud rational judgment, turning journalism into propaganda. The paper is an attempt to show that if a journalist chooses to abandon truth-seeking in favor of persuasion as his primary communication objective he immediately becomes a party to the conflict he is supposed to be observing impartially. In the end, such a journalist can turn into a propagandist. Abandoning truth-seeking transforms a critical discussion, based on a cooperative approach, into a persuasion dialogue, based on an adversarial approach. The persuasion dialogue, in turn, can further escalate a quarrel.

To provide answers as to how this transformation occurs in global journalism, this paper examines interplay between propaganda and journalism by delineating persuasion and truth-seeking in American and Russian media coverage of the Ukrainian crisis. The paper seeks to examine American and Russian media coverage of the Ukrainian crisis and show the nature of propaganda as fallacious emotional appeals, defined as those that supplant rational appeals.

2. Discussion

Propaganda is an elusive topic to describe using verifiable criteria. The challenge

is all the more fascinating given that we are currently experiencing an all-out propaganda war between Russia and the West in a completely new context. Unlike the Second World War, this is a local conflict, and unlike during the Cold War, people on both sides have full access to the other side's media discourse if they so wish (the question is how many people wish to make that effort rather than stay within the comfort zone of their own country's media narrative - a condition for propaganda to thrive). Richard Alan Nelson defines propaganda as follows:

Propaganda is neutrally defined as a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels. (Nelson, 1996, pp. 232-233)

Another interpretation is that propagandists present their facts selectively (thus possibly lying by omission) and use loaded messages to produce an emotional rather than rational response to the information presented (Denish, 2012, p.1).

There are studies concerning principles and responsibilities of journalism as an antidote to propaganda, written by journalism practitioners and critics. In their prominent book, Director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, Tom Rosenstiel and his co-author Bill Kovach (Rosenstiel & Kovach, 2001), present ethical guidelines to journalists based on the common conceptions about the press, such as neutrality, fairness, and balance. They argue that journalism's first obligation is to the truth, its essence is a discipline of verification and that its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.

The paper presents argumentation discourse analysis of the Ukraine-related media content of two American mainstream TV channels: *CNN* (as an example of a broadcaster with an international focus) and *Fox News* (a broadcaster targeting primarily a domestic audience) and their Russian counterparts: *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*), which broadcasts for an international audience, and the *All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company* (referred to as the *Russia Channel*), which is mainly a domestic broadcaster. This is done because propaganda for the domestic consumption is quite different from international propaganda. The choice of channels is also determined by the similarity of the pairs in terms of political affiliation: the more liberal (*CNN* and *RT*) vs. the more conservative TV channels (*Fox News* and *Russia Channel*). This juxtaposition will

increase the validity of the comparative study and raise the likelihood of interesting findings.

Appeals to emotions, such as fear, pity and compassion, are not necessarily wrong; they used legitimately and effectively in public awareness and charity campaigns. The problem is that while appeals to emotion have a legitimate, even important, place as arguments in persuasion dialogue, they need to be treated with caution because they can also be used fallaciously when they supplant rational arguments.

But how do we decide which emotional appeal is fallacious and which is not? The paper is based on the presumption that certain types of emotional appeals are very powerful as arguments in themselves, but they may have a much greater impact on an audience than is warranted in the case argued (Walton, 1992, p. 1).

There are three main emotional appeals that supplant reason:

Argumentum ad populum or *mob appeal* invite “people’s unthinking acceptance of ideas which are presented in a strong, theatrical manner and appeal to our lowest instincts” (Engel, 1976, pp. 113-114). The Russian takeover of the Crimea has been presented by the Russian mainstream media as liberation, reunification of the Russians living there with their homeland, akin to their return from captivity. According to this line, it was a legitimate restoration of historical truth: an act of saving Sebastopol, a city of Russian naval glory, for which so much Russian blood has been spilt, from becoming a NATO naval base. The images showed Crimeans dancing in the street with tears of joy in their eyes.

The story “Ukraine and EU sign free trade zone deal” published on the *RT* website (<http://rt.com>) on June 27, 2014, says:

Georgia and Moldova also signed both political and economic parts of the Association Agreement. Ukraine signed a political part of the agreement in March, shortly after Crimea rejoined Russia.

Note the clause Crimea rejoined Russia: the actor is Crimea not Russia who is the recipient of the action which is described by a verb with a clearly positive connotation conveying a sense of restoration of something that has been broken. The style of the story is markedly neutral; it is presented as a mere narrative of events that happened in and around Ukraine. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine signed the Association Agreement while Crimea rejoined Russia. Everyone is happy; they have got what they wanted.

The *Culture Channel* which is part of the *Russian State Television Holding Company* hosted two cultural historians on the *Power of the Fact* show as far back as 2012. The summary of the episode, published on the *Culture Channel* website (<http://tvkultura.ru/>), describes the program as follows:

One of the most ancient inscriptions in Russian dating back to the 11th century talks about the Crimea: "Prince Gleb measured the sea on ice from Tmutarakan to Korchev to be 14,000 sazhen." (Sazhen is a measure equaling approximately 2 meters. Korchev is the modern Crimean city of Kerch). Later the histories of Russia and Crimea have been so intertwined that the Crimean context has become part of Russian consciousness, and a significant part of Crimean cultural heritage has become part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union - Crimea as a unique mixture of civilizations from the Hellenic to the Soviet. What is the Crimean myth, does Crimea hold the same cultural appeal today as it did one hundred years ago, at the time of the Silver Age? Are there any people in Crimea continuing the Russian cultural tradition?

In this discussion, again, the sense of a lost and regained part of Russia was the core of the persuasive thrust.



Fig.1

Another *RT* story "Who undermines the Budapest Memorandum on Ukraine?", contributed by Dr Alexander Yakovenko, Russian Ambassador to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Deputy foreign minister (2005-2011), published on May 29, 2014, contains a picture of a poster in Russian

with the following caption: "Children walk past a billboard sign in Sevastopol on March 13, 2014, reading "On March 18 we will choose either ... or..." and depicting Crimea in red with swastika and covered in barbed wire (L) and Crimea with the colours of the Russian flag (R) (AFP Photo/Victor Drachev)". Note the hidden juxtaposition of innocent children (a girl and a boy for balance) signifying peace and security for the children and a need to protect them from a clear threat represented by a neo-Nazi Ukraine. This powerful visual is an example of appeal to fear in a theatrical manner. It is also an *argumentum ad hominem* described below in that it demonizes the opposing side (see Fig.1)

Argumentum as mesirecordiam is fallacious when one tries to persuade someone

to accept a popular view by arousing his sympathy or compassion (Michalos, 1970, p. 51). American mainstream media used very strong vocabulary, such as “aggression”, ‘annexation” and “occupation”. They compared the Russian involvement in the Crimea and Ukrainian eastern provinces with Hitler’s annexation of the Sudetenland in March 1938 (under the pretext of the alleged privations suffered by the ethnic German population living in those regions). This was meant to mobilize American government and society for a rescue mission to protect Ukraine from a Russian bully. On the other hand, the Russian media discourse also centered on protecting the Ukraine’s Russian-speaking population from neo-Nazi groups from Western Ukraine. The culmination of this appeal was the coverage of the Odessa tragedy in which over 40 pro-Russian protesters were killed.

As the genre of news is supposed to be objective, we often find opinion in the concluding part of a news story meant to put the news in perspective. The nature of a background setting is that it calls for a concise summary of the events leading up to the situation described in the story. This compactness leaves very little room for a two-sided approach to the news. It is in that part that we see opinion clearly stated. The story titled “Ukraine signed a trade and political deal with the EU last week, the one that Yanukovich had rejected. Ukrainian, Russian leaders agree to work on ceasefire”, published on June 30, 2014, on the *Fox News* website (<http://foxnews.com>), states:

The conflict in eastern Ukraine began after a protest movement among those seeking closer ties with the EU prompted President Viktor Yanukovich to flee in February. Calling it an illegal coup, Russia seized and annexed Ukraine’s Crimea region in March, saying it was protecting Russian speakers. The insurrection in the east began shortly afterward.” The authors openly blame Russia for seizing and annexing one Ukrainian region and indirectly for igniting an insurrection in another, whereas President Yanukovich had to flee from protesters merely seeking closer ties with the EU.

The story “Ukraine cries ‘robbery’ as Russia annexes Crimea”, published on March 18, 2014 on the *CNN* website (<http://cnn.com>), is supplied with this opening summary “Cheers in Moscow. Outrage in Kiev. Bloodshed in Simferopol.” Description of the bloodshed is found in the middle part of the story:

Masked gunmen killed a member of Ukraine’s military, wounded another and arrested the remaining staff of Ukraine’s military topographic and navigation

directorate at Simferopol, Defense Ministry spokesman Vladislav Seleznyov told CNN.

While the loss of even a single life is a tragedy, the use of the word bloodshed is a clear overuse of emotional appeal and is an example of argumentum ad misericordiam.

Argumentum ad hominem is an argument that uses a personal attack against an opposing arguer to support the conclusion that the opposing argument is wrong. Character assassination is evident in American media demonizing Putin, who is often described as a former KGB spy and a dictator with Soviet imperialistic ambitions. Character assassination, however, is such a powerful tactic in argumentation that it is difficult to resist using it, and it is then difficult to prevent the argument from denigrating into a personal quarrel.

The story “Putin calls for compromise in Ukraine,” published on the Fox News website on June 22, 2014, says:

Separatists in the eastern Donetsk and Lubansk regions have declared independence and asked to join Russia. Moscow has rebuffed their appeals, but is seen by Ukraine and the West as actively supporting the insurgency. Putin’s conciliatory words came as Russia began large-scale military exercises and after NATO accused Russia of moving troops back toward the Ukrainian border.

A circumstantial variant of an ad hominem attack on Putin is evident in the juxtaposition of Putin’s words and actions: his conciliatory words and his rebuffing of the separatists’ appeals come at the background of Russia’s large-scale military exercises.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, these emotional arguments all play upon the prejudices in an audience. To bring these prejudices to the fore, the speaker directs an argument at what he or she takes to be the deeply held emotional commitments of the audience. Such tactics exploit the bias of an audience toward its own interests – whether it is a financial interest, a social interest in belonging to a certain group (including a nation or a group of nations, such as membership of the European Union for the Ukraine), or an interest in avoiding harm or danger (e.g. a Ukrainian nationalist threat for eastern Ukrainians).

A well-known 17th-century political maxim said that interests never lie. People lie,

nations lie, but interests never lie. The primary interest of a journalist turned propagandist is to resolve a difference of opinion by defeating his opponent, while an objective journalist's goal is to find the common truth of the matter.

Plato's Socrates advocated dialectic aimed at establishing the truth through reasoned arguments, based on a cooperative view of argument. Sophists taught rhetoric aimed at persuasion, based on an adversarial approach to dispute. Plato's dialectician considered his opponent a partner in discussion while a Sophist saw an adversary in his interlocutor. While both bore their audience in mind when arguing their points, the latter viewed the audience as his main target of persuasion, since it was the audience that ultimately chose the winner.

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