

The US Press Again Becomes a Conduit for Pro-War Propaganda

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American journalists have a long, ignoble history of being willing conduits for pro-war propaganda. Usually, that behavior is in service to a military crusade that Washington has launched or wants to initiate. At times, though, such a betrayal of journalistic integrity occurs on behalf of a foreign country that both U.S. political leaders and news media elites have adopted as a favorite cause. We are currently witnessing the latter phenomenon with respect to news coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war.

The dominant media narrative is that the US government (and all Americans) must “stand with Ukraine” in the latter’s resistance to Russian aggression. The identification with Ukraine’s cause is now nearly total, and it is infused with arrogant righteousness. Noticeably missing is any sense, once so powerful in US foreign policy and general discourse, that America’s interests often are – and should be – distinct from the interests and objectives of any foreign country.

The emotionalism and shallowness is most evident with the television coverage of the conflict. American viewers are inundated with images of exploding shells from the invading Russian forces, sights of desperate, tearful refugees (mostly women and children) fleeing the invaders, and shots of other determined Ukrainian civilians arming themselves to defend their country. Television is a visual medium that always tries to evoke emotions among viewers, but that element has become truly over-the-top regarding treatment of the Ukraine war. Providing a deluge of images showing traumatized civilian refugees adds little to anyone’s understanding of the roots of the conflict, its underlying issues, or its likely outcome.

Indeed, prominent media outlets have been guilty of circulating transparently crude Ukrainian propaganda. Some of the material they’ve telecast turned out to be fake. A widely circulated image of a Ukrainian girl verbally confronting Russian troops actually was that of a [Palestinian girl confronting Israeli troops](#). 2015’s Miss Ukraine [was not taking up arms](#) against the Russian invaders, despite a well-covered photo op. A closer examination of the

image showed that she was brandishing an Airsoft gun. Some images of aerial combat footage of Ukrainian pilots battling Russian aggressors [were from video games](#).

There also has been an array of more subtle, but decidedly deceptive, accounts that US press outlets distributed. The supposed martyrs of Snake Island, who allegedly were blown to smithereens after defying and cursing a Russian warship, turned out to be [very much alive](#). The American news media dutifully reported a Ukrainian military account in early March that it had severely damaged, if not sunk, the Russian patrol ship *Vasily Bykov* in the Black Sea. The episode was supposedly a major victory, because the vessel was one of Russia's newest warships. The credibility of Kyiv's claim took a major hit on March 16, though, when the *Vasily Bykov* sailed, [apparently unharmed](#), into the port of Sevastopol in Crimea.

In light of such problems with accounts regarding the war, American journalists should at least be cautious about reflexively repeating Ukrainian government allegations. For example, Kyiv has repeatedly asserted that Russian forces deliberately target residential areas in their shelling campaigns, and the US media [echo those claims](#). Perhaps the allegations are true, but the generally accepted figures with respect to Ukrainian civilian fatalities ([726, as of March 17](#)) do not seem consistent with wholly indiscriminate assaults. Journalists should at least view Kyiv's accusations with some skepticism, yet there is scant evidence of meaningful scrutiny.

The Ukraine war would not be the first time that portions of the American press became willing conduits for foreign disinformation. In the years before the US entry into World War I, major American newspapers and magazines [credulously repeated British propaganda](#) about German forces in Belgium committing an array of atrocities, including raping nuns and bayoneting babies. Such stories later proved to be total fabrications, but they had a marked impact on American public attitudes toward Germany.

Some 7 decades later, following Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the performance of the American press was equally dismal. Media outlets gave prominent coverage to hearings by the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in October 1990, featuring alleged eyewitnesses to Iraqi war crimes. The leading witness was a tearful 15-year-old girl that Caucus chairman Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA) introduced only as "Nayirah." A more detailed identification, Lantos cautioned, would endanger her friends and relatives in Kuwait. Nayirah described herself as a hospital volunteer who had personally witnessed Iraqi soldiers forcing maternity ward nurses to remove newborns from their incubators. That action, supposedly taking place at 3 hospitals, allegedly resulted in the deaths of 312 infants.

The account was part of a sophisticated disinformation campaign by Kuwait's government to whip-up American public opinion into a frenzied willingness to endorse going to war against Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. A regime that could commit such monstrous acts had to be stopped was the clear message. Eventually, the falsity of the incubator atrocity story [became indisputable](#), especially when information confirmed that "Nayirah" was not a hospital volunteer, but the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador to the United States. By then, however, the United States and its allies were at war with Iraq. The false propaganda story had fulfilled its purpose.

In retrospect, the wonder is how professional journalists in the United States could have circulated such an inflammatory story without making even modest efforts to corroborate it.

Yet they did so. Worse, their successors who are covering the Ukraine war show no greater degree of skepticism in putting Kyiv's accounts of the conflict to such a test. Instead, they treat statements and images being given to them by Ukrainian authorities as though their authenticity is indisputable.

Such credulity leaves the media open to cynical manipulation by yet another foreign government. And make no mistake about it: the purpose of the current propaganda offensive is to generate public support in the United States for Washington's military intervention on Ukraine's behalf. This time, the American people need to recognize pro-war propaganda in the news media for what it is, and not take the bait.

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