Legitimizing and De-legitimizing Wars in the News: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the International Coverage of the Ukraine and Gaza War Declarations

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Abstract

This article examines how international media construct the legitimacy of war, focusing on coverage of two conflict declarations: Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Israel's military offensive in Gaza. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the study analyzes reports from The Guardian (UK) and The New York Post (US) to explore how discursive strategies shape public understandings of aggression, victimhood, and moral accountability. Despite a substantial body of research on media coverage of conflicts, comparative studies analyzing discursive strategies across distinct geopolitical contexts remain underrepresented. As such, this study seeks to answer the central research question: how do international media construct and differentiate the legitimacy of war in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Israel's military offensive in Gaza, and what ideological functions are revealed through this comparative analysis? Previous studies have typically focused on single-case analyses, often overlooking how narratives vary across different geopolitical landscapes. This study addresses this gap, revealing clear asymmetries in media coverage: Ukraine is framed through explicit condemnation of Russian aggression, emotive depictions of civilian suffering, and authoritative quotations of Ukrainian and Western leaders. In contrast, Gaza coverage situates Israeli military action within security and counterterrorism narratives, downplays structural context, and marginalizes Palestinian perspectives through selective quotation. This comparative analysis offers unique insights into how the divergent framing of these events reveals broader ideological functions in news discourse, challenging single-case studies by showing how media representations normalize particular narratives of violence across different geopolitical contexts.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Media Framing, War Legitimacy, Ideological Bias, Western Media.

1. Introduction

The role of international news media in shaping public understandings and moral evaluations of military conflict has long been established in critical scholarship (Chouliaraki, 2006) (Philo & Berry, 2004; Zollmann & Abunimah, 2023). News discourses are increasingly recognized not merely as passive reflections of conflict realities but as powerful agents in the construction of geopolitical narratives. Through selective emphasis, attribution of agency, and moral framing, media language actively influences how wars are understood, legitimized, and responded to by global audiences (Richardson, 2007; van Dijk, 2006). This ideological function of media discourse is intensified in wartime, where framing functions, including defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral evaluations, and suggesting remedies, actively shape perceptions of aggressors, victims, and justifiable responses. Crucially, the 'moral economics of war' refers to how media narratives assign moral value to certain actions and actors, thereby shaping public and political responses to conflicts. For instance, headlines such as "Putin unleashes Russian invasion of Ukraine" from The Guardian starkly illustrate how media narratives can frame geopolitical events, extending the theoretical assertions of this scholarship.

Despite extensive research on war reporting, there is a marked underrepresentation of comparative critical studies examining how similar discursive strategies are applied across geopolitical contexts. This study addresses this gap by analyzing international media coverage of two recent, geopolitically charged events: Russia's invasion of Ukraine (February 2022) and Israel's military offensive on Gaza (October 2023). Although both involved large-scale military operations, civilian casualties, and global political reactions, their coverage in international English-language media, particularly in British and American outlets, reveals stark asymmetries in discursive framing. Russian actions were denounced as unjustified aggression, whereas Israeli military responses were more frequently framed within a security discourse, emphasizing self-

defense and minimizing structural violence. To ensure comparability, this study focuses on the initial 48-hour coverage period for each event and selects comparable article types from ideologically distinct outlets. This approach allows for a consistent examination of the immediate media narratives that set the interpretive agendas for these conflicts.

This article applies a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to examine how news texts produced by two ideologically distinct media outlets, *The Guardian* (UK) and *The New York Post* (US), construct the legitimacy of war in their initial reporting of the Ukraine and Gaza declarations. CDA provides the methodological tools to uncover the subtle linguistic strategies through which ideological alignments are enacted in text (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 2006). By focusing on three interrelated strategies, naming and reference, foregrounding and backgrounding, and quotation and attribution, this study investigates how news discourse selectively constructs moral hierarchies and political legitimacy through language.

These strategies have clear ideological effects, as demonstrated by Puddephatt (2006), whose work highlights how international reporting often reflects the political sympathies and strategic interests of Western states, with conflicts involving allies often receiving more favorable coverage. Moreover, the differential framing of war in Ukraine and Gaza cannot be separated from the historical production of the Muslim and Arab 'Other' in Western media discourse (Parfitt & Egorova, 2004). This discursive legacy contributes to framing Palestinian resistance as terrorism, devoid of political context, while framing Ukrainian resistance as noble and democratic.

Building on this critical tradition, this article contributes to the literature by offering a systematic, comparative analysis of war legitimation discourse. By illuminating the distinct moral narratives surrounding the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, the study uncovers broader patterns of discursive alignment with Western geopolitical interests. At its core, this analysis reveals how media representations serve to legitimize Western-aligned states while marginalizing and delegitimizing opposing narratives. By foregrounding these dynamics, the study underscores the importance of critical

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engagement with how media normalize particular narratives of violence.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The ideological role of news discourse in shaping public perceptions of war has been widely explored in critical scholarship. Foundational studies in media discourse (Chouliaraki, 2006; Philo & Berry, 2004; Richardson, 2007) and political communication (Entman, 1993; van Dijk, 2006) emphasize the centrality of language in defining conflict narratives, assigning blame, and legitimizing or delegitimizing military action. Within this body of work, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) treats language as constitutive, not merely reflective, of social reality, viewing discourse as an inherently ideological social practice embedded within power relations (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The ways in which war is named, contextualized, and morally framed in news texts are never ideologically neutral. They are shaped by the affiliations and interests of media institutions, often aligning with dominant Western geopolitical agendas (Richardson, 2007; van Dijk, 2006). These framing choices actively construct who is seen as the aggressor, who is victimized, and whose violence is portrayed as justified or illegitimate.

This study analyzes the discursive construction of war legitimacy in international English-language news coverage, specifically in the contrasting cases of Ukraine and Gaza. To that end, the analysis draws on multiple layers of theoretical insight, including classical CDA approaches, framing theory, and postcolonial critiques of Western media representations. Each of these theoretical lenses contributes to understanding how power and representation in conflict zones are mediated; CDA reveals how discourse constructs social reality and power dynamics, framing theory examines how certain aspects of reality are emphasized or obscured in news narratives, and postcolonial critique highlights how non-Western voices are often marginalized or stereotyped. Together, these perspectives answer a common question: how are narratives of war shaped by underlying power structures and interests?

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2.1. Framing, Legitimation and Discursive Power:

The analysis is grounded in Entman's (1993) concept of framing, particularly the capacity of news texts to "define problems, diagnose causes, make moral evaluations, and suggest remedies" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In war reporting, these functions are ideological, systematically highlighting certain aspects of conflict while obscuring others, a process central to what CDA identifies as foregrounding and backgrounding. To operationalize how these frames construct moral authority, this study employs van Leeuwen's (2007) typology of legitimation, specifically the strategies of authorization (appeals to authority), moral evaluation (appeals to value systems), and rationalization (appeals to instrumental reasoning). As Simonsen (2019, p. 507) demonstrates, these strategies are not static; rather, they "evolve dialectically" as audience reactions compel "new adaptations" to maintain legitimacy under geopolitical pressure.

2.2. Linguistic Mechanisms of Hierarchy:

The study links these macro-strategies to micro-linguistic choices using a framework for newspaper analysis. Three strategies are paramount: naming, transitivity, and quotation. Naming practices assign agency and moral status; for instance, Hamas is referred to as "militants," "fighters," or "terrorists," constructing specific moral evaluations. Quotation patterns establish epistemic hierarchies, with direct quotes conferring legitimacy and indirect or skeptical attributions casting doubt (Gavriely-Nuri & Balas, 2023).

Following Banta (2019), these choices are analyzed not as stylistic variations but as ideological acts that position readers to accept specific military actions as justified. Furthermore, recent developments in cognitive CDA (Hart, 2022) illustrate how metaphors such as "war machine" or "wave of terror" activate mental schemas that reinforce these moral binaries between order and chaos.

2.3. Postcolonial Perspectives on Media Orientalism:

Finally, the discursive asymmetries in war reporting must be situated within broader

postcolonial frameworks. As argued by Reyes (2022) and Taha (2022), Western media representations of non-Western actors often rely on tropes of irrationality, fanaticism, and moral inferiority. This ideological othering creates a fertile ground for asymmetric legitimation: violence by Western-aligned states is often rationalized through security discourse, while resistance by non-Western actors is criminalized or depoliticized (Parfitt & Egorova, 2004).

By integrating these postcolonial critiques with classical CDA, this study interrogates how the global "mediasphere" functions as a site of symbolic warfare, where inequalities in voice and visibility are naturalized (Lewis, 2005, p. 10).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), treating language as a social practice embedded in ideology and power (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 2006; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA provides the methodological tools to systematically examine how discourse constructs, legitimizes, or challenges political positions. Within this framework, news texts are analyzed not as neutral reports but as semiotic constructions that reproduce meanings aligned with institutional interests. The analysis traces how discursive form and structure contribute to the moral economics of war, making specific types of violence thinkable and justifiable (Banta, 2019).

3.1. Research Design and Corpus:

This study employs a comparative case study design to examine the framing of two temporally proximate military campaigns: Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and Israel's declaration of war on Gaza in October 2023. This comparative approach explores discursive asymmetries across cases that differ in geopolitical context but share structural similarities as state-led military declarations following security crises. Focusing on the initial 48-hour window allows for an investigation of how immediate media narratives set the interpretive agenda for each conflict. According to agenda-setting theory, initial coverage plays a critical role in framing the

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scope and tone of public discourse and political reaction (Entman, 1993). Analyzing the first 48 hours thus provides a snapshot of the media's agenda-setting function at a crucial moment, capturing how narratives are rapidly constructed and disseminated. These articles were drawn from two ideologically distinct Anglophone media outlets:

- The Guardian (United Kingdom), known for its liberal-centrist editorial stance and frequent engagement with human rights discourse.
- The New York Post (United States), a conservative tabloid outlet aligned more closely with U.S. foreign policy interests and pro-military narratives.

This selection captures contrasting ideological positions with significant reach in shaping international public opinion. However, acknowledging the Western-centric perspective, it is important to note that non-Anglophone sources, excluded from this analysis, may offer alternative views that further illuminate these asymmetries. Their inclusion in future research will be vital for a more comprehensive understanding.

3.2. Sampling Procedure:

Articles were selected using targeted keyword searches (e.g., "Putin declares war," "Russia invasion," "Israel declares war,") on the respective outlet websites. Selection criteria required that texts be hard news reports (excluding editorials) published within two days of the declaration. Each article was archived and coded line-by-line.

3.3. Analytical Framework:

The coding protocol integrates Richardson (2007) CDA framework with Van Leeuwen (2007) legitimation strategies. To allow for systematic comparison, the analysis focused on three overlapping discursive strategies.

3.3.1. Agency Attribution:

Investigating how lexical choices and transitivity in news texts allocate agency and moral culpability. This category combines aspects of naming (e.g., "terrorist" vs. "militant") and transitivity processes that determine who is portrayed as the actor in events (Taha, 2022).

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3.3.2. Foregrounding and Backgrounding:

Examining which aspects of the conflice (e.g., historical context vs. immediate violence) are made salient or minimized (Hart, 2022; van Dijk, 2006).

3.3.3. Quotation and Attribution:

Analyzing epistemic heirarchies by tracking who is quoted directly versus who is paraphrased or framed with skepticism (Gavriely-Nuri & Balas, 2023).

3.4. Theoretical Integration and Reflexivity:

The methodology integrates these linguistic tools with broader postcolonial critiques. As developed by Reyes (2022), this lens highlights how discourses around Western versus non-Western conflicts are informed by entrenched moral hierarchies. This synthesis allows the study to capture not only how war declarations are reported, but how their legitimacy is discursively produced.

As with all qualitative CDA research, the interpretive role of the analyst must be acknowledged. The researcher's academic background in discourse analysis and familiarity with media representations of the Middle East likely shapes the lens through which ideological asymmetries are perceived and coded. This positionality, however, also strengthens the research, as it allows for informed reading of implicit discursive patterns, especially where representation intersects with postcolonial legacies and geopolitical alignments. To address potential researcher bias and strengthen analytical rigor, the study incorporates reflexivity through peer debriefing sessions, which provide external checks and balances on interpretations. During these sessions, peers independently reviewed the initial interpretations of data and provided feedback on potential biases and overlooks. This collaborative process facilitated the identification of blind spots and refined the analytical approach, ensuring that the findings remain grounded and accountable. By incorporating diverse perspectives, the study mitigates the influence of personal positionality on the conclusions, bolstering both the transparency and credibility of the research outcomes.

While the small corpus size limits broad generalization, it facilitates the deep, micro-linguistic analysis necessary to uncover subtle mechanisms of legitimation that quantitative approaches might miss. However, the focus on two ideologically distinct outlets, *The Guardian* and *The New York Post*, may not fully represent the broader global media landscape. Consequently, these findings should be interpreted as indicative of discursive strategies within influential Western news media rather than as universal patterns, underscoring the need for caution in assessing their broader applicability.

3.5. Ethical Considerations:

All analyzed articles were publicly available and accessed via official platforms. No human subjects were involved. Source attribution and quotations are provided transparently, and the ideological positioning of outlets is acknowledged as a variable of the study rather than neutralized.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a critical comparative analysis of discursive construction of legitimacy in the Ukrain and Gaza conflicts. The analysis traces how specific linguistic choices contribute to the legitimization or delegitimization of war actions organized around the three key strategies defined in the methodology: naming, foregrounding, and quotation. Notably, the media coverage of Ukraine strikingly framed the conflict as a moral dichotomy between democratic resilience and authoritarian aggression. In contrast, the Gaza coverage emphasized security narratives that minimized Palestinian perspectives. This foreshadowing sets the stage for a deeper exploration of these asymmetries in the ensuing case studies.

4.1. Case Study 1: Ukraine (February 2022):

This section analyzes how three international news articles, two from *The Guardian* (Beaumont & Borger, 2022; Smith, 2022) and one from *The New York Post* (Brown, 2022), discursively frame the legitimacy of Ukraine's resistance and the illegitimacy

of Russia's military invasion. The analysis follows the CDA categories outlined earlier: naming and reference, foregrounding/backgrounding, and quotation/attribution.

4.1.1. Naming and Reference:

Across the dataset, naming practices reflect a consistent ideological framing of Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the victimized defender. Russia's actions are repeatedly labeled as an "invasion," "attack," "assault," or "blitzkrieg." The *Guardian* headline "Russia Invades Ukraine as Putin Declares War" (Beaumont & Borger, 2022) employs a declarative and unequivocal structure that foregrounds Russian agency and culpability. The lexical choice "invades" immediately aligns the action with illegitimacy and transgression of international norms.

Similarly, the *New York Post* employs emotionally and historically loaded language in its headline: "Putin Declares War on Ukraine as Deadly Missile Strikes Plunge Country into Bloodshed" (Brown, 2022). The term "bloodshed" invites a visceral response and frames Russia's actions as violent and morally abhorrent. Another *Post* headline, "Putin's Blitzkrieg," evokes the memory of Nazi aggression, reinforcing a historical analogy of authoritarian violence. This strategic lexicalization collapses the distance between past and present, placing Putin in a lineage of morally condemned autocrats.

Naming practices extend to individuals, with Putin frequently characterized through descriptors such as "autocrat," "strongman," or "authoritarian leader," often contrasted with Zelensky, who is described as "resilient," "defiant," or "heroic." These identity constructions serve to moralize the actors involved and assign legitimacy asymmetrically.

4.1.2. Foregrounding and Backgrounding:

Foregrounding in the Ukraine coverage consistently centers on civilian suffering, chaos, and the urgency of defense. The *Guardian* article by Smith (2022) describes "missiles hitting residential buildings," "families hiding in underground shelters,"

and "panic in the streets of Kyiv." These vivid depictions humanize the Ukrainian experience and establish an affective frame that aligns readers with Ukrainian victims. Similarly, the *New York Post* reports "Ukrainians flee in panic amid explosions and sirens," using sensory and emotive detail to amplify reader empathy and moral outrage (Brown, 2022).

Foregrounding also emphasizes international unity and condemnation. Western leaders are shown reacting swiftly and decisively, reinforcing the perceived global consensus against Russian aggression. The repetition of moral judgment through quotes and headlines strengthens this effect.

By contrast, backgrounding is evident in the minimal references to Russia's stated motivations or the broader geopolitical history of NATO expansion, the Donbas conflict, or Russia's prior security concerns. Such contextual absences align with what Entman (1993) identifies as framing through omission: by excluding explanatory or mitigating background, the invasion appears as a spontaneous act of aggression rather than part of a complex geopolitical narrative.

This backgrounding reflects a larger ideological logic. As van Dijk (2006) notes, news discourse often suppresses causes and justifications when covering actions by geopolitical adversaries. In this case, Russia's narrative is structurally marginalized, reinforcing its construction as irrational and illegitimate.

4.1.3. Quotation and Attribution:

Quotation practices across all three articles reveal an epistemic hierarchy in which Ukrainian and Western voices are foregrounded as legitimate and authoritative, while Russian statements are either excluded or marked with skepticism.

President Zelensky's declarations are frequently cited directly and with no hedging. In *The Guardian*, he is quoted saying, "We will defend ourselves. We will not surrender," which is presented without challenge or competing interpretation (Beaumont & Borger, 2022). Such direct, emotionally resonant quotations cast

Zelensky as morally resolute, further legitimizing Ukraine's stance.

Western leaders, including U.S. President Biden and U.K. Prime Minister Johnson, are also quoted without discursive distancing. Biden's statement that "Putin chose this war" (Brown, 2022) is cited as a matter of fact. The lack of hedging verbs (e.g., "claimed" or "suggested") reinforces the credibility and authority of these voices.

In contrast, Russian statements are frequently paraphrased or accompanied by distancing language. In *The Guardian*, Putin's justification for the invasion, to "de-Nazify" Ukraine, is framed as a "claim dismissed by analysts as baseless" (Beaumont & Borger, 2022). This use of the verb "claimed" and the immediate counter-positioning of analysts' rejection diminishes the credibility of Russian sources. The result is what Richardson (2007) refers to as a discursive delegitimization of the Other through quotation control.

4.1.4. Lexical Framing and Emotional Appeals:

Lexical choices throughout the Ukraine coverage are emotionally charged and ideologically saturated. Common expressions include "Europe's darkest hour," "the largest military attack in Europe since WWII," and "a turning point in European history." Such terms construct a grand narrative of historical rupture and moral crisis, situating the conflict within a larger arc of Western democratic struggle.

The emotional lexicon is supplemented by powerful metaphors. Putin's military is referred to as a "war machine," and his strategy is described as "relentless," "brutal," and "unprovoked." Hart's (2022) insights into cognitive framing are useful here: these metaphors are not merely decorative but trigger schema of tyrannical violence, reinforcing readers' mental associations with authoritarianism and threat.

This moral and emotional intensification serves a clear ideological function. As Lewis (2005) explains, the global mediasphere structures symbolic violence by constructing moral hierarchies through language. In the Ukraine coverage, these hierarchies are starkly drawn: Russian violence is made hypervisible and morally unacceptable, while Ukrainian resistance is framed as heroic and universally

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justified.

4.1.5. Multimodal Reinforcement and Implied Imagery:

Although this study does not focus on visuals, the articles themselves are often accompanied by images of bombed buildings, fleeing civilians, and Ukrainian soldiers. These visuals amplify the emotive force of the textual frame and create a multimodal synergy in which text and image jointly construct a sense of moral urgency and solidarity. Machin and Mayr (2023) emphasize how such visual-textual combinations create affective environments that shape reader response. Even where not analyzed directly, their presence is part of the ideological framing ecosystem.

4.2. Case Study 2: Gaza (October 2023):

This section examines the discursive framing of Israel's declaration of war on Gaza following the Hamas-led attack of October 7, 2023, through analysis of three news reports, two from *The New York Post* and one from *The Guardian*. Applying the same CDA categories used in the Ukraine case, naming and reference, foregrounding/backgrounding, and quotation/attribution, the analysis reveals a starkly asymmetrical framing that constructs Israeli military action as legitimate and necessary, while Palestinian resistance and suffering are discursively marginalized or delegitimized.

4.2.1. Naming and Reference:

Naming practices in the Gaza coverage reveal a heavily polarized narrative structure that centers Hamas as the primary agent and assigns moral culpability through emotionally charged language. Both *The New York Post* and *The Guardian* consistently refer to Hamas as "terrorists," "militants," and "barbarians," reinforcing a discourse of criminality and brutality. The *Post* headline "Barbarians at the Gate: Israel Strikes Back after Hamas Massacre" (Lapin, 2023) combines loaded metaphors with historical allusion, invoking images of uncivilized savagery threatening the civilized world. Similarly, The Guardian headline "Israel and Hamas at war after

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surprise attacks from Gaza Strip" (Beaumont, 2023) uses the term "surprise attacks," foregrounding Hamas's aggression and rendering Israeli retaliation reactive and justified.

By contrast, the naming of Palestinian civilians is depersonalized and generic. Victims are referred to in collective, anonymous terms such as "Gaza residents," "casualties," or "the dead." These constructions obscure political agency and depoliticize Palestinian suffering, a phenomenon Reyes (2022) identifies as discursive dehumanization, where certain groups are linguistically stripped of individual voice and historical context.

Israeli actions, including bombing densely populated areas, are framed using sanitized or strategic language such as "responds," "retaliates," "launches airstrikes," or "targets militants." This aligns with Van Leeuwen (2007) strategy of rationalization, where military action is legitimated through appeals to necessity, security, and order. Naming is thereby used to construct Hamas as the singular source of violence, while Israeli military operations are framed as corrective and protective measures rather than acts of aggression.

4.2.2. Foregrounding and Backgrounding:

Foregrounding in the Gaza coverage overwhelmingly emphasizes the trauma, fear, and outrage experienced by Israeli civilians. The *New York Post* deploys vivid, emotive storytelling to depict the October 7 attacks, citing scenes such as "families butchered in their homes" and "children slaughtered in their beds" (Lapin, 2023). These narratives serve to establish moral urgency and legitimate Israeli military response, aligning with Entman's (1993) functions of framing, particularly moral evaluation and problem definition.

Foregrounding is also present in the repetition of Israeli official narratives. Both outlets prominently report that the attacks represent "Israel's 9/11," drawing upon familiar trauma metaphors to contextualize the violence in terms that resonate strongly with Western audiences. This discursive move universalizes Israeli suffering

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while positioning Hamas as a global threat comparable to al-Qaeda, thus facilitating both authorization and moral justification for war.

Conversely, backgrounding is apparent in the near-total absence of historical and structural context surrounding Gaza. Omitted or briefly mentioned are the 16-year blockade, recurring military operations, and the broader context of occupation and systemic deprivation. None of the three articles substantively engage with the asymmetric power dynamic between Israel and Gaza, nor with the decades-long history of Palestinian dispossession. As van Dijk (2006) notes, such ideological silencing constructs events as isolated incidents rather than products of structural violence. By narratively beginning the conflict on October 7, media discourse effectively erases Palestinian grievance and resistance, replacing historical causality with present-tense horror.

4.2.3. Quotation and Attribution:

Quotation and attribution patterns in the Gaza case further reveal a sharp epistemological asymmetry. Israeli leaders, particularly Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, are quoted extensively, often in declarative, emotionally charged statements. For example, Netanyahu's pronouncement that "We are at war. Hamas will pay an unprecedented price" (Golding, 2023) is repeated across outlets without interpretive framing or skepticism. Similarly, U.S. President Biden's statement that "Israel has the right to defend itself" (Lapin, 2023) is cited as an authoritative endorsement, reinforcing Western-aligned legitimacy.

Palestinian voices, by contrast, are markedly absent or presented with epistemic distancing. When Palestinian casualties are reported, they are often attributed to "the Gaza health ministry," with verbs such as "said," "claimed," or "reported." For instance, *The Guardian* refers to Palestinian deaths by stating, "Gaza's health ministry claimed that over 400 people have been killed" (Beaumont, 2023). This contrasts sharply with the treatment of Israeli sources, whose statements are more likely to be quoted directly, and without hedging. Richardson (2007) identifies this

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as a form of epistemic discrimination, where trust is unequally distributed based on ideological alignment.

Moreover, Palestinian representatives, whether from Hamas or civil society, are rarely granted voice. There are no direct quotations from Palestinian officials, humanitarian workers, or eyewitnesses. Instead, Palestinian suffering is represented indirectly and minimally, further reinforcing their discursive marginalization. This aligns with Reyes's (2022) argument that Western media frequently deny narrative authority to non-Western actors, especially in conflicts involving Western allies.

4.2.4. Lexical Framing and Emotional Appeals:

The emotional and ideological work of language is particularly pronounced in the Gaza coverage. Lexical choices such as "massacre," "slaughter," and "barbaric attack" are repeatedly used to describe Hamas's actions. The *New York Post* refers to Hamas as "pure evil," and uses phrases like "the worst attack on Jews since the Holocaust," invoking historical trauma to anchor moral outrage in long-standing narratives of Jewish victimhood (Golding, 2023).

In contrast, Israeli airstrikes are described using technical and strategic vocabulary, "precision strikes," "military targets," "defensive operations." Even when high civilian casualties are acknowledged, they are framed as unfortunate collateral damage, with headlines emphasizing Israel's intent to target Hamas rather than the impact on civilians. This aligns with Hart's (2022) discussion of cognitive mitigation strategies, where metaphors and lexical framing downplay responsibility and soften moral judgments.

Orientalist tropes are subtly embedded in the contrast between civilized and uncivilized actors. Hamas is positioned as irrational and vengeful, while Israel is framed as democratic, law-abiding, and reluctantly violent. The concept of the unassimilable other by Parfitt and Egorova (2004) is especially relevant here: Palestinians are constructed not only as dangerous but as incompatible with Western norms of rationality and legitimacy.

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4.3. Discussions: Asymmetries of Legitimation:

The comparative analysis of Western media coverage of the 2022 Ukraine war and the 2023 Gaza war reveals consistent and ideologically significant asymmetries in how legitimacy and illegitimacy are discursively constructed. Although both events involved sudden declarations of war, high civilian casualties, and strong global reactions, the media narratives framing these conflicts exhibit divergent discursive patterns that reflect and reproduce underlying geopolitical alignments. These divergences, evident across naming practices, foregrounding and backgrounding, quotation patterns, and lexical framing, demonstrate how war is not simply reported but narratively constructed through interlocking discursive strategies.

4.3.1. Naming and Reference: Discursively Constructing Legitimacy:

In the Ukraine case, both *The Guardian* and *The New York Post* consistently name Russia as the explicit aggressor using morally charged terminology such as "invasion," "blitzkrieg," and "war machine." President Putin is singled out and vilified through direct naming, described as a "dictator" or "autocrat," thereby personalizing blame and simplifying geopolitical causality into a moral dichotomy. Ukraine, by contrast, is linguistically positioned as the innocent defender, "resisting," "surviving," and "unifying" in the face of Russian brutality.

In the Gaza case, while Hamas is named with even more emotionally charged terms, "terrorists," "barbarians," and "militants", Palestinian civilians are rendered anonymous and politically passive. Unlike Ukraine, where civilians are framed as suffering *because of unjust war*, Palestinian civilians are presented as incidental victims, often without context or political voice. Meanwhile, Israel is framed linguistically as inherently defensive, responding to "terror" and acting with strategic necessity. This discursive asymmetry constructs a moral hierarchy in which Ukrainian resistance is valorized while Palestinian resistance is criminalized or erased.

4.3.2. Foregrounding and Backgrounding: Selective Visibility and Ideological Erasure:

Foregrounding in both case studies focuses on the immediate human cost of war, but the intensity and direction of this focus diverge. In Ukraine coverage, reports foreground vivid imagery of Ukrainian civilian suffering, families in bunkers, hospitals under fire, elderly evacuees. These scenes are emotionally amplified and contextualized within a broader narrative of democratic resilience and European unity.

In Gaza, foregrounding similarly centers Israeli civilian trauma, especially during the initial Hamas attacks, using graphic and emotive language to generate shock and moral outrage. However, when the focus shifts to Palestinian casualties, foregrounding diminishes. Palestinian suffering is often framed generically ("hundreds dead in Gaza") and temporally compressed, mentioned only briefly, with little historical or political context. Crucially, the backgrounding of Israel's occupation, the Gaza blockade, and systemic violence over decades renders Palestinian violence inexplicable, stripped of political cause or legitimacy.

This contrast mirrors what van Dijk (2006) describes as ideological silencing: the systematic omission of contextual knowledge that might complicate dominant narratives. In both conflicts, backgrounding functions ideologically, to justify one party's actions and delegitimize the other's.

4.3.3. Quotation and Attribution: Epistemic Hierarchies and the Politics of Voice:

Quotation practices further reinforce ideological asymmetries by determining which voices are authorized and which are marginalized. In Ukraine coverage, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is quoted directly and extensively, his speech framed with moral authority and narrative centrality. Western leaders are also cited affirmatively, reinforcing a discursive coalition of shared values and objectives. Russian voices, when quoted, are distanced with hedging verbs ("claimed,"

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"insisted") or accompanied by immediate rebuttal, as seen in *The Guardian's* framing of Putin's "de-Nazification" rationale as "baseless."

In Gaza coverage, a similar pattern emerges: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Joe Biden are quoted directly, their statements unchallenged and repeated. Netanyahu's declaration "We are at war" is given headline status, while Biden's endorsement of Israel's right to self-defense is cited as an authoritative moral anchor. By contrast, Palestinian voices are almost entirely absent or filtered through indirect, depersonalized attribution ("Gaza health ministry said…"), often accompanied by distancing language ("alleged," "claimed"). This reproduces what Reyes (2022) identifies as epistemic marginalization: the systematic denial of narrative legitimacy to non-Western or anti-hegemonic actors.

4.3.4. Lexical and Emotional Framing: Moral Economies of Sympathy and Outrage:

Lexical choices across the two case studies work to emotionally differentiate actors and actions. In Ukraine, Russian violence is described with terms like "unprovoked assault," "shock invasion," and "war crimes," while Ukrainian responses are framed with phrases like "heroic resistance" and "national defense." The emotional tone evokes empathy and moral solidarity, situating the conflict within a liberal-democratic framework.

In the Gaza context, lexical framing is more complex but equally ideological. Hamas is described using intensified moral language, "barbaric," "massacre," "evil", that goes beyond political critique to existential condemnation. Israeli military action, however, is wrapped in euphemism, "precision strikes," "targeting militants," or "responding to terror", terms that obscure civilian casualties and imply strategic proportionality. Even as hundreds of Palestinians are killed, the emotional tone remains muted or abstracted.

These framing patterns reflect broader orientalist binaries, positioning Western-aligned states as rational and restrained, and their adversaries as emotional, violent,

and irrational. As Lewis (2005) argues, the global mediasphere functions through "language wars," where symbolic and moral hierarchies are constructed not only through what is said, but through how it is said, and who is allowed to speak.

4.3.5. Broader Ideological Implications: Naturalizing Geopolitical Alignments:

Taken together, the discursive asymmetries revealed in this comparative analysis point to a broader ideological function: the normalization of Western geopolitical interests through selective moral framing. Ukraine is framed as a site of heroic defense, deserving of aid and solidarity; Gaza is framed as a site of chaos and terror, warranting military reprisal. Both narratives are constructed not merely through facts, but through layered discursive strategies that include lexical choices, quotation patterns, backgrounding practices, and epistemic hierarchies.

The findings confirm that war legitimacy is not an objective status but a discursively constructed reality. Media coverage plays a central role in shaping this reality by controlling visibility, regulating voice, and guiding moral interpretation. These patterns serve to maintain dominant narratives about democracy, security, and civilization, while suppressing counter-narratives that challenge Western-aligned hegemony.

5. Conclusion

This study has critically examined how international news media discursively construct the legitimacy or illegitimacy of war declarations, through a comparative analysis of Anglophone coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Israel's declaration of war on Gaza in 2023. Drawing on a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, the analysis has revealed systematic asymmetries in how these conflicts are framed, differences that reflect and reinforce broader geopolitical hierarchies and ideological alignments. These findings underscore the necessity of critical media literacy strategies that go beyond surface-level reading. In particular, scrutinizing attribution patterns, distinguishing between actors who are directly quoted and those who are paraphrased, serves as a crucial method for revealing underlying biases in representation. This

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analytical awareness reveals that legitimacy is not inherent but is discursively constructed through the selective prioritization of narrative voices.

In the Ukraine case, media discourse consistently positioned Russia as the sole aggressor, employing unambiguous naming strategies, emotionally resonant depictions of civilian suffering, and frequent quotation of Ukrainian and Western leaders. These discursive choices constructed a clear moral dichotomy between authoritarian violence and democratic resistance, aligning public sentiment and policy discourse with Ukraine's cause.

In contrast, coverage of the Gaza conflict foregrounded Israeli trauma and framed Hamas exclusively as barbaric and criminal, while largely omitting the historical, structural, and geopolitical context behind Palestinian resistance. Palestinian civilian suffering was depoliticized and frequently abstracted, and Palestinian voices were marginalized or presented with epistemic distancing. Israeli military actions, though similarly destructive, were rationalized and legitimized through language that emphasized defense, precision, and restraint.

These contrasting discursive patterns underscore the ideological work of media language in shaping public perceptions of legitimacy and moral accountability in war. They also highlight how global conflict narratives are mediated not simply through reporting, but through a constellation of discursive strategies, naming, framing, omission, and quotation, that reproduce dominant power structures and cultural hierarchies.

Recognizing this dynamic underscores the urgent need for strengthened critical media literacy, particularly in times of war, when narratives are rapidly constructed and widely circulated. Readers, journalists, and policymakers must become more attuned to the ideological scaffolding that informs representations of conflict, and more reflexive about how language shapes the moral economy of war.

Future research could expand on this study by incorporating multimodal discourse analysis, exploring how images, headlines, and visual hierarchies co-construct

legitimacy alongside textual framing. Audience reception studies could offer further insight into how media consumers interpret and internalize these ideological cues. In addition, cross-linguistic and regional comparisons, including Arabic-language or non-Western media outlets, would help contextualize how discourses of war legitimacy vary across cultural and geopolitical lines.

These findings have practical implications for journalistic practice and media literacy education. Journalists could utilize the insights from this study to reflect critically on their own reporting techniques, aiming to provide more balanced representations of conflict. By understanding the discursive strategies that shape war narratives, media professionals can work towards reducing bias and ensuring more equitable coverage. Furthermore, integrating these findings into media literacy programs can empower audiences to critically engage with news content, fostering a more informed and reflective public that can discern underlying biases and recognize the power dynamics at play in media representations.

Ultimately, this study affirms that news reporting is never ideologically neutral. In the construction of legitimacy and illegitimacy, media discourse plays an active role in shaping global understandings of war, morality, and justice. Attending to these discursive practices is not merely an academic exercise, it is a necessary step toward a more ethically informed engagement with the narratives that define international conflict.

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