JOURNALISM IN THE CROSSFIRE
Media coverage of the war in Ukraine in 2014

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War reporting has mostly been analyzed as a struggle between political and military control over information and journalistic professionalism. An analysis of reporting in mainstream media from the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014 shows that many other aspects must also be considered. In a comparative study, mainstream media coverage in four countries, Ukraine, Russia, Poland, and Sweden, was analyzed and interviews were held with journalists in the media included in the content analysis. Findings revealed significant variations in the framing of the conflict, portrayal of actors involved, and word choice across national settings. Interviews with journalists also high-lighted crucial differences in approaches and perceptions. Results show that the specific journalistic culture in each country, self-censorship, and the degree of activist approach among journalists similarly play an important role in war reporting. Researchers from all four countries participated in the project.

KEYWORDS   journalistic culture; professional values; Russia; self-censorship; Ukraine; war reporting

Introduction

During wartime, journalism usually finds itself in a kind of crossfire. Sometimes this crossfire is quite literally between the two sides in the conflict, i.e. the fighting. More often, however, this crossfire is more metaphorical, journalists struggling to maintain professional autonomy while under pressure from the military or political leadership, or attempting to balance the professional values of objectivity and impartiality against expectations from sources and audiences to share emotions or show patriotism and loyalty to the country and to the political and military leadership.

The coverage of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 clearly contained both literal and metaphorical crossfire situations. Journalists were not only killed, wounded, and beaten while conducting their work, but there were also many examples of partisanship in mainstream media, and the media was accused of spreading disinformation and propaganda (Boyd-Barrett 2015; Khaldarova and Pantti 2016).

The purpose of this article is to analyze coverage of the conflict in Ukraine in selected mainstream media and to discuss factors leading to different approaches towards conflict reporting in four countries, Ukraine, Russia, Poland, and Sweden. The study employed two methods, content analysis of media coverage and semi-structured interviews with journalists, to identify patterns of coverage and to explore journalistic practices and perceptions with regard to conflict reporting. By focusing on two directly involved countries (Ukraine and Russia) as well as two neighboring countries (Poland and Sweden), the article examines media coverage and performance and discusses them in the broader context of factors as

the professional journalistic culture, the media system, and its relation to politics in each country.

Consequently, the main questions to be addressed include:

RQ1: How was the 2014 war in Ukraine framed in mainstream media in the four countries, for example, in descriptions of the conflict, its causes, and actors involved?

RQ2: How was the framing of the war in Ukraine in the studied countries influenced by specific journalistic cultures and by power relations in the different media systems?

RQ3: How were tensions between professional detachment and journalistic activism influenced by the degree of involvement into the conflict in the four countries?

War Reporting and the Role of Media in War

Media have always played an important role during times of war and international conflicts. In his classic book, *The First Casualty*, Phillip Knightley (2004) describes the eternal conflict between journalistic norms and national/military interests in controlling information flows and distributing the "correct" information. In terms of an overview of propaganda, the media play a crucial role in what is described as "psychological warfare", for example when it mobilized world opinion before the Gulf War in 1991–1992 with the help of public relations firms (Jowett and O'Donnel 2012). The role of the media in conflict and war has become even more important, reflecting changes in both the media (the rise of networks, citizen journalism, user-generated content, etc.) and the character of international conflicts that have occurred in the past 30 years (from traditional military conflicts to today's asymmetric conflicts (Ayalon, Popovich, and Yarchi 2014).

Media research has so far mostly studied conflicts and wars with the United States/NATO as a strong, decisive participant, from the first Gulf War in 1991–1992 to the war against Libya in 2011 and involvement in the civil war in Syria (e.g. Allan and Zelizer 2004; Tumber 2004; Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2014). There has been less research on the role of media in conflicts in the former Soviet empire such as Moldova, Georgia, Nagorno Karabash, and Ukraine. Also in Russia, media are considered more important in international conflicts. In a speech in 2013, the Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov emphasized that the border between military and non-military means in conflicts has changed, and non-military means are now more effective. As one of these non-military means, he mentioned "information operations in close connection with political, economic and military pressure" (Persson and Vendil-Palm 2014, 32). This emphasis on information is clearly reflected in the resources that are poured into television (TV) channels like Russia Today (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014; Widholm 2016).

In analyzing the role of media in recent wars, Hoskins and O'Loughlin have identified three phases of conflict mediatization: the broadcast war during the 1990s with the dominant role of international news channels, such as CNN; the "diffused war" during the 2000s typified by new possibilities to document and distribute information on the internet and in social media; and the "arrested war" in which professional media and military institutions can control social media dynamics and use them for their own needs. This has become especially visible in the coverage of the war in Ukraine in 2014, where "mainstream news cultures in the west seem ill-equipped to filter out

disinformation from fullscale (Russian) informational war, which exploits politics based on truth" (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2015, 1335).

War Reporting and Normative Values of Journalism

War reporting puts the normative foundations of journalism under pressure (Allan and Zelizer 2004, 4–5). One of the most important basic values in Anglo-Saxon journalism is to present all sides of a conflict, to have some kind of neutrality (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). This norm is, of course, under heavy pressure from the state and military in times of conflict and war when journalists are supposed to support their "own side" (Robinson 2004). Many scholars argue that the mass media tend to employ a patriotic framework of reporting and cover events in crisis situations that threaten the well-being of their nation (Waisbord 2002; Nossek 2004; Zandberg and Neiger 2005).

Journalistic cultures are shared ideals and practices, a "whole way of being" constructed and carried by the people living in the culture (Zelizer 2004). These cultures can be analyzed in different dimensions as institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies. Normative values are an integral part of the institutional roles in journalistic culture: the degree of activism, power distance, and market orientation (Hanitzsch 2007). Despite globalization, research has shown clear differences in normative values among journalists in different parts of the world, especially concerning the dimension of professional detachment (Waisbord 2013). In countries with a strong degree of political parallelism, media and politics are intertwined and partisan journalism is common (Hallin and Mancini 2004). But in countries outside the western world, journalistic activism is not strongly connected with political parallelism but mainly with the paternalistic tradition of journalism considered as the "tool for development". According to De Albuquerque (2013), the normative model by Hallin and Mancini which to a great extent is based on the dimension of political parallelism and pluralism, does not work in non-western countries due to lack of political competition in general.

There is a strong tradition of activism and political connections in journalism in Central and Eastern Europe, but, when asked, journalists' neutrality is the most important ideal (Anikina 2015). Still, activist ideals are strong, at least in Poland. In Russia, which has a strong literary publicist tradition in journalism, ideals are more careful today and also less critical. Moreover, within the institutional context, journalists are constantly under the pressure of owners and other actors to perform self-censorship (Koltsova 2006). There is a striking lack of studies dealing with journalistic culture in Ukraine. Existing literature on the Ukrainian media, however, points to a traditionally high level of instrumentalization of the media and journalism by media owners and the political establishment (Dyczok 2009; Ryabinska 2011).

Reporting is not only influenced by professional culture. Differences in media systems and among media firms (editorial line, media ownership, and so on) are also important in explaining how reporting on war and conflicts differs. Our study of the coverage of the war in Ukraine includes four countries with clear differences in media systems. In Russia, the media system is a kind of state-commercialized model with a low level of professional autonomy for journalists, strong influence of the vertical of power (Vartanova 2012), and high pressure from the institutions financing the media (Kiriya and Degtereva 2010). At the same time the journalist reporting in Russia in general is framed not under direct

coercion from the Kremlin but by self-censorship and general support of the powerful by leading journalists and anchors (Yablokov and Schimpfossl 2014).

In Ukraine, oligarchs with political interests have been controlling the mainstream media, but a balance between different power groups and a pluralism of available information has been observed (Ryabinska 2011). The Euromaidan events also brought more pluralism as new independent media appeared and increased the influence of journalists, many of whom became active participants in the democracy movement (Szostek 2014; IREX 2015). Media systems in Poland and Sweden are different to Russia and Ukraine in many ways. Swedish media has been described as being more independent in relation to the state and politics, but under increasing commercial pressure. Polish media has been characterized in recent years by strong commercialism in media and a strong commercial pressure on journalistic autonomy (Dobek-Ostrowska 2012). Historically in Poland, there have been strong ties between politics and media, and these connections are still visible in government pressure on state TV and radio.

Control over media and a focus on the media economy are two basic issues discussed in media research influenced by the political economy approach (Murdoch and Golding 2005). This perspective emphasizes power and relates strongly to dimensions of professional autonomy in the journalistic culture. In many ways professional journalistic cultures and political economy perspectives are two dimensions of media systems reflecting each other and are difficult to separate. The professional culture and the political economy of the media system create an environment where dominating discourses are amplified in war reporting. An example relevant for the Ukrainian case is the coverage by Ukrainian TV of the war between Russia and Georgia (Taradai 2014).

Methods

In September 2014, a group of media researchers from Poland, Ukraine, Russia, and Sweden met for a workshop to discuss how to study the role of media in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The choice of Ukraine was obvious at that point—a military conflict was dividing Europe and had changed the security system. The focus of the project was mainstream media because of its importance for the public discourse concerning the conflict.

The idea behind the cooperation was to gather perspectives from all sides in order to bring research closer to an understanding of the coverage of the war by mainstream media in the four countries, and the processes behind this coverage. Backed by funding from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, a research project was formed and researchers worked in close cooperation to develop the methods applied during the project.

The study was based on two types of data: quantitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews.

The *quantitative content analysis* focused on news coverage during the most intense period of the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014, from July 10 to the ceasefire on September 6. Three kinds of media have been analyzed in all four countries: TV news which has the largest audience, a high-circulation tabloid and a quality newspaper with a wide readership.[1]

The researchers developed a common code scheme that included 37 variables covering various aspects of media reporting of the conflict. In order to find frames showing the neutral/activist dimension in the coverage, themes and tendency in the coverage and words used to describe the conflict and its actors were analyzed. The code scheme

drafts were tested in all countries and refined to sort out ambiguities in the code scheme. In each country coding was done by one or two coders directly included in the project, and the coders met before coding to coordinate the work.

The content analysis included news coverage, but not debates and editorials. As a maximum, the first five main reports on the TV news programs and the first five articles in the newspapers were analyzed every day. In total 1875 reports and articles were analyzed. The complete code scheme is available in the project's final report (Nygren and Hök 2016).

The *semi-structured interviews* were with journalists (mostly reporters) involved in the coverage of the conflict in the analyzed media outlets. Five or six journalists in each country were interviewed, with the exception of Ukraine where 17 journalists were interviewed. In Russia, it was not possible to interview journalists in two of the analyzed media outlets, so some other journalists with experience covering the war in mainstream media were interviewed (public TV channel OTR and online news *Vzglyad*). The semi-structured interviews followed the same format in all four countries and included questions about the conditions affecting the coverage, pressure from external influences, how disinformation was handled, and the role of the journalist in relation to the conflict. The interviews were accomplished by researchers in each country.

The results were then analyzed from the perspective of the theories described above, i.e. media systems (degree of political parallelism and professionalization) and war reporting (degree of political/military control over information). In the final conclusion, these dimensions are discussed in relation to the results.

Results from the Content Analysis

There was massive coverage in mass media in both Ukraine and Russia, and there were many days during the period of the analysis when much more content was produced than the five first reports/articles chosen for analysis. The coverage of the conflict was also important news in Poland and Sweden, but the coverage there focused more on the consequences for these two countries. An analysis of the themes in the coverage clearly demonstrate that there are differences based on the degree of closeness to the conflict.

In *Ukraine* the conflict itself was in focus—the fighting in eastern Ukraine, the efforts of the Ukrainian military, and the situation for refugees and internally displaced people. A substantial part of the Ukrainian media content focused on stories about the Ukrainian military beyond its military actions, indicating that mainstream media took a patriotic stance. In the *Segodnya* tabloid, which is based out of Donetsk, there was a campaign to generate support for refugees, and in all of the analyzed media outlets the Ukrainian military was given more attention than the political sphere and the international political game. The "enemy" was almost invisible, and only a few articles mentioned the rebels in eastern Ukraine. Russia's involvement was given more attention, in terms of both its military and humanitarian involvement.

In *Russia*, the picture was more diverse. The fighting and civilians were given a lot of coverage, but international politics, sanctions, and the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) were given even more coverage. Russian media covered the conflict by supporting the position of the Russian government as leading politicians were appealing to international policy and law. Russian support to eastern Ukraine was also important, but the coverage was mostly about the humanitarian support for civilians in the area.

In *Poland*, the coverage focused on the international dimension of the conflict. Sanctions, international politics, and Russian military involvement were the most important areas, as well as the consequences of the sanctions for Poland. The angle was Poland and mainly the consequences of the conflict for Polish national security and economy.

In *Sweden*, the most important theme was the downing of MH17, especially in the tabloid, *Aftonbladet*, where this theme took up two-thirds of the coverage. International politics, Russian military involvement, and sanctions were also given a lot of attention, and the events in Ukraine were given less coverage. The fighting and consequences for civilians were only covered when reporters from the Swedish reporters were in Ukraine reporting from the conflict area (Table 1).

The differences between the themes show that the basic news evaluation still works in mainstream media (Shoemaker and Cohen 2006). The degree of closeness/distance and how the home country and audience are affected by the conflict are the most important variables in the choice of themes. In Ukraine and Russia, there are also political dimensions behind the choice of subjects, i.e. a degree of support for the position of the home country.

These differences also become clear in an analysis of the main perspective of each news report and article. Together with observations about actors and sources visible in the coverage, the patterns of national perspectives become visible.

In *Ukraine*, the military and civil society were the dominant actors and coverage of the events in eastern Ukraine was intense and had a clear focus on support for the Ukrainian military. Ukrainian politicians and authorities took a second seat. Instead, soldiers and activists who helped equip and feed the army and provided assistance to internally displaced people were represented as "our side" in mainstream media content. Russian politicians and rebels were almost never dominant actors, and the enemy was hardly visible in the Ukrainian coverage. The main perspectives were support for Ukraine in general as well as the Ukrainian military.

In *Russia*, the actors were more on the political level—Russian politicians as well as Ukrainian and international politicians. The pro-Russian rebel had a minor role, and the

TABLE 1
Themes in the coverage (% of reports/articles)

	Russia	Ukraine	Poland	Sweden	Total
International politics and sanctions	16	10	20	19	15
Actions involving weapons in the conflict area	13	17	7	11	13
Consequences for civilians in the conflict area	10	19	2	5	11
Stories on separatists (not fighting)	1	1	7	5	3
Russian involvement (in general and military)	3	7	12	6	7
Russian humanitarian aid (convoys)	7	3	5	4	5
Military support for Ukraine	1	3	3	0	2
Popular support for one side and for civilians	1	4	4	1	3
National consequences, sanctions, etc.	7	9	16	14	10
Negotiations Ukraine–separatists–Russia	5	1	2	2	3
Stories about the Ukrainian military (not fighting)	7	16	1	0	8
Downing of MH17	13	6	17	30	14
Other	13	4	3	2	7
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Number of articles (*N*)	624	650	352	249	1875

perspective was mostly focused on support for the Russian government and, in part, for civilians in eastern Ukraine.

The focus in *Poland* was also on Russia—both the Russian government and the Russian rebels. The threat from Russia completely dominated the coverage, and Ukrainian military and civilians were hardly visible. International politicians were important, as were Polish politicians. Support for Ukraine was dominant, but a traditional neutral news perspective was also applied. This pattern is the same in *Sweden*, where the daily coverage was very much focused on the political level. The Russian perspective was hardly visible in Poland and Sweden (Table 2).

The perspective in the media is evident by not only *what* was covered, but also *how* it was covered—words used to describe key actors and events. Values are expressed by the manner in which news is framed, which also shows the audience how to interpret the news. When words and symbols are used repeatedly to favor a certain kind of interpretation, often with an emotional direction, the framing becomes visible (Entman, Matthes, and Pellicano 2009).

In the analysis, words used to describe the events in eastern Ukraine show how different kinds of frames were constructed in the media in the four countries. In the Ukrainian media, the events were mostly described with the official word used by the government and military—"anti-terrorist operation" (ATO), but the words "war" and "conflict" were also used, or "situation", but never "civil war". In the Russian media, the dominant word describing the event in Ukraine was "war". "ATO" was common as well, usually when Ukrainian representatives were quoted. Also, the phrase "punitive actions" was used to describe civilians as victims.

In the Polish media, the conflict in Ukraine was described as a "conflict" but also as a "Russian invasion" at the end of the period. The language used in the Polish media was strongly military-related, which is in line with the focus on military actions in the coverage. In the Swedish media, "conflict", "war", and "crisis" were used equally, but seldom "ATO" or "civil war". Swedish media used a more neutral language to describe the events (Table 3).

Even more clear were the differences in labeling of the Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. In *Sweden* and *Poland*, quite neutral notions such as "pro-Russian rebels" or "separatists" were most common. These three words also describe the goals for this group, and in Poland they are also generally called "Russians", or "soldiers" when the focus was on fighting.

TABLE 2
Main perspective in the coverage (% of reports/articles)

	Russia	Ukraine	Poland	Sweden	Total
Support for Ukraine in general	2	33	55	0	23
Support for Ukrainian government	1	7	1	50	9
Support for Ukrainian military	1	33	1	0	12
Support for civilians	14	8	0	6	8
Support for Russian government	50	0	0	4	17
Support for separatists in Donbass	11	0	0	2	4
Neutral	21	18	44	37	27
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	624	649	352	249	1874

TABLE 3

Words used in mainstream media to describe events in eastern Ukraine in 2014

	Russia	Ukraine	Poland	Sweden
Terrorist actions	0	4	6	0
Anti-terrorist operation (ATO)	17	61	12	3
Punitive action	10	0	0	1
Situation	22	26	16	5
Conflict	24	36	31	38
Civil war	9	0	3	8
Russian invasion/aggression	0	15	22	14
War	43	37	55	37
Crisis	14	3	12	34
Rebellion	2	0	8	6
N	258	501	244	140

Values are the percentage of the reports/articles where the events were given a specific designation. More than one word can be used in the same article.

In *Ukraine*, the rebels were mostly called "militants", "separatists", and "terrorists", the last one being a logical result of following the official language in the "anti-terrorist operation". Interestingly, words that clearly indicate a connection to Russia, such as "Russians", "mercenaries", or "Pro-Russian", were seldom used. Both "militants" and "separatists" were regarded by the Ukrainian journalists as neutral names.

In *Russia*, the dominant label was more positive—the rebels were called "people's militia". This expression was completely dominant, and the rebels were described as a kind of defense against the punishers from Kiev. This is also in line with the description of the conflict as a "civil war". Also, the notion "terrorist" was used in Russian coverage when Ukrainian sources were quoted (Table 4).

There were also some larger frames for the coverage, such as the national and historical context for each country. These frames are difficult to measure quantitatively

TABLE 4

Words used in mainstream media to describe pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine in 2014

	Russia	Ukraine	Poland	Sweden
Terrorists	18	66	21	10
Pro-Russian	2	5	29	71
Rebels	6	0	28	64
Soldiers	2	7	22	7
Separatists	0	27	71	77
People's militia	81	2	2	0
Illegal armed groups	0	9	7	0
Militants	0	53	16	0
Mercenaries	0	9	7	0
Self-defense fighters	8	1	0	2
Criminals/bandits	0	4	10	3
Russians	0	10	30	3
N	253	430	257	151

Values are the percentage of the reports/articles where rebels are mentioned. More than one word can be used in the same article.

because they are often taken for granted. They were present in the coverage, but seldom visible in the daily reporting. This was especially true for *Ukraine*, where the context goes back to Euromaidan and the struggle against the Yanukovych regime. The conflict was about defending the nation, its independence, and its democracy, the "enemy" was hardly visible and labeled "terrorists". Defending the nation against Russian aggression was the most common context in the coverage; in 22 per cent of the analyzed reports/articles, Russian aggression and invasion were described as the cause of the conflict.

In *Russia* the context was more complicated. The conflict was described as a civil war, but at the same time it was also a struggle between Russian values and the West within the borders of Ukraine. The "people's militia" was defending ethnic Russians against Ukrainian nationalists and "fascists" in Kiev. This was related to the struggle against fascism during the "great patriotic war" (World War II), a link that is directly visible in about 20 articles and reports. The Russian coverage also strongly demonized the West (the United States, NATO, and the European Union), and the conflict was described as a defense of the "Russian world".

The history was also brought up in *Poland*, but in a different version. The fear of Russia and Russian expansion was clearly visible and some events were directly linked to Polish history (World War II, the period of communism). In some right-wing media (not in the three outlets that were studied) there were direct links created between the downing of MH17 and the catastrophe in Smolensk in 2010, where the Polish president and a large part of the Polish leadership died. In the interviews, Polish journalists emphasized support for Ukraine as part of the Polish national struggle against Russia.

In *Sweden*, there was more of a distance to Ukraine both geographically and culturally. Focus in the coverage was very much on international politics and sanctions and areas where the news media had correspondents and sources producing content all the time (news agencies and satellite channels). The researched newsrooms also sent their own reporters to the conflict area to report on the development on the ground and about life for civilians and the fighting groups.

Between Professional Detachment and Journalistic Activism

In a recent survey of the professional duties of journalists in Poland, Russia, and Sweden, neutral ideals were regarded as most important: to bring forward various opinions, stand free from special interests, and provide information objectively. Activist ideals were less important, such as mobilizing people to act and educating the public (Anikina 2015). Despite these ideals, content analysis showed a clear bias in the coverage of the war in mainstream media in all four countries in the study. There is a gap between the journalists' perception of the ideals of neutrality and their practice—in other words, coverage of the conflict. This gap looks different in the four countries, depending on the degree on involvement and basic questions concerning the reasons behind the conflict.

How do journalists in the media outlets in the study reflect on this gap between professional ideals of neutrality and detachment, on one side, and partisanship and activism, on the other? The second part of the project consisted of interviews with journalists in the newsrooms of the media outlets included in the study. The interviews included questions about impartiality and patriotism, pressure from external forces, and self-censorship.

Ukraine

Nearly all of the interviewed journalists mentioned the ethical dilemma they faced while covering the war in eastern Ukraine, that is, the need to balance impartiality against a sense of citizenship or patriotism. Many journalists acknowledged that they should remain impartial from a normative perspective, but it was extremely difficult when the war is ongoing within their country.

> There have been many discussions on this issue [impartiality of journalists]. And while for the Poles, the Swedes … the answer is obvious: they have to provide two or even three, four perspectives in this conflict, stay emotionless and reserved. For us these things are contestable already, because, figuratively speaking, when your mother is being offended, should you be tolerant towards the offender of your mother? (Journalist M, 1+1)

While the interviewed journalists expressed awareness of this dilemma, the majority said that they could not be impartial or neutral. Some journalists also argued that they felt they were not only journalists but also citizens and they had an obligation to serve the national interests of Ukraine.

> I'm a journalist of Ukraine and I hold to Ukraine's interests. Nowhere in the world do journalists give the floor to terrorists. I can't imagine a US or European journalist would give the floor to terrorists. (Journalist L, 1+1)

In particular, many 1+1 reporters openly expressed their solidarity with the Ukrainian army and, broadly speaking, the Ukrainian side. The editor of one section at the *Den* newspaper also said that the editorial policy did not foresee taking commentaries from the representatives of self-proclaimed republics. "We don't take comments from the militants" (Journalist H, *Den*).

Some interviewees, however, questioned a patriotic approach widely popular among Ukrainian journalists.

> I don't know if we can call it propaganda, but ultimately, patriotic journalism—is not journalism anymore … I try to be [impartial]. I try to not allow myself at least hate speech towards people, even armed people who in fact commit terror now. (Journalist C, *Den*)

Although the majority of interviewed journalists admitted their lack of neutrality and impartiality, most of them said they tried to follow the standards of professional journalism despite their possible personal partisanship. In particular, journalists said they constantly checked information through various sources and tried to report what they saw, instead of distorting facts or constructing "reality".

> I'm a citizen of this country, I don't violate journalistic standards. I mean, I don't provide false or twisted information. I don't incite provocative things, like "Guys, please shoot for me on the camera". (Journalist O, 1+1)

1+1 reporters also emphasized that they tried to avoid close-up shots of dead bodies, even if they knew that the bodies were those of Russian soldiers and could be important evidence. Journalists also said that while holding interviews with Russian raiders caught by the Ukrainian army, they tried to do it as a "normal" interview, not an interrogation.

Journalists at 1+1 admitted that they adopted an official (governmental) terminology with regard to militants, arguing that the actions of militants spoke for themselves.

> I say "terrorists", "militants", "illegal armed groups", "pro-Russian mercenaries" … How should we call people that fire at civilians' houses? They are not military men. (Journalist O, 1+1)

In contrast to the nearly unanimous approach by 1+1 correspondents, journalists at *Den* showed some differences in their attitudes. One freelance journalist writing for *Den* said that she tried to avoid excessively emotional language and stick to more neutral terms. Another former journalist who left *Den* some time ago mentioned that there was still no consensus on how to name "those armed people".

Interviewed journalists said they did not experience editorial pressure when covering the war in eastern Ukraine. At the same time, several other journalists recalled a few cases where editors changed their stories' headlines to sound more judgmental, but they did not find those cases particularly disturbing.

Most of the interviewed journalists admitted that they practiced some form of self-censorship, guided by the fear of causing harm. In particular, journalists referred to the fear of revealing important military information, but also to cases that could damage the image of the Ukrainian army.

> There were many cases of looting in volunteer battalions, and we really didn't know how to show this. But then those cases were not massive, and we could discredit the entire battalion. (Journalist N, 1+1)

Such considerations were quite typical for many of the interviewed journalists. Although they pointed out some cases where they ran "unpopular" stories, there were also quite a few cases of self-censorship. In many cases, self-censorship was fueled by the journalists' fear that some of the stories could be used by "Russian propaganda" and thus bring harm to Ukraine.

Russia

In Russia, questions about the coverage of the war in Ukraine were very sensitive. Only journalists at the *Kommersant* newspaper agreed to answer questions. In order to get a broader picture of the condition for coverage of the conflict in Ukraine, some journalists from other mainstream media were chosen for interview: from the state online news, *Vzglyad*, and the public TV channel, OTR. All of the interviewed journalists agreed that they should be neutral towards all actors of the story. Even if they emphasized the necessity of showing all conflicting voices, the reporter of the pro-Kremlin online media outlet, *Vzglyad*, agreed that their reports aimed to maintain the positive image of Russian government, "of course, as *Vzglyad* is a state medium, we support Russian policy". But, according to the reporter, he tried to make his articles more balanced:

> In order to follow the principle of impartiality, I used some pro-Ukrainian sources. But … Everything depends on the language you use to describe these sources. I always use words that could make the audience doubt their information.

The reporter of the *Kommersant* newspaper tried to give the audience different approaches to the conflict and include diverse opinions in the news stories. This reporter argued that "the position of the activist is not relevant for our newspaper". This observation was supported by the editor of the newspaper:

> We don't have any guidelines for the coverage of Ukraine. Neither the owner nor the chief editor told us that we must represent any side of the conflict in a particular (positive or negative) way. But as an editor, I understand that some issues regarding Ukraine are more sensitive than others. That's why I asked reporters to be more careful and attentive to what and how they write.

Both interviewees at *Kommersant*, the editor and the reporter, emphasized that their editorial policy differed from the situation in state-owned media, which, according to them, tended to ignore some important issues of the conflict. The editor of *Vzglyad* agreed that the journalists of his medium were biased while reporting on not only Ukraine but on all situations that involved the Russian government, but he states that he also did not receive any guidelines from the authorities:

> Nobody from Kremlin calls us and tells what we should (or should not) do. But in our medium we have a kind of journalistic consensus about our strategies in covering political news. We have to construct a positive image of the government. Each editor or reporter knows it and follows it.

A reporter from the TV channel, OTR, stated that neither he nor his colleagues were under pressure from the authorities. Nevertheless, the channel tried to avoid discussing the conflict, although some news bulletins on OTR included reports about it. Denying the authorities' influence on his work, the reporter described the following situation:

> Although our channel focuses on events in Russian regions, sometimes editors allow us to write news about Ukraine. And some officials highly commended our reports because we were balanced. There are no enemies or friends, good or bad guys in our reports. Just facts.

The journalist and the editor of *Kommersant* said that although authorities did not influence their work, they felt huge pressure from the situation in the Russian media market:

> Maybe you know that in 2011 there were some changes in the media environment that were characterized by purges in the media market. To a certain degree we were in the similar situation, e.g. some people had been dismissed. Due to that, our editorial policy changed. Now, articles about some issues cannot be published. For example, my article about Russian troops in Ukraine was published on our Web page but then removed. The editor told me that the article was just bad. But maybe he did not want to conflict with someone "above us". Nevertheless, we try to cover problems, which are important for the public.

Russian journalists in the study gave the impression of being careful and having a strong sense of self-censorship. As we can see, all of them find no contradiction between the notion of neutrality and some self-restrictions they use. Moreover, as we can see from the results of the content analysis, the generally shared idea of neutrality has no impact on tendentious coverage of the conflict. This confirms earlier research that found that contemporary mainstream Russian journalism adapted to pressure from the political sphere through owners and the media structure, and developed strong self-censorship (Koltsova 2006; Nygren and Dobek-Ostrowska 2015).

Poland

Polish journalists emphasized several difficulties in achieving neutral reporting. According to a reporter from public service TV, these difficulties were related to the fact that the way a given journalist reported on the issue was related to the country from which the media professional came.

> In a natural way, we have a negative attitude toward those people who are unpleasant to us, and treat us as though we were their enemies.
> (Reporter, TVP)

The TV reporter said that both being objective and standing for the side of civilians is of critical importance. But, as noted by a reporter from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, finding this type of balance is impossible to reach in practice:

> The problem often lies in the fact that we are not able to show the conflict objectively, because we cannot be on both sides.

The reporter from *Gazeta Wyborcza* was quoted as saying that as a journalist in the time of war:

> The journalist tries to be objective but in the case of war, you must always be on one side ... You have to realize that some journalists are also parties to the conflict, they are the soldiers in the war ... The question is—when does journalism and when does a media professional starts to be a soldier of ideological front.

This quote could explain why the content analysis showed Polish media as being pro-Ukrainian. Overall, the dominance of the pro-Ukrainian perspective in news reporting was explained by referring to historical experiences; here, by a reporter on the tabloid *Fakt*:

> We all had very similar beliefs that the Ukrainians were getting hurt. That the Ukrainians are doing something that has happened in Poland at the turn of 1989 and 90 and we need to support them.

In line with the main subjects covered by Polish media, the reporter from *Gazeta Wyborcza* further claimed that the independence of Ukraine is a fundamental vector of Polish policy. Therefore, the way the Polish media presented the Ukrainian side is not surprising:

> The whole policy of Józef Pilsudski aimed to create the Ukrainian state, which would be a buffer against Russia. Later, the emigration policy of Mieroszewski and Giedrojć, who said to the Poles: "Listen, you should take care of Ukraine." The Ukrainian people should be independent, because it is the best defense for Poland.

Among the sources of information quoted by Polish journalists were Ukrainian people, both the government and the army or civilians. Moreover, the Ukrainian side was presented mainly in a positive or neutral way. Overall, the way in which the sides of the conflict were described often reflected the individual experience of journalists (gathering information, getting access to sources, and so on). To this end, both the amount of information and multiple sources of conflicting nature (propaganda included) were seen as a problem when reporting on the crisis:

> There is too much information and too much completely opposing information.
> (Reporter, *Gazeta Wyborcza*)

The Polish journalists did not feel any pressure from editors or politics in their coverage of the war. They described the choice of subjects and angles as a result of the development in the conflict, and the only pressure they mentioned was time—the conflict between publishing and the need for verification. Direct political links in the coverage were also results of reactions in society, for example when relatives of victims of the Smolensk catastrophe (in 2010) wrote a letter to the relatives of the victims of the downed MH17. The *Fakt* tabloid made a story of this, and the issue was also discussed in *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

Sweden

All journalists emphasized the need for impartiality, to give the opinions of both sides in the conflict and independently evaluate the events. This differs from the tradition in Ukraine and Russia, a senior reporter at *Dagens Nyheter* says: "journalism in Ukraine is very nationalistic, it is about supporting our boys at the front". He tried to be neutral in the reporting, and gave as an example an interview he held with a Swedish Nazi fighting in one of the volunteer battalions for Ukraine:

> Whatever you write, it can be interpreted as you being part of the conflict … I gave this Nazi volunteer a possibility to give his version and I got a flood of mail claiming that I was throwing dirt of the sake of Ukraine.

Also, among ordinary people in eastern Ukraine, the assumption is that media is part of the conflict. A reporter at *Dagens Nyheter* said:

> When I say I am a journalist from Sweden, people ask me when we will tell the truth about the conflict. They have heard on Russian TV that western media does not tell the truth. A large proportion of the propaganda is about the other side lying, and to some extent Ukrainian and western media also write that the Russian media is lying.

At SVT, the editor for foreign news said it was important to present both sides. But at the same time, it was easy to give the conflict a "David and Goliath" framework, i.e. the big bad country against the small neighbor. A reporter at SVT said that he did not want to be a spokesperson for any side, he wanted to give his personal perspective and question statements made by groups and people in power. When he held an interview with people from Right Sector in Kiev, some people said he was too critical: "I always turn things around and ask critical questions, and this is my way to work with all parts".

None of the Swedish journalists spoke about pressure from authorities to influence their work, but all five spoke about the strong feelings among the audience. One reporter at *Dagens Nyheter* drew a comparison to the reactions he got when he reported from the Israel–Palestinian conflict when he spoke about all the angry mail and comments he received after publishing anything that could be considered negative about either side. Pro-Russian groups, in particular, were active in putting pressure on journalists:

> They are terrible. I have collected some on my computer, and in one case it was close to an open threat to me. I think it is organized and systematic, and the purpose can be to make me lose my temper … it affects me strongly sometimes.
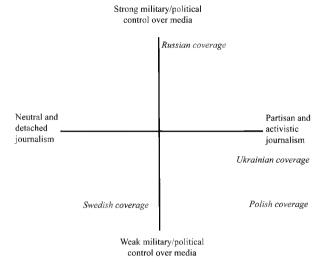
Strong military/political
control over media

Russian coverage

Neutral and
detached
journalism

Partisan and
activistic
journalism

Ukrainian coverage

Swedish coverage   *Polish coverage*

Weak military/political
control over media

FIGURE 1
Coverage of the war in Ukraine in 2014 in mainstream media in four countries

The reporter at SVT also spoke about strong pressure from pro-Russian groups via email and comments on Facebook about journalists supporting the fascist regime in Kiev, but he also reflected on the fact that he lives in a society where distribution of information is not independent of the fact that the largest news agencies are based in western countries and that this perspective is the most prominent in media. "We all live in a world that is not without ideological and structural context", he said.

Conclusions

The content analysis shows that the coverage of the war in mainstream media correlates strongly with the political-historical context of each country. Themes in the coverage are related to the audience and the political situation in each country according to classical principles of news values. The framing of the conflict is closely related to the political situation in each country—the main perspective, how the war is described and what words are used to label the conflict and actors. Journalists explain this framework with a mix of partisanship and self-censorship, a professional culture where journalism is closely connected to politics in a system that research has labeled "political parallelism" (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The exception is Sweden where framing was embedded in the western media system dependent on elite sources and the international news industry.

In media research, the history of war reporting mostly focuses on the relationship between military/political control over information and professional values of journalistic autonomy. This relationship has evolved and brought the two sides closer through military information strategies, combined with the need in news media for a constant flow of news (Allan and Zelizer 2004). The results of this project show that the relationship between journalists and military is only part of the story. The professional culture, patriotism, self-censorship, and political context are also important variables in explaining the actual coverage.

Both these dimensions are important, and taken together they provide a model for analyzing the role of mainstream media in war reporting. This model has two variables:

- The degree of military/political control over information flows.
- The professional journalistic culture, mainly the degree of partisanship/activism or neutrality/detachment within the journalistic culture.

In the coverage of the war in Ukraine in the four countries, mainstream media can be placed within the analytic model shown in Figure 1.

In *Ukraine*, there is clear patriotism both in the coverage and among journalists in all three media outlets supporting the national struggle. The professional culture favors partisanship over neutrality in this coverage, and journalists define themselves as taking part in the defense of the nation. Military sources hold a strong position, because very often they were the only source of information about the fighting, but the interviews have shown that there was no direct control or pressure over information flows from both the political and military elite. Instead, journalists were often very critical of political and military leaders. This critical approach and the partisan coverage were the result of the huge mobilization of the Ukrainian society and pressure resulting from this mobilization. Outside this patriotic discourse, Russian and separatist media were subject to some restrictions. Russian TV channels were removed from the cable TV packages and some Russian journalists were not allowed to work in Ukraine. At the same time, it was very challenging or almost impossible for Ukrainian journalists to work in the territories controlled by the rebels.

In *Russia*, the coverage related more to the "western threat" against the Russian world than the actual war in Ukraine. This war is represented mainly as such: a "western threat". Journalists describe self-censorship and how they carefully adapt to the policy of government. There are also differences between the media outlets, in that the elite quality newspaper *Kommersant* could be more neutral than others. Looking back, the difference is huge compared to the critical coverage of the first war in Chechnya in 1994 (Belin 2002). In the coverage of Ukraine in 2014, political control was strong in mainstream media, and the professional values more passive than activist.

In *Poland*, the coverage was even more "anti-Russian" than in Ukraine. The focus was on Russian aggression, international sanctions, and threats against Poland. Journalists explained this using historical experience, that the security of Poland was threatened. They also explained that in war reporting you must always pick a side—a kind of activist journalism also found earlier among Polish journalists. This brings the conflict directly into Polish politics, a kind of domestication of the conflict where it is used in internal politics in Poland. This coverage becomes part of strong nationalistic tendencies in Poland, in the same way that the coverage of the war in Georgia in 2008 was used in Ukraine (Taradai 2014).

Swedish media clearly distances itself from the conflict compared to the other countries in the study. Its coverage is part of the western news system, and international politics and MH17 are the biggest themes. Impartiality is a key value, but at the same time dominance for western actors and perspectives is strong. This is rather a consequence of being a part of the western news system (news agencies and TV exchange) than taking a stand in the conflict.

The analysis shows the coverage of the war in Ukraine is deeply embedded in the political economy of the media systems and in professional journalistic cultures. There is no single description of the coverage, but rather a web of factors building different pictures

of the conflict in all countries in the study. The framing of the conflict in Russia and Ukraine is a result of activism and self-censorship embedded in the professional cultures, as well as mechanisms in the media system. The result is a coverage following political divisions far away from professional ideals of objectivity and impartiality. This is also coherent with earlier research on how media works hand in hand in times of war with its own governments (Carruthers 2011). Dependence and influence from audiences, authorities, and the military results in uncritical support for the "home" side (Cottle 2006). This is also amplified in professional cultures characterized by a low degree of power distance and a high degree of interventionism/activism as in Russia (Hanitzsch 2011).

The coverage in Poland and Sweden differs in the sense that the media system gives space for more pluralism and some distance to the conflict makes it less sensitive. Still there is a clear domestication of the conflict in Polish media and the place within the western media system influences the framing of the conflict in both countries. Professional cultures also play a role in Poland and Sweden, with more activist attitudes in Polish journalism clearly visible in our study (Anikina 2015).

There are also other dimensions not included in the analytical model that should be subjects for further research: one is the degree of commercialism in the media system and the extent to which both the market and the audience influence the coverage. Another important dimension outside the model is the increasing significance of social media networks, the kind of content they offer, and the importance of these networks in relation to traditional mainstream media.

In future research, it is important to continue cooperation between researchers from countries on different sides in the conflict analyzed. This can create a common understanding about the gaps between professional values and the actual conditions for journalists in daily work. It can also provide new knowledge on how journalism can reach beyond the nationalistic discourse and contribute to a dialogue and understanding as proposed, among others, by researchers wanting to promote "peace journalism" in contrast to conventional "war journalism" (Lynch 2008).

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

1. The analyzed media are: Ukraine: news on Channel 1+1 and in the newspapers *Den* and *Segodnya*; Russia: news on Channel 1 and in the newspapers *Komsomolskaja Pravda* and *Kommersant*; Poland: news on Wiadomości TVP and in the newspapers *Fakt* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*; Sweden: news on SVT (Rapport) and in the newspapers *Aftonbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter*.

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