CHINESE REPORTING ON THE UKRAINE WAR.
A COMPARATIVE CADS STUDY OF CGTN'S COVERAGE
OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

Ruth Breeze and María Fernanda Novoa-Jaso

Abstract

During the first months of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the attitude of the Chinese authorities was the object of much speculation. This paper sheds light on the Chinese official position by examining how the Chinese global channel CGTN presented the main actors and actions in the conflict over the first three months. By conducting a corpus assisted discourse study of all the reports published about the conflict on CGTN from February to May 2022, and comparing them with two similar corpora from international news providers Al Jazeera and Euronews, we identify the main trends in representation of nations, leaders and actions in all three channels. We trace how CGTN negotiated the discursive dilemma posed by China's neutral position and consider how it used reporting on this conflict to pursue certain strategic goals, possibly with a view to influencing public opinion in areas of the world where audiences may be receptive to stances that are not overtly pro-Russian yet are sceptical of the West.

1   Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caused shock waves across world institutions, and most democratically elected governments reacted with expressions of deep concern. On 2 March, the UN General Assembly voted to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine with 141 votes in favour to 5 against (by Russia itself, North Korea, Belarus, Syria and Eritrea), and with 35 abstentions. Interestingly, most Arab nations supported the motion, although Iran, Iraq and Algeria abstained. Central Asian republics abstained, probably as a form of "strategic silence" in recognition of their continuing dependence on Russia and their need for good relations with other states that are critical to the west, such as China (Dadabaev & Sonoda 2023). However, probably the most important exception to the general trend to condemn the invasion was the People's Republic of China (PRC), which appeared to international observers to be "walking a tightrope" in which it neither condemned nor supported Russia (Soufan Center 2022).

In parallel to political and diplomatic reactions to the invasion, journalists and editors struggled to obtain reliable information and interpret the rapidly changing situation. Over the days that followed, most major news media gave prominence to the Ukrainian defensive position, while speculating as to Russian intentions. By contrast, reports about the war published in non-Western media, such as Russia's RT and China's CGTN, diverged sharply from those offered by mainstream European and US news agencies or Western online newspapers.

In this context, given the uncertainty surrounding China's attitude to the conflict, the perspective presented in media such as CGTN is particularly interesting for at least two reasons. First, given the non-democratic context of the PRC, where media control is rigorous (Wang 2018), scrutiny of CGTN reporting is likely to shed light on the ambiguities of the Chinese government's stance and possibly reflect subtle changes over the early months. Second, CGTN targets audiences in the developing world as well as the West with a view to propagating the Chinese version of current events, and thus has the potential to influence worldwide audience perceptions of international affairs (Ye & Albornoz 2018). Previous studies suggest that in foreign affairs, Chinese media have a preference for "constructive journalism" (Zhang & Matingwina 2016) and emphasize China's "humanitarian" actions (Sun 2022), always presenting Chinese leaders positively (Wang 2018). It is therefore interesting to examine the discursive strategies used on CGTN to describe the outbreak and early development of the Ukraine war, in order to provide insights into the Chinese authorities' broader campaigns to influence public opinion on a world scale.

Given our main focus on how the Russia-Ukraine situation is reported on the main Chinese international news network CGTN, it might seem logical to analyse news from this source in isolation. However, to shed light on the specificity of CGTN reports, we consider that it is important to compare them with those produced by similar news media based elsewhere. In theoretical and methodological terms, our study follows the principles of Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), by taking a comparative approach to seek patterns that emerge over larger bodies of text (Partington et al. 2013), informed by the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to discourse analysis, which takes account of historical, geopolitical and strategic contexts (Reisigl & Wodak 2009). In what follows, we compare a corpus consisting of all the news items about the Russia-Ukraine conflict published on CGTN during the first three months, with two corpora of similar short reports on the same subject from two other international news media (Aljazeera and Euronews).

2   Theoretical framework

Although short news items have a semblance of objectivity, the ideological position of the journalist or medium is subtly conveyed through the roles given to different actors, the vocabulary chosen to describe them or their actions, and the general perspective adopted, all of which come to constitute, in a Foucaultian sense, what is accepted as "valid knowledge at a certain place and certain time" (Jäger & Maier 2009: 34). This study follows the principles of CADS, a methodological approach designed to detect patterns over large volumes of text which might not be readily available to the naked eye (Partington et al. 2013). By combining statistical information about word frequencies and combinations with the more qualitative approach characteristic of discourse analysis, CADS methods are used to find recurrent trends in the texts in question, test hypotheses, and create a robust grounding to complement subjective readings.

In its methodology and aims, CADS is compatible with the DHA in discourse analysis (Reisigl & Wodak 2009), often used to explore the workings of national ideologies, media bias or discrimination in a social context. The DHA employs quantitative and qualitative methods to find out how particular actors or actions are referred to linguistically, what characteristics are attributed to them, what arguments are used, what perspective is applied, and so on. The DHA pays special attention to "context" (Wodak 2011: 67), including the micro-context, but also the broader sociopolitical and historical contexts in which the discursive practices are embedded.

Importantly, as Partington et al. (2013: 12) explain, CADS – like other approaches to discourse analysis – is essentially comparative, since "it is only possible to both uncover and evaluate the particular features of a discourse type by comparing it with others". Several previous CADS studies of recent war situations have compared two sources: Lombardo (2009) compared reporting on the Iraq war in the BBC and CBC; Duguid (2009) contrasted the use of speech and thought verbs across different genres related to the Iraq conflict; Marchi and Taylor (2010) examined the co-text around key lexis such as "war" to uncover differences between political and media framing of the Iraq invasion. Comparative studies of war reporting using related methodology such as content analysis (e.g. Carpenter 2007) have also revealed trends in the type of sources cited by different media. This is important, because the choice of sources is linked to legitimation of the conflict itself (Hallin 1986). Here, too, CADS methodology offers an efficient method for exploring the representation of key actions and the presence of actors and sources in large volumes of text.

We chose to compare the corpus of CGTN reports with two corpora from international news providers based in non-combatant countries, in order to identify differences that help us to describe the Chinese perspective on this conflict. This three-way comparison enabled us to determine what might be particularly characteristic about each medium, rather than establishing a potentially misleading dichotomy between two. In our discussion, the differences that appear will be discussed with reference to the context of each medium/country, with a special focus on our findings concerning CGTN and the Chinese stance towards the conflict. In particular, we wanted to establish who/what the main actors in the conflict were in each medium, how they were presented, and how the conflict itself was described. Our view was that these three aspects would give us essential insights into the perspective on the conflict adopted by the different news providers.

3   Material and method

Since the main object of study was CGTN, as the principal Chinese news outlet for international audiences, we needed to find sources of similar reports for comparative purposes. After considering various candidates, we finally decided on Al Jazeera, a well-known non-western international news provider, and Euronews, an independent European-backed news channel. The genres used were similar to those in CGTN, consisting mainly of very short news items presented in text format with occasional longer pieces, and the channels were relatively independent, that is, not US or Russian-backed, so their coverage can be compared to that of CGTN, which purports to provide a geopolitically independent view of international affairs. These three news providers are briefly profiled below.

CGTN: CGTN was formally established in 2017 through the merger of seven Chinese state news sub-channels and international networks dating back to 1958 as the PRC's main state broadcasting outlet (Zhu 2022). It broadcasts worldwide in English, French, Spanish and Arabic, also through apps and social networks, and claims to have over 150 million followers worldwide. Despite recent adjustments, Chinese media still fulfil the historical function of propaganda, promoting Communist Party policy lines (Shambaugh 2015, Meng 2018), although CGTN is increasingly conceptualised more as an exercise in 'soft power' to increase ideological influence abroad (Peng & Keane 2019, Tang 2023), particularly in developing countries (Zhang & Matingwina 2016, Zhu 2022).

Al Jazeera: Owned by the Qatari state, Al Jazeera was launched in 1996, and is thought to have changed the television landscape of the Middle East. It

broadcasts worldwide, enjoys the reputation of relative objectivity when reporting on international affairs, and has been described as a conciliatory "opinion maker" on the world stage (el-Nawawy & Powers 2010).

Euronews: After the Gulf War of 1992, when CNN came to dominate news coverage across the world, the European Broadcasting Union proposed that a channel should be launched to counteract US dominance and present information from a European perspective. Despite some criticisms, its reporting is generally seen as objective and perceived as broadly pro-Ukraine (Dziadul 2022).

All the news reports on the Russia-Ukraine conflict were downloaded manually from all three media websites. A total of 1,799 items were collected from CGTN, 5,156 from Al Jazeera and 989 from Euronews. A corpus was created for each month and medium in Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014) (see Table 1). Although the datasets are complete, that is, they include all the available items, they are of different sizes, owing to the different priorities, editorial policies and styles of the three media. CGTN and Al Jazeera both provided very short news briefs (mean 66 and 92 words, respectively), while Euronews published longer articles (mean 502 words). Given these differences in corpus size, normalized frequencies were used throughout to calculate frequencies, following standard practices in CADS.

	Feb-Mar	Mar-Apr	Apr-May	Total
CGTN	32,105	51,941	34,725	118,771
Al Jazeera	188,888	135,495	147,924	472,307
Euronews	232,109	140,658	123,990	496,757

Table 1: Number of words in each corpus (month/medium)

Following the principles of the Discourse Historical Approach (Reisigl & Wodak 2009), an analysis of a body of texts begins by establishing how the main actors and actions in those texts are named (nomination) and described (predication). In this case, a previous question needed to be addressed, namely, which actors actually appear most in the texts? Since presences and absences are both important for the ideological framing of news (Breeze 2014), our first research question is as follows:

RQ1   Who/what are the main actors in CGTN, Al Jazeera and Euronews, and how are they described?

To identify and profile the main actors, we conducted three different types of search in Sketch Engine:

1. The presence of the different state actors (countries) was identified by locating all the mentions of countries (e.g. Russia, Russian) and, where appropriate,

metonymic representations of their government (e.g. Kremlin), in each of the nine corpora. The results were calculated for a total of 43 countries which had an aggregate normalized frequency of more than 0.01 in at least one of the corpora. Countries mentioned, but which did not reach an aggregate normalized frequency of 0.1 in any of the corpora (e.g. North Macedonia, Pakistan) were discarded.

2. Mentions of individual people (e.g. Putin, Zelenskiy, Biden). Most people mentioned were heads of government, ministers or military personnel. In total, 15 heads of government and 21 other individuals were located (F>0.001). They were grouped together according to nation, and their normalized aggregate frequency in each corpus was calculated. People representing transnational bodies (e.g. Ursula von der Leyen) were included under organization rather than nationality.

3. News agencies, newspapers and broadcasting companies (e.g. Reuters, Bild, BBC). The news agencies, newspapers and broadcasting companies mentioned were grouped according to the country where they are based (e.g. TASS was classified as Russian), and the normalized aggregate frequency was calculated for each nation.

In all cases, care was taken to locate as many instances of relevant names as possible, since different transcription (e.g. Zelenskiy, Zelenskyy, Zelensky) and punctuation (e.g. US and U.S.) systems were used, not always consistently, by the different media. Once the frequencies of each for each country had been calculated, graphs were drawn in Excel. To avoid excessive visual complexity, the data were grouped according to the following areas: Russia, Ukraine, USA, UK, EU/EFTA, Asia.

Our second question relates to the actions occurring in Ukraine: what words are used to describe these, and what other words co-occur with them? The second research question is therefore:

RQ2 How do CGTN, Al Jazeera and Euronews describe the Russian action in Ukraine?

We used the thesaurus tool in Sketch Engine and manual analysis to identify words used to describe the conflict. Statistics were obtained from Sketch Engine and graphs drawn using Excel. The most salient trends found in our investigations for research questions 1 and 2 were explored through qualitative analysis of concordance lines and the wider co-text, with a view to interpreting these findings and relating them to context.

4 Data analysis

4.1 Nations and nationalities

Figure 1 shows the normalized frequency (percentage of total words) of the main nations and nationalities mentioned by month and medium. For the sake of visual clarity, subsidiary actors are grouped together by area (EU/EFTA and Asia). The main actors in all media/months are Russia and Ukraine, followed in CGTN by the USA, and in all corpora by European countries. The presence of EU countries rises across the period, while CGTN is the only channel to give prominence to Asian actors: China is presented as encouraging restraint in the first months, while during the second month, CGTN gives more coverage to India's independent stance on Russia than the other media, as well as to Erdogan's attempts at mediation.
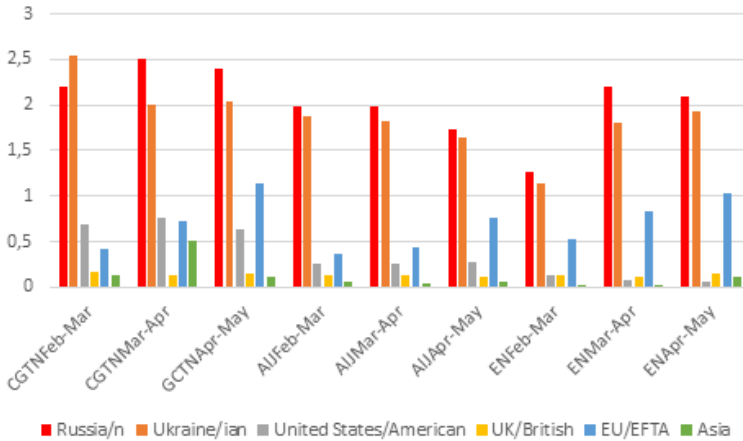

Figure 1: Relative frequency (% of running words) of main state actors (Russia/n/Kremlin, Ukraine/ian, United States/US/White House) by medium/month

To complement Figure 1, Figure 2 shows the breakdown of frequencies within European countries. Germany and the UK appear most, followed by Poland, Finland and Sweden, perhaps on grounds of geopolitical proximity to the conflict or changing relations with NATO, and France, owing to Macron's high-profile statements concerning the conflict.
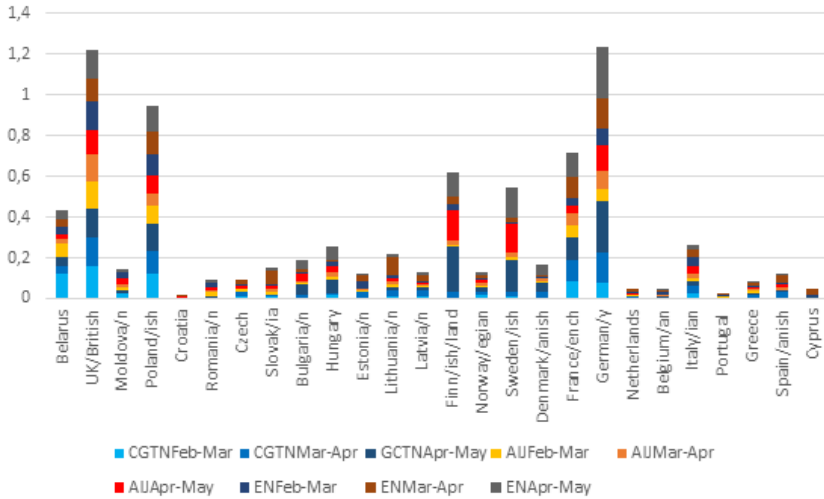
Figure 2: All mentions of European countries across 3 months/media (% of running words)

4.2 Main individual actors by nation/area

Figure 3 shows the normalized frequency of mentions of the main individual actors according to nation (e.g. Putin, Lavrov, etc. are grouped together as Russian actors), by month and medium. Again, Russian actors receive more visibility than those of any other nation, followed by Ukrainian actors. Once more, CGTN gives more importance to the USA than the others do, and European actors appear more in month three. CGTN also gives more visibility to Asian leaders/ spokespeople.

Figure 4 shows the relative frequency of the names of six heads of government who were prominent in the first months of the conflict. Chinese President Xi is included as relevant for the present study. Again, we note the prominence of Biden in the CGTN datasets. CGTN also gives more prominence to EU leaders than the other two media, particularly in the third month, when it focuses particular attention on Macron and Scholz and their attempts at mediation with Putin and Zelenskyy, particularly in the context of Russia's embargo on Ukrainian food exports in the third month of the crisis. Euronews gives the lowest coverage to US actors.
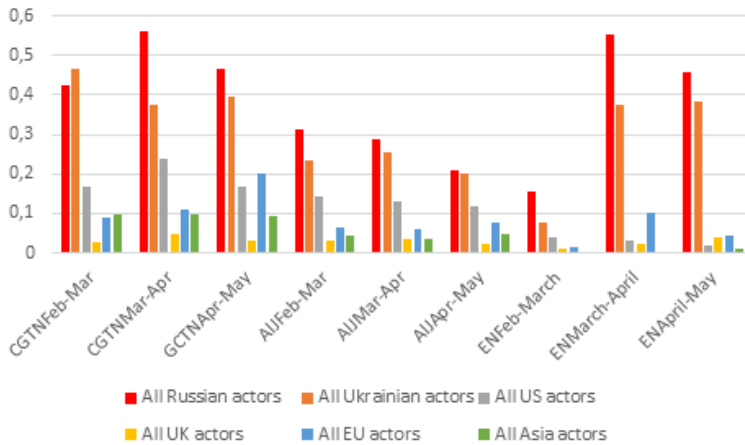
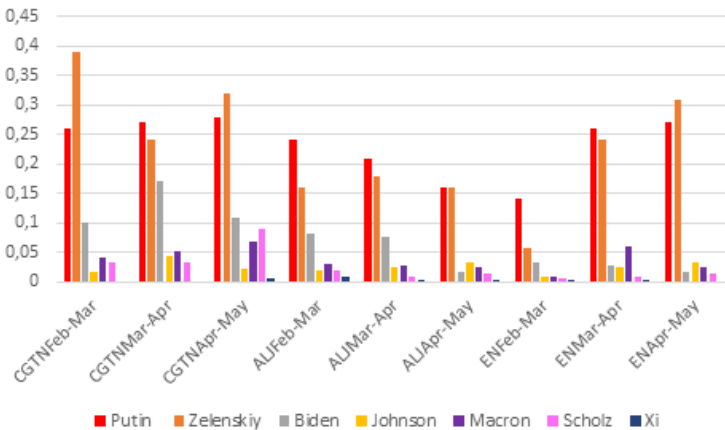Figure 3: Relative frequency (% of running words) of main actors by nationality

Figure 4: Relative frequency (% of running words) of six prominent heads of government

4.3 Sources used by nation/area

The range of sources used by any medium may influence the way it frames news stories. Figure 5 shows the frequency of mentions of specific news agencies and broadcast media, grouped according to their geopolitical origin. Again, the data are normalised and displayed by months, for the first three months of conflict.
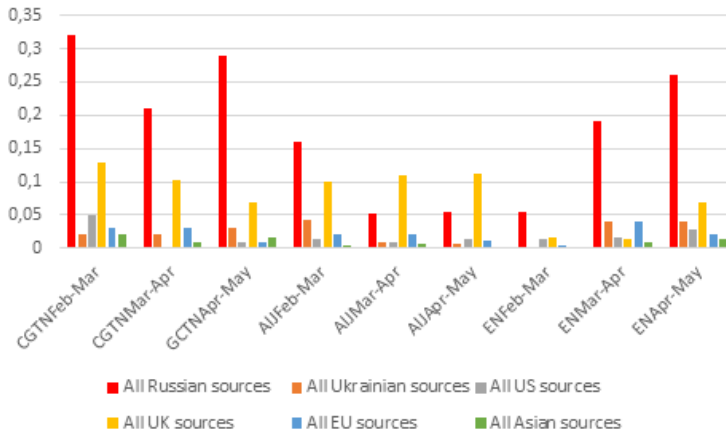
34

Figure 5: Mentions of sources across the three months/media (% of running words)

Sources named are also important, since they give us an idea of where the media are obtaining their information. Most sources are news agencies, followed by newspapers and TV channels. As Figure 5 shows, all three media refer to Russian sources, but CGTN shows particular reliance on them, particularly TASS, which dominates the sources used in all three months. CGTN also uses UK sources, particularly Reuters, in the first month but gradually uses this less. Euronews makes increasing use of Russian sources, while Al Jazeera turns away from Russian sources after the first month but makes steady use of Reuters. One further feature that is of interest is the wide variety of sources used in month one, when news media seemed to be looking far and wide to obtain information about a swiftly developing new scenario.

4.4 Overall presence of nations, actors and sources by month/medium

To obtain an overall impression of which countries dominated the reports in each medium, we calculated the aggregated data for nations, actors and sources, which is displayed in Figure 6. This assembles the information from the previous sections, showing that Russia remains dominant in all three media, but particularly CGTN and Euronews, that the USA is particularly prominent in CGTN, and that European countries gained more visibility as the months progressed.
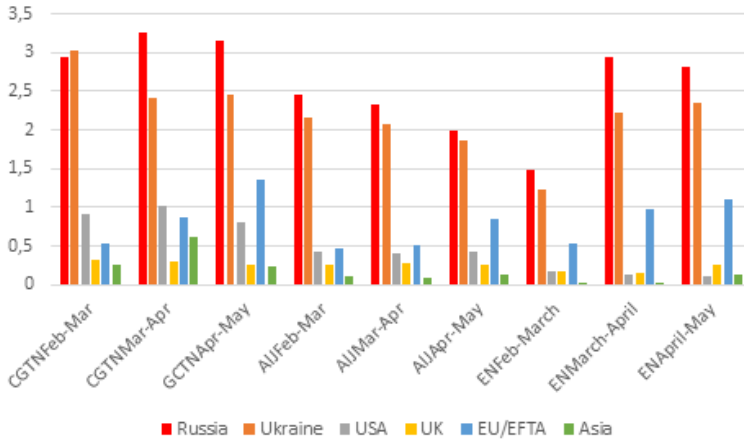
Figure 6: All mentions, sources and actors across the three months/media

4.5 How is the event described?

We identified the most frequent lemmas used to denote the conflict in Ukraine (Figure 7).
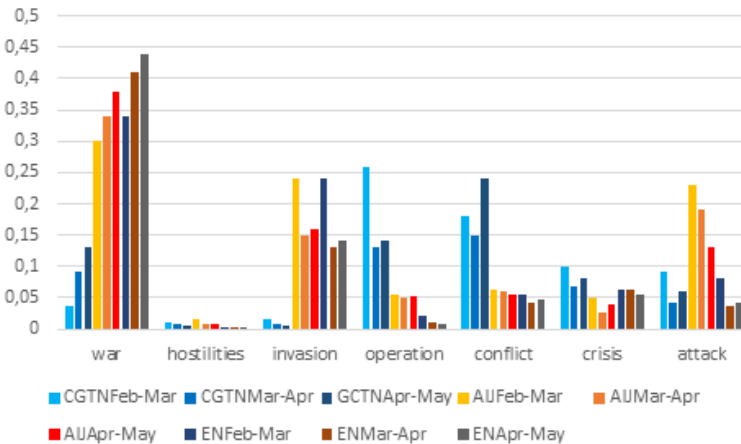

Figure 7: Terms used to describe Ukraine conflict Feb-May 2023

It is noticeable that the term "war" rarely appears in CGTN (for uses, see qualitative analysis below). In the other two media, "war" is the term of choice used to refer to the current conflict. A similar pattern emerges with the term "invasion", which is hardly used by CGTN but frequently found in the other two media, particularly in the first month. CGTN shows a preference for "operation" and "conflict", which are both only sparingly used by Al Jazeera and Euronews. On the other hand, Al Jazeera stands out from the other two media in its use of the term "attack", particularly in the first month. The term "hostilities", although technically more appropriate than "war", scarcely appeared.

4.6 Overview of quantitative analysis

The foregoing sections have brought various tendencies to light. Russia and Russian actors/sources are the main protagonists in all three media, while Ukraine clearly comes second. A general rise in the prominence of EU leaders in the second and third month is noticeable. CGTN gives prominence to a wider range of actors and sources than the other channels, with a particular focus on the USA, Asia and some European leaders. The terms it uses for the conflict are also at variance with those in Euronews and Al Jazeera. Euronews hardly refers to actors/sources beyond the immediate conflict zone and Europe itself. Further light will be shed on these results in the qualitative analysis below.

5 Qualitative analysis

Regarding the overall trends observable from Figures 1-7, it is notable that in CGTN and Euronews, more overall prominence is given to Russia, with Ukraine in second position, while Al Jazeera appears to give more balanced representation to the two sides. At the same time, the USA is more salient in CGTN than in the other two, appearing least in Euronews. One noteworthy trend shared by all three media is the rise in the number of EU mentions over the three months. We centre here on the discursive naming practices for, and roles played by, the main (institutional and human) protagonists appearing in the news, and the nature of the actions for which they are responsible. The following analysis is ordered by actor (Russia, Ukraine, USA, the West, Asia, China), looking first at CGTN, and then at the other two media in each case.

5.1 Russia

In CGTN, "Russia" itself is initially presented as the active agent. In particular, during the first month of the conflict, actions are attributed to an agentive "Russia" rather than to its leaders, implying unilateral hegemonic action by a nation-state. However, in line with Russia's own policy and ad hoc censorship

laws (HRW, 2022), Russia's actions are not described as an "invasion", but rather as an "operation" (1).

(1)   *Russia conducted a "special military operation" in Donbas Thursday morning.* CGTN Feb-Mar

As Figure 7 shows, CGTN's terminology for the conflict contrasts with that used by the other media, with frequent use of "operation" and "special military operation", and avoidance of "invasion" and "war", which are the default options in the other two. CGTN maintains this tendency throughout the three months (see below). Statements about "Russia's" actions are often presented in terms of very specific strategic aims that might legitimize them in the eyes of the public (2).

(2)   *Russia has carried out a missile attack on a training center for the Ukrainian Special Operation Forces, where foreign mercenaries were based.* CGTN Feb-Mar

Putin is mentioned increasingly as the conflict progresses, chiefly in a discursive role associated with verbs such as "address", "say" and "tell". Notably, he is presented as separate from Russia as such, offering judgements on "Russia's" actions (3).

(3)   *President Vladimir Putin addressed the national security council, praising Russia's "special military operation" against Ukraine.* CGTN Feb-Mar

At the same time, "Russia" is often placed as the victim of other countries' actions. Importantly, the first collocate of "Russia" in months one and three is "sanction", which comes before even "Ukraine". The belligerent formulation of many reports (4) on sanctions is striking.

(4)   *German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock on Thursday pledged to launch a "full package" of massive sanctions against Russia.* CGTN Feb-Mar

In fact, there is a consistent thread running through the months in which Russia is presented as cooperative but is being victimized by the West. Perhaps owing to its heavy reliance on TASS, CGTN reports Russian claims uncritically (5).

(5)   *Russia does not consider itself to be at war with NATO, but that NATO does, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said.* CGTN Apr-May

Nonetheless, by the third month CGTN's neutral or implicitly pro-Russian stance appears to be crumbling somewhat, without being explicitly rejected:

at this point, CGTN begins to report, in neutral terms, some statements by international actors that criticize Russia's actions (6).

(6)   *While Guterres said he understands Russian security concerns, according to a UN statement, the Russian action is a violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and goes against the UN Charter.* CGTN Apr-May

Significantly, the narrative of the "special military operation" continues into the third month of the conflict, but increasingly contains the implication that this will soon be over, with association of lexis such as "complete", "end" or "after" (7).

(7)   *It will be possible to resume the dialogue after Russia completes "special military operations" in Ukraine, the diplomat [Vladimir Yermakov] noted.* CGTN Apr-May

On this point, it is worth noting that during the first month of the conflict, CGTN uses the term "special military operation" 28 times (see Figure 7), and 14 of these instances are presented in quotation marks. This trend then picks up over time: in the second month, 33/38 instances have quotation marks, and 17/18 in the third. In mainstream English-language sources, the use of quotation marks would suppose a nuanced or ironic attitude towards the entity in question, but its significance in the context of CGTN is not entirely clear. An expert with experience working for CGTN indicated to us that irony can be ruled out, and that the writer is probably using quotation marks to indicate that this is a neutral quotation from what the Russian government says. Increasing use of quotation marks over the months suggests a growing need to signal neutrality in what is proving a difficult diplomatic situation.

Special discussion is also required of the term "war" in CGTN: "war" is rare in the early months, but by April-May it starts to appear. However, it occurs in very particular contexts, never signalling the assumption that the Russia-Ukraine conflict is a war. The contexts are as follows:

As a negation: "Russia's UN envoy Vasily Nebenzya told the UN Security Council that Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement of a "special military operation" in eastern Ukraine 'is not a war. It is a special military operation'".

As a future or hypothetical event: "Kremlin denies reports that Russia plans to declare war against Ukraine", or in the context of a return to the "cold war", a new "world war", or a possible nuclear war, "Russia says risks of nuclear war 'must be kept to minimum'".

In references to the Second World War: "perpetuating the memory of the courage and heroism of the peoples of the CIS in the Great Patriotic War".

When quoting Ukrainian or western sources: "NATO's Secretary-General has warned the war in Ukraine could last for years".

The above pattern contrasts sharply with the way "Russia" is represented by Al Jazeera and Euronews. As Marchi and Taylor (2010) observe, the co-text surrounding such words for conflict affords insight into the writer's unspoken assumptions about what is happening. In both channels, from the outset, the terms "invasion" and "war" are among the first collocates of "Russia", with "Russia's invasion of Ukraine" presented as a taken-for-granted label for what is happening (Lombardo 2009), and the humanitarian consequences of Russia's actions underlined (8), (9).

(8)   *More than 2.5 million people have fled Ukraine since Russia launched its invasion on February 24, according to the UN's migration agency.* AlJ Feb-Mar

(9)   *More than 600 apartment buildings have been damaged since Russia's invasion started.* AlJ Feb-Mar

Al Jazeera only uses the term "special military operation" in the first month, when quoting Russian leaders literally (10).

(10)   *"I want to say that the special military operation is going strictly according to schedule, according to plan," Putin said, opening a meeting with his security council.* AlJ Feb-Mar

By the third month of the war, Al Jazeera focuses on the problems for Africa and the Middle East if grain supplies are held up, and the need for diplomacy to resolve this situation. At the same time, Al Jazeera gives a voice to Russian spokespeople, without commentary.

(11)   *"We are not planning to attack other countries and we did not attack Ukraine either, we were just dealing with the issues there," Lavrov said.* AlJ Feb-Mar

For its part, Euronews similarly presents the conflict unquestioningly as an invasion or a "war", or as "Russia's war in Ukraine", only using "special military operation" when citing Russian sources. Perhaps because of proximity, Euronews dwells more on "Russia's nuclear forces", since these might potentially represent a threat to Europe. It also provides details of deadly arms, such as "thermobaric rockets: Russia's most fearsome weapon". Regarding leaders, Euronews consistently attributes individual responsibility to Putin for

the invasion, and his name is associated with terms such as "order", "demand",
"war" and "aggression". The Russian troops are also frequently referred to as
"Putin's forces" or as following "Putin's orders", a consistent trend over the
three months, which subtly insists on the responsibility of the Russian leadership,
rather than the Russian people.

5.2 Ukraine

In the representation of Ukraine, CGTN reporting also diverges from that
found in the other two media. Reports on Ukraine in the first month present a
curiously bloodless view of the situation, with some surprising assertions, as
in (12).

(12)   *The special military operation of Russia in relation to Ukraine does not threaten
        civilians, RIA reported on Thursday, citing the Russian Defense Ministry.* CGTN
        Feb-Mar

Ukrainian people are initially represented as demotivated and unlikely to
fight (13), while leader Zelenskyy is presented as probably short-lived (14).

(13)   *During an exclusive interview with CGTN, he [Li Yonghong] said that though
        Ukraine has passed the law allowing citizens to carry firearms for self-protection,
        people do not have that motivation.* CGTN Feb-Mar

(14)   *U.S. is ready to help Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy evacuate from
        Kyiv, RIA has reported.* CGTN Feb-Mar

Moreover, statements by Ukrainian spokespeople, particularly Zelenskiy, are
presented as untrustworthy "claims" (15).

(15)   *In an address to Estonia's parliament, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy
        claimed that Russia was using phosphorus bombs in Ukraine, but without
        providing any evidence.* CGTN Mar-Apr

Moreover, the CGTN perspective on Ukraine is clearly coloured by the
uncritical use of Russian sources, which are mentioned explicitly (16) (17).

(16)   *Ukraine is ready to start talks with Russia and called for the need of security
        guarantees, Russian media reported on Friday.* CGTN Feb-Mar

(17)   *The United Nations should urge Ukraine to stop preventing the evacuation of
        citizens from the zone of Russia's "special military operation", Sputnik reported
        on Wednesday, citing Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.* CGTN Apr-May

From the first to the third month, there is a subtle transition from representing Ukraine and its leader as weak to stressing their intransigence and foregrounding their support from the West, particularly the USA (18).

(18)   *Zelenskyy says Ukraine will never recognize Crimea as Russian territory. Ukraine will never recognize Crimea as Russian territory, nor will it agree to autonomy for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Friday.* CGTN Apr-May

In short, CGTN gives prominence to news about Ukraine from Russian sources, and presents statements by Russian spokespeople neutrally, including statements about Ukrainian "crimes" (19).

(19)   *The West has been covering up the crimes of the Kyiv government, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, adding that Russia cannot remain indifferent to requests for assistance from Donetsk and Luhansk.* CGTN Feb-Mar

This perspective on Ukraine contrasts sharply with that found in the other two media, where Ukraine is tacitly assumed to be the victim of an "invasion", "war", or "attack". In Al Jazeera's reports, Ukraine is presented in four recurrent ways: 1) as suffering civilian losses or evacuations; 2) as agent of real or claimed victories or losses; 3) as agent in intense diplomatic relations with other countries, with a major focus on Zelenskyy and his statements; 4) as defiant towards both Russia and people in the West calling for a ceasefire. Notably, however, in almost all cases Al Jazeera cites specific sources (mainly Ukrainian or Russian spokespeople) as providing this information, suggesting a desire on the part of the channel to avoid monologic assertions that might betray excessive commitment (el-Nawawy & Powers 2010).

Euronews similarly presents Ukraine as the victim of an "invasion" or "war", but here with strongly worded unattributed assertions about Russian activities, such as "international outrage grows over the killings of civilians in Ukraine". Human interest stories are more frequent, and the European perspective is perceptible: reports focus on Ukraine's role as a food-producing area that is implicitly important for Europe, as an area from which refugees are fleeing (to central and western Europe), and as a country with an important (European) historical and cultural heritage. A further area that is more prominent in Euronews than in the other two sources is the question of cyberwarfare, perhaps because European countries are also thought to have been victims of cyberattacks from the East.

5.3 The West

It is striking that CGTN includes more references to the USA and western countries than the other media, and assumes that these constitute a unified group collaborating actively with Ukraine. It frequently lists together EU countries with the USA, or refers generically to "the West" and its strategic ambitions. Moreover, CGTN regularly cites critical Russian sources on this subject (20).

(20)   *The current situation in Ukraine is the "quintessence of the West's course towards the marginalization of Russia", Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in an interview with RT.* CGTN Apr-May

One of the rare opinion pieces offered on CGTN, by Stephen Ndegwa, "a Nairobi-based communication expert", presents the following view (headed by a disclaimer stating that these are "not necessarily the views of CGTN") (21).

(21)   *On Ukraine, the West is guilty as charged (...) the Ukrainian conflict has fully exposed the West's long-term intentions in both Ukraine and the region. (...) The West's actions in Ukraine are fomenting another cold war through the mantra "you are either with us or against us".* CGTN Mar-Apr

Zelenskyy's intransigence is associated with his backing from the United States, and he is consistently depicted as acting hand in hand with the USA (22).

(22)   *"It was Zelenskyy's Washington curators who contributed to the fact that the negotiations turned into stagnation and are not ongoing", Chairman of the Russian State Duma's international affairs committee Leonid Slutsky was quoted as saying.* CGTN Apr-May

One other combination that occurs four times in the third month requires more detailed consideration. This is the expression "Biden's 'surrogate' war in Ukraine", which contains the implication that the USA is responsible for prolonging and instrumentalizing the conflict, thus transforming "a conflict that could have been concluded within a matter of weeks or months into something much more problematic and highly dangerous" (CGTN Apr-May).

Curiously, despite the aggressive attitude attributed to "the West", there are also references to Western "fears", principally concerning Russia's "superiority" as a nuclear force (23).

(23)   *The conflict in Ukraine has sown fear and panic across the Western world. Many are anxious the clash with Russia could easily spiral out of control, dragging more countries into direct confrontation with the world's largest nuclear force. (...) Demand for doomsday bunkers is soaring.* CGTN Apr-May

By contrast, Al Jazeera is consistently pro-Western in its reporting on the invasion itself, and stresses the wider negative consequences of the conflict for the area (24).

(24)   *Beyond the human suffering and historic refugee flows, the war is boosting prices for food and energy, fuelling inflation and eroding spending power, while disrupting trade, supply chains and remittances in countries neighbouring Ukraine, the IMF said.* AlJ Feb-Mar

The only instances when a more critical stance is visible concern issues such as reporting/news availability and bias. Several reports include criticism of "the pervasive mentality in Western journalism of normalizing tragedy in parts of the world such as the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Latin America", presumably in a bid to build solidarity in the Middle East and Global South, and the West's double standard on refugee policy (25).

(25)   *Poland, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, who had previously refused to welcome Muslim immigrants, have opened their borders to people fleeing Ukraine.* AlJ Feb-Mar

The rising prominence of EU actors over the three months (Figures 1-3) can mainly be explained by interest in Finland and Sweden's bid for NATO membership. Qatar is a member of NATO, and therefore strategic alliances of this kind are of relevance. Al Jazeera also pays some attention to Erdogan's opposition to NATO expansion. The role of German leaders is also significant here, with particular prominence given by Al Jazeera to statements by Scholz, and to Scholz's contacts with Putin, suggesting an interest in distinguishing the different stances within Europe.

In Euronews, the West is presented uncritically as a strategic alliance backing the Ukraine, with some conflation of EU, NATO and "the West" in general, as is noticeable in the frequent "lumping together" of these entities in expressions such as "the EU and the West in general", "western countries" or "the United Kingdom, United States and European Union have said" (see Breeze 2014).

Euronews reports frequently assume the existence of two sides, namely "Russia and the West", between which a deep rift has arisen: "the West rallied behind Ukraine". It also stresses the diplomatic efforts by the western side, reporting various initiatives to resolve the "diplomatic standoff between Russia and the West" and to "strengthen the trans-Atlantic partnership". Interestingly, Euronews often refers to the EU as "the bloc", assuming that member states think and act in unison. "The West" is here primarily presented as a geopolitical alliance against perceived threats from Russia, so we find frequent expressions

related to defence: "the protective shield of the western defence alliance", "the bloc's defensive industry". Interestingly, some of the divisions within Europe appear to have been relativized by the Ukraine war, which, it is suggested, has revealed the fragility of EU defences and forced some European leaders to rethink some of their red lines (26).

(26)   *Macron also laid out his vision of a broader community of European democracies that would allow for deeper cooperation between non-EU countries. Within this new political union, nations like Ukraine and even the UK could be a part of it.* EN Apr-May

Euronews also shows a particularly European perspective in spelling out the possible consequences of the war for European citizens, with items addressing questions such as "How will Russia's invasion of Ukraine affect flight paths, journey times and ticket prices?" or explaining how "EU sanctions against Russia are already starting to hit businesses in Belgium".

5.4 Asia

Mentions of Asia and Asian leaders are rare in all the corpora. However, they are most prominent in CGTN, which gives some coverage to China and its leaders, particularly during the first month, when "China" is presented as a collective entity calling for restraint (27).

(27)   *Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying on Thursday said that China is closely monitoring the latest developments in Ukraine and calls on all parties to exercise restraint to avoid the escalation.* CGTN Feb-Mar

It relays messages asking Chinese citizens in Ukraine to remain cordial, and takes care to present China as a source of humanitarian aid (28).

(28)   *The Red Cross Society of China sent another batch of emergency humanitarian aid, including food and daily necessities, to Ukraine.* CGTN Feb-Mar

In general, a slightly more distanced attitude emerges over the three months of the study. By the end of this period, we find references to the negative consequences of the war for China's international relations, particularly with the EU, and learn of China's call for "responsible" behaviour (29).

(29)   *China on Friday called for maximum restraint from relevant sides in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and efforts to prevent a humanitarian crisis of an even larger scale in Ukraine. (…) China is deeply worried about the worsening humanitarian situation in Ukraine and saddened by the reported increase in civilian casualties and refugees.* CGTN Apr-May

Importantly from a geopolitical perspective, Japan plays a larger role in the CGTN reports than in the other two sources. Although reports of Japanese actions are presented impartially, it is stressed that China's historical rival Japan is lining up with Ukraine and the West (30).

(30)   *Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Tuesday the country will provide food and medicine to Ukraine as additional relief supplies, Kyodo News reported.* CGTN Apr-May

The only other Asian countries to figure are Turkey and India, which appear more in the second month owing to various diplomatic initiatives. Interestingly, CGTN occasionally associates China with India (31), voicing common desires for peace.

(31)   *India and China insist on diplomacy. Both have repeated calls to end the violence, return to dialogue and allow access for humanitarian aid.* CGTN Mar-Apr

Al Jazeera takes a very different stance, pointing to the uncertainty surrounding China's position during the first month. American reports that Russia has asked China for support are mentioned neutrally, alongside reported Chinese insistence that such claims are being used to "smear" China. Space is also given to "warnings" issued by western countries against Chinese intervention. Over the months, Al Jazeera continues to assert strong links between Russia and China, often quoting Russian sources on this, while also mentioning pressure exerted by the West on China to use its diplomatic power to find solutions. Al Jazeera's reporting on Indian initiatives is slightly more positive, with a focus on Biden's assertion that India is a "friend and partner".

Euronews gives some prominence to tensions between the USA and China, also alleging Chinese support for Russia, and reporting EU requests to China to maintain neutrality. Euronews attributes China's increasingly cautious attitude to its need to maintain good trading links with the EU and USA. Regarding India, several articles celebrate India's "booming" relationship with the EU, but also discuss its trade relations with Russia, and its capacity for filling a gap in wheat supply to substitute Ukraine. In general, the presentation of India centres on its economic power more than its diplomatic activities. Finally, concerning other Asian countries, both Al Jazeera and Euronews mention Japan among countries imposing sanctions or issuing denunciations, and pay some attention to Taiwan, where "the crisis is being watched closely", bringing out some obvious parallels with Russia's claims to Ukrainian territory.

6   Discussion

The contrastive CADS approach adopted here has enabled us to trace how CGTN's reporting on the Russia-Ukraine conflict diverges sharply from that of two other international news providers in a number of respects. Given that, in non-democratic contexts, the media are conceptualised as a tool to promote national interests (Sun 2022), this study of CGTN sheds light on the Chinese government's careful position vis-à-vis the Ukraine conflict, tracing a subtle change in stance over the first three months. Over the period of study, CGTN reporting moves from describing the situation as a relatively bloodless operation that will soon be over to admitting the presence of considerable destruction. By relying on Russian sources and giving prominence to Russia, its leaders, and their words, CGTN initially positions itself more favourably to Russia. Its reports are carefully phrased to avoid negative appraisals of Russia, at first by uncritically repeating the official Russian line that the conflict is merely an "operation" (HRW 2022), by playing down casualties (Lombardo 2009). China's own role is carefully framed as neutral and "humanitarian" (Lin 2022, Sun 2022). As Bayley and Bevitori (2009: 89-90) point out, use of the term "humanitarian" in international conflicts carries a positive orientation towards "providers", and although it also conveys disapproval of violent conflict, this may be tacit rather than openly expressed. These "positive" self-representations reflect the "self-legitimising" trend observed in Chinese news reporting (Liu & Li 2017, Wang 2018: 658) and can be related to China's leaders' ambition to acquire "soft power" in developing countries (Zhang & Matingwina 2016).

As the situation develops, CGTN continues to cite Russian sources and give prominence to Russian statements. However, faced with the need to report the continuation of the conflict and Ukrainian resistance, the reports begin to shift blame for unpleasant events to "the West's meddling", resorting to implicit and explicit projection of the USA as a "foil for a positive self" (Tang 2023: 3). At the same time, somewhat confusingly, although a geopolitical alliance between the USA, Europe and Ukraine is unproblematically assumed, CGTN begins to express concern about the consequences of the conflict for China's own relations with areas such as Europe, stressing the need to maintain cordiality. Noticeably, CGTN gives more prominence to the USA than the other media, and the USA's geopolitical ambitions are presented in contrast to China's "responsible" attitude to world affairs (Lin 2022). The unconstructive and potentially hostile stance presupposed on the part of the USA tallies with contemporary reports from within China suggesting that government communications were promoting narratives framing the war as a crisis provoked by the USA and "NATO expansion"

(Soufan Center 2022) and playing down Russia's responsibility by situating the Ukraine conflict within US-China strategic competition (Sun 2022). Through these strategies, CGTN legitimized China's own "responsible" approach and delegitimized that of the United States.

All in all, the somewhat equivocal attitude observed in CGTN seems to reflect Zhang's (2022) explanation of the wider contextual dilemma facing the Chinese authorities, namely, that supporting Russia could make China the target of criticism on the international stage, but opposing Russia could mean that China loses an important ally. Some experts have suggested that the Chinese leaders were hoping to avoid strict commitment to one party in the conflict and build a mediating role, thus enhancing China's role as a responsible world power (Soufan Center 2022, Sun 2022). However, our analysis has traced how ongoing destruction and deterioration of Russian relations with other countries led to a subtle change in attitude over time, whereby CGTN remains uncritical towards Russian claims but becomes increasingly critical towards the USA.

By contrast, the underlying position taken for granted in Al Jazeera and Euronews is that the Russians are conducting a violent invasion of Ukraine, which constitutes an outrage against the security of an independent nation and a threat to world peace. This can be seen in their unproblematised use of terms such as "war" and "invasion", and their representation of the main actors. The main difference between the two is that Al Jazeera maintains somewhat greater distance to the conflict, tending to attribute all assertions and thus recognise the potential for other versions (Lombardo 2009), perhaps reflecting its mission as a "conciliatory" medium documented by el-Nawawy and Powers (2010). By contrast, Euronews itself takes discursive responsibility for statements denouncing atrocities and predicting negative consequences, possibly reflecting public opinion in European countries or European government stances (Blackburn 2023), or simply on grounds of proximity to the conflict zone.

As far as CADS methodology is concerned, the approach in our paper has proven useful to quantify aspects such as mentions of actors and use of sources, confirming the findings of previous research exploring the ideological implications of the reliance on different sources by different media (Hallin 1986, Carpenter 2007). Our quantitative findings concerning actors mentioned and terms used for the conflict also reflect CADS studies of the Iraq war (Lombardo 2009, Marchi & Taylor 2010), in revealing distinct trends in different media. However, the three media examined here are non-combatants, and we found little evidence of the kind of direct positioning through pronoun use or demonization identified in the latter study. Instead, our study sheds light on the

subtler differences that characterise reports for global audiences by media based in ostensibly uninvolved countries.

As a whole, this paper contributes to our understanding of international reporting on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and adds to our knowledge of how CGTN communicates within this context. Although it is unlikely that CGTN has significant uptake in Europe, the importance of understanding Chinese global media should not be underestimated. Experts have speculated that what is presented in CGTN as "valid knowledge" (Jäger & Maier 2009) may be finding a receptive audience in the Global South. Our findings confirm observations by other authors that CGTN is exploiting the potential offered by taking a critical anti-Western stance on Ukraine, and thereby highlighting concerns it shares with many developing countries (Greitens 2022). Our study also adds to our knowledge of reporting in Al Jazeera and Euronews, both of which would be worthy of further studies in their own right.

Regarding limitations, our study clearly covers only the first three months of the conflict. However, by using comprehensive corpora containing all relevant news reports published by three comparable news providers, it provides a reliable overview of CGTN's reporting, shedding further light on Chinese responses to this crisis, and illustrating some features of communication styles in CGTN. One further limitation that should be mentioned here is the difference in length of the news items used, particularly that between CGTN and Al Jazeera, which both published very short items, and Euronews, where the news articles were considerably longer. This difficulty was partly overcome by using normalised frequencies, but it still remains problematic, as text length inevitably influences word frequencies (for example, longer texts would be expected to make greater use of synonyms). In this context, Euronews was the outlier, and the presence of longer news items might skew the quantitative results. However, our analysis shows that the normalised word frequencies were still within similar ranges to those for the other two media, which suggests that this did not represent a major problem for this study.

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Ruth Breeze is Full Professor of English at the University of Navarra, Spain, and PI of the GradUN Research Group in the Instituto Cultura y Sociedad. She has published widely on scientific discourse, legal discourse and specialised communication. Her most recent co-edited books are *Narrating Migrations from Africa and the Middle East: A Spatio-Temporal Approach* (Bloomsbury), *Pandemic and Crisis Discourse: Communicating COVID-19 and Public Health Strategy* (Bloomsbury) and *Imagining the Peoples of Europe: Populist Discourses across the Political Spectrum* (John Benjamins). She is co-editor in chief of *Ibérica* journal.

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8132-225X

Address: Ruth Breeze, Institute for Culture and Society, University of Navarra, 31009 Pamplona, Navarra, Spain. [e-mail: rbreeze@unav.es]

María Fernanda Novoa-Jaso is Assistant Professor in the Department of Public Communication at the University of Navarra, Spain, where she teaches international communication, public opinion and sociology. She has been a visiting fellow at the Oxford Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. She is the author of the volume *International Communication and Public Opinion*, and several articles in international journals.
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1858-8343

Address: María Fernanda Novoa-Jaso, Department of Public Communication, School of Communication, University of Navarra, 31009 Pamplona, Navarra, Spain. [e-mail: mnovoa@unav.es]