

Agonised, localized and politicized: The visual representation of the Russo-Ukrainian War in online news

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Abstract

This article investigates the visual representation of the Russo-Ukrainian War in online news media, focusing on the perspectives of Ukraine's two greatest aid providers: the US and the EU. The concept of visual metonymic framing, which sheds light on how news images frame war through metonymical relations, is introduced. A metonymy-based image analysis is conducted on the featured images of randomly sampled articles from CNN News and Euronews in the first two years of the war, proposing potential motivations for differences between the two news portals. The findings reveal the agonized, localized and politicized nature of news images, emphasizing human suffering, local impacts and politicized representations. The research suggests that visual metonymy not only renders complex events more comprehensible but also actively shapes public perception, offering fresh insights into the communicative dynamics of conflict reporting.

Keywords

framing, online news, Russo-Ukrainian War, visual metonymy

Introduction

One of the most well-known axioms in news production, 'if it bleeds, it leads', captures the enduring link between violence and news, highlighting conflict and adversity as core news values (Bednarek and Caple, 2017). This is particularly striking in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War and its coverage in different media ecosystems. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which has been going on since 2014, entered a new phase

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with the massive Russian invasion in February 2022. This new phase not only intensified destruction and hostilities outside of Ukraine's eastern regions but also brought about heightened global media attention (Tschirky and Makhortykh, 2024). The abundance of digital content emerging from the war zone led to it being called one of the most media-tized conflicts to date (Fernández-Castrillo and Ramos, 2023). Scholars have since offered critical insights into how the war is framed through – among others – comparative studies on the evolution and divergence of narratives. Regarding textual framing, Tschirky and Makhortykh (2024) examined how the siege of Mariupol was framed on Twitter, highlighting the dominance of human interest and conflict frames. A thematic analysis by Hoban and Rister (2024) explored the narratives through which Russian and Ukrainian media outlets addressed the risks associated with the attack on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Fernández-Castrillo and Ramos (2023) found that, in terms of visual framing, familiar conflict-reporting narratives – such as images of military forces and destruction – were already prominent in the first six months of the war. Locoman and Lau (2024) also incorporated visual frames into their analysis of Russian news broadcasts and found an increase in patriotic symbols, as well as a peak in frames that portrayed residents of Ukraine as pro-Russian. These latter examples reinforce a general trend that draws attention to the framing power of images.

For a considerable time, images have been regarded as visual statements that can draw the audience's attention to particular narratives (Powell et al., 2015). In addition, images can evoke strong feelings and offer easily noticeable cues for choosing among the flood of news articles (Powell et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the framing mechanisms of violence in online visual discourse are less evident due to ethical considerations. There tends to be a paucity of explicit depictions, e.g. images portraying the dead and injured, especially in journalistic media. Although the formats and platforms of news consumption are changing significantly, with short-form video content gaining prominence (Reuters Institute, 2024), news media remains an essential source of information on complex matters, such as the violent war acts analysed in this article. Considering this, the article examines the visual framing mechanisms through which online news portals present the Russo-Ukrainian War by observing the featured images of articles published in the first two years of the war.

Given the editorial limitations on explicit portrayals and the difficulty of capturing the complexity of war in a single image, this article proposes a substitution-based analytical approach to visual framing – one grounded in the logic of metonymy. Therefore, the concept of visual metonymic framing, which sheds light on how the images under study frame war through metonymic relations, is introduced. Based on the current understanding, this approach is novel, as no prior research has conceptualized or applied visual metonymy in framing conflict reporting. The following research question will be answered within this framework: How do online news portals employ visual metonymic framing to depict the Russo-Ukrainian War, and what differences emerge between the US and EU perspectives? Through a metonymy-based approach, this study shows how featured images stand in for complex realities, making the war easier to grasp and more emotionally impactful for audiences. Visual metonymic framing helps capture attention, encourage engagement and shape public understanding of distant conflicts. The article argues that, in online news media, the Russo-Ukrainian War is visually represented

through agonized, localized and politicized frames that highlight human suffering, local consequences and political messages. These frames influence public perception and can affect support for war-related policies and humanitarian aid. Overall, the study introduces a framework for analysing how metonymic imagery constructs narratives around complex geopolitical events, offering a foundation for future research on visual representation in media. The article is structured as follows: it first outlines the theoretical and practical foundations of visual metonymic framing, followed by analysing images from US and EU news sources. It concludes with a discussion of the findings, limitations and implications.

Literature review

Visual metonymic framing as a concept

The notions of *frame* and *framing* are prolifically used in scholarly discourse, as evidenced by the terms' usage in several scientific disciplines, including media science, cognitive linguistics and sociology. One of the most often used ideas in the social sciences (Bryant and Miron, 2004), framing is vital in media theory (Lecheler and De Vreese, 2018). Without downplaying further interpretations, this article proceeds with Entman's (1993: 52) often-cited definition, according to which to frame is 'to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described'. In essence, framing involves emphasizing certain story elements to shape audience perception and interpretation, guiding their understanding of the issue and influencing their reactions. Although some scholars have critiqued the conceptual ambiguity and overlap of framing with other media effects theories (Cacciatore et al., 2016), its continued relevance lies in its adaptability to complex communicative phenomena. While framing research has traditionally centred on textual elements, the role of visuals as powerful framing devices has gained increasing attention, with visual framing emerging as a specialized research field (Dhanesh and Rahman, 2021).¹ This focus is particularly important in online conflict communication, where images are employed not only to illustrate events but also to influence audience perceptions (Fahmy, 2004; Makhortykh and Sydorova, 2017; Powell et al., 2015). The importance of visual narratives is reflected in the scholarly stance, according to which 'in the age of social media networks, visuals are framing devices on steroids, so much so that many times, the visual is the message' (D'Angelo et al., 2019: 22). Visuals often hold the primary communicative weight, shaping the audience's understanding and emotional response more effectively than text alone.

However, while reports on violent acts appear daily, stipulations on their explicit visual depiction make the framing mechanisms of violence in online visual discourse less clear. News outlets generally adhere to similar principles when it comes to depicting violence, despite their varying editorial guidelines. Violent images are only broadcast in the most justified cases, i.e. when they include information necessary to comprehend the incident (see, e.g., CNN, nd; Euronews, nd). Furthermore, news producers and communication professionals agree that dignity is essential when reporting on people affected

by violent events (Dhanesh and Rahman, 2021). Journalistic ethics dictate that, while violent imagery and death can be shown, they must be handled with care to avoid sensationalism and respect the dignity of those depicted. For example, guidelines from CNN and Euronews emphasize minimizing harm and ensuring that such images are necessary for understanding the story.² In this regulated media environment, the question arises as to which motifs ‘substitute’ explicit violence in the images accompanying war news. The question can be approached from the perspective of visual metonymic framing, which captures the substitutions through which violence and thus war are portrayed in news reports, and presents a method with which metonymic relationships can be detected in such news images.

Metonymy is a cognitive and cultural process in which a concrete, tangible entity is used to represent an abstract, generalized concept or a related entity (Kövecses and Radden, 1998; Radden and Kövecses, 1999). For example, the phrase ‘Brussels issued a statement’ uses ‘Brussels’ to represent the EU’s governing bodies – a strategy used both verbally and visually by the Hungarian ruling party to create narratives (Benczes, 2019). This metonymy relies on conceptual relatedness as Brussels is closely associated with the EU’s institutions due to its role as the *de facto* capital of the Union. In cognitive linguistics, metonymy is defined as ‘a figure of language and thought in which one entity is used to refer to, or . . . “provide access to”, another entity to which it is somehow related’ (Littlemore, 2015: 4). The two entities are part of the same idealized cognitive model (ICM; Lakoff, 1987), so ‘access is provided’ within the same ICM (Kövecses and Benczes, 2010). These models are structured mental representations of our knowledge of the world, which we use to interpret our experiences and the complexity surrounding us. Idealized and schematized, these models serve as the foundation for our conversations and actions (Lakoff, 1987).³

This process allows abstract, complex ideas – such as war, violence, or destruction – to be rendered accessible and relatable through concrete, tangible representations. For instance, an image of a bombed-out building can stand in for the larger concept of destruction, just as an image of a crying child might evoke the suffering and displacement caused by war. Such metonymic representations simplify cognitive processing by highlighting a complex event’s most salient and relatable details, enabling audiences to engage with them more effectively. This characteristic makes metonymy a particularly expedient tool for framing. Scholars have recently focused on comprehending metonymy’s ubiquity in the visual domain as well (see, e.g., Benczes, 2019; Goehring et al., 2017; Nagy-Béni, 2024), pointing out that metonymic thinking makes mental processing easier by allowing us to concentrate on the most pertinent detail in a situation and use that information to arrive at the overall idea. Images serve as metonymic stand-ins for abstract concepts that are either too difficult to capture visually or too graphic to display. Scholars have explored how visual metonymy creates meaning in contexts such as anti-domestic violence campaigns (Goehring et al., 2017) or online crime reports (Catalano and Waugh, 2013). In war reporting, this ability to provide tangible representations of abstract concepts such as conflict, suffering, or resilience is critical for engaging audiences and framing narratives. However, these images do not merely illustrate abstract ideas – they often substitute for the direct visualization of violence, especially when ethical or editorial constraints limit graphic imagery.

The framing power inherent in metonymy, placed in the visual modality, leads to the notion of visual metonymic framing. The article proposes a multidisciplinary definition of visual metonymic framing that combines the metonymy concept of cognitive linguistics (as seen in, e.g., Kövecses and Radden, 1998) with the framing concept of media science (as seen in, e.g., Entman, 1993) and is embedded in the visual modality (as seen in, e.g., Brantner et al., 2013):

Visual metonymic framing is the selection and visual accentuation of some aspects of the perceived reality via making one conceptual entity which provides mental access to another conceptual entity within the same idealized cognitive model salient, with the aim of providing interpretation patterns and/or positioning an event, situation in a communicative context.

Here, *communicative context* refers to the environment surrounding the communication, e.g. in this case, the news genre, more specifically, online news. This definition underscores the framing power of metonymy, particularly in the visual modality, where it can direct attention to specific aspects of a phenomenon while drawing focus away from others. This is especially useful in reporting on violence, defined as ‘a behaviour that is intentional, unwanted, nonessential and harmful’ (Hamby, 2017: 168),⁴ where visual metonymies allow for the representation of complex events through salient and evocative imagery. By employing these strategies, news organizations can effectively communicate the human and material consequences of conflict while navigating the constraints of audience sensitivity and media ethics.

Visual metonymic framing as an analytical framework

Given that war is a violent and complex act, the approach relies on the Action and Complex event idealized cognitive models (ICMs). Two questions, which contribute as sub-questions to answering the research question, can be addressed by identifying the metonymic relationships of these ICMs in the news images: Which metonymic relationships of the Action ICM are used to represent violence visually? Which subevents are used to represent the complex event of violence visually?⁵ The Action ICM contains various elements that may be related to the ACTION, such as relationships between an ACTION and an INSTRUMENT used in the ACTION, an ACTION and the RESULT of this ACTION. Although linguistic examples abound in Action ICM (as seen in Kövecses and Radden, 1998), the following metonymic relationships can be identified in the visual modality, specifically in images depicting violent acts (adapted from Nagy-Béni, 2024):

- AGENT FOR ACTION: images that depict perpetrators of violent acts, such as soldiers;
- INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION: images that depict a tool, such as a weapon, that can be used as an aid to inflict a violent act;
- OBJECT FOR ACTION: images depicting objects that are recurrent in the act of violence, often symbolic (but never weaponry), such as flags;
- PATIENT FOR ACTION:⁶ images depicting the targets and victims of the violent act;

- PLACE FOR ACTION: images depicting the location of the violent act (without the appearance of agents and/or patients);⁷
- RESULT FOR ACTION: images depicting the aftermath of an act of violence, such as ruins.

The Complex event ICM builds on the foundation that life is full of complex events (the whole) that, to use the terminology of Conceptual Metaphor and Metonymy Theory, are made up of multiple subevents (the parts) that combine to form the larger, complex whole (Kövecses and Benczes, 2010). A complex event can be represented by successive subevents; namely, initial, central and final subevents can stand for the whole complex event. For example, in the case of the statement ‘they stood at the altar’, the initial subevent represents the complex event, the marriage ceremony itself. Similarly, events like war are often too abstract to be depicted as a whole, so they are represented through specific subevents, such as the preparation for battle, the act of fighting and the aftermath of destruction, that stand for the broader concept. Recalling the complete complex event is made possible by identifying and comprehending subevents. The metonymies in the analysis of images of violence can take the following forms:

- INITIAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT: images that depict either agents or patients in their state before a violent act,
- CENTRAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT: images that depict characters amid the action,
- FINAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT: images depicting the aftermath of violent acts, such as injured people or ruins.

The above offers an analytical framework, motivated by the Action and Complex event ICMs,⁸ that allows the study of violent news coverage, in this case, war reporting, by exploring the substitutions through which news images evoke the complex actions of war.

Methodology

The visual metonymic framing approach was applied to a sample that allowed a comparison of news reports from the US and the EU. The article focuses on online news media because of its prominence in providing information to diverse audiences and its relatively wide accessibility (Hoban and Rister, 2024). Understanding the similarities and differences of visually embedded narratives across regions is particularly important in the case of highly mediatized conflicts. Between 24 January 2022 and 31 August 2024, Ukraine received the most aid from the US and EU institutions. The country’s largest aid partner, the US, has committed \$92.7 billion in aid when considering military, financial and humanitarian support, while EU institutions have pledged \$48 billion in financial and humanitarian aid (IfW Kiel Ukraine Support Tracker cited by Statista, 2024). The study only looks at these two benefactors because the statistics show a significant disparity between the two largest donors and the nations that trail them.

Although a recent study revealed that European and US citizens share a range of views on major global issues, such as the preferred outcome of the war (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2023), citizens' support for the level of intervention shows a changing trend. A Gallup (2024) study found that more than a third of Americans believe their country is doing and spending too much to help Ukraine. Over the course of the conflict, the proportion of Americans who say that the US supports Ukraine excessively has increased. As for the EU, there still seems to be widespread support for the EU's response to the Russian invasion. However, support for EU war-related measures has declined in the past two years compared to spring 2022. There is still broad support for humanitarian aid, but support for financial and military assistance shows a decreasing trendline. For example, although 55 percent of EU citizens agree with providing weapons to Ukraine, data show a declining trend in support for this measure over time (European Parliament, 2024). Opinions in both the US and the EU are split. Considering that media messages interact with public opinion and discourse, which can impact war-related measures and policy-making, the visual war reporting of CNN News and Euronews was analysed to contrast the US and EU perspectives. CNN holds a hegemonic position in the global news provision and is one of the most influential English-language news websites globally.⁹ Born out of the desire to represent the European perspective, Euronews is Europe's leading international news channel.¹⁰ Although it does not allow generalizability of the results, focusing on just two outlets made it possible to conduct a manageable but thorough analysis.

The research was driven by the general question of how CNN News and Euronews reported visually on the Russo-Ukrainian War. Applying the concept and analytical framework of visual metonymic framing, two more specific, descriptive questions emerged: through which metonymic relations do news portals represent the war as action and through which metonymies do news portals represent the war as a complex event? Based on the EMOTIONAL DISTANCE IS PHYSICAL DISTANCE metaphor (Lakoff et al., 1991), it is expected that CNN News operates with metonymic relationships capable of bridging the physical distance between US citizens and the war in Ukraine to a greater extent than Euronews. Our essential experience is that spatial closeness is linked to psychological and social closeness (Fahmy, 2004), which is expressed in terms such as 'I feel close to someone' or the opposite when 'I distance myself from someone'. Research indicates that closeness and affection or favourable assessment positively correlate (Marmolejo-Ramos et al., 2018). The strategy of visual metonymic framing that bridges the physical distance not only increases or maintains reader engagement but also has the potential to affect the public's perception of the need for the large-scale aid provided by the US to Ukraine.

To answer the research question, a metonymy-based image analysis, guided by the Action and Complex event ICMs, was conducted on the featured images of 480 randomly sampled articles from CNN News and Euronews in the first two years of the war (24 February 2022–24 February 2024). Given the importance of the visual hook in news production (Dhanesh and Rahman, 2021) and following similar studies on the visual framing of war (Makhortykh and Sydorova, 2017), this research focuses on representative images, using textual cues only when necessary for disambiguation. While not depreciating the contextualizing effect of headlines and captions, this study treats 'images

as objects of interest in their own right' (Farkas and Bene, 2021: 120). As a first step, all links to the relevant tag ('War in Ukraine' for Euronews and 'Russian invasion of Ukraine' for CNN) were extracted from the defined period using the Octoparse software. The raw sample consisted of 44,520 links overall. In the second step, the sample was reduced to 480 items by randomly sampling 10 articles from each of the 24 months for each news portal (10/month/website). The analysis was conducted on the featured images of the articles by first coding the metonymic relationships of the Action ICM. In this step, it was possible to identify multiple metonymic relationships in the same image since it frequently happened that the ACTION could be accessed through, for instance, both the AGENT and the INSTRUMENT (e.g. in an image showing an armed soldier). Then, where possible, the metonymies of the Complex event ICM were identified. In three cases, it was impossible to identify the metonymies that activate the initial, central and final phases: for the PLACE FOR ACTION and OBJECT FOR ACTION relations, all three subevents are represented by the given place or object. The third case is related to a subcategory of the AGENT FOR ACTION metonymic relation, where images show indirect agents such as politicians and experts being interviewed, so the action itself is not directly related to the war events – at least in the sense that the war itself is the explicit act of violence that is examined as a visual metonymic representation – so these images also embody all three subevents at once, and their coding for the Complex event ICM would not have been of analytical value. Finally, intercoder reliability was calculated after involving a second coder trained in visual metonymy identification; 10 percent of the sample was randomly selected to be analysed by the second coder. This was followed by the calculation of Cohen's kappa, which showed agreement of .61 for the Action ICM and .62 for the Complex event ICM. The agreements can be considered substantial or moderate depending on which categorization is used. Firstly, differences were due to the identification of human entities, i.e. the extent to which they play a central role in the given picture. For example, one coder coded only RESULT FOR ACTION, while the other also coded PATIENT FOR ACTION for the same image. Secondly, differences also arose in the units where the identification of the subevents could not be applied (see the three cases previously mentioned). A more precise delineation of the latter is needed to develop the analysis framework further and address these discrepancies better when training the co-coder.

Findings

Visual metonymic frames via the Action ICM

Investigating online news about the Russo-Ukrainian War through the Action ICM revealed which metonymic relationships are used to represent events that are difficult or limited to portray visually. As discussed above, in this stage, more than one metonymic relationship could have been detected in the same image. A total of 549 metonymic relationships were identified in the 480 images. Figure 1 illustrates that the AGENT FOR ACTION relationship was detected in most cases. Its dominance is clear for CNN News, where it is responsible for more than half of the cases (55%, $n=149$), but it was also found to be the most frequent metonymic connection for Euronews (39%, $n=108$).

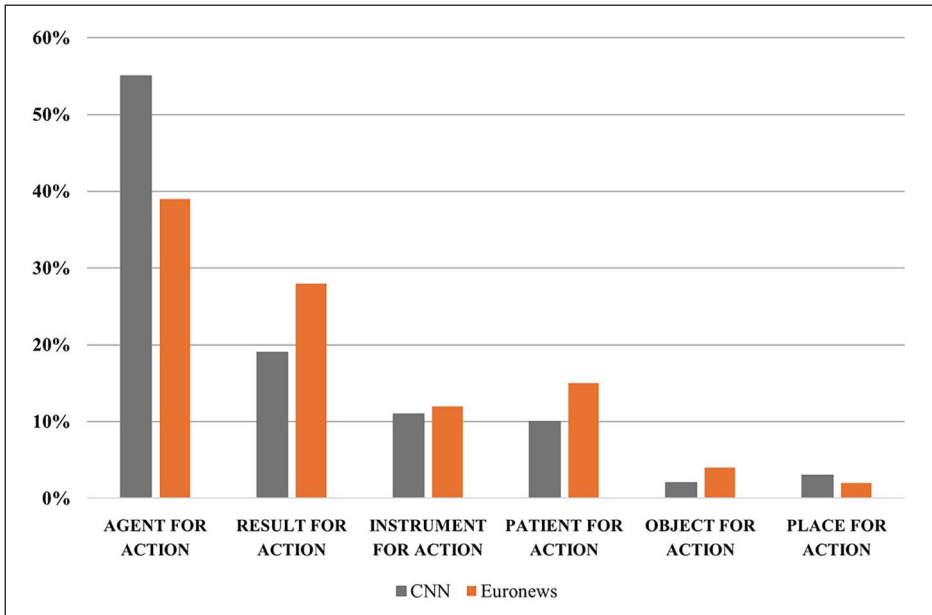


Figure 1. Distribution of the metonymic relationships of the Action ICM in the sample.

The most dominant metonymic relationships. The examination of the images revealed two distinct subcategories within the AGENT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship: that of direct and indirect agents, as illustrated in Figure 2. In the case of CNN News, 34 percent ($n = 50$) of these images show individuals labelled as direct agents involved in the war because they are fighting or helping on the battlefield. This sub-category predominantly comprises soldiers, with a few images of fire brigades. This result is in line with the findings of Fernández-Castrillo and Ramos (2023), who have shown the importance of the representation of ‘armed forces’, especially in the visual narrative of the Russian side. Agony, as in the agonies of battle and extreme physical conditions, is reflected in these images.

In 66 percent ($n = 99$) of the cases, however, we see individuals who, although playing a similarly important role in the war, do so away from the battlefield and are thus labelled as indirect agents. This latter subcategory is led by images of politicians, supplemented by images of experts and newsreaders. The visual cue was not always sufficient for this categorization. In cases where it was unclear from the featured image whether an agent or patient was depicted or where the indirect agents were not leading politicians, the headlines of the articles provided a basis for identification. Within the portrayal of political actors, both news portals have more pictures of Ukrainian politicians than Russian politicians, with a heightened focus on President Zelenskyy, often in negotiations with other leaders. In these images, the leader of the country metonymically evokes the concept of the country, providing a compact reference in which the politician



Figure 2. Left: Indirect agents in the AGENT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship.

Source: Evan Vucci/AP on CNN, 21 February 2023 (CNN 2023e). Right: Direct agents in the AGENT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship.

Source: Laurent Gillieron/AP on Euronews, 15 February 2024 (Euronews 2024).

represents their country, and the role and interests of the country in the war. Although the difference is smaller at Euronews, the indirect agents are also shown more often (59%, $n = 64$) than the direct ones (41%, $n = 44$). This corroborates the findings of Fernández-Castrillo and Ramos (2023), who labelled the category of discussions between relevant political leaders and representatives of the international community as ‘diplomacy’. Béni and Szabó (2022) found a similar indirect–direct agent ratio in their research on a sample of Hungarian news stories, pointing to the politicized nature of the conflict. These images take the attention away from the physical consequences of war and place it in a global frame beyond the violent events, which can thus distance the events from the audience. By reporting about war as if it were the ‘playground of political powers’, we learn less about the struggles faced by soldiers and civilians. However, the politicized nature of this frame may also intend to make audiences more aware of political matters connected to the events.

The second most frequent metonymic relationship for both news outlets is the RESULT FOR ACTION: for CNN News, it accounts for 19 percent ($n = 52$) of all metonymic links detected, while for Euronews, the ratio stands at 28 percent ($n = 78$). Within this category, two subcategories have also emerged: local results, featuring images of local damage and destruction like destroyed houses and burned areas, and global results, depicting broader financial and economic consequences, such as a grain field representing supply chain difficulties caused by the war. The two subcategories are exemplified in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Left: Local results in the RESULT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship.

Source: State Emergency Service of Ukraine on CNN, 5 January 2024 (CNN, 2024). Right: Global results in the RESULT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship.

Source: Julia Kochetova/Bloomberg/Getty Images on CNN, 12 December 2023 (CNN, 2023a).

The depiction of local results outnumbers the global results for both news portals, with CNN News showing a significant 71–29 percent ($n = 37$ vs $n = 15$) difference, while Euronews shows a 60–40 percent ($n = 47$ vs $n = 31$) ratio.

The prevalent representation of local outcomes reveals the standard pattern of aftermath photos utilized in conflict coverage. Most of these featured images show ruins, which metonymically represent destruction. By showing the consequences of the action taken, they activate the news value of impact (Bednarek and Caple, 2017). The comparative study by Fernández-Castrillo and Ramos (2023) also identified a lot of the so-called ‘destruction’ imagery, which was crucial to the visual narrative of the conflict, particularly from the perspective of the Ukrainian side. Depictions of the conditions created by attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure can bring the public closer to the events of the war. As for the implication of this localized frame, through the news value of impact and negativity, these featured images have the potential to engage readers and generate sympathy, which may also indirectly influence support for war relief.

Other occurring metonymic relationships. The INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION and PATIENT FOR ACTION metonymic relationships were identified in similar proportions in the sample. The AGENT FOR ACTION connection is often accompanied by the former metonymic relationship, particularly when soldiers are portrayed with guns and, in certain instances, with tanks that metonymically represent the act of firing or attacking, as seen in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Featured image activating the INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship.
 Source: Staff Sgt Matthew A Foster/US Army National Guard on CNN, 21 March 2023 (CNN, 2023d).

However, missiles and tanks are also shown separately (at least the human factor is not visible in these instances). The INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship, which reinforces the militarized frame, accounts for 11 percent ($n = 31$) in CNN News and 12 percent ($n = 33$) in Euronews.

The portrayal of war victims and endurers of harm were coded under the PATIENT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship, which accounted for 10 percent ($n = 26$) and 15 percent ($n = 43$) of all detected relationships in CNN News and Euronews, respectively. This manifestation often occurred with the RESULT FOR ACTION relationship (e.g. a resident standing in front of a demolished house). Readers are introduced to the characters of a news item more quickly and thoroughly through images of the victims than they can be through words alone. These images personify loss and humanize otherwise abstract events, enabling readers to empathize with the subject emotionally (Greer, 2007). Figure 5 illustrates how some articles continued to use imagery from this category despite the overall paucity of images showing the dead and injured compared to other categories. This framing strengthens the agonized nature of the representation by uncovering the extreme suffering at the forefront. Because people are more likely to relate to and comprehend news framed around personal experiences, research indicates that personalization is essential for involving audiences with complex issues (Dhanesh and Rahman, 2021). Crucially, this tactic works well to counteract ‘war fatigue’, which happens when viewers grow indifferent to such news.

Finally, the OBJECT FOR ACTION and PLACE FOR ACTION categories lag behind the others, with a few scattered images of flags symbolically representing the warring parties (standing at 2%, $n = 6$ for CNN News and at 4%, $n = 11$ for Euronews) and also some map illustrations referring to the location of a particular battle without depicting any human entities or military factors (standing at 3%, $n = 7$ for CNN News and at 2%, $n = 5$ for Euronews).



Figure 5. Featured image activating the PATIENT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship.
 Source: AP Photo on Euronews, 27 March 2023 (Euronews, 2023a).

Visual metonymic frames via the COMPLEX EVENT ICM

Examining which SUBEVENTS replace the entire COMPLEX EVENT of the Russo-Ukrainian War in the featured images of related articles published on CNN News and Euronews, the result points to the dominance of the FINAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT metonymy. As Figure 6 shows, the final phase was present in 58 percent ($n = 80$) of cases for CNN News and 67 percent ($n = 114$) for Euronews.

Pictures coded under the FINAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT metonymy show war victims and/or their surroundings after enduring harm. In the centre of these pictures are damage and ruins. Figure 7, which depicts the catastrophic devastation caused by bombardment, demonstrates this phenomenon. As the image's focus, the resulting harm was coded under the RESULT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship from the perspective of the Action ICM, and it was listed under the FINAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT metonymy regarding the COMPLEX EVENT ICM. The scene of destruction, where the ruins stand for the explosion, ignites the relationship. These featured images operate with the news value of impact, activated by aftermath images, which demonstrate the grave effects of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the agony experienced by locals.

Totals of 22 percent ($n = 30$) and 11 percent ($n = 8$) of the metonymies were classified as CENTRAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT for CNN News and Euronews, respectively. These images, as seen in Figure 8, depict the midst of the action. In these instances, agents – who are primarily soldiers – are observed carrying a weapon or an incendiary device or engaging in combat (such as firing a missile). Unlike the static images of the initial and final stages, these images are more dynamic because the actors can be seen in motion (and thus in action). The proportion of these images, particularly the 22 percent ratio for CNN, may seem surprising in light of the tightening of access to events by the Ukrainian authorities over time. The fact that these images are nevertheless present in the sample in notable numbers can indicate the spread of mobile journalism, the use of

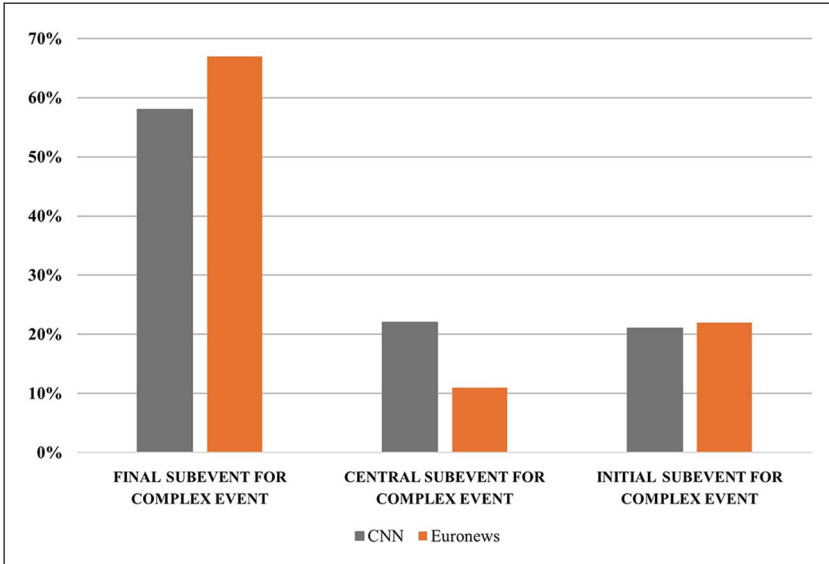


Figure 6. Distribution of the metonymies of the COMPLEX EVENT ICM in the sample.

screenshots taken from videos as featured images, or a trend towards recycling images. While these images may seem to depict the ‘raw reality of war’, they are still metonymic representations that stand in for the broader context of conflict, choosing emotionally charged, relatable details that evoke the larger, more complex event.

Finally, the INITIAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT metonymy accounted for 21 percent ($n = 29$) of the detected metonymies for CNN News and 22 percent ($n = 38$) for Euronews. Usually, the initial stage is when the agent gets ready or when they formulate their intent to act. Accordingly, a significant portion of the photos classified under this phase show agents, primarily armed soldiers, as illustrated in Figure 9. Because of their uniforms and the weapons they carry, they can be recognized as soldiers even in the absence of any textual cues. In fact, the uniform metonymically alludes to the characters’ occupations. In practical terms, these portrayals comprise pictures of soldiers in a standby state, possibly awaiting orders to deploy, without a clear indication of an impending attack.

Different patterns of visual metonymic framing at CNN News and Euronews. Comparing the two news portals, the visual metonymic frames show similar trends, with a few minor differences. CNN News tends to use more metonymic relationships capable of bridging the physical distance between its primary audience and war events. An example of a potentially engaging and involving metonymic relationship is highlighting local results and central phase imagery. While both news portals favoured the representation of local results over global ones, this ratio shows a striking difference for CNN News (71–29%). This tactic helps bring the events closer to the US public by using emotionally charged images, such as those of horrific damage, destruction and injured people. Such localized



Figure 7. Featured image activating the FINAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT metonymy.
Source: Roman Chop/AP on Euronews, 16 April 2023 (Euronews, 2022b).

and agonized aftermath imagery can increase the audience's sense of involvement and social closeness, and indirectly influence support for war relief. Looking at the trend line over the two years, CNN News consistently featured local results, with a slight increase over time. The choice of such featured images can depend on many aspects, such as the article's content: if it is about an attack and its aftermath, it is worth highlighting the result visually. With a more balanced ratio (60%–40%), Euronews gradually shifted focus from local to global results, possibly reflecting debates on EU-level sanctions against Russia. By highlighting the global results, the roots of these sanctions become 'visible' to citizens, which can be understood as a basis for validation.

On the other hand, proportionally speaking, CNN News used central phase depiction more than Euronews, with images showing the 'raw reality of war', which can evoke strong reactions, such as shock or empathy, thus pulling in readers. The CENTRAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT metonymy follows an increasing trend line for both news portals, but more so for CNN News. Given the potential of these metonymic frames to generate higher reader engagement, the results confirm the initial expectations about the framing strategies of the two news outlets, though the differences are not significant. Factors like access, journalistic norms and visual culture likely influence these differences, so further testing of the results and their implications is needed. The motivations warrant further examination, considering the complex relationships between government bodies, international institutions and media organizations with ties to either side of a conflict, as well as the influence of public discourse on decisions regarding war and policy measures. It is possible that news portals strategically choose their framing mechanisms, thus fostering reader engagement to sustain public support for aiding Ukraine. However, these



Figure 8. Featured image activating the CENTRAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT metonymy.
 Source: CNN, 14 August 2023 (CNN, 2023b).

assumptions require further analysis, including interviews with the concerned parties and audience analyses.

Overall, the findings point to the dominance of the AGENT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship, with agents being either direct actors, such as soldiers, or indirect decision-makers, such as politicians. We seem biased towards human-centred storytelling: violent acts, such as the Russo-Ukrainian War, are primarily interpreted and visually represented in terms of what they mean to the people involved in them or affected by them. Although visual storytelling tends to prioritize human-centred narratives, this may not reflect a limitation but rather a cognitive strategy, anchoring incomprehensible events in human experience. The alternative – mechanistic or structural imagery – may fail to evoke empathy or engagement. The portrayal of politicians shows an increasing trend throughout the observed period, which underlines the politicized nature of the war. As compact and easy-to-interpret references, politicians metonymically represent their country and its interests. Alternatively, it is probable that, as time passes and the shock element diminishes, the public may grow accustomed to direct agents' representation, shifting focus to political actors. The RESULT FOR ACTION metonymic relationship also significantly defines the visual narrative of both news portals, pointing to the war's local and global consequences. As for the sequentiality of events, the prominent FINAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT metonymy activates the news value of impact by presenting the characteristic aftermath image, which shows the devastation brought about by attacks and mass bombings. The CENTRAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT metonymy was also detected in a notable number of cases, despite potential accessibility issues and editorial restrictions. CNN News used central phase depiction more than Euronews, enhancing reader involvement through shock and empathy. Both outlets favour local results over global ones, showing the immediate war impact through vivid images. The findings reveal patterns in visual



Figure 9. Featured image activating the INITIAL SUBEVENT FOR COMPLEX EVENT metonymy.
Source: CNN, 18 August 2023 (CNN, 2023c).

narratives mediated through metonymic connections and propose potential motivations behind differences between the two news portals.

Conclusion

This article examined the visual representation of the Russo-Ukrainian War, focusing on the perspectives of the two greatest aid providers: the US and the EU. The visual metonymic framing approach revealed how the ‘undepictable’ aspects of violent events are portrayed in online news – specifically, how complex and geographically distant conflicts are distilled into symbolically charged visuals that shape public understanding and emotional engagement.

The findings suggest that the war is visually framed as agonized, localized and politicized. The agonized frame draws attention to human suffering by depicting pain, injury and grief. These images not only represent anguish but are affective in themselves: they invite audiences to feel with and for the subjects portrayed, generating empathy and moral engagement. Such imagery can sustain emotional investment and humanitarian concern in a media environment where audiences grow fatigued or desensitized to distant violence. The localized nature of the visuals indicates a pattern in which global warfare is brought closer to home. The analysed images focus on immediate, on-the-ground consequences – damaged infrastructure, displaced civilians and urban ruins. By narrowing the scope to specific people and places, these images make the war more tangible and emotionally resonant for viewers, potentially reducing the psychological and geographic distance between the audience and the conflict. The third theme relates to politicized framing, i.e. how the visuals construct the war not only through suffering and destruction but also as a geopolitical stage, where agency is not only with the fighters but also embedded in the representational choices of the media. This representation gives

the impression that the main stakeholders in the conflict are the world's leading politicians, taking attention away from those who suffer most from the war.

Taken together, these patterns reveal how visual metonymy does more than condense complexity – it selectively shapes narratives. Given the documented decline in public support for prolonged involvement in the war, visual choices may play a role in influencing how audiences interpret the necessity, morality, or urgency of action. The strategic use of visual frames – whether to evoke empathy or emphasize political agency – can subtly guide public sentiment and align viewers with particular war interpretations. News organizations use visual hooks to pique interest; a well-crafted frame can engage readers irrespective of cultural or social barriers (Dhanesh and Rahman, 2021). Academically, this research contributes to the growing field of visual metonymy by demonstrating its utility in analysing complex geopolitical events, offering a nuanced method for understanding how images shape narratives. Practically, the research highlights how image selection by journalists and editors actively shapes the framing of violent events, influencing public support for aid and policy. Ultimately, visual metonymy is not merely a representational strategy but an act of selective authorship, shaping what is seen, felt and remembered. The framing of war thus emerges as a dynamic process, involving journalists, editors and viewers who co-construct meaning through familiar, emotionally potent cues.

The main limitation of the research is the sample, in terms of both size and scope. While the analysis of two news portals does not represent all media coverage, the findings highlight key trends that invite further exploration of the visual metonymic framing approach across a broader variety of media. The article succinctly compares two news portals, but exploring factors beyond the visual metonymic frames is the subject of another article. The comparison between US and EU perspectives also raises important questions about the motivations behind metonymic frames, especially given that the two actors (specifically the US and EU institutions) are the largest aid providers to Ukraine. Finally, while the temporal aspect is only briefly discussed, its deeper analysis – especially in relation to the war's timeline – could yield additional insights.

Comprehending the intricate relationship between media and armed conflicts is crucial to acknowledging the broader consequences for public opinion and global awareness of complex geopolitical occurrences (Fernández-Castrillo and Ramos, 2023; Locoman and Lau, 2024; Tschirky and Makhortykh, 2024). For this reason, a logical extension of the research would be an audience analysis, complementing the data obtained by examining the issuer side. Representing a complex conflict like the Russo-Ukrainian War through a single image inevitably simplifies the issue and risks losing contextual depth (Fernández-Castrillo and Ramos, 2023). Still, featured images act as orientation tools in news feeds, guiding our attention and influencing click behaviour. Textual elements such as headlines and captions are equally important in this orientation. Although this article does not address multimodality comprehensively, as the images extracted from war-related news labels presuppose a shared context, a more detailed examination of textual elements would undoubtedly enrich the interpretation of visual data. Therefore, the insights of – among others – Forceville (2006) and Brdar-Szabó and Brdar (2022) on multimodality are to be incorporated to take the research further.

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Notes

1. See Bock (2020) for more about theorizing visual framing.
2. For a detailed discussion on the ethical considerations of using violent and graphic images in journalism, see Zelizer (2010).
3. *Idealized cognitive model* is named in many different ways in the literature: *script*, *scenario*, *scene*, *cultural model*, *frame*, *domain*, *schema* are all used to allude to structured mental representations of a particular aspect of human experience (Kövecses, 2006).
4. Hamby (2017) offers a detailed account of the evolution of violence definitions, arguing that this precise definition avoids underestimating non-prototypical acts of violence and enables more accurate identification of causes and consequences.
5. The names of the ICMs are capitalized, based on Kövecses and Radden (1998) and Radden and Kövecses (1999), while conceptual metonymies are formatted in small capitals according to the traditions of cognitive linguistics (Kövecses, 2006).
6. This metonymic relationship is not included in the linguistic examples presented in Kövecses and Radden (1998) and Radden and Kövecses (1999). However, following Peirsman and Geeraerts (2006), it was necessary to include it in the Action ICM when transferring it to the visual modality. The article interprets the PATIENT FOR ACTION relationship as one relating to the target or endurer of the action and applies it exclusively to human entities.
7. The PLACE FOR ACTION metonymic relationship was coded only when no people were depicted, focusing on the scene of the violent act. This provision is crucial as it prevents redundancy, given that coding for each image would not provide analytical value.
8. See Kövecses and Radden (1998), Radden and Kövecses (1999), Kövecses and Benczes (2010) and Littlemore (2015) for details about the types and categorization of metonymy.
9. Based on data from SimilarWeb's (<https://www.similarweb.com/>) News & Media Publishers category.
10. Based on the About us section of Euronews (<https://hu.euronews.com/about>).

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