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Biases in Donbas Media

INTRODUCTION

Currently, the political tensions in the Donbas region of Ukraine are particularly high.

The area is plagued by violence and caught in the crossfire between Russian insurgents and

Ukrainian forces. Both countries have a claim to the region as it is Russian-speaking and

culturally similar to Russia, yet according to international boundaries Donbas has been part of

Ukraine since its independence in 1991. Many speculations have been made as to what the

political alignments are of the Donbas citizens. In order to better understand the situation on the

ground, I analyzed the regional media.

METHODS

In order to best conceptualize bias, I studied the two regions of Donbas separately.

Donbas consists of two oblasts, Donetsk and Luhansk. I decided to focus exclusively on media

produced in the region since media produced elsewhere, such as Kyiv, do not reflect Donbas

biases. I then isolated media by type: radio, television, print, and online. As we discussed in

lecture, radio in the region is largely used for transmitting music and lighthearted talk shows.

Talk shows are rarely political. While television is often a source of news, I am unable to access

television station in Donbas from the United States. I could find no channels which were

transmitted online. Additionally, all Ukrainian channels were disconnected in the summer of

2014 (Analysis of Media 9). The infrastructure necessary for transmitting television is also

damaged due to the war and much of it is inaccessible because of ongoing violence (Analysis of

Media 9). Additionally, the channels that remain have been reported to be transmitting heavily anti-Ukrainian broadcasts, therefore the channels are certainly biased in favor of Russia (Analysis of Media 9). With such clear biases, further research was unnecessary. With printed media, I again ran into the problem of availability in the United States. I cannot read printed newspapers from afar. However, unlike television, much of printed news is published online. This brings us to the final source: online media. For this paper, I examined online sources of media from the Donbas region of Ukraine.

Donbas media is not a popular subject among academics, and therefore determining relevant news sources was difficult. However, a report by Institute of Mass Media, GFK Ukraine, Ukrainian Confidence Building Initiative (UCBI), and US Agency for International Development (USAID) titled "Analysis of the media situation in southern and eastern regions of Ukraine" not only analyzed media in various regions of Ukraine, but it also lists prominent news sources by oblast, isolating relevant media in Donetsk and Luhansk (4-6). From this list, I determined the sources which I would examine.

For Donetsk media, I reviewed *Eastern Project* (*Восточный Проект*) and *Donetsk News Agency* (*Донецкое Агентство Новостей*) (both the Russian and English versions, separately). In Luhansk, I reviewed *Prav-da!* (*Прав-да!*), *My City* (*Мой Город*), *Severdonetske* (*Северодонецке*), and *Tribune* (*Трибун*). Additionally, I reviewed *Donbas News* (*Новости Донбасса*) which covers both Donetsk and Luhansk.

Next, I created a method for determining the bias of a given source. I decided to review individual articles which included violence related to the war. Therefore, if it merely referenced conversations or possession of weapons or strategy, the article was not reviewed. Once the articles were chosen, I would record the perpetrator of the violence. In order for someone to be

considered a perpetrator, they had to be the subject of the sentence in which they verb described the violence. If the perpetrator was not named explicitly, the article was considered "neutral". Finally, the perpetrator was categorized as either "Ukrainian forces" or "Russian forces". If they could not be categorized or if both forces were considered perpetrators, the article was categorized as "neutral". If the perpetrator were Ukrainian forces, the article was categorized as "pro-Russian". If the perpetrators of the violence were Russian forces, the article was categorized as "pro-Ukrainian". It is important to note that the categorization of "neutral", therefore, does not indicate true neutrality. Rather, it denotes the absence of explicit and blatant bias. That by no means indicates that there is no deeper bias, but only that the bias is not readily shown on the surface.

Due to time constraints and a desire to focus my attention, I chose to focus my efforts on a relatively small timespan. I attempted to choose a timeframe which was recent and therefore relevant. I also wished the time to include a barrage of violence, providing me with more reports and therefore better data. Finally, I looked to find a timeframe which witnessed Russian and Ukrainian violence roughly equally. This was nearly impossible to determine. Outside media almost never get involved in the day to day fighting. Instead, Western and other powerful media tend to cover extraordinarily violent, important, or extreme events. The reporting of the daily action is left up to the local media. However, that makes it nearly impossible to determine who is actually firing the shots. While I would have liked "a variety of perpetrators" to be one of my requirements for a good timeframe, but this was impossible. Through the other criteria, I chose the week of November first to November seventh, including news published both on the first and on the seventh.

RESULTS

In the chart below, I included all of the sources I could access online from Donetsk and Luhansk. Beside the name of the news agency, I listed the language in which their articles were published. English is denoted by an E, Russian by an R, and Ukrainian by a U. I then filled in the number of articles per category from each given source. Finally, for ease of viewing the table, I bolded and underline the categorization with the most articles for each source.

Article Biases by Source			
	Pro-Russian Articles	Pro-Ukrainian Articles	Neutral Articles
Donbas News (R)	1	0	**<u>5</u>**
Eastern Project (R)	0	**<u>1</u>**	0
Donetsk News Agency (R)	**<u>24</u>**	0	1
Donetsk News Agency (E)	**<u>11</u>**	0	0
Prav-da! (R)	0	**<u>2</u>**	0
My City (U/R)	0	**<u>4</u>**	2
Severdonetske (R)	1	**<u>4</u>**	0
Tribune (R)	0	**<u>5</u>**	0

For the purposes of analysis, I did not observe *Eastern Project* due to the lack of relevant articles. I found that the articles in this source tended to be largely cultural pieces. It gave all the appearances of a very local publication. *Eastern Project* publishes many articles on the arts and culture, as well as local advertisements and notices. Additionally, small-scale local crimes are often awarded articles. These include traffic accidents, petty crimes, and other such incidents. This in itself is very interesting, but not relevant for the purposes of this research. Instead, I focused my attention on the other seven sources.

The articles from the Donetsk oblast were nearly uniformly anti-Ukrainian. No articles during this period of time were pro-Ukrainian and only one was assessed as neutral. This holds true for articles both in Russian and in English. In stark contrast, news from Luhansk was vastly pro-Ukrainian. Among all four online media sources in Luhansk, only one source,

Severdonetske, published any pro-Russian. *Severdonetske* only published a single pro-Russian article as compared to their four pro-Ukrainian articles. *My City* was the only source to publish neutral articles. Four articles from *My City* were judged to be pro-Ukrainian and only two were considered neutral.

The table below records the biases of articles without separating individual media sources. Instead, this table groups articles by the region in which they were published. All Donetsk news sources are grouped in a single row (including *Eastern Project*). Likewise, all Luhansk news agencies are combined in the final row. The news source *Donbas News*, which is widely distributed in both Donetsk and Luhansk, is awarded its own row under the descriptive title "Pan-Donbas Sources".

Article Biases by Region			
	Pro-Russian Articles	Pro-Ukrainian Articles	Neutral Articles
Pan-Donbas Sources	1	0	**5**
Donetsk Sources	**35**	1	1
Luhansk Sources	1	**15**	2

In this table, regional biases are made incredibly clear. In Donetsk, only one of 37 articles was considered pro-Ukrainian and only one was assessed as neutral. This is compared to 35 pro-Russian articles from Donetsk. This phenomenon is mirrored in Luhansk, where out of eighteen articles one was considered pro-Russian and two neutral, leaving fifteen pro-Ukrainian articles. This contrast is immensely substantial.

Pan-Donbas sources, seemingly in an effort to appease both populations and retain viewership, publish almost exclusively neutral articles, with five categorized as neutral and only one categorized as pro-Russian. In viewing these articles, almost all of them focused on the action rather than the perpetrator. For instance, while articles from other sources may use phrases such as "Ukrainian military bombs apartment buildings" or "militant forces shoot and kill civilians",

Donbas News tended to rephrase such accusatory statements to form sentences such as "apartment buildings bombed in war" or "civilians injured in crossfire". It must be noted that such statements are not truly neutral, but rather are avoiding language which could be considered partisan. Were they truly impartial, *Donbas News* would include the facts of each event instead of avoid the truth in an attempt to appear impartial. While the Pan-Donbas Sources category has much less data than the other two, the results are still notable.

IMPLICATIONS

The visible bias in the media is concerning. While both Donetsk and Luhansk are culturally, ethnically, and linguistically similar, their media biases are completely opposite. While it is possible this is in response to the strongly biased views of the general population, this scenario is unlikely. It is far more likely that the bias in the media is the result of either censorship or of bias in the elites who own media sources. Both scenarios are worrisome, though censorship is perhaps worse.

Censorship and biased elites are both worrisome situations because either way, the public is not being properly informed on issues of importance. This causes ignorance in voters, hindering democracy and accurate representation. However, while elite bias implies a structural problem, censorship implies limited freedom. If the biases are so strong due to censorship, the freedom of the press is limited and likely so are other freedoms, such as freedoms of speech and expression. This implies high levels of control by opposing forces within the Donbas region, which could potentially perpetuate the violence. And, since the public is not properly informed due to biased media, it is nearly impossible to assess the true will of the people and use that as a tool in attempts to resolve the Russian-Ukrainian dispute

LIMITATIONS

While the observations in the "results" section are notable, no statistical analysis has been done to assess the significance of the figures. This study was very limited in both timeframe and resources. In order for statistical analysis to hold weight, additional data must be collected. This can be done by expanding the period of time examined as well as by additional efforts to find more regional sources. Expanding the timeframe could result in more accurate data. Examining a year worth of articles would serve to offset potential irregularities. The timeframe problem could also be offset by examining similar timeframes in multiple years to watch the progression of bias in the media. If access on the ground in Donbas were possible, it would also be beneficial to examine resources which are not available in the United States to establish a more comprehensive view of all media.

Data could also be more accurately assessed through comparison. Since this study examined only data from Donbas, it did not provide any analysis in the larger context of the world's understanding of the regional violence. A better understanding could also be gained by comparing pro-Russian sources within the region to pro-Russian sources outside the region as well as comparing pro-Ukrainian within the region to pro-Ukrainian sources outside the region. An examination of the media biases in a global context would be preferable.

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