

***Beyond the headlines:
Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in times of conflict***

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ABSTRACT

The wars of the 21st century are not the first media wars, and many tropes and schema have long histories, particularly propaganda and the othering of a purported enemy. What is new today is that although mass media remains a central and hegemonic source of insight and perspective, citizen journalism, social media, spreadable media, and surveillant, data-driven media have grown in significance at an exponential level, adding a layer of complexity. In this article, we focus on disparity in media coverage and make the point that media and information literacy provide a valuable set of lenses from which to view a cluster of news and social media accounts taken from the government, mainstream media, alternative media, and the DIY mediasphere of the social media. It centers on two conflicts that receive little media exposure -the Nagorno-Karabash conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the internal Anglo-Francophone conflict in Cameroon. It also offers examples of classroom activities that could be adapted and modified to most educational settings.

Keywords: *MIL, media and information literacy, media coverage, media wars.*



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INTRODUCTION

Conflict and warfare are an ongoing legacy of human history; past antagonisms condition the present and future. How and why murderous violence and mass aggression towards strangers should continue in the 21st century as the policy and practice nations use to resolve fundamental disagreements is beyond the scope of this paper. Our interest lies in the rhetorical arts, particularly how and to what extent conflict is expressed and explained in media and information sources. This article contributes to the already existing literature on the role of media in times of armed conflict (Baden & Meyer, 2018; Frohlich, 2018; Gilboa, 2002; Lynch, 2015; Robinson, 2012) and offers first-hand accounts and pedagogical applications of MIL in times of conflict.

Given that we are media and information literacy experts, our remit is on who is framing conflict, how it is framed, and where and when the resulting accounts are circulated. In particular, we want to focus on disparity in media coverage and make the point that media and information literacy provides a valuable set of lenses from which to view a cluster of news and social media accounts taken from the government, mainstream media, alternative media, and the DIY mediasphere of the social media. Underscoring the gap between what is covered and circulated and what remains local, alternative, and obscured is the main aim of this paper.

Through a media and information literacy lens, this article focuses on two conflicts that receive little media exposure - the Nagorno-Karabash conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the internal Anglo-Francophone conflict in Cameroon. Two authors are MIL practitioners in areas directly affected by these conflicts. The other two teach MIL at universities in the United States and Canada. Regardless of our proximity to conflict, this article offers examples of classroom activities that could be applied in any educational setting.

The disparity in news coverage and MIL education

It is common for news networks to rush to report from the scene when a military conflict breaks out. However, as Janine Zacharia (2022) says in the Stanford News interview, the coverage is usually short-lived and “dominates until there’s a resolution or it becomes clear the conflict isn’t going to end quickly” (De Witte, 2022, Interview with Janine Zacharia) On February 24, 2022, the spotlight was on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Almost two years into this war, we can observe that media attention is waning somewhat. Still, the coverage of the war in Ukraine has dominated the media landscape and received disproportionately more media attention than any other current conflict (Digital News Report, 2022).

This discrepancy in media attention - which has received both criticism and justification from academics, politicians, and journalists alike - is not new nor unique to the Ukraine conflict. In an NPR article, Christopher Blattman (2022), the author of *Why We Fight*, points to particular geopolitical reasons for this conflict, such as the reality of spreading this conflict internationally, the role of superpowers, and the possibility of using nuclear weapons. Eva Polonska-Kimunguyi (2022), a Research Fellow at the London School of Economics, says that the unequal media coverage of wars is marked by racism and open hypocrisy. She cites examples of the war in Yemen and the support for Saudi Arabia from Western allies or conflicts in Ethiopia, Syria, Somalia, Kashmir, Palestine, Afghanistan, and many other places that did not receive nearly as much attention as the war in Ukraine.

These perspectives both deserve attention. Media and information literacy (MIL) practitioners often find themselves in a heated debate. The issues are often compounded by strong arguments and emotions expressed in public by people directly implicated in serious conflicts. As MIL practitioners, we should not avoid difficult discussions about historical context, geopolitics, racism, and power relations that affect media coverage. We also must bring attention to conflicts that rarely make it to news headlines, or even if they do, are quickly pushed to the back pages or out of sight entirely.

Given the ubiquity, reach, and impact of media - both legacy and new media included - it stands to reason that any attempt to teach about it and to provide users with some tools to help react to it will have to be broad, sweeping, and ambitious. This makes UNESCO’s Media and Information Literacy (MIL) initiative both exciting and daunting. UNESCO (n.d.) defines MIL as “a composite set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and practices that allow effectively access, analyze, critically evaluate, interpret, use, create and disseminate information and media products with the use of existing means and tools on a creative, legal and ethical basis” (para. 3) The strategies, programs, and curricula developed through UNESCO MIL provide a

blueprint for global citizens to interact meaningfully with media and information. Although MIL emerged primarily from communication studies, it has been researched and practiced by academics and practitioners from many other fields, such as journalism, education, and librarianship, just to name a few. Subsequently, the authors of this article are academics, activists, and professionals from various disciplines and settings. In the following sections, we will present the two conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Cameroon and share practical classroom ideas on addressing disparity in media coverage.

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia went through a devastating war in 2020 in Nagorno-Karabakh when Azerbaijan decided to solve a 30-year-old conflict inherited from the Soviet Union by force.¹ The war ended after 44 days with Russia's brokered ceasefire and Russian peacekeepers in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, divided into Armenian and Azerbaijani-controlled parts. In the following years, Azerbaijan pressured Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh by force and aggression to achieve the desired results in peace talks (Fults & Stronski, 2022).

When the 2020 war broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh and martial law was declared in Armenia, the official state narratives were shaped around #WeWillWin and #WeAreWinning hashtags. These simplified messages led the society to believe that Armenia would eventually win. As the war ended unexpectedly on November 9, 2020, with a trilateral statement about a ceasefire (BBC, 2020) leaving part of Nagorno-Karabakh under Azerbaijani control, people were in shock and disbelief. Many of the beliefs that the authorities had been building through media for many years (about Russia's role as the guarantor of the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh, about the capacities of the Armenian army, about the course of the negotiations, etc.) collapsed. The trust in official sources was shattered, especially as the authorities started updating casualty information and answering difficult questions about the war and the country's future with errors, doubts, and misinformation (Freedom House, 2021). The post-war surveys indicate that there is an enormous decline in public trust in government, parliament, as well as in media (CRRC, 2022).

The war in Ukraine can have direct implications for Nagorno-Karabakh that are widely speculated and manipulated in the Armenian and international press. While many Armenian independent news outlets call the events in Ukraine a war and invasion, Public TV avoids the term war, often using just "military actions" as the government of Armenia tries to stay neutral due to its economic dependency on Russia and its large military and peacekeepers presence in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenians also watch Russian state-controlled TV channels; a portion of society believes in Kremlin propaganda.

While the conflicts in Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh are on very different scales and have incomparable grounds and implications, seeing Ukrainian president Zelenski on every news channel and magazine cover while it takes almost a month for BBC and CNN to speak about the humanitarian crisis in the Nagorno-Karabakh when Azerbaijan blocks the life road connecting the region with Armenia, raises questions about double standards of the West (Qiblawi, 2023).

Anglophone conflict in Cameroon. Another example of a conflict that does not receive much media exposure despite the devastating loss of life and human suffering is Cameroon. Since 2016, the country's Northwest and Southwest Regions have been facing a major security crisis. These two regions are English-speaking, while the rest of Cameroon is primarily French-speaking. Postcolonial legacy and abuses of power by the current government led to the Cameroon Anglophone conflict. There have been competing interests among the various groups involved in this conflict, with some calling for a return to the federal system of government with two separate governments for the English and French regions, while others for the independence of the English regions from Cameroon and the formation of a new state called "Ambazonia" (Nganji & Cockburn, 2020). As of 2023, almost 600,000 people have been displaced (UNHCR, 2023), and 6,000 killed (Boursin, 2022) due to this ongoing conflict between the Anglophone separatists and the Cameroonian government led by Paul Biya. This is not the first conflict in Cameroon, let alone the only ongoing conflict. Since 2011, the Far North region of Cameroon has been the subject of an incursion on its soil by several

¹ For more information about the conflict visit: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer>

terrorists from the Boko Haram group. Although the reasons behind this conflict are complex, disinformation, media, and social media propaganda played an essential role in instigating violence.

Various groups in Cameroon, including Anglophone activists, the government, and even ordinary citizens, have used social media to promote their cause and used propaganda techniques to attack opponents, spread misinformation, and activate strong emotions. The activist groups claiming to be from “Ambazonia” created and circulated numerous videos of the execution of people and students and other human rights abuses. Also, Anglophone activist groups are accused of instigating “ghost towns” strikes and threatening those who refuse to participate in burning schools and businesses (Nganji & Cockburn, 2020). Due to the lack of proper investigation, it is difficult to determine the extent of misinformation, but many of these videos aimed to create panic and mobilize the populations of these regions to action. However, the disinformation and propaganda were not only created by secessionists. Diverted or faked photos showing the lifeless bodies of secessionists or their leaders arrested or killed have also been used to convey the idea of the superiority of the armed forces.

Similarly, the 2020 Ngarbuh massacre illustrates how authorities used disinformation to cover up civilian killings. For two months, the government had denied the massacre, saying five civilians had died following the explosion of fuel containers following exchanges of fire between soldiers and separatist “terrorists.” However, under international pressure, the authorities finally acknowledged that 3 soldiers had murdered 13 civilians (23 according to the UN). These facts also recalled the video of the execution of two women and their two babies in 2015 in the north of the country, which the government had described as “fake news” and “horrible fakery” before retracting and arresting seven soldiers accused of having executed these civilians (Le Monde, 2020, para.10).

MIL EDUCATION APPROACHES TO ADDRESS THE DISPARITY IN MEDIA COVERAGE

Developing strategies for teaching about and living in media-saturated environments is one thing. Still, it is something entirely different to be made accountable for an Alexandrian Library full of knowledge to pivot and adapt to particular issues, events, and stories. Thus, when events occur, or flashpoints emerge, media

educators find themselves in a delicate balance. Below, we offer a few ideas on how to approach the issue of disparity in conflict coverage that come from our own teaching experiences, primarily in higher education but also in K-12 and outside of formal education community activism. Many ideas came from the *Media Literacy in Times of Conflicts handbook* developed by Grigoryan (2023) for the Media Initiatives Center in Armenia. These ideas and activities are not exhaustive, but hopefully, they will inspire MIL practitioners to bring a complex discussion about the disparity in news coverage to their classrooms.

Reflect on your positionality

As mentioned, two of the authors of this article are MIL practitioners from Armenia (Grigoryan) and Cameroon (Pascal). For them, conflicts in these countries are parts of everyday reality. They also teach MIL to the audience directly implicated and with strong emotional ties to the content being taught. The other two authors, Polish American (Kozłowska-Barrios) and Canadian (Hoechsmann), follow armed conflicts from afar, primarily through news sources and other media. Although still in an observer position, Kozłowska-Barrios has an immediate family in Poland and is indirectly affected by family ties and Poland’s geographical proximity to Ukraine. As MIL practitioners, we should foster an environment of nonviolent communication (Friesem, 2021) in our classrooms; however, it is also important to note that we are not entirely objective, and our direct involvement, family ties, news we consume, or official stance of our governments impact how we perceive and teach about conflict. Therefore, self-reflection and awareness of our positionality should be the first step.

International collaborations. With the increased use of video conference tools and efforts of media literacy organizations such as UNESCO’s MIL Alliance, International Council for Media Literacy (ICML), Association for Media Literacy (AML), Nordicom, and many others to bring international audiences, it becomes more accessible than ever to invite class lecturers from around the world. Grigoryan and Pascal visited via Zoom students in Kozłowska-Barrios’ undergraduate course at the university in the United States to talk about media literacy efforts in their countries. There were two memorable experiences from these class visits. First, none of the students ever heard about the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. It prompted an interesting

discussion of why they had never heard about it and how international news is covered in major U.S. networks. Second, Pascal decided to present in French, and one of the student's mothers, a French speaker originally from Syria, was our translator. Although the topic of the discussion was media literacy for peacebuilding in Cameroon, students started opening up about their personal experiences of having family members in Syria or Palestine and sharing the acts of social media censorship like in the case of #SaveSheikhJarrah or media portrayal of refugees from Syria. Bringing speakers with a personal connection to conflict makes the content relatable and encourages discussion about power, race, and geopolitics in news media coverage.

The power of access to the Internet

Regardless of where the conflict occurs, the fight over who controls the information is at the forefront. As of the time of this writing (August 2023), almost all operating independent news stations in Russia have been closed, social media such as Facebook and Instagram are banned, and Twitter is heavily restricted (Sauer, 2022; RSF, 2023). Similarly, as the war broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, martial law was declared in Armenia, which also indicated that no information different from the state information could be published. However, social media was not shut down, and people could share information this way. The most extreme information control measures were applied in Cameroon, where the government shut down the Internet in the two affected Anglophone regions for 93 days in 2017, citing the spread of falsehood (Nganji & Cockburn, 2020).

Ask students to choose one current conflict and research how governments limit access to information sources using the Freedom House's latest edition of *Freedom on the Net* report. Discuss with them different forms of censorship, such as internet shutdowns, blocks on foreign websites or social media platforms, restrictions on circumvention technology, or new laws restricting foreign websites and content.

Another idea is to introduce students to Article 19 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the cornerstone of MIL education. Article 19 says, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." Then present them with statistics on global internet penetration rate (Digital 2023, DataReportal,

2023) and discuss how disparity in access to broadband internet impacts information access during conflict.

In Cameroon, only 46.1% of citizens have access to the Internet, and 37.14% have access to it primarily via a mobile connection (Statista, 2023). During several training workshops organized by EdukMedia, the organization led by Pascal, the instructors learned that social networks were the only way for young people to learn about the Anglophone conflict. Moreover, even if they had not solicited information on this topic, information on the conflict in the Anglophone zone appeared in most of their social media news feeds and was shared in discussion groups. In Cameroon and other developing countries, access to the open Internet is still sparse, and Internet use is limited to social media accessed through mobile phones.

Discuss with students how lack of access to quality media and diverse viewpoints impacts peacebuilding efforts. Should access to broadband Internet be a human right? In this example, we showcased Cameroon; however, students could research any other area affected by armed conflict. They could also watch documentaries like *The Social Dilemma* or *Trust Me* and discuss how social media's exposure to violent content could lead to further radicalization in conflict-torn areas.

News headline investigation

A simple classroom activity to address the disparity in media coverage is tracking news headlines with NexisUni or any other database that aggregates news articles. In this activity, students can practice their information literacy skills, such as searching and accessing articles, and media literacy critical thinking skills in analyzing these search results. The graph below (Figure 1) presents one week of media coverage of the three conflicts from the day they started. I used the keywords Nagorno Karabakh (dates: 27 Sep - 4 Oct 2020), Ukraine (24 Feb - 2 Mar 2022), and Cameroon (9 Sep - 16 Sep 2017). As the graph shows, there is a significant disparity in how much media attention these conflicts attract.

To modify this activity, students could research several current armed conflicts and examine the coverage of the conflict in news media. Databases such as NexisUni allow filtering results by region, e.g., coverage in European, South American, and African news sources. Then, they could present short reports and discuss with other students which conflicts received

more attention, what kind of media, and the possible reasons behind this disparity.

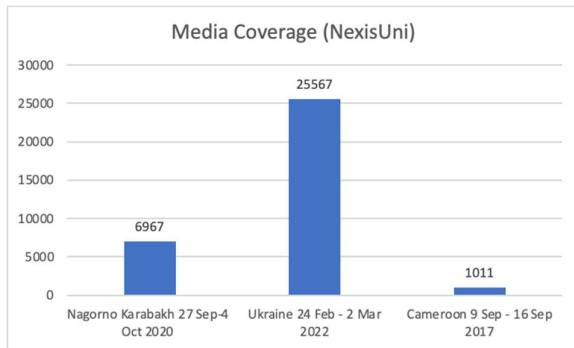


Figure 1. Search results in NexisUni

To develop this activity further, they could prepare journalistic materials about the studied conflict for a local audience. By producing their own reports, they could learn how to verify information, the rules of ethics, and the copyright of photos/videos and give proper credit to the source of the information. Therefore, there are many levels of approach to this activity.

Ideas and values in news coverage

On September 12-13, 2022, Azerbaijan attacked Armenia, approaching the city of Jermuk and occupying new territories. It caused a strong response from the international press, with many countries condemning Azerbaijan’s aggression. However, there were also misunderstandings and confusion in the global media. For example, *Nechepurenko and Engelbrecht (2022)* titled their *The New York Times* article as follows: “Clashes Erupt in Nagorno-Karabakh Raising Fears of Another War.” Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed region and a long-term conflict area between Armenia and Azerbaijan, is being confused with the sovereign territory of Armenia by *The New York Times*. FIP.am, an Armenian fact-checking platform, collected the erroneous headlines and explained the confusion. *The New York Times* later changed the headline, moving NK from the title (Figure 2).

Discuss this or any similar example you know with the students and listen to their opinions: What values, interests, and circumstances influence the topics and headlines in the international media? Do the headlines represent reality? Do they contain attitude, position, and interests?

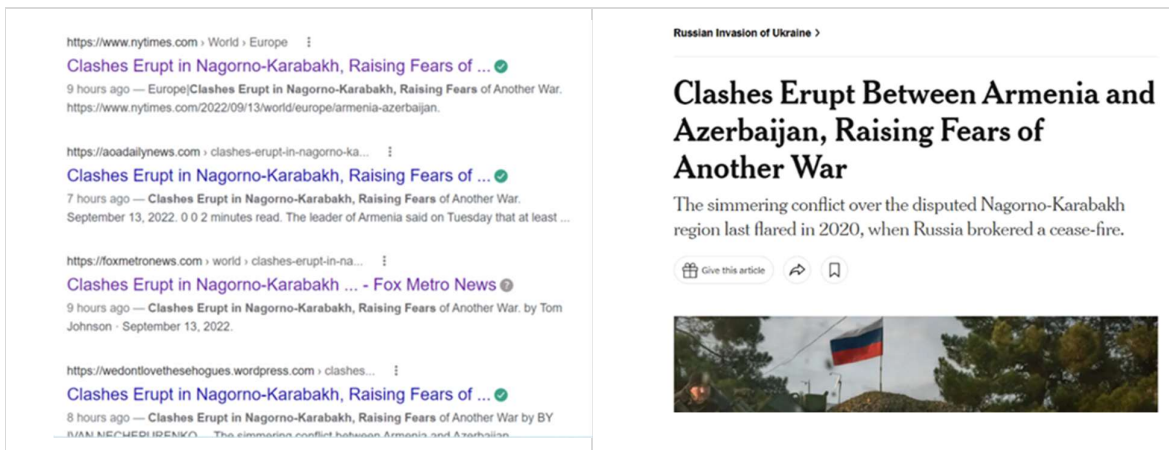


Figure 2. The original and changed headlines of the September 13 article in *The New York Times*

Decode propaganda techniques

Youth in Cameroon are exposed daily to images and videos on social media presenting mutilated bodies and scenes of beheadings. Students participating in EdukMedia programs confessed that their primary instinct is “to share” such messages as they fear for their

security and want to alert other people about the conflict. Unfortunately, very few participants acknowledged verifying this information before sharing it. When asked about their feelings upon viewing such violent content, fear and desolation were the most common answers among the students.

In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the sides used hate propaganda for over 30 years but intensified recently. Even after winning the war, the leadership of Azerbaijan not only did not stop the offense and bullying but took it to another level by opening a Military Trophies Park in the center of Baku. The Park showcased not only military equipment and weaponry but also the helmets of those who died at war, mannequins of the Armenian soldiers specifically made to look funny and freaky, and a park that hosted many families and children who came to take photos. Azerbaijan later removed displays depicting Armenian soldiers and the helmets of soldiers following a complaint by Armenia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (HRW, 2021). In 2022, Azerbaijan's children were enlisted to sing a song on public television insulting French President Emmanuel Macron and labeling him pro-Armenian (Natiqqizi, 2022). Another example is videos of mutilated Armenian female soldiers (Avetisyan, 2022) that circulated on Telegram. Respect towards women and love for mothers is sacred in the Caucasus, and these videos made by Azerbaijan had a devastating psychological effect on the Armenian audience.

Understanding propaganda means deconstructing the language of information wars and propaganda narratives, dealing with the volume of hate speech, enemy image portrayals, and manipulation techniques for misleading people. *Mind Over Media* provides a set of criteria for decoding propaganda: 1) Activate strong emotions, 2) Attack opponents, 3) Respond to audience needs and values, and 4) Simplify information. Find several examples of videos, images, or memes (you can browse them on the Media Education Lab website²) and provide a worksheet with propaganda criteria for students to analyze. In this way, the instructor can control the classroom content and environment and expose the audience to videos and images appropriate for the intended audience.

The instructor could also ask the students to do their own research; however, it is essential to consider the audience's age and readiness and take appropriate precautions. Due to disparity in media coverage, some examples may be difficult to find. Students can go to Google and set up a search engine for a specific country they are interested in (e.g., google.cm for Cameroon; Google.am for Armenia) and then search for images, news, or videos. They could also use a VPN. This

activity will teach them to recognize not only propaganda techniques but also the search strategies for finding content that is harder to discover, and it will allow them to see what people living in these areas are exposed to. However, it is important to remember that in this way, they may be exposed to very disturbing and violent content. Therefore, this activity is not recommended for every audience.

#hashtags and spread of information

During conflicts, #hashtags often become a tool of digital warfare, propaganda, and awareness. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the hashtags #IsraelUnderFire and #GazaUnderAttack became a way to track the claims of both sides. The hashtags #DontBelieveArmenia and #FactsAboutAzerbaijan were created during the Artsakh war, and in Cameroon, hashtags #BringBackOurInternet and #Ambazonia were widely circulated.

To understand how hashtags work, experiment with them on social media with your students. Ask them to create a campaign on an important issue and spread the information about the campaign using short, catchy hashtags.

CONCLUSION

The wars of the 21st century are not the first media wars, and many tropes and schema have long histories, particularly propaganda and the othering of a purported enemy. What is new today is that although mass media remains a central and hegemonic source of insight and perspective, citizen journalism, social media, spreadable media, and surveillant, data-driven media have grown in significance at an exponential level, adding a layer of complexity. At best, these multiple, contending information sources enrich global discourse and dialogue. However, the tendency is more toward informational chaos and even direct, agentive "chaos creation efforts effects" (Zelenkauskaitė, 2022, p. 3). There does not appear that a quick fix is on the horizon that will enable harmony and equanimity for the global public looking for the correct or fair interpretation of conflicts either on local, regional, or global scales. Without a solution to information chaos, MIL offers a kernel of hope.

² <https://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/>

Media and Information literacy is a teaching and learning strategy, so it can't pop out like a genie from a bottle, like a magical resolution to the problems at hand. However, it offers a vast reservoir of learning strategies that can be implemented directly in any conflict situation. For example, it helps to decode media messages, promotes understanding of the context and motive in which the information was produced, encourages self-reflection on how media messages impact our emotions, and, above all, leads us to rethink our own position as to whether as a participant or observer, we can contribute to building healthy media landscapes that value thorough journalism, responsible use of information, and inclusion of voices and perspective of those who have been traditionally marginalized.

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