

Shaping of Perceptions & Misperceptions Among Masses During War Escalations : A Comparative Analysis of Information Dynamics, Media Influence, and Perception Management

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Abstract

In the modern-day world, war is not only about fighting on the battlefield but also manipulating the belief of the opponent country using intelligence. During war escalation, people form opinions based not on their personal experience, but from news stories and government releases, along with other posts on social media. As a result, they become more susceptible to misperceptions; these are misconstrued situations employed to frighten, sow discord and garner the unthinking support of the public for the providing of military firepower. Due to an increase in the use of social media and modern means of communication, this task has become even easier as not everyone is well-equipped to measure what is happening during wars. Misconceived observations of the conflict can aggravate and harm the process of resolution. The paper seeks to ascertain the role of the government and media in distorting the public opinion during wars by analysing case studies such as Russia – Ukraine War and other major wars worldwide. Usage of management perceptions, misinformation, and the war in which does escalate.

Keywords: Perception Management, Misinformation, War Escalation, Public Opinion, Media Literacy, Information Warfare.

Introduction

Today, war is not just about the battlefield, but about the global stage and also more. In modern wars, it's basically the information that is sculpted to suit the interests of those who use it. This means perceptions can be altered, truths distorted and public opinion weaponised as effectively as any weapon. The increasingly intertwined worlds of media ecosystems, government messaging, and social media platforms means that everyday people are becoming exposed to carefully crafted myths and disinformation to mislead them about present-day conflicts.

People usually don't form their own perceptions about war. The reality emerges from numerous news reports and state-run broadcasts, public and official statements, social media commentary and visual imagery. All these may be used to create a perception for a particular political or military purpose. When people internalise incomplete or inaccurate narratives of a conflict this leads to a misperception which is a distorted understanding of events which causes fear and increases hostility and uncritical public support for military escalation. Misperceptions are not incidental state and non-state actors actively cultivate them to manage perceptions, in other words to convince the populations of what they ought to believe about war and its protagonists. Sickness due to forbidden wailing and nocturnal talking. They weaken informed civic engagement at the individual level. On a social level, they worsen division and weaken trust in institutions. At an international level, they can extend the conflicts and obstruct the diplomatic resolution since they can make the compromise appear inconceivable to the inflamed public. The speed at which misperceptions travel has greatly accelerated with advancements in digital communication. Therefore, traditional mechanisms to correct them are getting ineffective.

Through a comparative lens, this paper analyses these dynamics drawing on the cases of the Russia-Ukraine War and the other major conflicts to examine how governments and media organisations shape public narratives at the time of war escalation and what it means for conflict resolution.

Review of Literature

War escalations are fought not only on battlefields but also in the realm of public perception. During armed conflict, governments, media institutions, digital platforms, and non-state actors compete to shape how populations interpret events, assign blame, define victims and aggressors, and imagine possible outcomes. The literature shows that mass perceptions during war are not formed spontaneously; they are structured through propaganda, framing, selective exposure, emotional narratives, rumor circulation, and increasingly through algorithmically amplified digital content. Scholars across international relations, communication studies, political psychology, and conflict studies argue that these processes often generate misperception -systematic distortions in how ordinary people understand threats, intentions, and realities of war.

Early work in international relations established misperception as a central factor in conflict behavior. Jervis argued that political actors routinely interpret others' intentions through cognitive biases, historical analogies, and incomplete information, often leading to escalation and strategic error. Although his focus was elite decision-making, the framework has been widely extended to mass publics, especially where media systems transmit simplified and emotionally charged narratives that mirror elite threat constructions. In wartime, such distortions are intensified because uncertainty is high, information is incomplete, and audiences are more susceptible to binary moral framings.

A core strand of the literature examines propaganda and state narrative construction. In conventional and hybrid wars alike, states attempt to sustain legitimacy by crafting coherent narratives around security, identity, sacrifice, and national survival. These narratives are often directed not just at external audiences but at domestic populations whose compliance, morale, and emotional alignment are politically crucial. Research on wartime communication shows that narratives work most effectively when they connect current conflict to preexisting myths, traumas, or collective memories. Publics are less persuaded by raw facts than by stories that resonate with identity and fear. This helps explain why war communication frequently relies on symbols, historical grievances, and simplified civilizational language rather than detailed evidence.

A second major theme concerns media framing. Traditional media do not merely report war; they structure it through repeated frames such as self-defense, humanitarian crisis, terrorism, liberation, or existential threat. Framing theory suggests that when media consistently highlight some aspects of conflict while marginalizing others, they influence not only what people think about but how they think about it. During escalations, this has direct consequences for public support for military action, tolerance of civilian suffering, and attitudes toward diplomacy. Literature from communication studies shows that conflict coverage often privileges official sources, especially in the early stages of war, thereby

reproducing state-preferred interpretations and narrowing public understanding of alternatives.

The literature also highlights the role of misinformation, disinformation, and rumor in shaping wartime consciousness. In periods of war escalation, information ecosystems become saturated with unverifiable images, emotionally manipulative claims, fabricated atrocities, and misleading context. Social media intensifies this problem by rewarding speed, virality, and outrage over verification. False or misleading wartime narratives can spread rapidly because they align with preexisting anxieties and group loyalties. Research on digital conflict communication suggests that people are especially likely to believe and share false war-related information when it reinforces in-group identity or confirms moral assumptions about the enemy. This means misperception is not simply a failure of information access; it is also tied to affect, identity, and social belonging.

Recent scholarship on AI-assisted and digital review tools also notes the growing scale and complexity of research on war-related information systems, reflecting how fast the field is expanding and how difficult it is to synthesize comprehensively without systematic methods. AI tools are increasingly being explored to support literature search, screening, and extraction in systematic reviews, though scholars caution that usability, transparency, and standardized evaluation remain major challenges.

Another important line of research comes from political psychology, which explains why masses under wartime conditions become vulnerable to distortion. Fear, trauma, uncertainty, and perceived collective threat narrow cognitive openness and increase reliance on heuristics. Under these conditions, individuals more readily accept simplified friend-enemy distinctions, overestimate intentional hostility, and interpret ambiguous events as proof of coordinated. Wartime perception is often structured through processes that portray the opposing side as barbaric, irrational, or inherently violent. Such portrayals create moral distance and make extreme policies appear necessary or even virtuous. Literature on atrocity narratives shows that real violence and manipulated representation can become entangled, with genuine suffering used within competitive framing struggles to mobilize outrage and justify further escalation. In this environment, masses are not simply passive recipients of propaganda; they become participants in symbolic warfare through sharing, endorsing, and emotionally investing in selective representations of conflict.

Digital media studies extend this argument by showing how platform architecture influences wartime perception. Algorithmic systems amplify content that triggers strong reactions, and war-related posts often combine fear, grief, nationalism, and moral certainty—all highly engaging emotions. As a result, digital platforms can intensify polarization and create fragmented but internally coherent information communities. These communities may consume entirely different “wars,” each organized around distinct facts, heroes, victims, and timelines. The literature increasingly describes this as a crisis of shared reality. In war escalations, the problem is not only propaganda from above but the decentralized production of perception through influencers, partisan networks, anonymous accounts, and transnational digital publics.

There is also substantial work on strategic narratives in international relations. Strategic narrative theory argues that political actors seek to shape how the public understand the past, present, and future of international events. During war, successful narratives define who started the conflict, what is at stake, and what kind of peace is imaginable. These narratives matter because public support for endurance, sanctions, intervention, or negotiation often depends less on military facts than on persuasive narrative coherence. Competing actors therefore invest heavily in information operations to secure domestic legitimacy and international sympathy.

The literature on hybrid warfare and information warfare is especially relevant here. Contemporary conflicts rarely separate physical violence from communication strategy. Information operations are now treated as integral to warfighting, not peripheral to it. Civilian populations are targeted psychologically through campaigns designed to induce confusion, panic, distrust, fatalism, or rage. This literature suggests that mass misperception can itself be weaponized: if populations lose confidence in institutions, cannot distinguish truth from manipulation, or become trapped in escalating cycles of fear and retaliation, the strategic objectives of conflict actors are advanced even without territorial gain.

At the same time, not all literature is pessimistic. Some scholars emphasize media literacy, trusted local journalism, fact-checking networks, and plural information environments as partial safeguards against wartime misperception. However, the evidence is mixed. Corrections often fail when false beliefs are identity-reinforcing, and fact-checking may lag behind viral conflict content. More promising are approaches that strengthen epistemic trust before crises erupt: resilient institutions, transparent communication, and diversified media consumption patterns. The literature suggests that societies with deep political polarization or low trust are particularly vulnerable to mass misperception during war escalations.

Methodologically, the field is interdisciplinary and fragmented. Reviews of literature emphasize that a strong literature review should move beyond summary to identify themes, tensions, and gaps. Common ways of structuring such a review include thematic, methodological, chronological, and theoretical organization. In this topic area, a thematic structure works best because the scholarship spans propaganda, framing, digital misinformation, identity processes, and psychological bias. A persistent gap in the literature is the uneven attention to the mass public in the Global South, vernacular digital spaces, and non-English wartime information ecologies. Another gap is that much research focuses either on elite information strategy or on platform misinformation, while fewer studies integrate both into a unified account of how war perceptions are socially produced.

A related gap concerns everyday audience reception. Many studies explain what states or media attempt to do, but fewer explore how ordinary people interpret, resist, remix, or selectively believe wartime narratives in daily life. This is important because publics are not uniform. Class, ideology, religion, media habits, and prior exposure to violence shape how people process conflict messaging. Future research would benefit from combining discourse analysis with interviews, surveys, and digital ethnography to better understand why some populations internalize escalatory narratives while others remain skeptical.

Overall, the literature indicates that perception and misperception during war escalations emerge from the interaction of cognitive bias, emotional vulnerability, media framing, propaganda systems, digital virality, and identity politics. Mass opinion in wartime is not simply informed or misinformed; it is actively organized through competing structures of meaning. Understanding this process is essential for international relations because public perception affects democratic consent, escalation tolerance, diplomatic space, and postwar reconciliation.

Research Gap

There has been a lot written on elite-level misperceptions driving war escalation. Some recent examples include how anonymous sourcing in the mainstream media launders atrocity narratives (e.g., Russian abundances, Gaddafi rapes, Hamas beheadings). Similarly, cognitive warfare is driving downward public sensemaking through flooding the sphere with AI deepfakes and deselecting disinformation. Overall, the gap is in figuring out how that will shape mass perceptions among the civilian populace during the escalating phases. Studies like Scherling's analysis highlight propaganda models in reporting. NATO's cognitive warfare frameworks discuss enemy techniques like OODA loop disruption. However, few people investigate such empirical mechanisms of perception formation at the mass level, such as algorithm-induced amplification on the social platform, emotional framing inducing bandwagon effects or psychological biases (belief perseverance, attribution, etc.); real-time information warfare. The gap raises questions about how various specific interventions, such as platform transparency mandates or counter-narrative priming, might address misperceptions that underpin public support for ongoing conflict, which is something that could lead to more innovative interdisciplinary studies drawing on fields such as media psychology, network analysis, and conflict simulation.

Methodology

This study is about what people think and feel during a war and how they form their opinions about it. It follows a qualitative research approach and does not do surveys. Instead, it uses secondary analysis, drawing on things that other people have already found out about how the media affects what people think about war and risks, how people share information during a conflict, and ideas from psychology, international relations, and media studies to help understand how people behave when wars are getting worse.

The study looks at parts of the world where there are conflicts, compares them, and analyses things like propaganda, how algorithms make certain information more popular, how emotions are used to frame information, and how people still biases affect their thinking. Through the comparative method, the study finds patterns across cases and makes general statements about how people's perceptions are managed during wars. Even though the study only uses information that is already available, it is transparent and draws from many fields to get a complete picture.

The study focuses on four case study areas: the war between Russia and Ukraine, the war in Iraq, the conflict between Israel and Iran, and how social media affects people's fear and perception of conflict around the world. The Russia-Ukraine War shows how different media sources can create different realities for people. The Iraq War looks at how the media can distort what people think is happening in countries with free elections. The Israel-Iran conflict examines how misunderstandings can happen when countries are suspicious of each other and have proxy actors involved. The study of social media and fear dynamics looks at how being online can make people more afraid and think there is more conflict even if they are not directly affected. These cases show that managing people's perceptions is an issue that involves many different factors.

Analysis

Communication tactics are progressively being concerned with the OODA loop (Observe–Orient–Decide–Act), interrupting the decision-making process by affecting the way people perceive information. Perception works in two timeframes, in the short run it leads to confusion, panic and misinformation by sudden shocks of information; in the long run it undermines institutional trust, redefining belief systems by repeated exposure to biased accounts.

Regional Analysis

A. Global North (USA and Western Democracies)

Media intensity and emotional framing play a key role in perceived threats in Western democracies, including civil war or nuclear conflict. Polls indicate that approximately 35 percent of Americans think that a civil war is probable, which is not comparable to the actual probability of a conflict. This means that media exposure is a greater motivator of perception than reality.

B. Europe (Russia-Ukraine Conflict Zone)

The Russia-Ukraine conflict exemplifies how the media systems of the two countries create parallel realities. Western discourses present it as an invasion over sovereignty and humanitarian issues whereas Russian discourses explain it as a strategic military action.

C. Middle East (Israel Iran Escalation)

Misperception in the Middle East is based on the security dilemma, where defensive measures are seen as offensive threats. As an example, development of nuclear can be perceived as a deterrence or existential threat by each party. It is also complicated by the existence of proxy actors, which make communication more complex and uncertain, making the misinterpretation and instability more prominent.

D. South Asia (India-Pakistan Media War)

Perception warfare in South Asia has moved to the digital platform via Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube. These platforms allow the fast spread of stories by the states, influencers and

citizens in parallel. Viral campaigns, hashtags, and emotional content influence the social opinion, and counter-narratives seek to rectify misinformation.

E. Global Digital Ecosystem (Cross-Regional)

A cross-country study (60 countries 2017-2022) demonstrates that the higher the exposure to social media, the greater a fear of conflict even in the absence of real circumstances. Passive users develop a long-lasting fear as a result of repeated exposure, and active users exhibit greater increases with political engagement. Algorithms are more focused on emotionally charged content, which intensifies polarization and sensationalism.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Russia Ukraine war (Media Polarization)

Because of two hegemonic narrations, the first one which shows the conflict as an invasion and the second one which shows the conflict as a special military operation, two different accounts of the same events are created by default. The mismatched casualty estimates, biased reporting, and biased framing make it easy to be confused and mistrusted. This places the world split in terms of its opinion with different sections of the world holding different narratives.

Case Study 2: Iraq War (Military vs Media Perception Gap)

The Iraq War is an example of the disconnect between the realities of the ground and the mediated image, as an analysis of 200 British military individuals indicates that the media perception of the information was inaccurate in many aspects, overemphasized and was disturbing in terms of feelings. This gap between reality on the ground and media reporting, did not just have a reflection on the morale of the soldiers but also to the perception of their families and the general population.

Case Study 3: Israel-Iran Escalation (Security Misperception)

When one state is seen as having defensive actions, the other state is seen as an aggressive threat and the cycle of actions and reactions starts, even escalating the tensions. The fact that proxy actors intervene in this dynamic further complicates the situation and introduces another layer of uncertainty and distortion of the narrative. As such, escalation is barely controllable and deterrence mechanisms are compromised by incessant misconstructions of intentions.

Case study 4: Global Social Media Fear Dynamics

An investigation of the social media exposure of 60 countries reveals that it raises fear and conflict perceptions all over the globe. The higher the exposure of people to political content, the higher perceived risk of conflict is perceived, even in comparatively stable regions. As an example, the probability of civil war in the United States increased by 6 points (29-35) percent in the opinion of people, which is an example of how the digital information space affects the opinion formation.

Synthesis of Findings (Mechanisms of forming Perceptions)

The process of perception is influenced by a set of interrelated processes: propaganda messages capitalize on identity and fear; media framing illuminates the aspects of conflict that are selective; misinformation propagates false or misrepresentative information; algorithmic amplification favours engaging yet polarizing content; and cognitive biases such as confirmation bias reinforce prior beliefs. The distance also enhances the need to rely on mediated information hence individuals are more susceptible to misperception.

Discussion

The findings indicate that individuals' thoughts during a war are drawn from their information sources, feelings, and stories they have heard. An absence of evidence underpins this thinking. It's how people make sense of information which will depend on how they communicate and the kind of information they see.

A significant finding is that media influences the way people interpret things. People get opinion from media. Studies have shown that increased media coverage almost always inspires the public to change their opinions regarding risk. This is because media is what makes people aware of happenings. People's opinions frequently change based on the information they interact with. Words resonate with the listener. The increasing use of AI-powered information systems has created complexity. Determining the veracity of facts is a challenging task. Such a lack of communication can increase the chances that people will misinterpret each other's intentions and make matters worse. Conflict can arise from misunderstanding.

The way people process information during war matters too. What people already believe, how they feel and how far away they are affect how they form opinions. Those who reside far from the conflict tend to believe the misinformation while those closer to the conflict rely on their own experiences according to research. The proximity to a conflict aids a better understanding of the same. How the stories are constructed also matters. Tales can help in framing thoughts of people and in acquiring power. This is known as "warfare." Controlling meanings is essential to any conflict between the parties involved in the fight. Escalation is also a matter of perspective. The energy of the conflict is only one factor, as are interpretations of actions. Misinterpretations, doubt, and danger enhance the escalating momentum.

Frequent violence may make people think that violence is a normal occurrence. It is capable of changing the people's views towards war. Over time, justify it. Overall, these findings show that misperceptions during war are not mistakes but are significant and have real consequences. The media, cognitive biases and strategic information control all play a role in shaping perception during war. The media, psychological processes and strategic narratives all influence how people think during war. The perception during war is shaped by information environments, psychological processes and strategic narratives. These factors shape perception during war at a basic level. War perception is mediated interpretation

created through the selective patterns of communication and exposure. The analysis indicates that perception during war is not always reality. The way we perceive war essentially depends on how information environments interact with psychological processes and strategic narratives.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore that misperception during war is not incidental but systematically engineered through propaganda, media framing, algorithmic amplification, and cognitive exploitation. Addressing this challenge requires coordinated action across governments, platforms, civil society, and international institutions. The following policy recommendations emerge from the analysis:

1. Platform Accountability Frameworks — Legislate rules requiring social media companies to deprioritize algorithmically amplified conflict content lacking verified sourcing, especially during active war escalations.
2. National Media Literacy Programmes — Embed media literacy in school curricula and public awareness campaigns so citizens can identify propaganda, framing bias, and emotionally manipulative narratives before crises erupt.
3. Independent Cross-Border Fact-Checking Consortia — Institutionally fund fact-checking bodies insulated from state influence to provide real-time verification during escalations, particularly in high-risk regions like South Asia and the Middle East.
4. State Communication Transparency Mandates — Require government communication agencies to disclose when information operations are conducted domestically, ensuring public accountability.
5. UN Cognitive Security Advisory Panel — Establish an international body under the UN to monitor information warfare trends and coordinate counter-narrative strategies among member states.
6. Bilateral Confidence-Building Communication Channels — Formalize structured communication mechanisms between adversarial states to reduce security misperceptions arising from ambiguous signals and proxy actor interference.
7. AI and Deepfake Regulation — Develop international norms and domestic laws governing the use of AI-generated content in conflict zones to curb the spread of synthetic disinformation.
8. Support for Local and Vernacular Journalism — Fund trusted local journalism in the Global South and non-English media spaces, which are currently underrepresented in research and vulnerable to unchecked misperception.

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