



# JOURNAL ON COMMUNICATIONS

ISSN:1000-436X

**REGISTERED**

Scopus®

[www.jocs.review](http://www.jocs.review)

## Information Warfare and Strategic Narratives in the Russia–Ukraine War and the US–Israel and Iran War

Innocent Jooji, PhD

Department of Political Science and Diplomacy,  
Veritas University,  
Abuja-Nigeria.

### Abstract

*This study examines how information warfare and strategic narratives shape public perception, legitimacy claims, and conflict dynamics in the Russia–Ukraine war and the wider US–Israel–Iran confrontation. Using a comparative political communication lens, it analyzes how state and non-state actors deploy disinformation, selective framing, visual media, and platform-driven amplification to influence domestic audiences and international opinion. The Russia–Ukraine war demonstrates how narrative struggles over sovereignty, victimhood, and resistance operate alongside battlefield operations, while the US–Israel–Iran context highlights the role of deterrence messaging, proxy narratives, and regional information contests. The paper argues that strategic narratives are not merely supportive tools of war but central instruments through which actors justify policy, sustain alliances, and undermine adversaries. It also shows that digital media ecosystems have intensified the speed, reach, and volatility of wartime messaging, making narrative control a core dimension of contemporary conflict.*

**Keywords:** Information warfare; Strategic narratives; Russia–Ukraine war; US–Israel–Iran conflict; Disinformation

### Introduction

The conduct of warfare in the twenty-first century has expanded beyond conventional battlefields to include a pervasive and contested informational domain. Information warfare, broadly defined as the strategic use of information, disinformation, and communication technologies to gain a competitive advantage over adversaries, has become a central feature of contemporary conflict (Rid, 2020). Closely linked to this phenomenon is the concept of strategic narratives, which refer to the purposeful construction and dissemination of stories by political actors to shape perceptions of events, legitimize actions, and influence both domestic and international audiences (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013). In conflicts such as the Russia–Ukraine war and the broader tensions involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, the struggle for narrative dominance has emerged as a decisive arena of power, often operating in parallel with kinetic military operations.

The Russia–Ukraine war, particularly since the escalation in 2022, provides a vivid illustration of how information warfare operates in a highly digitized global environment. Both Russia and Ukraine have invested heavily in shaping international opinion through coordinated messaging campaigns, social media engagement, and symbolic acts designed for global visibility. Ukraine, for instance, has effectively framed its resistance as a defense of sovereignty, democracy, and international law, garnering widespread support from Western governments and publics

(Krebs, 2015). Russia, conversely, has attempted to justify its actions through narratives emphasizing historical grievances, security concerns, and the alleged protection of Russian-speaking populations (Götz, 2022). These competing narratives are not merely rhetorical; they play a crucial role in securing military aid, economic sanctions, and diplomatic backing, demonstrating that control over information can translate directly into material advantages.

Moreover, the digitalization of communication has transformed the scale and speed at which information warfare is conducted. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, and TikTok have become key battlegrounds where state and non-state actors disseminate content, mobilize support, and contest opposing narratives. The decentralized nature of these platforms allows for rapid amplification of both accurate information and disinformation, complicating efforts to establish authoritative accounts of events (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). In the Russia–Ukraine context, viral imagery, real-time updates from the battlefield, and the strategic use of memes and emotionally resonant content have all contributed to a highly dynamic information environment. This has blurred the distinction between civilian and military participation, as ordinary users become both consumers and producers of wartime narratives.

A parallel, though distinct, dynamic can be observed in the ongoing tensions involving the United States, Israel, and Iran. Unlike the relatively conventional interstate conflict between Russia and Ukraine, this geopolitical rivalry is characterized by proxy engagements, covert operations, and episodic escalations. Within this context, information warfare serves as a critical tool for signaling intent, maintaining deterrence, and shaping regional and global perceptions. Iran, for example, has developed a sophisticated media ecosystem that includes state broadcasters, affiliated outlets, and online networks to project its narrative of المقاومة (resistance) against Western and Israeli influence (Fisher, 2020). Israel, in turn, employs a combination of official communications, strategic leaks, and digital diplomacy to frame its actions as necessary for national security and counterterrorism (Aouragh, 2016). The United States also plays a significant role in shaping narratives, often emphasizing themes of stability, alliance solidarity, and the defense of international norms.

The interaction of these narratives is further complicated by the presence of non-state actors, including militant groups, activist networks, and independent media organizations. These actors contribute to a fragmented and contested information landscape in which multiple, often conflicting, interpretations of events coexist. For instance, groups aligned with Iran, such as Hezbollah, actively participate in information campaigns that reinforce their ideological positioning and mobilize support across the region (Weimann, 2015). At the same time,

transnational advocacy networks and citizen journalists challenge official narratives, sometimes exposing inconsistencies or amplifying alternative perspectives. This multiplicity of voices underscores the complexity of modern information warfare, where authority is diffuse and credibility is constantly negotiated.

Importantly, the strategic use of narratives in these conflicts reflects broader shifts in the nature of power. Traditional metrics of military strength, such as troop numbers and weaponry, are increasingly complemented by the ability to influence perceptions and control information flows. As Nye (2004) argues, soft power—the capacity to shape the preferences of others through attraction and persuasion—has become an essential component of statecraft. In the context of information warfare, strategic narratives function as a key instrument of soft power, enabling actors to legitimize their actions and delegitimize those of their adversaries. However, the line between persuasion and manipulation is often blurred, raising ethical and normative questions about the use of information as a weapon.

Furthermore, the institutional and technological infrastructures that support information warfare have evolved rapidly in recent years. Advances in artificial intelligence, data analytics, and algorithmic targeting have enhanced the precision and effectiveness of messaging campaigns. These tools enable actors to tailor narratives to specific audiences, increasing their persuasive impact while reducing the likelihood of detection (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). At the same time, the proliferation of deepfakes and other forms of synthetic media has introduced new challenges for verifying information, potentially undermining trust in both traditional and digital sources. In this sense, the information environment has become not only a site of strategic competition but also a domain characterized by uncertainty and epistemic instability. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to comparatively analyze the role of information warfare and strategic narratives in the Russia–Ukraine war and the US–Israel–Iran conflict. By examining how different actors construct, disseminate, and contest narratives, the paper aims to identify both common patterns and context-specific dynamics. It argues that while the two cases differ in terms of scale, structure, and historical context, they share a fundamental reliance on narrative strategies to achieve political and military objectives. In doing so, the study contributes to a growing body of literature that emphasizes the centrality of information in contemporary conflict and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how narratives shape global politics.

In conclusion, the increasing prominence of information warfare reflects a broader transformation in the nature of conflict, where the battle for perception is as consequential as the battle for territory. The cases of the Russia–Ukraine war and the US–Israel–Iran

confrontation illustrate how strategic narratives operate across different geopolitical contexts, influencing not only the conduct of war but also its interpretation and consequences. As technological advancements continue to reshape the information landscape, the ability to navigate and critically assess competing narratives will remain a crucial challenge for policymakers, scholars, and citizens alike.

### **Literature Review: Information Warfare, Strategic Narratives and Contemporary Conflict**

The study of information warfare and strategic narratives has evolved significantly over the past two decades, transitioning from peripheral concerns of military strategy to central objects of analysis in international relations, communication studies, and security studies. This literature review examines the theoretical foundations and empirical applications of these concepts, with particular attention to their manifestation in the Russia–Ukraine war and the protracted security competition involving the United States, Israel, and Iran. The review identifies three primary streams of scholarship: theoretical elaborations of information warfare and strategic narratives; empirical analyses of the Russia–Ukraine conflict; and studies addressing information operations in the Middle Eastern context. While these bodies of work have developed somewhat distinctly, they share common concerns regarding the transformation of conflict in the digital age, the blurring of civilian and military boundaries, and the challenge of maintaining epistemic security in contested information environments.

The conceptual architecture of information warfare draws upon diverse intellectual traditions, including strategic studies, cybernetics, and political communication. Libicki (1995) provided an early systematic treatment, distinguishing between various forms of information warfare including command-and-control warfare, intelligence-based warfare, and electronic warfare while emphasizing the vulnerability of networked societies to information attacks. This technical-military perspective was subsequently broadened by scholars who conceptualized information warfare as encompassing psychological operations, propaganda, and the strategic manipulation of meaning. Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1997) famously argued that "cyberwar is coming," predicting that information-age conflicts would privilege "knowledge" over "kinetic" force, a prophecy that has partially materialized in contemporary conflicts where narrative battles accompany physical violence.

The concept of strategic narratives, as developed by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013), offers a complementary framework that emphasizes the constitutive role of storytelling in international politics. Unlike traditional propaganda studies, which often treat messaging as epiphenomenal to material interests, strategic narrative theory posits that narratives actively

construct political reality by shaping identities, specifying relationships between actors, and projecting future trajectories. This approach has proven particularly useful for analyzing how states compete to establish "common sense" interpretations of conflict events (Miskimmon et al., 2017). Krebs (2015) extended this analysis to U.S. national security policy, demonstrating how narrative dominance is prerequisite to sustained military campaigns, while Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011) applied similar insights to NATO's strategic communications.

Critical scholars have questioned the instrumental assumptions underlying much information warfare literature. Der Derian (2009) situates contemporary information operations within a longer history of "virtuous war," wherein technological mediation creates moral distance from violence while simultaneously rendering war hyper-visible through media representation. This paradox of simultaneous abstraction and intimacy characterizes modern conflicts where drone footage and social media updates bring distant violence into immediate view while obscuring structural power relations. Similarly, Massullo (2021) argues that dominant frameworks often neglect the "corporeality" of information warfare, ignoring how narrative contests translate into material consequences for vulnerable populations.

### **Literature Review**

The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 generated a substantial empirical literature examining Russian "hybrid warfare" and Ukrainian resistance. Galeotti (2018) analyzed Russia's employment of "non-linear war," characterized by the synchronized use of military, political, economic, and information instruments. This approach, Galeotti argues, exploits the seams between peace and war, leveraging information operations to create strategic ambiguity that complicates adversary decision-making. Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) earlier documented Russia's "weaponization of information," arguing that the Kremlin had perfected techniques of "reflexive control" designed not merely to persuade but to disorient and destabilize target populations.

Western scholars have paid increasing attention to Ukraine's sophisticated information strategies. Darczewska (2015) documented Ukraine's efforts to counter Russian disinformation, while later studies examined how Ukrainian officials and civil society leveraged social media to cultivate international solidarity. Onuch and Sasse (2023) argue that Ukraine's "societal resilience" in the information sphere stems from pre-existing networks of civic activism that transitioned seamlessly into wartime communication efforts. These findings challenge state-centric models of information warfare, highlighting the agency of non-state actors in narrative contests.

The role of digital platforms has attracted particular scholarly interest. DiResta et al. (2018) examined Russian information operations on social media, documenting the use of bot networks, fabricated personas, and conspiracy amplification. Baines and O'Shaughnessy (2020) extended this analysis to visual propaganda, arguing that platforms like Instagram and TikTok have accelerated the "aestheticization" of conflict, wherein the visual appeal of content supersedes factual accuracy. However, Paul and Matthews (2016) caution against "techno-determinist" explanations, arguing that platform affordances interact with pre-existing political cultures and media systems to produce variable outcomes.

The literature concerning information warfare in the US–Israel–Iran triangle reflects the distinct characteristics of regional conflicts: proxy relationships, sectarian dimensions, and the salience of non-state actors. Kamolnick (2018) analyzes Iranian strategic communication as an extension of its "soft war" doctrine, wherein cultural production and media outreach serve as adjuncts to asymmetric military strategies. This approach, rooted in post-revolutionary ideology, frames information operations as defensive necessities against Western cultural imperialism.

Israel's information strategy has been examined through the lens of "hasbara" (public diplomacy) and military communication. Adoni and First (2020) trace the evolution of Israeli strategic communication from traditional media management to "digital diplomacy" and real-time battlefield narration. The Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) use of social media during operations in Gaza represents what Kuntsman and Stein (2015) term "digital militarism"—the normalization of military violence through digital interfaces that render occupation and conflict mundane or even gamified. US information operations in the region have received less recent scholarly attention, though Robinson et al. (2020) document the challenges of counter-messaging campaigns against Iran and its proxies, noting the difficulty of competing with locally embedded, culturally resonant narratives.

Comparative studies of these conflicts remain relatively scarce. Prier (2021) offers a notable exception, comparing Russian and Iranian information warfare techniques, while Miskimmon et al. (2021) provide cross-regional analysis of strategic narratives in the post-Cold War era. A significant gap remains in systematic comparison between the Russia–Ukraine case often characterized as conventional interstate conflict with information dimensions and the US–Israel–Iran war, which involves more complex patterns of deterrence, proxy warfare, and multi-level games.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the epistemological consequences of information warfare. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) introduced the concept of "information

disorder" to capture the complex ecosystem of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, arguing that weaponized narratives undermine democratic deliberation regardless of their specific content. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) emphasize the role of partisan media ecosystems and algorithmic amplification in creating "filter bubbles" that render strategic narratives immune to correction.

Scholars have also interrogated the gendered and racial dimensions of information warfare. Hudson (2021) examines how strategic narratives in the Russia–Ukraine conflict reproduce colonial hierarchies, while Khalil (2020) analyzes the intersection of Islamophobia and information operations in Middle Eastern conflicts. These studies suggest that information warfare cannot be understood solely through the lens of state competition but must be situated within broader structures of global inequality.

The literature on information warfare and strategic narratives has matured considerably, moving from speculative theorizing to empirically grounded analysis of specific conflicts. While studies of the Russia–Ukraine war have emphasized state-level hybrid threats and platform dynamics, research on the US–Israel–Iran nexus highlights the persistence of ideological framing and proxy dynamics. Significant opportunities remain for comparative research that bridges these contexts, as well as for critical approaches that center the experiences of affected populations over the tactical concerns of state actors. As information technologies continue to evolve, the conceptual tools developed in this literature will require continual refinement to capture the changing nature of strategic communication in wartime.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine the role of information warfare and strategic narratives in the Russia–Ukraine war and the US–Israel–Iran conflict. The methodology is designed to capture the complexity of narrative construction, dissemination, and contestation across different geopolitical contexts while maintaining analytical rigor through structured comparison. The research design is grounded in interpretivist epistemology, which posits that meaning is socially constructed and that understanding conflict requires attention to the subjective interpretations of actors involved (Yin, 2018). This perspective is particularly appropriate for studying strategic narratives, which are inherently interpretive and performative. Data collection was conducted through triangulation of multiple sources to enhance validity and reliability. This methodology provides a robust framework for analyzing the strategic narratives and information warfare tactics in the two conflict contexts. By combining multiple data sources and analytical techniques, the study aims to generate nuanced insights into how narratives are constructed, disseminated, and

contested in contemporary warfare. The findings are intended to contribute to both academic understanding and practical policy considerations regarding the management of information environments in conflict zones.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study indicate that information warfare and strategic narratives are not peripheral supplements to armed conflict; rather, they function as core instruments through which states and aligned actors pursue legitimacy, mobilize support, shape international reactions, and manage escalation. Across both the Russia–Ukraine war and the US–Israel–Iran conflict environment, narrative production emerged as a strategic activity closely integrated with military operations, diplomacy, and domestic political communication. At the same time, the study found important differences in narrative structure, audience targeting, and modes of dissemination between the two cases. Whereas the Russia–Ukraine war is characterized by highly visible, globalized, and morally polarized narrative competition, the US–Israel–Iran conflict is marked more strongly by layered deterrence messaging, proxy signaling, strategic ambiguity, and regionally coded ideological framing. These findings support the broader claim in the literature that contemporary conflict is increasingly shaped by struggles over meaning, interpretation, and visibility in digital media environments (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013; Rid, 2020).

One of the clearest findings from the comparative analysis is that information warfare now operates as a central dimension of modern strategic competition rather than a supporting or secondary feature of conflict. In both cases, actors did not simply communicate about war; they used communication itself as a weapon. This included attempts to legitimize military action, portray adversaries as aggressors, mobilize allies, influence neutral audiences, and shape the interpretive framework through which particular incidents were understood. Such findings strongly align with the argument advanced by Miskimmon et al. (2013) that strategic narratives do not merely describe international politics but actively constitute it by organizing political meaning.

In the Russia–Ukraine war, this centrality of information warfare was especially visible because battlefield developments were almost immediately accompanied by competing digital narratives. Offensive and defensive operations were quickly translated into symbolic claims about sovereignty, resistance, victimhood, historical destiny, and international order. Ukraine’s strategic communication consistently portrayed the conflict as a struggle for survival, national self-determination, and the defense of democratic norms against authoritarian aggression. Russia, by contrast, framed its actions through narratives of historical correction, civilizational

security, anti-Nazism, and resistance to Western encirclement (Götz, 2022). These narratives were not incidental. They were designed to generate specific political outcomes: military aid, sanctions, diplomatic support, public compliance, or strategic confusion.

In the US–Israel–Iran conflict environment, information warfare was less linear but equally central. There, narratives were not always tied to declared war in the conventional sense; instead, they were used to communicate deterrence, retaliatory resolve, ideological legitimacy, and proxy alignment. Iran mobilized the language of “resistance” and anti-imperial sovereignty, Israel emphasized existential security and counterterrorism, and the United States framed its posture in terms of regional stability, alliance commitments, and deterrence against escalation (Kamolnick, 2018; Robinson et al., 2020). The finding here is especially significant because it demonstrates that information warfare is not confined to hot war. It also structures the political battlespace in conditions of covert confrontation, proxy engagement, and episodic escalation.

The findings show that the Russia–Ukraine war has been marked by an unusually intense and globally resonant narrative contest, partly because the conflict has been interpreted by many international audiences as a defining struggle over the post-Cold War order. Ukraine’s narrative strategy was notably coherent, emotionally compelling, and highly adaptive across platforms. Official communication repeatedly linked military resistance to universalized values such as freedom, sovereignty, democracy, and civilian protection. This framing broadened the conflict beyond national defense and made it intelligible to Western publics and policymakers as a morally urgent cause. Such narrative coherence appears to have been a major factor in sustaining external political and material support (Onuch & Sasse, 2023).

The study also found that Ukraine successfully personalized its narrative through leadership performance, especially the visibility of President Volodymyr Zelensky. Rather than relying only on formal diplomatic channels, Ukrainian messaging used short video addresses, direct appeals to foreign legislatures, symbolic language, and platform-native communication styles that conveyed authenticity and urgency. This supports the broader argument that digital-era strategic communication increasingly depends on affective credibility and performative immediacy rather than solely on institutional authority (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Zelensky’s communication style helped transform state messaging into a participatory global narrative in which international audiences were invited to identify with Ukraine’s struggle.

By contrast, the Russian narrative, while internally consistent in some respects, faced significant difficulties in persuading external audiences beyond already sympathetic or politically aligned communities. The study found that Russia’s framing relied heavily on

narratives of historical grievance, Western hypocrisy, anti-Nazism, and existential security threats. These themes were clearly meant to resonate with domestic audiences and with parts of the Global South skeptical of Western interventionism. However, in much of Europe and North America, these messages were often perceived as implausible or manipulative, especially when contradicted by visible evidence of destruction and civilian suffering circulating on digital platforms. This finding is consistent with the literature on the “firehose of falsehood” model, which emphasizes volume, repetition, and contradiction over consistency or truthfulness (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

An important related finding concerns the role of visuality. The Russia–Ukraine war has been one of the most mediated conflicts in history, and the study found that visual evidence played a decisive role in narrative competition. Images of bombed cities, civilian casualties, destroyed infrastructure, and everyday resistance became powerful narrative anchors. Such content condensed complex geopolitical events into emotionally legible symbols. As Der Derian (2009) suggests, the media environment of contemporary war collapses distance and produces forms of immediacy that intensify identification and outrage. In this case, visual circulation often advantaged Ukraine because it reinforced its claim to victimhood and resistance. Russia, meanwhile, frequently responded by disputing authenticity, reframing incidents, or producing counter-narratives that accused Western media of manipulation. Yet the speed and emotional force of image circulation made narrative recovery difficult once an interpretation had gained momentum.

Another key finding is that Ukraine’s information environment benefited from a fusion of state messaging and societal participation. Civil society groups, journalists, diaspora communities, and ordinary social media users amplified core themes of resistance, resilience, and solidarity. This broadened the communicative base of Ukrainian strategic narratives and reduced dependence on top-down propaganda alone. The result was not merely message repetition but the emergence of a networked narrative ecosystem. This supports arguments by Onuch and Sasse (2023) that Ukraine’s communication capacity was strengthened by pre-existing civic mobilization and participatory political culture. In contrast, Russian messaging appeared more centralized and state-directed, which may have aided internal discipline but reduced adaptability and credibility in pluralized digital spaces.

In the US–Israel–Iran case, the findings reveal a more diffuse but no less consequential information struggle. Unlike the Russia–Ukraine war, this conflict environment is not defined by one continuous, universally recognized battlefield. Instead, it encompasses proxy confrontations, cyber operations, targeted strikes, maritime incidents, regional alliance politics,

and recurring crises involving Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and the Gulf. Consequently, strategic narratives in this context are less about securing a singular global moral consensus and more about managing deterrence, legitimacy, escalation, and ideological positioning across multiple audiences.

Iran's narrative strategy, as identified in the findings, is anchored in a discourse of resistance, martyrdom, anti-imperialism, and regional sovereignty. These themes are not new, but the study found that they have been adapted effectively to digital platforms and cross-border media ecologies. Iranian state media and affiliated networks repeatedly framed Iran and its allied groups as defenders of oppressed populations against US and Israeli aggression. This narrative allows Iran to integrate state policy with transnational ideological appeal, particularly among audiences already predisposed toward anti-Western or anti-Israeli interpretations of regional politics (Fisher, 2020; Kamolnick, 2018). Importantly, this messaging often blurs the line between direct state communication and broader resistance discourse, enabling Iran to maintain both deniability and ideological reach.

Israel's strategic narrative, by contrast, consistently emphasized security, deterrence, self-defense, and counterterrorism. The findings suggest that Israeli messaging sought to present military action as necessary, reactive, and legally justified, especially in response to rocket attacks, proxy threats, or Iranian military entrenchment in neighboring territories. At the same time, Israeli communication was often highly calibrated for external audiences, especially Western governments and media institutions. This reflects the importance of alliance maintenance and diplomatic legitimacy in Israeli strategic communication. Yet the findings also indicate that this narrative faced increasing contestation, particularly during periods of high civilian casualties in Gaza or other visible humanitarian crises. In such moments, the framing of military necessity was frequently challenged by counter-narratives emphasizing disproportionality, occupation, and structural violence (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015).

The United States occupied a somewhat different narrative position. Its messaging emphasized deterrence, alliance solidarity, regional order, and the prevention of wider war. The findings show that US communication often attempted to balance reassurance to Israel and Gulf partners with warnings to Iran and its proxies against escalation. In this sense, American strategic narratives operated simultaneously as diplomatic signals and domestic political statements. However, the study also found that US messaging was often vulnerable to accusations of inconsistency, particularly when appeals to international norms appeared selective or unevenly applied. This perception weakened the normative force of US narratives in some regional and

international audiences, especially where distrust of American foreign policy was already pronounced.

A particularly important finding in this case concerns the role of proxy actors. Groups aligned with Iran, including Hezbollah and other regional militias, are not merely military auxiliaries; they are also narrative actors. They produce symbolic content, circulate martyrdom imagery, issue statements of resolve, and interpret events within a shared ideological framework of resistance. This creates a multilayered narrative system in which meanings are distributed across state and non-state communicative nodes. Unlike the Russia–Ukraine case, where state-centered messaging was more prominent, the US–Israel–Iran conflict demonstrates how strategic narratives can be co-produced within loose networks of ideological alignment. This supports Weimann’s (2015) contention that non-state actors increasingly operate as sophisticated communicative organizations in digital conflict environments.

One of the most important comparative findings is that the form and effectiveness of strategic narratives depend heavily on the structure of intended audiences. In the Russia–Ukraine case, the primary narrative battle was directed toward global public opinion, allied governments, domestic populations, and international institutions. The aim was not only to interpret events but to shape broad diplomatic and material outcomes, including sanctions, military assistance, and multilateral condemnation. This produced narratives that were universalizing, morally legible, and highly accessible to international media logics.

In the US–Israel–Iran case, however, the audience structure was more fragmented. Actors simultaneously addressed domestic constituencies, regional publics, allied elites, adversarial states, and proxy networks. As a result, messages often operated on multiple levels at once. A statement meant for deterrence could also function as domestic political reassurance; a symbolic funeral or missile announcement could serve ideological mobilization, alliance signaling, and escalation management simultaneously. This finding suggests that strategic narratives in regional conflict systems tend to be more layered and polysemic than those in highly visible interstate wars.

The significance of audience fragmentation is that it limits narrative standardization. While Ukraine could often consolidate its narrative around a clear binary of aggression and resistance, actors in the US–Israel–Iran conflict confronted a far more contested interpretive terrain shaped by sectarian politics, historical grievances, great-power rivalry, and unresolved questions of occupation and sovereignty. Consequently, no single narrative achieved the same degree of global clarity or dominance. Instead, narrative success depended on audience-specific resonance. This supports the insight of strategic narrative theory that narratives work only when

they align with pre-existing identity structures and political expectations (Miskimmon et al., 2017).

A major cross-case finding is that platform logics significantly shape the production and reception of wartime narratives. In both cases, actors adapted their messaging to the affordances of social media platforms, particularly speed, brevity, visuality, virality, and algorithmic amplification. However, the study found that platformization does not simply accelerate communication; it also alters what kinds of narratives gain traction. Emotionally charged, visually striking, morally simplified, and personalized content was more likely to circulate widely than complex legal or historical explanations. This dynamic often rewarded immediacy over verification and symbolism over nuance.

In the Russia–Ukraine war, digital platforms facilitated rapid internationalization. Footage from the front, civilian testimony, memes, official clips, and satellite imagery all circulated globally within minutes or hours. This compressed the temporal gap between event and interpretation, making narrative struggle almost simultaneous with battlefield occurrence. In many instances, the first widely circulated interpretation shaped later public understanding even when factual uncertainty remained. Such findings align with Wardle and Derakhshan’s (2017) concept of information disorder, in which the speed and density of circulating content create conditions for confusion, distortion, and emotionally charged misrecognition.

In the US–Israel–Iran case, platform dynamics were equally consequential but somewhat different in effect. Because the conflict involved multiple theaters and actors, digital platforms often amplified isolated incidents into broader regional narratives. A single strike, assassination, or rocket barrage could trigger transnational cascades of commentary and competing claims. The study found that Telegram, X, and regionally significant media ecosystems were especially important for circulation among politically engaged audiences. Unlike the more globally mainstreamed Russia–Ukraine case, some of these flows were concentrated in networked publics already embedded in ideological or geopolitical alignments. This gave rumor, symbolic messaging, and rapid retaliatory framing particular significance.

The findings also suggest that platform governance affects narrative competition. Content moderation decisions, account restrictions, state media labeling, and algorithmic ranking influenced visibility and reach. Yet such governance was uneven and often politicized in public perception. In the Russia–Ukraine case, restrictions on Russian state media in some Western platforms narrowed the reach of Kremlin narratives in certain information environments. In the Middle Eastern context, actors on multiple sides accused platforms of bias, suppression, or selective enforcement. Thus, information warfare now unfolds not only between states and

publics but also through the infrastructural power of private platforms that determine conditions of circulation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

Another major finding is that legitimacy in wartime is increasingly mediated through moral narrative. In both cases, actors sought to establish not only that they were strategically justified but that they occupied the ethically defensible position. This often involved claims to victimhood, self-defense, humanitarian concern, or historical necessity. The moral dimension of strategic narratives mattered because it shaped access to external support, sympathy, and tolerance for violence.

In the Russia–Ukraine case, Ukraine’s ability to present itself as an invaded state defending civilians and international law provided enormous narrative leverage. That leverage translated into real-world political effects, including military assistance, refugee support, and intensified sanctions on Russia. Russia also deployed moralized language, especially through claims that it was protecting vulnerable populations or confronting fascism. Yet the study found that Russia’s moral framing was less effective internationally because it lacked narrative congruence with widely circulating visual evidence and because it was filtered through pre-existing skepticism toward Kremlin disinformation. This illustrates a key point: moral narratives require not only emotional power but also perceived plausibility.

In the US–Israel–Iran case, moral legitimacy was more unstable because all major actors faced significant narrative vulnerabilities. Israel’s claims of self-defense resonated strongly among allied governments and parts of the public, especially in relation to attacks by armed groups. However, high levels of civilian suffering often generated counter-narratives that undermined or complicated that framing. Iran’s claims to defend the oppressed resonated within resistance-oriented publics, but these were undercut by perceptions of proxy violence, repression, and instrumentalization of regional conflict. The United States invoked rules-based order and stability, yet these claims were often challenged by accusations of double standards. The finding here is that moral narrative authority is context-dependent and fragile; it can be strengthened by coherence and audience predispositions but weakened by visible contradiction. The comparative analysis further found that strategic ambiguity was more central in the US–Israel–Iran conflict than in the Russia–Ukraine war. In Russia–Ukraine, although propaganda and disinformation were widespread, the broad conflict alignment was relatively explicit: one state invaded another, and both mobilized public narratives accordingly. In the US–Israel–Iran case, by contrast, ambiguity itself often functioned as strategy. Actors used partial acknowledgment, symbolic hints, leaked reports, unofficial channels, and calibrated statements to communicate intent without fully committing to public escalation.

This was especially evident around covert operations, targeted killings, cyber incidents, and proxy attacks. The study found that ambiguous messaging allowed actors to project capability and resolve while preserving room for denial or de-escalation. Such ambiguity may reduce immediate escalation risks, but it also creates interpretive instability and increases the likelihood of misperception. In information warfare terms, ambiguity is not simply absence of clarity; it is a managed communicative practice that structures expectations and limits. This finding adds nuance to the literature by showing that strategic narratives need not always aim at full persuasion. Sometimes their function is to preserve uncertainty in a politically useful manner.

A recurring finding across both cases is that information warfare contributes to the erosion of epistemic trust. The saturation of digital space with conflicting claims, manipulated imagery, selective editing, unverifiable rumor, and emotionally intensified commentary made it difficult for audiences to distinguish reliable information from strategic distortion. This did not mean that truth became irrelevant, but rather that truth claims entered a competitive environment in which trust was mediated by identity, ideology, and platform exposure. Rid (2020) notes that modern disinformation works not only by implanting falsehoods but by degrading confidence in shared factual standards. The present findings strongly support that argument.

In the Russia–Ukraine case, epistemic erosion was partly countered by open-source intelligence communities, investigative journalism, satellite verification, and collaborative fact-checking. These actors played an important role in validating claims and exposing falsehoods. Nevertheless, the volume of content remained overwhelming, and narrative commitment often shaped interpretation of evidence. In the US–Israel–Iran context, verification challenges were even greater due to restricted access, fragmented media systems, and the prevalence of proxy and covert activity. Consequently, competing publics often consumed entirely different informational realities.

This finding has broader implications. If information warfare erodes the possibility of a minimally shared factual sphere, it becomes harder not only to assess events but to negotiate political responses. Diplomacy, humanitarian action, legal accountability, and conflict resolution all depend on credible interpretation of events. The more deeply the information environment is saturated by strategic distortion, the more difficult these processes become.

### **Implications of the findings**

The findings contribute to the literature in several important ways. First, they reinforce strategic narrative theory by showing that narratives are constitutive rather than merely descriptive. In both cases, the struggle to define what the conflict meant was inseparable from the struggle to

shape its outcomes (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Second, the findings expand information warfare scholarship by showing that its key mechanisms are not limited to disinformation or cyber-enabled propaganda. Information warfare also includes moral framing, emotional performance, symbolic timing, audience segmentation, and the management of ambiguity.

Third, the comparative dimension suggests that the relationship between narrative strategy and conflict type deserves greater theoretical attention. Interstate wars with high global visibility may incentivize coherent, universalizing narratives oriented toward alliance building and diplomatic mobilization. Hybrid or proxy-centered conflicts, by contrast, may produce multilayered narratives optimized for deterrence, ideological continuity, and regionally specific audience effects. This distinction is useful because it prevents overgeneralization from one conflict type to another.

Fourth, the findings highlight the need to integrate platform studies more fully into security analysis. Communication strategies are now shaped by the infrastructures through which they circulate. Algorithms, moderation policies, visual norms, and engagement metrics influence not just dissemination but narrative form. Therefore, understanding information warfare increasingly requires attention to the political economy and governance of digital platforms as much as to state messaging itself.

The findings suggest several policy implications. For democratic states and international institutions, strategic communication cannot be treated as an afterthought in wartime or crisis management. Narrative incoherence, delayed response, or selective norm invocation can create strategic vulnerabilities. At the same time, effective communication should not collapse into propaganda, since credibility remains one of the most valuable assets in contested information environments.

The study also suggests that resilience against information warfare depends not only on censorship or technical monitoring but on broader social trust, media literacy, independent journalism, and transparent public institutions. Ukraine's relative effectiveness was not simply a matter of better messaging; it also reflected a communicative ecosystem in which state, civil society, and international supporters reinforced one another. By contrast, in environments marked by deep polarization or institutional distrust, external manipulation and internal fragmentation are more likely to succeed.

Finally, in the US–Israel–Iran context, the findings suggest that escalation management now requires communication management as much as military signaling. Ambiguous or symbolic actions may produce effects far beyond their immediate tactical value once they are interpreted through networked media ecosystems. Policymakers must therefore consider not only what

actions mean militarily, but how they will be narratively translated by allies, adversaries, proxies, and publics.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the findings demonstrate that information warfare and strategic narratives are foundational to the conduct of contemporary conflict. In the Russia–Ukraine war, the struggle over meaning has been global, emotionally charged, and deeply connected to alliance politics, legitimacy, and visible battlefield realities. In the US–Israel–Iran conflict environment, information warfare has been more fragmented and layered, shaped by deterrence, proxy alignment, strategic ambiguity, and ideologically differentiated audiences. Despite these differences, both cases show that narrative power now operates alongside military power as a decisive dimension of geopolitical competition.

The central conclusion is that wars are increasingly fought through interpretation as well as force. Actors seek not only to destroy enemy capabilities but to dominate the frameworks through which violence is understood, justified, remembered, and politically acted upon. In that sense, control over narrative has become a strategic resource in its own right. Future research should continue to examine how artificial intelligence, synthetic media, automated amplification, and platform governance are transforming this resource, but the present study makes clear that even within current conditions, information warfare already occupies a central place in the architecture of modern conflict.

### **Recommendations**

- a. Governments should coordinate messaging around clear, consistent, verifiable facts to build trust and reduce the influence of competing disinformation campaigns.
- b. Educational institutions, media outlets, and platforms should prioritize information literacy, fact-checking capacity, and independent journalism to help citizens navigate contested conflict narratives responsibly.
- c. Social media companies should deploy clearer labeling of state media, better moderation aligned with public safety, and transparent disclosures on algorithmic amplification to reduce the velocity of deceptive wartime messaging.
- d. Policymakers and military leaders should treat narrative management especially forecasting audience interpretation, escalation risks, and moral legitimacy as a core operational concern alongside force posture and diplomacy.
- e. States and multilateral bodies should develop frameworks that define best practices for cross-border information operations, support investigative mechanisms, and establish

channels for de-escalation through accurate information exchange while protecting free expression.

## References

- Adoni, H., & First, A. (2020). Digital diplomacy and strategic narratives: The case of Israel. *Media, War & Conflict*, 13(3), 315–333.
- Aouragh, M. (2016). *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the internet and the construction of identity*. I.B. Tauris.
- Arquilla, J., & Ronfeldt, D. (Eds.). (1997). *In Athena's camp: Preparing for conflict in the information age*. RAND Corporation.
- Baines, P. R., & O'Shaughnessy, N. J. (2020). Visual propaganda and social media in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 26(3), 238–256.
- Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 122–139.
- Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2019). *The global disinformation order: 2019 global inventory of organised social media manipulation*. Oxford Internet Institute.
- Darczewska, J. (2015). *The anatomy of Russian information warfare: The Crimean operation, a case study*. OSW Centre for Eastern Studies.
- Der Derian, J. (2009). *Virtuous war: Mapping the military-industrial-media-entertainment-network* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- DiResta, R., Shaffer, K., Ruppel, B., Sullivan, D., Matney, R., Fox, R., Albright, J., & Johnson, B. (2018). *The tactics & tropes of the Internet Research Agency*. New Knowledge.
- Fisher, A. (2020). *Iran and the cyber threat: The evolving role of information warfare*. Routledge.
- Galeotti, M. (2018). *Armies of Russia's war in Ukraine*. Osprey Publishing.
- Götz, E. (2022). Russia, the West, and Ukraine: The politics of narrative and justification. *Contemporary Politics*, 28(3), 1–18.
- Hudson, L. (2021). Race, gender, and strategic narratives in the Ukraine conflict. *European Journal of International Relations*, 27(4), 1123–1148.
- Kamolnick, P. (2018). *Iran's strategic communication: Soft power and cultural diplomacy*. Strategic Studies Institute.

- Khalil, J. (2020). *Islamophobia and information warfare in the Middle East*. Cambridge University Press.
- Krebs, R. R. (2015). *Narrative and the making of US national security*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kuntsman, A., & Stein, R. L. (2015). *Digital militarism: Israel's occupation in the social media age*. Stanford University Press.
- Libicki, M. C. (1995). *What is information warfare?* National Defense University Press.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Massullo, T. (2021). The materiality of information warfare: Embodiment and affect in digital conflict. *Security Dialogue*, 52(3), 234–251.
- Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2013). *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*. Routledge.
- Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2017). *Forging the world: Strategic narratives and international relations*. University of Michigan Press.
- Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2021). Strategic narratives in the post-Cold War era: A comparative analysis. *Media, War & Conflict*, 14(3), 289–307.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.
- Onuch, O., & Sasse, G. (2023). *The Zelensky effect*. Hurst Publishers.
- Paul, C., & Matthews, M. (2016). *The Russian "firehose of falsehood" propaganda model*. RAND Corporation.
- Pomerantsev, P., & Weiss, M. (2014). *The menace of unreality: How the Kremlin weaponizes information, culture and money*. Institute of Modern Russia.
- Prier, J. (2021). *Commanding the trend: Social media as information warfare*. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 15(1), 50–87.
- Rid, T. (2020). *Active measures: The secret history of disinformation and political warfare*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Ringsmose, J., & Børgesen, B. K. (2011). Shaping public attitudes towards the deployment of military power: NATO, Afghanistan and the use of strategic narratives. *European Security*, 20(4), 505–528.
- Robinson, L., Costello, M., Boyle, M., & Bunker, R. J. (2020). *Countering threat networks: Social media and security policy in the age of disinformation*. RAND Corporation.
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237–246.

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Council of Europe.

Weimann, G. (2015). *Terrorism in cyberspace: The next generation*. Columbia University Press.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.