

**How the South African media's engagement with think tanks shaped coverage
of the Russia-Ukraine war**

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Abstract

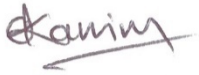
Research on the relationship between media and think tanks points to evidence of an interdependent and mutually beneficial arrangement. Think tanks offer their expertise in return for exposure, but factors such as professional credibility, the resources at their disposal and their adherence to media logics impact the success of this exchange. To explore the think tank-media nexus in South Africa, this study draws on agenda building and source theories to examine the ways in which three South African news sites utilised think tanks in their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war. Through a thematic analysis and purposively selected interviews with media and think tank staff, it details a range of engagements between journalists and experts that occurred on the public record and behind the scenes. Think tanks served as high-value sources, content producers and educational tools for the media. This is not only indicative of their agenda-building influence, but also highlights how experts are playing a compensatory role in under-resourced newsrooms.

Keywords: Agenda building; media-source relationships; Russia-Ukraine war; South African media; think tanks

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in the Department of Journalism, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.



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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Think tanks are among many actors and institutions – politicians, corporates, non-governmental organisations and interest groups – competing to leverage the communicative power and reach of the media in a bid to amplify their viewpoints. These institutions are primarily concerned with conducting research on a range of domestic and international issues with the overarching aim of influencing the policymaking process (McGann 2016). To achieve this goal, think tanks use their skills and networks to carve out influence in the marketplace of ideas through a variety of activities such as dissemination of their research, hosting seminars, engaging with political stakeholders, and leveraging the media (Abelson 2002; Tchilingirian 2018).

Existing literature affirms that think tanks and the media enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship based on the demand and supply of expertise (Rich and Weaver 2000; Chadwick et al. 2020). Generally considered to be credible sources due to their scholarly credentials and expertise (Rashid 2013; Jezierska 2020), think tanks are regularly sought out by journalists to analyse and interpret major news events and complex issues. They readily acquiesce as media visibility is a means for these organisations to “influence the climate of opinion” (Tchilingirian 2018, 171) and is often taken as a measure of their relevance in policy development (McNutt and Marchildon 2009).

When it comes to domestic and international conflicts, the role of think tanks in influencing public opinion and the direction of foreign policy via the media warrants attention given their expertise, proximity to decision-makers and visibility-seeking efforts. How they utilise, or are utilised by, the press shapes the narratives of conflict (Altheide and Grimes 2005; Koval et al. 2022). There is a wide consensus that the media “are the means through which societies experience war” (Joseph 2014, 228), which provides a scholarly prompt for examining whether and how think tanks contribute to shaping that experience. In existing literature, the news media have been accused of presenting a “flawed” and “unreliable” representation of war when it involves their own countries by patriotically advancing their home state’s narrative while vilifying the opposition (Ran and Liu 2023, 3). Even when covering distant conflicts – “other people’s wars” – journalists appear to take a side (Taylor 1997, 100). Factors such as their political dispositions, relationship with sources and the political economy of news production influence coverage of conflicts (Ran and Liu 2023).

This study focuses on the South African media’s use of think tanks in their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war. It analyses the media appearances of three foreign policy think tanks – the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD), the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and the South African Institute of

International Affairs (SAIIA)¹ – over 20 months (February 2022 to September 2023), in order to determine their influence over media coverage of the conflict. Drawing on agenda building and source theories, and combining a thematic analysis with in-depth interviews featuring media and think tank staff, it explores whether there is a mutual dependency between media and think tanks, how they articulate their relationship with each other, and the implications thereof on news coverage of the war.

1.1. Contextual background: The Russia-Ukraine war and South Africa's foreign policy

On 24 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a “special military operation” in Ukraine, a move that continues to be widely condemned as a violation of international law (Bellinger 2022). As the conflict between Russian and Ukrainian troops wages on two years later, the ensuing geopolitical rifts have been thrown into sharp relief. Since the war began, Western states have expressed their opposition to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine through sanctions and by voting against it at the United Nations (UN). However, South Africa – along with other Global South states – has adopted an independent, ‘non-aligned’ position and resisted pressure from the West to censure Moscow (Sidiropoulos 2022).

The Soviet Union's provision of military support to the African National Congress (ANC) during the liberation struggle underpins the notion that South Africa is repaying “a debt of gratitude” to a loyal friend (Chan 2023). A less romanticised explanation offered by experts is that the government's reluctance to condemn Russia is strongly rooted in its foreign policy values (Van Wyk 2023). Since South Africa's reintegration into the international community in 1994, it has enacted a foreign policy based on key principles such as non-alignment and independence (Sidiropoulos 2022). This means that the country 1. resists “becoming embroiled in the politics of confrontation and aggression” and 2. asserts its autonomy in promoting dialogue and negotiation as the preferred way to peacefully resolve conflicts (Sidiropoulos 2022). The Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Naledi Pandor (2022) has cited these twin principles when called on to justify South Africa's position on the war.

Given South Africa's growing partnerships with Russia in areas such as trade, defence, mineral resources and nuclear energy (Vuksanović 2023), and both countries' roles in the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) bloc, its pro-Russian position seems pragmatic. However, South Africa's

¹ The author is employed at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA). This study was conducted independently without funding from SAIIA.

ties with Russia is jeopardising its relationship with its second-largest trading partner, the United States (US), which could further exacerbate the country's economic and development challenges (Gramer 2023; McKaiser 2023). Despite the potential fallout, the government has stuck to its guns. At the South Africa-Russia Joint Inter-Governmental Committee on Trade and Economic Cooperation in March 2023, Pandor acknowledged Russia as an "old friend", and pointedly said that the two countries "cannot become sudden enemies on the demand of others" (Hunter 2023).

There are apparent contradictions between the government's self-proclaimed neutrality on one hand and its friendly ties with Russia on the other that have attracted significant media scrutiny. For instance, in February 2023, South Africa hosted joint military training exercises with Russia and China on the eve of the first anniversary of the war (Ray 2023). Then in May 2023, US Ambassador Reuben Brigety accused the government of covertly supplying arms to Russia via a cargo ship that docked at a navy base near Cape Town (Khumalo 2023). A subsequent governmental inquiry found no evidence of these claims, and led to calls for Brigety to be expelled from his post (Smit 2023). In July and August 2023, media speculation on whether South Africa would act in accordance with the Rome Statute and arrest President Vladimir Putin if he attended the BRICS Summit in Pretoria came to a head (Gerber and Mahlati 2023).

As the war unfolded over the past 24 months, another criticism has mounted: South Africa's position on the conflict betrays its commitment to human rights, which is another key pillar of its foreign policy (Brysk 2009). The country abstained from voting on two UN Resolutions condemning Russia's occupation of Ukraine, and one calling for its suspension from the UN Human Rights Council (Dent 2022). Media coverage has highlighted a pattern of disregard for international law, noting that South Africa previously failed to condemn human rights abuses by other states such as Myanmar, Burundi, Iran and Syria in UN votes (Dent 2022) and refused to arrest former Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir when he was in the country in 2015 (Killingsworth 2017).

1.2. Factors influencing media coverage of the war

Post-apartheid, the mainstream press in South Africa has largely operated as a watchdog over government, similar to the function played by media in Western democratic societies (Curran 2000; Christians et al. 2009). Many journalists believe they have a responsibility to serve as a check on political power; and not "pander to the agendas of government officials" even while trying to "be fair" in their reporting (Rodny-Gumede 2015, 63). This has resulted in a combative relationship with the ANC, who, since 1994, has desired a patriotic press that is supportive of its transformation agenda

(Daniels 2013). Over the years, the ruling party has accused the media of being overly critical of government's actions in addition to being "anti-transformation, anti-developmental and anti-ANC" (Malila 2014, 14). Within this context, journalists' professionalism, neutrality and perceptions of their role in a democracy have come under the spotlight (Rodny-Gumede 2015; Chuma et al. 2017; Hadland 2007).

A scan of national news sites suggests that the media have taken a strongly critical position against the state on the Russia-Ukraine issue. For example, a *News24* (2023) editorial written in January 2023 rebuked the government's warm reception of Russian officials, calling it a "betrayal of democracy, human rights and the rule of law". Its assistant editor, who travelled on board the government aircraft that was stranded in Poland due to logistical issues during the African Peace Mission, described the trip as a "diplomatic cock-up" and a "failure" (du Toit 2023). The *Daily Maverick* has stated that it "has been, and will remain, resolutely critical of the invasion" (Poplak 2023). Its June 2023 editorial referred to the government as "Putin fanboys", and warned the ANC that it was making a "historic mistake" in pivoting towards Russia (Brkic 2023).

In the financial media, coverage has focused on the economic repercussions of South Africa's support for Russia, specifically its potential exclusion from the US's African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Should America make good on its threat to suspend South Africa from AGOA, through which it enjoys duty-free access to US markets, the country could lose up to \$60 billion a year in exports (Marrian and Bissek 2023; Fabricius 2023). An editorial in the *Financial Mail* (2023) did not shy away from excoriating the Ramaphosa administration for "its eye-watering incompetence" in handling the Lady R cargo ship inquiry, while also weighing in on the "strange geopolitical dance South Africa is attempting as it goofs its way through the diplomatic jungle".

With its strong domestic dimensions and political complexities, the war demands in-depth and quality reporting from South African journalists, which in turn requires resources and expertise. However, newsroom economics appear to be a constraint on local media coverage of conflicts. A scan of the major news sites indicates that the media draw the bulk of their coverage on the war from international news agencies such as Reuters, Bloomberg and Agence France-Presse (AFP). A recent study found that 80% of Russia-Ukraine stories in leading online news sites in South Africa were sourced from wire agencies (Radebe 2022).

Evidence indicates that financial pressures are constraining the media's ability to function optimally. Since the early 2000s, as the print industry irreversibly declined and digital advertising revenues failed to adequately compensate, retrenchments and cost-cutting measures have become a recurring and unfortunate occurrence in the news media (Mndebele 2019; Rumney 2022). Newsrooms are operating with fewer and less experienced staff, and offer little to no support, training and mentoring to reporters (Satchwell, Bikitsa and Mkhondo 2021). Journalists themselves have cited economic and capacity constraints as factors impeding their ability to practice "proper" journalism (Chuma et al. 2017, 123). An interrelated factor is that most newsrooms have been stripped of specialist reporters who had the requisite skills to cover niche areas such as labour, justice and health (Daniels 2018). While specific figures for foreign policy or global news reporters in the South African media are unavailable, the scenario presented by Daniels (2018) suggests that they are likely few and far between.

Based on the above, it is unlikely that editors can afford to contract international correspondents or dispatch local journalists to foreign conflict zones. The group of reporters who accompanied the African Peace Mission delegation to Moscow and Kyiv in June 2023 was a notable exception. Journalists travelled on the chartered plane provided by government, but their accommodation and other travel-related expenses were paid by their companies.

Another constraint on domestic reporting of the conflict is the limited interactions between journalists and the Presidency. Unlike in the US, South Africa does not have the tradition of a press corps that accompanies the president on all diplomatic visits², nor White House-type briefings in which journalists are regularly updated on diplomatic engagements and have a platform to pose questions. This directly impedes the media's normative roles (Chuma et al. 2017) as watchdog over government and facilitator of debate in a democratic society.

The above conditions create an opportunity for experts such as think tanks to be readily admitted into the media sphere by dint of their expertise and proximity to the subject matter at hand. As Pautz (2011) notes, their research, commentary and dissemination efforts have been known to shape public understanding and potentially influence governments' decisions on matters pertaining to conflict and foreign policy.

² Although a presidential press corps was jointly proposed by media and government in 2002 (see Wasserman and Van Zyl 2003), it took years until it was launched under the Zuma administration and appears to have been short-lived.

1.3. Think tanks in South Africa

The global think tank industry is comprised of more than 11,100 institutes³ (McGann 2021). Asia is home to the largest number of them, followed by Europe, North America, South and Central America, and Africa respectively (McGann 2021). With 2203 think tanks, the United States has the biggest national count of think tanks. South Africa's think tank population pales in comparison – 102 – but it is still the largest in Africa (McGann 2021).

Foreign policy-focused research institutes are a small but significant part of the country's think tank ecosystem. Following the advent of democracy, they were among an inner circle of civil society actors who constituted “the change industry” that readily offered support and advice to the new administration (Taylor 2002, 37). The government was intent on positioning South Africa as a global player and hence engaged closely with academics, intellectuals and research institutes to formulate its foreign policy (Hughes 2004). Think tanks continue to provide expertise to the government and regional bodies on issues such as international relations and diplomacy, economic engagement, security, climate change, human rights and conflict. Their key activities include academic, policy and contract research, training, conferences and seminars, and media engagement.

The Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD), the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) have a track record in research on Russia-Africa relations that predates the current conflict and were therefore relevant to this study. Staff from these institutes have featured in the media as commentators on a variety of issues such as security; geopolitics; regional trade; South Africa's bilateral relations with Zimbabwe, the United States, China and the European Union; COVID-19, human rights issues, migration; democracy and governance; climate change; and violent extremism. On the Russia-Ukraine conflict specifically, they have established themselves as authoritative voices through regular media interviews and op ed contributions in prominent national and international news outlets.

Given that they possess the requisite knowledge on foreign policy and are engaged with the media, the study expects to find that they played an active role in shaping media narratives on the Russia-Ukraine war.

³ The index was last updated in 2020, so these figures have likely changed. In South Africa, for example, new think tanks such as the North-South Institute, the Media Leadership Think Tank and the Artificial Intelligence Institute were established after 2020.

CHAPTER 2: AIMS AND RATIONALE

This study seeks to examine the relationship between media and think tanks in South Africa, through analysing their interactions during the Russia-Ukraine war. Focusing specifically on three influential online news sites and three prominent research institutes, its aims pertain to the following four aspects:

- **Media utilisation:** To uncover how South African media has incorporated think tanks into their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war, both in terms of frequency and the nature of engagement.
- **Selection dynamics:** To identify the key factors influencing South African journalists' and editors' decisions in choosing which think tanks to interact with on the aforementioned conflict.
- **Media strategies:** To identify the strategies employed by South African think tanks to influence media coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war, based on their own perceptions of the media.
- **General relationship:** To gain insights into the broader, reciprocal relationship between media and think tanks in South Africa, through the lens of the Russia-Ukraine war.

To help address the knowledge gap on the media-think tank nexus in South Africa, this study employs a thematic analysis of media content and in-depth interviews with relevant individuals from both sectors. By investigating their interactions during the Russia-Ukraine war, the study seeks to demystify the relationship between journalists and think tanks, and contribute to the limited pool of research on how think tanks come to influence the media agenda.

The links between South African media and think tanks warrant academic investigation as it is inextricably linked to questions of news framing, source selection and diversity of viewpoints in the news. Research on the think tank-media nexus has historically been concentrated on the developed world, specifically the US and the United Kingdom (UK). There are indications that this is changing, with scholarship emerging from Bangladesh (Rashid 2013), Latin America (Merke and Pauselli 2015), Spain (Castillo-Esparcia, Guerra-Heredia and Almansa-Martinez 2017) and China (Zhang 2021). With few exceptions (Bennett et al. 2012; Nkrumah 2022), scant research has been conducted on South African think tanks. The existing literature is focused on their role in developing or shaping policy; their interactions with the media remain largely unexamined.

This is a critical oversight as neither think tanks nor the media are monolithic entities with universal experiences. For one, Western think tanks far outnumber African ones and have greater resources at

their disposal (McGann, Signé, and Muyangwa 2017). Financial sustainability is a challenge for African think tanks, including those in South Africa, which receive little to no local funding and have an over-reliance on international donors (McGann, Signé, and Muyangwa 2017). Not only does this pose a risk to their credibility and independence, but it may also mean that these think tanks have less capacity to professionalise their communications and invest in media visibility strategies (Rashid 2013). The media landscape in the developed and developing world is vastly different. South Africa's is shaped by a constitutionally protected free press on one hand (Reporters Without Borders 2023), but inexorable financial constraints stemming from the irreversible decline of the print industry on the other (Wasserman 2020; Rumney 2022). In this context, experts such as think tanks have an opportunity to fill content gaps that under-resourced newsrooms cannot (Powers 2016), which can result in a reconfiguration of the power dynamics between journalists and their sources.

In the current climate of propaganda and misinformation, the credibility of think tanks has come under the spotlight even as they remain dominant figures in the media sphere. As Helguero (2018) notes, they face criticism over a lack of funding transparency as well as undisclosed conflicts of interest. Prominent American think tanks stand accused of being lobbyists for hire by both the corporate sector and foreign governments seeking to influence policymaking in Washington (Helguero 2018; Clifton 2023). Public opinion polls conducted in the US and the UK suggest a public trust deficit in think tanks: only one in five Americans and Britons said they trusted what think tanks had to say (Cast from Clay 2018). Respondents cited think tanks' "hidden agenda", unclear messaging and a lack of transparency in funding as reasons for their suspicions (Cast from Clay 2018). Against this backdrop, examining how South African think tanks are contributing to media narratives on the Russia-Ukraine war is linked to pertinent considerations about experts' influence over the media agenda and journalists' relationship with their sources.

2.1. Research questions

The following four research questions underpin this study:

1. How has the South African media utilised think tanks in their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war?
2. What factors influence journalists' and editors' decisions when choosing which think tanks to engage with?
3. How do South African think tanks perceive the media, and what strategies do they use to influence media coverage based on these perceptions?

4. What insights do the interactions between media and think tanks during coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war offer into their overall relationship?

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the ambiguities surrounding the very definition of a think tank, as it is imperative to understand their socio-political status and the hybrid roles they inhabit. Drawing on the theory of agenda building, it then proceeds to survey existing literature on the central themes underpinning this study: the utilisation and representation of think tanks as expert sources, the relationship between media and think tanks, and conditions that enable these institutes to secure greater media attention.

3.1. Defining think tanks

There is a lack of consensus on what think tanks are and what they do due to the considerable differences in size, structure, activities and cultural contexts of these organisations (Stone 2007). The term first featured in military parlance during World War II where a ‘think tank’ referred to a war room in which American soldiers would meet to strategise and plan (Abelson 2002). It later became associated with organisations, prompting stronger definitional considerations.

Pautz (2011, 423) offers an ideal-typical definition of think tanks as:

intellectually, organizationally and financially autonomous from government, political parties, or organized interests; and set up with the aim of influencing policy. They have no formal decision-making power and claim political neutrality while often making no secret of their ideological standpoints.

Independence appears to be a condition for the very existence of think tanks, particularly those operating in Anglo-American contexts (Stone 2007). In reality, it presents a paradox as think tanks cannot detach from the broader contexts that they operate in (Jezierska and Sörbom 2021). For instance, German and Nordic think tanks have close ties to political parties (Stone 2007); Chinese think tanks serve the interests of the authoritarian state (Tsai and Lin 2021); and African think tanks are heavily reliant on foreign donor funding to implement their research agendas (McGann, Signé, and Muyangwa 2017). Think tanks therefore must actively construct their independence by making strategic choices about who to distance themselves from and who to gain proximity to (Jezierska and Sörbom 2021).

McGann (2016, 7) understands think tanks to be “organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues that enable policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy issues”. Similarly, Rich (2004,11) points out that think tanks are “institutes that actively seek to maximize public credibility and political access to make their expertise and ideas influential in policy making”.

As the above definitions indicate, there is a wide consensus that the ultimate objective of think tanks is to influence policymaking. Yet they overlook a key point: think tanks cannot achieve this alone. Relationships with external actors like the media are a “necessary ingredient” for achieving influence (Pautz 2018, 156).

Medvetz (2008) presents an alternative definition that acknowledges the diversity and interconnected nature of think tanks. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of social space, he regards think tanks as boundary organisations that operate in between the worlds of business, media, academia and government. They work across and with actors from these spheres, and also draw their legitimacy from them (Pautz 2020). A subsequent study (Medvetz 2010) on how think tank experts conceive of their roles reinforces their hybridity. They were found to identify with four roles: the academic scholar, the political aide, the entrepreneur and the media specialist (Medvetz 2010). Rather than being bound to a single sphere, think tankers must traverse all four in their construction of knowledge, engagement with policymakers and quest for public influence (Medvetz 2010).

Think tanks embody the media specialist role by executing an array of communication activities including media appearances, press briefings, seminars, conferences, workshops and report launches to market their knowledge products and expertise (McGann 2016). In recent years, their priorities have shifted to digital and social media channels, which facilitate the promotion of ideas to multiple audiences (McNutt and Marchildon 2009; Chadwick et al. 2020). While think tanks have historically placed the highest premium on access to mainstream media channels for its unparalleled reach and opportunities to participate in and shift the course of policy debates (see Pautz 2018), many have embraced social media as an additional route to impact. Recent research highlights that tanks are increasingly prioritising dissemination of their research via social channels, recognising that it offers a vast audience while simultaneously allowing for more close and active engagement with their stakeholders, and the opportunity to directly influence public policy processes (Zhao and Zhu 2023; Jang, Bechara and Bottom 2021).

It is beyond the scope of this study to exhaustively map the ongoing definitional debates surrounding think tanks. The abovementioned explanations have been selected to illustrate think tanks' multi-dimensionality. In particular, the definition offered by Medvetz (2008) resonates with the purposes of this research: it sparks a consideration of the media's utility for think tanks and the ways in which think tanks engage in journalistic practices in pursuit of their objectives.

3.2. Theoretical premise: Agenda building

In their seminal study on agenda setting, McCombs and Shaw (1972) uncovered a strong link between what the media chose to highlight as important election issues and what the public considered to be their central concerns. Their research affirmed that there was a transfer of issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda, which means, in layman's terms, that the more media coverage an issue receives, the more ingrained that issue is in people's minds (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Rogers, Dearing and Bregman 1993).

Agenda building departs from the original premise of agenda setting theory. Lang and Lang (1991) conceptualised the term to address loopholes in the agenda setting approach, which led them to the conclusion that "the news media agenda is not set, but is built" (Vu 2020, 1). Lang and Lang (1991) contended that the relationship between the news media and the public is more complex than McCombs and Shaw suggested, and asserted that outside forces are at play (Vu 2020). This relates to an additional critique of agenda setting research, which is that it tends to accept the media agenda "as a given" or preconstructed reality (Rogers, Dearing and Bregman 1993, 72-73). Discarding that presumption, agenda building proceeds to examine the influences on media coverage and, therefore, public opinion. It is tied to a critical approach to newsmaking that regards the media itself as a crucial but not autonomous actor in the construction of news (Berkowitz 1986). Agenda building intersects with the idea that:

The media agenda is constructed through an interactive process between the news media and their sources, in the context of competing news organizations, news-handling conventions and routines, and issue interest groups (Rogers, Dearing and Bregman 1993,73).

Sociological approaches to news production support the premise of agenda building by problematising the multiple influences on and multiple actors involved in the production of news. In an explication of their hierarchies of influence model, Reese and Shoemaker (2016) highlight that digital technologies and global connectivity have transformed journalism and diluted its traditional gatekeeping power.

The new reality of newsmaking, they argue, is one of collaborative relationships between journalists, citizens and social movements which has “[redistributed] how content is created and shared” (Reese and Shoemaker 2016, 394). They identify five levels of factors shaping news content on a micro to macro scale: the individual traits and values of media professionals; news routines relating to sourcing and gatekeeping; organisational-level concerns within media companies; institutional factors related to economics, politics and culture; and the larger social system (Reese and Shoemaker 2016).

Scholars have developed two primary approaches to agenda-building studies. The first focuses on reciprocal relations between the media and other actors. Rather than seeing news makers as the sole arbiter of the media agenda, agenda building accommodates for the role of other players in this process (Vu 2020). Research on agenda building has been predisposed towards the media’s interactions with government and political elites. By applying it to media-think tank relations, this research can contribute to an understanding of how non-state actors influence news agendas and public discourse.

The second approach explores the provision of information subsidies to the media (Vu 2020). Coined by Gandy (1982), “information subsidies” refer to content that organisations freely provide to journalists in a bid to secure coverage of their work. Press releases, op eds and blogs by think tanks can be considered a subsidy because they “reduce the prices” that the media would usually incur for producing news (Gandy 1982, 8). Studying agenda building through this lens offers insights into whether and how the media make use of think tanks’ research products.

An alternative approach discourages a purely quantitative focus in agenda-building research, where actors’ influence is typically measured by counting the number of times they are mentioned in news coverage. This approach instead focuses on the invisible influences over the media, which scholars contend are useful indicators of agenda-building power (Reich 2011). Invisible influences here refer to sources who offer expert knowledge and insider information to journalists but are not cited in the media content (Malling 2023). While they may not be visible in the news, they inspire the angles, questions and content that journalists use in the newsmaking process (Malling 2023).

In seeking to determine whether think tanks were a key influence on the media’s coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, this study is guided by the approaches to agenda building outlined above.

3.3. Journalism-source relationships

Sources – the people and institutions that journalists turn to for information – are considered indispensable to the practice of journalism (Fisher 2018). How journalists identify and engage with their sources relates directly to questions of power and representation: whose voices are included and excluded shape the reporting of news events and, consequently, public understanding of them.

Many studies on agenda building and source relations have been influenced by Hall et al.'s (1978) influential case study on how the UK press report on street crimes. Their research emphasises the power of sources to influence the news agenda and delineate the parameters of debate on issues. Hall et al. (1978, 58) contend:

...two aspects of news production – the practical pressures of constantly working against the clock and the professional demands of impartiality and objectivity – combine to produce a systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions.

These elite sources are considered 'primary definers': through privileged access to the media, they are able to put forth initial interpretations of a news event or issue, establish themselves as the authority on the topic, and therefore regulate all subsequent discourse on it (Hall et al. 1978).

Within journalism scholarship there are differing schools of thought on how sources come to be selected. First, there is the view that journalists choose sources based on their intuition or gut feeling, which makes the process a highly subjective one (Dunwoody and Ryan 1987, 21). Proponents of this view argue that credibility is conferred *onto* a source *by* the media (Dunwoody and Ryan 1987, emphasis added). The alternative view emphasises discretionary judgment, and regards credibility as a professional tool that journalists employ in their daily news work (Reich 2011). Reporters select sources based on factors like the source's profession and level of expertise (Reich 2011).

Scholars agree that the relationship between journalists and their sources is essentially about control, but they disagree about who wields it. Hall et al. (1978, 58) contend that journalists play a "secondary role" to primary definers in determining the news agenda, while others argue that the relationship is more ambiguous. Ericson, Baranak and Chan (1989) in Fisher (2018) contend that journalist and their sources are constantly negotiating for control over information and how it is presented, and that neither actor has absolute or permanent power in the relationship. In a similar vein, Reich (2011) notes that sources exert power in the initial stages of a story as specialist knowledge providers, but editorial control subsequently shifts to and remains with journalists throughout the rest of the newsmaking

process. They have the final say in how the source's knowledge is translated to audiences through the use of news frames and inclusion of other voices (Reich 2011).

Studies investigating media-source relationships have mainly focused on government and political actors. In comparison, journalists' interactions with non-state actors such as interest groups and social movements have received less attention, resulting in a lack of understanding of their influence-seeking behaviours and motivations (Kwenda 2013). Recent research in this field has countered Hall et al.'s (1978) assumption that political elites are the only primary definers of news. Scholars have drawn attention to the ascendance of NGOs in mainstream American media (Powers 2016), the prominence of trade unions as news sources in the UK, Spain and Denmark press (Binderkrantz, Bonafont and Halpin 2017) and the strong visibility of academic researchers in South African news coverage of COVID-19 (Joubert, Guenther and Rademan 2022) to illustrate that non-state actors also wield influence over news narratives. However, a gap remains in our understanding of think tanks' potential role as primary definers, especially in South Africa. The proliferation of these institutes in recent decades (McGann 2021), along with their interstitial position between politics, academia, business and the media (Medvetz 2010), positions them as key players in both political and public spheres. Therefore, this makes them worthy of closer examination.

3.4. Think tanks as primary definers

Scholars assert that our dynamic and globalised world necessitates the use of experts to help journalists explain, understand and interpret complex issues and events (Albæk 2011). An enduring view holds that experts' primary value lies in the provision of "compensatory legitimacy" to journalists: because the norms of professional objectivity preclude reporters from inserting their own judgments into stories, they draw on experts – who are perceived to possess authority and independence – to confirm the frames and conclusions they have already reached (Albæk 2011, 338). In this scenario, experts simply passively provide the information that reporters request (Albæk 2011).

However, Albæk's (2011) empirical examination of how journalists utilise and interact with researchers in Denmark found contrary evidence of more active engagement between journalists and experts. Researchers not only provided background knowledge, but they also actively served as "sparring partners" to journalists as they developed their frames for interpreting a specific issue, and attempted to explain its significance and future consequences (Albæk 2011, 335). An important finding was that journalists decided on frames *during* or *after* their conversations with researchers (Albæk 2011), which suggests that the information provided by these experts directly shaped their

reporting and contributed to building the media agenda on certain issues. While this study appears to emphasise the positive value of experts as primary definers, it, however, does not engage with the potential drawbacks for news diversity, both in terms of source selection and plurality of viewpoints. Harjuniemi's (2022) study on news coverage of economic policy in Finland found that journalists displayed a strong preference for government and economic research think tanks as they regarded them to be the most credible experts on Finland's economic policy. They were less inclined to use banks, business executives and labour unions in their reporting as they found them to be less authoritative but also less objective due to their partisan interests (Harjuniemi 2022). The study validates Hall et al.'s (1978) findings that the routine accessing of certain sources due to their authoritative status enables them to set the news agenda on a specific topic. In this instance, their ubiquity in Finnish news curtailed pluralistic discourse on economic policy, as the viewpoints of the key sources on this issue reproduced a consensus while marginalising competing opinions (Harjuniemi 2022). The findings underscore how journalists' reliance on a narrow range of voices creates an echo chamber and prevents audiences from hearing different perspectives.

Chadwick et al.'s (2020) inquiry into the British media's use of the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) further illustrates the plurality deficit associated with primary definers. Comparing how news anchors interacted with politicians, IFS experts and other sources ahead of the 2015 UK general elections, the study found that the IFS emerged as a primary definer through 'authority signalling'. Overt authority signalling referred to the anchors' use of verbal markers such as "independent", "respected" and "clever" to position the IFS as an authoritative source (Chadwick et al. 2020). In contrast, the anchors constructed politicians as lacking these credentials, suggesting that they could not be trusted to discuss economic policy due to being partisan representatives (Chadwick et al. 2020).

Assumed authority signalling referred to language that presented the think tank's opinions as matters of fact that could not be disputed, while politicians were frequently challenged about their claims (Chadwick et al. 2020). Journalists rarely contested the IFS's claims and consistently entrenched its authority as a superior source while marginalising others (Chadwick et al. 2020). Reflecting on how these repetitive and formulaic practices impact the quality of election debates, Chadwick et al. (2020, 911) note: "Our concern is that the 'dance' between political elites and journalists, in a field of news that is crucially important, becomes a superficial and ritualized exchange."

In America, Dunlap and Jacques (2013) found that the media created an enabling environment for climate change denialism by uncritically amplifying dubious research from conservative think tanks. In

South Africa, the Institute for Race Relations (IRR), one of the oldest think tanks in the country, has similarly engendered controversy due to its “unscientific” research on climate change, COVID-19 and race-related inequalities (Mismanage 2022a). It expresses similar sentiments to those of conservative American think tanks by disputing or denying the role humans are playing in climate change (Msimang 2022a). The IRR’s annual public opinion survey on race is also regarded as methodologically flawed, yet many media outlets have uncritically reported on the findings, often with sensationalist and misleading headlines (Msimang 2022b)⁴.

The literature surveyed above highlights that the casting of think tanks as expert news sources is a function of journalists’ professional judgment and the widely accepted norms of news production such as expertise, credibility and objectivity. At the same time, it points out the risks that arise from the over-reliance and uncritical use of expert sources.

3.5. Reciprocal relations between media and think tanks

Scholars (Rich and Weaver 2000, Pautz 2013) have found that the mutually beneficial exchange – of information subsidies for media exposure – underpins the interactions between the news media and think tanks around the world. The media-think tank relationship is characterised by “a degree of reciprocity and structural inter-dependencies” (Denham 2010, 312), which has come to the fore in existing literature.

Focusing on the American context, Abelson (2014) describes the media’s relationship with think tanks as “incestuous”. These institutions appear more frequently in national news than other types of non-profit interest groups (Grossman 2012 in Grömping and Halpin 2021). Well-established journalists moonlight as research fellows at prominent think tanks, while think tank staff feature prominently as opinion contributors and interviewees in mainstream media (McGann 2016). Prominent American think tanks like Brookings have built television studios to facilitate media interviews and live broadcasts with their scholars.⁵ These conditions have created an intertwined existence between media and think tanks, despite both claiming independence and autonomy (Medvetz 2010).

In Britain, think tanks are “omnipresent” as expert sources in the media, serving the needs of journalists and politicians (Pautz 2013). Drawing attention to the close networks between these

⁴ The headline of a news report from *The Citizen* on the findings of the 2019 SAIRR survey reads ‘More white people have experienced racism than black people since 1994 – IRR’. <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/more-white-people-have-experienced-racism-than-black-people-since-1994-irr/>

⁵ See <https://www.brookings.edu/brookings-television-and-radio-studios/> (Accessed December 8, 2023)

institutes and journalists, Pautz (2018) explored how think tanks' media efforts were instrumental in influencing the Conservative Party to campaign on austerity policies in the run up to the 2010 general elections. The study found that think tanks actively sought endorsement for their policy proposals from influential papers like the *Financial Times*, recognising that this would help sway policymakers' decisions on public spending (Pautz 2018). The findings solidify the argument that think tanks should be seen as agenda builders who use the media as a conduit to push for desired policy changes (Stone 2007). As Montobbio (2013) asserts:

Think tanks are an instrument of soft power, to argue, convince, and influence public opinion – directly or through the media – in other think tanks, government, institutions and actors of the political system involved in policy-making, as well as in other relevant national and international actors (Montobbio 2013 in Castillo-Esparcia, Guerra-Heredia and Almansa-Martinez 2017, 707).

In Bangladesh, think tanks are playing a “media capacity building role” for journalists (Rashid 2013, 187). Reporters confirmed that they approached think tanks to clarify and deepen their understanding of issues such as economics, environment and politics, and even welcomed the possibility of receiving training from think tank experts on these subjects as it would benefit their reporting (Rashid 2013). These findings speak to the behind-the-scenes interactions between reporters and think tanks, which arguably strengthens the latter's agenda-building potential but has unfortunately not received much scholarly attention.

Research indicates that the ties between think tanks and the media in authoritarian states are similar to those in democratic systems. In China, Zhang (2021) observed that the government, think tanks and the media are interconnected. Most Chinese think tanks are reliant on government funding, and the authoritarian state expects these institutes to collaborate with media outlets – which operate under strict state control – to promote and defend government's policies (Zhang 2021). The researcher found evidence of an increasingly “co-operative relationship” between journalists and a prominent think tank, with the latter supplying information subsidies on vital policy issues and collaborating with the media on certain projects (Zhang 2021).

Fisher (2018), in an exploration of how digital publishing platforms are reconfiguring the traditional journalist-source relationship, asserts that the democratisation of content production and distribution via the internet has resulted in a shift in power between reporters and their sources. The latter now

have the choice to forego mainstream media entirely and communicate directly with their audiences on their own platforms (Fisher 2018). This is a developing area of inquiry in think tank studies. To date, studies have found that think tanks are investing in their own digital platforms such as websites and newsletters, and experimenting with apps, video and podcast production (Jang, Bechara and Bottom 2021; Anstead and Chadwick 2018) in an attempt to establish alternative channels of influence and reach multiple audiences.

Recent research has confirmed that social media holds particular appeal for think tanks. It is a powerful, low-cost channel through which institutes can freely advocate their viewpoints, reach policy actors and forge direct ties with the public, all while bypassing the gatekeepers i.e. journalists and editors (Zhao and Zhu 2023). In a cross-country evaluation of 207 think tanks' use of Twitter and Facebook, Zhao and Zhu (2023) found that lower-resourced organisations recorded almost similar levels of activity and engagement as that of wealthier, prominent ones. This importantly illustrates that social media has levelled the playing field among think tanks (Zhao and Zhu 2023). Economic resources may no longer be the most important determinant of their media capital, as previous studies (Rich and Weaver 2000) conducted before the mass adoption of social platforms showed. While research has not conclusively established how think tanks' use of digital or social media impacts their relationship with the news media, early indications are that it is expanding their options for policy influence and may reduce their heavy dependence on mainstream media (Zhao and Zhu 2023).

3.6. Determinants of media visibility for think tanks

The following section considers the determinants of media visibility of think tanks, highlighting factors that enable them to emerge as primary definers. Not all think tanks are adept at securing media coverage, and those that do receive different amounts of it (Rashid 2013). Media appearances generally tend to be concentrated among a small number of institutes, with coverage skewed towards those with superior economic resources and sophisticated media strategies (Grömping and Halpin 2021).

Rich and Weaver (2000) conducted one of the largest studies into think tanks' media activity, which entailed mapping the appearances of US think tanks in six national newspapers over an eight-year period. Economic resources emerged as a primary determinant of media visibility (Rich and Weaver 2000). The authors found a correlation between think tanks' annual budgets and the frequency of their appearances in the media, indicating that those who are more economically endowed can

produce more knowledge products, and invest more in communication activities compared to their counterparts with fewer resources (Rich and Weaver 2000).

The main non-economic contributor to media visibility was think tanks' relevant expertise in relation to newsworthy events. In news coverage of the Gulf War, institutes with experience in Middle East policy were cited almost two times more than those who were not familiar with that topic (Rich and Weaver 2000). This correlates with the idea, mentioned in the preceding section, that journalists use a source's credibility as a professional tool to augment their reporting (Reich 2011).

With regard to ideological biases, Rich and Weaver (2000) found that think tanks with no clearly identifiable ideology were the most prominent voices in four of the six newspapers, compared to those with a palpable liberal or conservative bent. This conforms with the view that journalists prefer to use sources with no overt biases in a bid to inflect objectivity into their reporting (Schudson 1989). However, Allern and Pollack (2016) identified a contrary trend in their media analysis of Swedish advocacy think tanks. Ideologically outspoken think tanks emerged as agenda setters specifically because their opinions ignited public debate and they did not shy away from controversy (Allern and Pollack 2016).

Another factor impacting think tanks' media attention relates to the organisational norms of newsmaking. Scholars (Kelstrup and Blach-Ørsten 2020; Rashid 2013) have suggested that think tanks can be more successful in securing media coverage if their communications conform to "media logic". In other words, they ought to tailor their content to the preferences of journalists and editors in order to increase their chances of uptake. Research on the media strategies of international NGOs (Wright 2019; Waisbord 2011) supports this. These organisations have successfully adopted journalistic practices to overcome editorial barriers to access in mainstream media. They provide summarised versions of their reports, offer timely analyses on breaking news developments, co-produce content with media houses, and provide compelling videos for publication (Powers 2016). Exploring how environmental NGOs in South Africa have similarly integrated journalistic tools and strategies in their communications, Kwenda (2013) contends that this has enabled them to become the primary definers on climate change issues, which, by definition, attests to their power to shape the news agenda.

In addition to expertise and media-savvy strategies, scholars have probed the specific conditions under which think tanks can secure greater exposure. Grömping and Halpin (2021) found a correlation between think tanks' media visibility and specific policy contexts. Australian think tanks, they note,

are able to attain more media coverage when their areas of focus align or coincide with current government concerns. They receive greater media attention because journalists frequently turn to them for insights on these hot-button issues (Grömping and Halpin 2021). Like in the American context (Rich and Weaver 2011), there was also a positive correlation between think tanks' resources and expertise and their levels of media visibility.

Powers (2016) examined whether changes in the political, civic and media landscape in the US has opened the news gates for NGOs. The author found an inverse relationship between the amount of resources media outlets dedicated to international news and their reliance on NGOs as expert sources. News organisations with the least amount of resources cited leading NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch the most in their coverage (Powers 2016). This study convincingly shows that constraints within newsrooms are creating conditions for civil society actors to ramp up their media presence.

Is the same situation unfolding in South Africa? There is a scholarly deficit on how internal pressures in the media industry have affected the use and visibility of experts such as think tanks. South African news media are operating below capacity following a wave of retrenchments, the loss of specialist beat reporters and shrinking operating budgets over the years (Rumney 2022; Daniels 2018). In a study by Chuma et al. (2017, 123) local reporters cited economic and capacity constraints as factors impeding their ability to practice "proper" journalism. A more recent independent inquiry into media ethics (Satchwell, Mkhondo and Bikitsha 2021) similarly drew attention to interrelated issues such as under-resourced newsrooms and a dearth of training and skills development for reporters. In a study on media coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war, Radebe (2022) confirmed an entrenched dependence by South African news outlets on international news wires, likely because they lack in-house capacity to cover international news. The above conditions potentially create a similar opportunity identified by Powers (2016), where think tanks stand to be readily admitted into the media sphere due to their ability to fill knowledge and content gaps.

On the whole, existing scholarship has presented evidence of a co-dependency between the media and think tanks based on what can be described as a trade. Think tanks supply information subsidies to the media in exchange for news visibility. This arrangement, however, is contingent on various factors outlined above, and has notable implications. For one, the usage and representation of think tanks as expert sources propel them into a powerful position vis-à-vis other groups in the media. This

gives them a competitive advantage in building the news agenda for an issue (such as the Russia-Ukraine war), while also impacting the range of voices and extent of debate.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

This study is located within a qualitative research paradigm. In media studies, qualitative research is a valuable method to “render plausible the terms by which groups explain themselves to the world and to clarify the role that mass communications plays in such explanations” (Paul 1991,7 in Brennen 2022).

The timeframe selected was February 2022 to September 2023. This 20-month window contained significant domestic news developments that generated huge media and public interest in South Africa. These included but are not limited to: the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022; South Africa’s decision to abstain from voting in UN resolutions against Russia in April and October 2022; Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s visit to Pretoria in January 2023; South Africa’s joint military drills with Russia and China in February 2023; the Ramaphosa-led African peace mission in June 2023; and the BRICS Summit in August 2023.

4.1. Selection of data sources

The primary data sources were media texts collected from news websites, interviews with journalists covering the Russia-Ukraine war, and interviews with think tank staff.

The University of Pennsylvania’s annual think tank index (McGann 2021) guided the selection of think tanks for this study. From the South African think tanks ranked in the index, those with a research focus on foreign policy were identified. Of these, the IGD, ISS and SALLA have a track record of research on Africa’s relations with geopolitical powers, including Russia. On the Russia-Ukraine conflict specifically, they appeared to have established themselves as authoritative voices through regular media interviews and op ed contributions in mainstream media outlets.

An overview of the three institutes selected for this study follows below.

4.1.1. The Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD)

The IGD – formerly the Foundation for Global Dialogue – was created post-1994 by the ANC to assist the newly established government with advancing its foreign policy ambitions (Institute for Global Dialogue n.d.) With funding from the German government, the foundation undertook policy-oriented research, public dialogues and provided grants to other NGOs interested in international relations. In the late 1990s, the foundation became an institute and has operated independently of government. It officially partnered with UNISA in 2010 to jointly produce research (Institute for Global Dialogue n.d.).

The IGD's strong historical ties to government have enabled it to "enjoy preferred access" to policy officials (Hughes 2004, 33). It has signed agreements with National Treasury and the Department of International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO) that enable formal co-operation (Institute for Global Dialogue 2011). The IGD derives the bulk of its revenue from consultancy work for the South African government and international organisations (Institute for Global Dialogue 2011). Its research and projects are funded by foundations, trusts and a few corporates (Institute for Global Dialogue 2011).

4.1.2. The Institute for Security Studies (ISS)

The ISS describes itself as "Africa's leading multidisciplinary human security organisation, with a unique operational model that combines research, policy analysis, technical assistance and training" (Institute for Security Studies n.d.). Created in 1991 and originally known as the Institute for Defence Policy, the ISS works across a wide range of human security issues. It monitors conflicts, arms control, regional governance, climate change, gender, crime and criminal justice, and recently ventured into futures studies.

The ISS has a long and influential track record in security policy formulation and engages closely with the African Union (AU) on peace and security reform. It receives funding from various foreign governments, agencies and foundations that are disclosed on its website (Institute for Security Studies n.d.).

4.1.3. The South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA)

Established in 1934, SAIIA is one of South Africa's oldest foreign policy think tanks. In its own words, it is an "independent public policy think tank advancing a well-governed, peaceful, economically sustainable and globally engaged Africa" (South African Institute of International Affairs n.d.). The institute works across a wide range of issues related to foreign policy, governance, the environment, economic policy and social development.

In the 1990s, SAIIA played a leading role in setting up the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) business group (Hughes 2004) and maintains a good working relationship with DIRCO. Over the years, the institute has been called on to provide policy input on issues such as trade, multilateralism, the G20, nuclear non-proliferation and climate change. It has also worked closely with the AU and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) on governance, industrialisation and climate change policy. SAIIA is funded by a number of foreign governments and agencies and runs

a fee-based membership system for students, corporates and diplomatic officials (South African Institute of International Affairs n.d.).

4.2. Media outlets

The three media outlets chosen for this study were *News24*, the *Daily Maverick* and *BusinessLIVE* due to their reach, accessibility and wide-ranging news content. As the biggest news site in the country, *News24* reaches the broadest possible audience, which is valuable for think tanks seeking to raise policy awareness or influence public opinion on specific policy positions. The *Daily Maverick*, a smaller independent news site, is known for its strong investigative coverage and robust commentary section. It arguably attracts more ‘elite’ audiences from business, civil society and the political sector who also regularly feature as commentators on the site. *BusinessLIVE* is an integrated digital news platform that republishes selected content from the *Business Day*, the *Financial Mail* and the *Sunday Times*’ weekly *Business Times* section. Given that it packages economic news, analyses and commentary from three prominent financial news publications, it is valuable for this study. *News24* and *BusinessLIVE* fall under the commercial media category, while the *Daily Maverick* is independently owned. The media content obtained from these outlets was a mix of general news and business coverage.

Table 1: Media outlets in this study

Outlet	Type	Average Daily Users*
News24	Digital media (commercial)	865 049
Daily Maverick	Digital media, with a limited weekly print edition (independent)	347 616
BusinessLIVE	Digital media, with print edition (commercial)	97 229

*Source: Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) South Africa⁶. This table reflects the average daily users for the month of August 2023.

4.3. Collection and categorisation of data

The study consists of two data sets: media texts from news websites, and interviews conducted with journalists and think tank staff. Below is a brief explanation of how these data sets were gathered and categorised.

⁶ See https://www.iabsa.net/pages/measurement_dashboard/ (Accessed February 8, 2024)

4.3.1. Media texts

The media content was obtained from website searches on the three news websites. The institutes' full name and variations thereof were used as keywords. From the initial results returned, those that fell outside the timeframe of this study and that were not related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict were eliminated. The remaining results were captured and categorised according to the main topic of each piece. News articles written by staff reporters as well as those republished from news wires – Bloomberg, AFP and Reuters – were included in the sample. The researcher considered the latter to be relevant because news desks employ editorial judgment when selecting content to publish from these agencies.

A well-known method for assessing think tanks' media visibility entails counting the number of times the institute and its staff appear in the press. This study utilises two indicators from previous research on media visibility of NGOs and think tanks: prevalence and prominence (Powers 2016; McNutt and Marchildon 2009). Prevalence is a tally of how often a think tank was mentioned in the sample, while prominence evaluates the weight of that mention by looking at think tanks' source position or counting the amount of space it was given in a story (Powers 2016). In this study, prominence was measured by where a think tank featured in the source hierarchy in each news article.

Results were then disaggregated into five categories: interviews, op eds, citations, event coverage, and multimedia. The first category contained news articles in which the IGD, ISS and SAIIA staff were interviewed and quoted. The second contained opinion pieces written by staff from these institutes. The third captured citations of research conducted by IGD, ISS and SAIIA in news articles or opinion pieces. These citations were sub-categorised to differentiate between those provided by think tank staff themselves (in their op eds or interviews), and those provided by journalists and other authors. The fourth category housed news articles based on or derived from a think tank event, such as a webinar or research conference. The fifth category referred to multimedia, such as video interviews or podcasts, that researchers may have conducted with these outlets. An additional "Other" category accommodated peripheral coverage such as a once-off, fleeting reference to a think tank. Results from this category were not included in the final count of media mentions as they were insignificant.

For the purposes of this study, the analysis focused on the news articles category. The researcher captured all sources – i.e. the person/s that journalists attributed information to through direct quotes or paraphrasing (Matthews 2013). These sources were coded for their institutional affiliation and were placed into three categories: official sources, expert sources and ordinary/citizen sources. In this

study, official sources referred to South African and foreign government officials, diplomats and staff from EU and AU agencies. Expert sources were considered to be knowledgeable professionals and were sub-categorised into think tanks, academics, political analysts and so forth. Civic sources comprised citizens, businesspeople and workers.

Categorising and counting the number of sources in each article enabled the author to assess the plurality of voices and whether journalists tended to turn to a particular kind of source in their reporting. A count of sources also revealed the extent of coverage that the think tanks received in the press. However, frequency was not a sole indicator of their influence on the media – the qualitative data garnered from interviews was also used to evaluate this.

The author also coded for source hierarchy by assigning each source a number based on the order in which they appeared in each story: source 1; source 2; source 3 etc. From this, an overall picture emerged of the primary definers of the conflict.

4.3.2. Interviews

When deciding on a research instrument, in-depth interviews were an ideal choice for the study as it enabled the researcher to collect valuable data from media and think tank participants. The questions were semi-structured to allow for an open-ended conversation with participants and follow-up questions.

The researcher looked at by-lines of the news stories in the sample to identify journalists who were reporting on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Requests for in-depth interviews were sought with a journalist and editor from each media outlet. Three journalists writing for *News24*, the *Daily Maverick* and *BusinessLIVE* agreed to participate. Two editors employed at *News24* and the *Daily Maverick* participated in this study.

To garner think tank perspectives about the media, in-depth interviews with a researcher and a communications expert from the IGD, ISS and SAIIA were conducted. A set of semi-structured questions was posed to researchers regarding their engagements with journalists and perceptions of their role as media experts. A separate set of questions regarding media strategies was used for interviews with communications staff.

In total, five interviews with media professionals and seven with think tank staff were conducted during October and December 2023. Due to time constraints and demanding work schedules, 11 of the 12 interviews took place virtually on Microsoft Teams and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Audio recordings of all interviews and signed consent forms remain stored in a secure digital location known to the researcher and supervisor. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, numerical labels were assigned to their responses. Journalists and editors are reflected as J1 through J5; and think tank staff as T1 through T7.

4.4. Method for data analysis

When analysing the media texts, the researcher first used basic elements of quantitative analysis to count the number of media mentions and measure source prominence. However, the study predominantly utilised thematic analysis, a qualitative research method that identifies and interprets common threads – themes – in a data set (Braun and Clarke 2006). It is a favoured method in communication studies as it enables researchers to extract in-depth and interesting meanings that eschew binary outcomes (Braun and Clarke 2006). In thematic analysis, the data speaks for itself. A key benefit is that it is “an unobtrusive method” that renders experiences of participants central to the research findings (Hecker and Kalpokas, n.d.).

Thematic analysis is one of the most accessible forms of qualitative research due to the lack of rigid rules and prescriptions on how it should be conducted (Nowell et al. 2017). Researchers are encouraged to use their judgment in determining themes and do not necessarily require extensive theoretical knowledge or experience to deploy this method (Nowell et al. 2017). However, the flexibility that thematic analysis offers can result in an inconsistent approach to data analysis, leading scholars to question its rigour (Nowell et al. 2017). To guard against this, the study followed the six-step approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, 87) which outlines how to conduct a credible thematic analysis.

Firstly, to get familiar with the data, the researcher read through the media texts and noted down initial thoughts about potential themes. In subsequent re-readings of each text, the researcher identified interesting and recurring information and tagged them as preliminary codes. This constituted the second, and crucial, step in the thematic analysis. Examples of initial codes were ‘criticism’, ‘food insecurity’ and ‘war crimes’, which helped explain what was happening in the data (Nowell et al. 2017). The researcher opted for an inductive coding approach: codes were identified

directly from each article rather than the researcher's predetermined conceptions (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The third step involved identifying themes. This was done by combining similar codes together and noting which emerged as major, minor and sub-themes. A theme was understood to be a dominant idea that "captures something important about the data in relation to a research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 10). Themes were gauged from the headlines, blurbs, lead paragraph and main points in each article.

Table 2: Example of thematic coding

Codes	Theme
Incoherent foreign policy, national interests, UN voting abstentions, government's errors in communicating, tension between political ideology and economic reality	Criticism of South Africa's foreign policy
Potential AGOA expulsion, economic alienation from the West, sanctions, grain shortages	Implications
BRICS, de-dollarisation, new world order, state sovereignty, anti-Western position	Agency in international affairs
Military support, historic bonds, Russia-Africa trade, Russia-Africa Peace Summit	Russia's relations with Africa

The fourth step in the thematic analysis entailed reviewing the themes. They were double-checked against the media texts for accuracy and consistency. This process helped ensure that a full picture emerged from the data and no important information was missed (Braun and Clarke 2006). Where necessary, themes were merged if they overlapped or removed if they were irrelevant to the Russia-Ukraine war.

Having done the legwork, the researcher moved on to defining and naming themes. This penultimate step entailed describing the 'story' that each individual theme told in relation to the research questions (Nowell et al. 2017).

The sixth and final step focused on writing up the report. Once the themes were finalised, the researcher proceeded with compiling the findings and discussing the results.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The objective of this study is to contribute to scholarship on the media-think tank nexus in South Africa, utilising the lens of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The researcher set out to analyse the coverage think tanks received in the media, the strategies think tanks have employed to garner media coverage and the perceptions journalists have of think tanks and vice versa. This chapter presents the results of this inquiry. It is divided into two parts: the first includes a quantitative evaluation of the media appearances of the three think tanks in the selected media outlets, and a thematic analysis of the news articles in the data set. The findings therein focus on the manifest and latent meanings regarding the war and the use of think tanks by the media. The second part focuses on insights obtained from interviews with media professionals and think tank staff.

5.1. Media appearances of think tanks

The IGD, ISS and SAILA featured in *News24*, the *Daily Maverick* and *BusinessLIVE* during the time period of this study. After eliminating results that were not relevant to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the total sample featured 109 media mentions. The media visibility of the three think tanks differed: the ISS recorded the highest number of media mentions (61), followed by SAILA (40), and the IGD (8).

From the three outlets, think tanks were most prominent in the *Daily Maverick* (53 appearances), followed by *News24* (39 appearances) and *BusinessLIVE* (17 appearances). The data analysis revealed that the amount of coverage think tanks received in the three news sites outlets varied. The bulk (49%) of SAILA's media appearances was concentrated in *News24*; with the rest split between *BusinessLIVE* and the *Daily Maverick*. Most (69%) of ISS's media coverage was in the *Daily Maverick*, while 26% of it was in *News24* and 5% in *BusinessLIVE*. The IGD's media appearances were almost evenly distributed across the three news sites.

The table below categorises these media mentions. It illustrates that the predominant ways think tanks secured coverage on the Russia-Ukraine war was by conducting 48 interviews in which they served as news sources and by providing 46 op eds for publication. Other forms of coverage such as citations of their research reports (11), think tank-hosted events (3) and video/audio interviews (1) were minimal.

Table 3: Russia-Ukraine-related media coverage of think tanks on three South African news sites during February 2022 – September 2023

	Sources in news stories	Op-ed contributions	Citations of research reports	News report based on a think tank's event	Multimedia	Total units of media coverage
IGD	7	0	1	0	0	8
ISS	12	40	8 (6 of which were provided by ISS authors in their op eds)	1	0	61
SAIIA	29	6	2	2	1	40
TOTAL	48	46	11	3	1	109

As per the data, the types of media coverage recorded for each think tank also varied. For the IGD and SAIIA, serving as sources in news stories accounted for 87.5% and 72.5% of their media appearances respectively. This is in contrast to the ISS, which secured most of its media appearances – 65.5% – through op ed contributions and 20% from serving as sources in news stories. For SAIIA, op eds accounted for 15% of its total media coverage. The IGD did not publish op eds related to Russia-Ukraine on the three news sites within the timeframe of this study.

By a quantitative assessment alone, the ISS recorded the highest media visibility when it comes to the Russia-Ukraine conflict compared to SAIIA and the IGD. However, the data analysis here is limited to three South African digital news sites and is therefore a snapshot rather than a comprehensive account of these think tanks' engagements with the media. The institutes selected for this study indicated that they had conducted far more media interviews on the Russia-Ukraine war with radio and television outlets than with print outlets or news websites. They were also sought out by various international media outlets as news commentators. Secondly, the above results have not been adjusted for other factors such as budget size, which has been shown by Rich and Weaver (2000) to impact the amount of media visibility think tanks are able to secure.

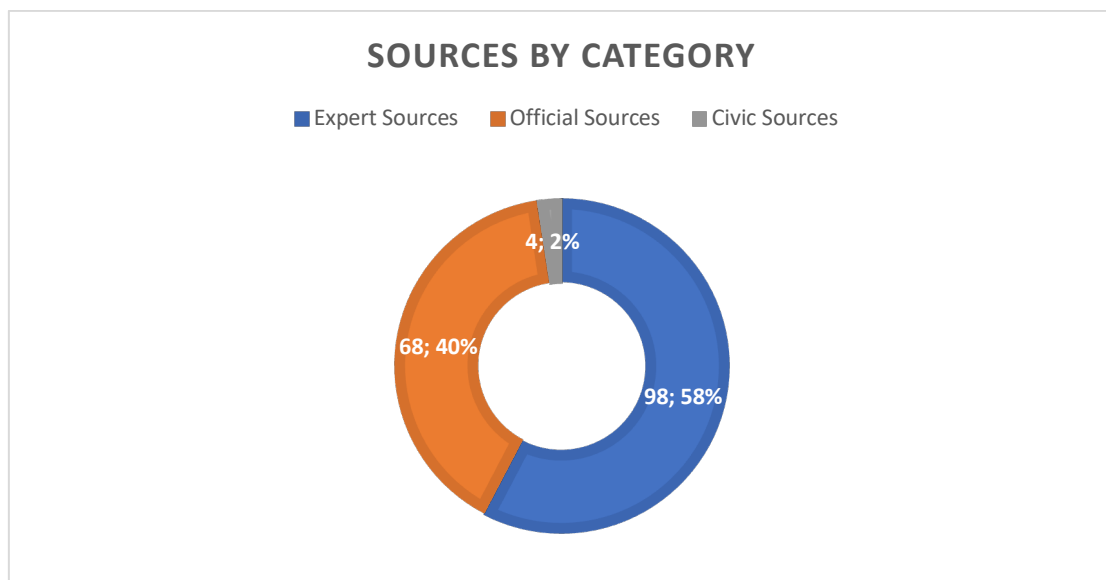
5.2. Sources in news coverage

The thematic analysis in this study focused on think tanks' appearances in news stories. They appeared in a total of 43 news articles (see Appendix) during the period under review. The majority (35) of the

articles were written by staff or commissioned reporters, while eight were republished from international wire agencies. Across the news articles analysed, a total of 170 sources were recorded. Except for two articles which featured a single source, all articles in the sample contained multiple sources. The average number of sources per story was four. To determine prevalence, sources were counted and categorised into three categories: expert, official and civic sources.

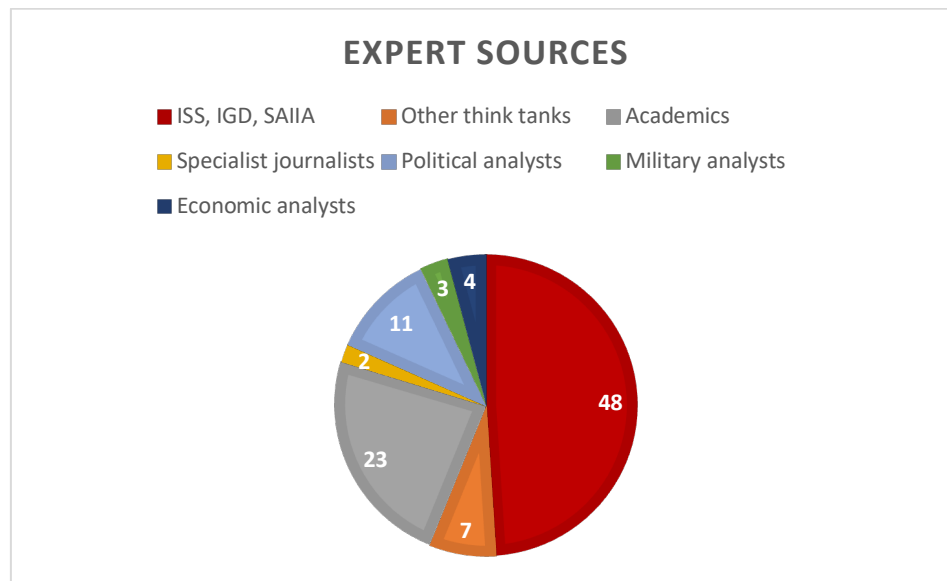
Experts were the most cited sources in media reporting of the war across all three news sites, followed by official and civic sources. As the chart below shows, they accounted for 58% of all sources recorded, followed by official sources (40%) and civic sources (2%).

Figure 1: Categorisation of sources



5.2.1. Expert sources

In this category, think tanks were the most utilised type of experts. Given that the IGD, ISS and SAIIA were keywords used in website searches, staff from these think tanks naturally featured as a source at least once in every article. These three think tanks accounted for 28% of the entire source sample, but there were also few voices from other think tanks present. Academics were also strongly visible in this category, followed by analysts with political, economic and military backgrounds. The figure below presents a disaggregation of the expert sources in the media texts.

Figure 2: Breakdown of expert sources

Most experts that journalists drew on were South African, which was to be expected considering the domestic dimensions of the conflict. A handful of foreign experts from the United States, Britain, Russia and Argentina were quoted to provide a country perspective in stories with a geopolitical or BRICS-related angle.

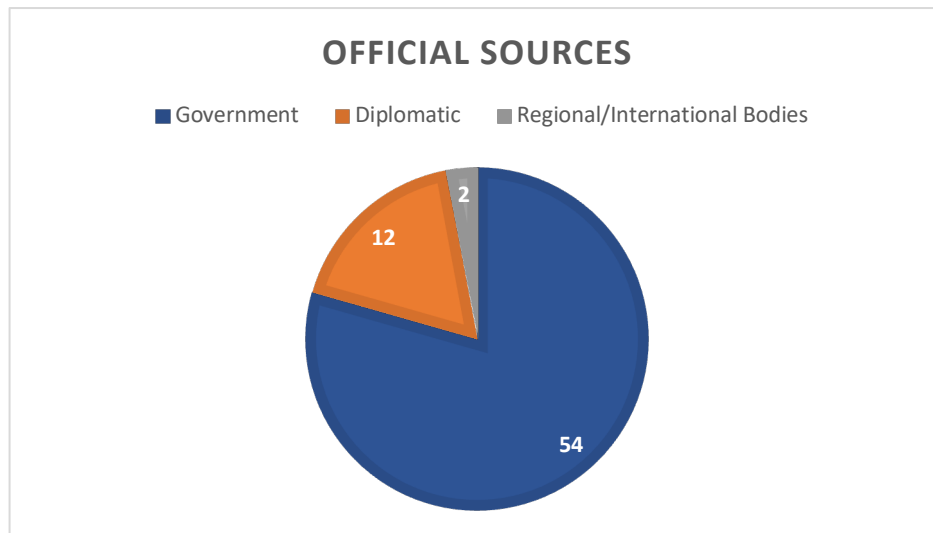
With respect to the trade and economic implications of the war, reporters predominantly relied on South African think tanks and economic analysts. Sources from the business sector were notably absent in coverage of the economic repercussions of the war and South Africa's likely expulsion from AGOA. Only one story included quotes from a business leader – the CEO of Mercedes Benz – on the potential impact on vehicle exports if South Africa's duty-free access to the American market was suspended. This sourcing practice was also evident in a previous study that found that journalists routinely gravitate towards economic experts working in government, research institutes and think tanks when covering issues related to economic policy as they perceive them to be more credible than those in the private sector (Harjuniemi 2022).

5.2.2. Official sources

Official sources were the second most visible in news coverage. There were 68 such sources comprising government officials, diplomats and representations from the AU and the European Union (EU). Within this category, South African government officials were the most prevalent, which was, once more, an expected finding considering the data sample and the news event itself. A handful of

foreign sources that appeared in the sample were US and EU representatives, the Russian and Americans ambassadors to South Africa, AU and BRICS member state officials.

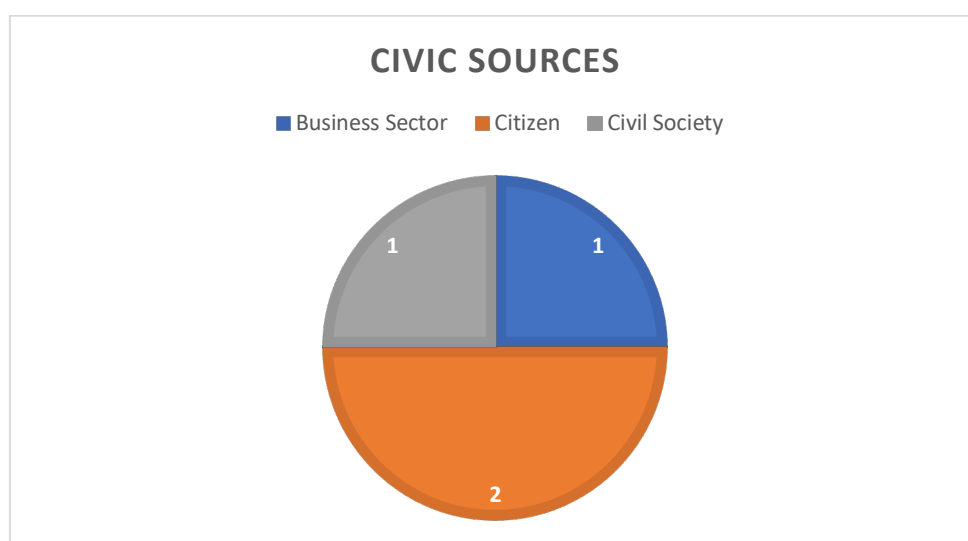
Figure 3: Breakdown of official sources



5.2.3. Civic sources

There was a glaring absence of civic voices in media coverage of the conflict, as the figure below reflects. Citizens featured briefly in one news report on the Russian cargo ship docking in Simon's Town, but they were not named. Civil society perspectives were also largely missing, barring quotes from a spokesperson of the Ukrainian Association of South Africa in one article.

Figure 4: Breakdown of civic sources



5.3. Source prominence

Journalists referred to think tank sources as an “expert”, “foreign policy expert”, “foreign relations expert”, or “analyst” in the news articles. These descriptors were also often used in headlines to convey that the story was based on authoritative views. In the news articles, tank researchers were introduced by their organisational titles such as ‘Head of the Russia-Africa programme at SAIIA’, ‘senior researcher at the ISS’ or ‘senior research fellow at the IGD’, which provided a clear indication of their professional experience and affiliations, and reinforced their credibility. The language used by journalists is an example of overt authority signalling (Chadwick et al. 2020) that served to position think tanks as knowledgeable, authoritative sources to readers.

In searching for evidence of agenda building and primary definers in media coverage, the study also tested for prominence of sources by ranking the order in which they appeared in each news story. It follows that the position of a source in a story reflects the importance that the reporter ascribed to them. Since every story involved four sources on average, the analysis focused on the first five sources in each one to capture the most prominent voices.

The analysis revealed that reporters positioned government officials and experts from the IGD, ISS and SAIIA upfront in their stories. Whenever these sources were used, they appeared predominantly as the first, second or third source in a story.

Table 4: Source hierarchy

	First Source	Second Source	Third Source	Fourth Source	Fifth Source
Government	16	15	8	7	2
Think tanks (IGD, ISS and SAIIA)	12	14	10	7	1

Often, a government voice would be followed by a think tank voice or vice versa. The interplay between these two types of sources served to create conflict. Boukes, Jones and Vliegenthart (2020) refer to conflict as a journalistic method that allows a reporter to cover an issue comprehensively by including and comparing contrasting views that deepen readers’ understanding of that issue. In the news reports analysed, a government official would often be quoted explaining or defending government’s position, and a think tank’s voice would follow with an opposing view.

The following excerpt from Article 3 (Appendix) that juxtaposes views from ANC international relations head and deputy secretary-general Nomvula Makonyane and an ISS expert illustrates this practice:

Mokonyane emphasises that being nonaligned doesn't imply the ANC has no views on the war — it simply means the party doesn't favour one side over the other. That may be a tortuous distinction and a difficult line to sell, given the ANC's historical position. Jakkie Cilliers, head of African futures & innovation at the Institute for Security Studies, tells FM [the Financial Mail] that since 1994 South Africa has been "very clearly and deliberately" anti-West. As such, it hasn't played the nonaligned game well enough to avoid partisanship and enjoy beneficial relationships with all sides.

The dissection of sources revealed a few important findings. Firstly, the media utilised South African experts more than they did government sources in their reporting of the Russia-Ukraine war. Although government ministers and spokespeople explained and defended South Africa's stance on Russia at length in the news reports, the media did not allow the state's narrative to go unchallenged. Instead, government's viewpoint was outnumbered by experts who were called on to dispute, contradict and be a voice of disagreement against South Africa's diplomatic stance on the conflict. This resulted in a 'criticism and consequences' narrative dominating media coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war.

Secondly, while reporters followed conventional journalistic practices of using multiple sources in their reporting, these sources were drawn from a narrow pool. Think tanks and government officials dominated as sources on issues such as South Africa's foreign policy position on the conflict, the economic and security implications for the wider world, the possible arrest of President Putin under the Rome Statute, the expansion of the BRICS bloc, and the geopolitical fractures between the West and Global South countries.

Perspectives of civil society and citizens were largely absent in the sample analysed, as were the voices of Ukrainian or Russian civilians — those directly impacted by the war. This raises the possibility that journalists rely on official and expert sources in their reporting (Harjuniemi 2022; Schudson 1989), thereby neglecting other crucial perspectives. However, since this study focused only on articles mentioning the IGD, ISS and SAIIA, it might have missed stories that also featured 'ordinary' voices but did not quote any of these specific think tanks. Further research with a broader sample could provide

a clearer picture of whether journalists have an entrenched preference for official/elite sources in their reporting of the Russia-Ukraine war.

5.4. Thematic analysis of news coverage

This section presents an analysis of the news articles and the main themes that emerged therein. It also looks at information attributed to think tanks through direct quotes or paraphrases to ascertain whether they could be seen as reinforcing or disputing the narratives advanced by journalists. The findings help to answer Research Question (RQ) 1, which asks: How do media utilise think tanks in their coverage of the war; and shed light on whether think tanks can be regarded as agenda builders on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

The table below presents the five key themes identified in the sample, and their frequency across the news articles.

Table 5: Recurring themes in the analysis

Theme	Definition	Frequency
1. Implications	The war presents economic, geopolitical, legal and food security risks for South Africa and the wider continent.	20
2. Criticism of South Africa's foreign policy	The government chose to side with Russia despite claiming to be non-aligned. This was jeopardising South Africa's international standing and economic ties.	17
3. African agency and opportunity	South Africa has an independent foreign policy and will not bow to pressure from the West to sever ties with Russia. Additionally, African states must leverage the current competition from global powers for their natural resources, economic markets and UN votes.	11
4. BRICS vs the West	The BRICS represents an alternative to Western hegemony; however, whether it can provide tangible benefits for South Africa remains to be seen.	9
5. Russia's influence in Africa	Amid economic sanctions and political censure from the West, Russia is courting African states in a bid to fulfil its global power ambitions.	9

*Some articles featured under multiple themes.

There were overlaps and intersects between some of these themes, especially given the implicit connection between the political and economic dimensions of the conflict. For instance, allegations by the US ambassador that South Africa covertly supplied arms to Russia via a cargo ship that docked in a naval base in Simon's Town resulted in the US threatening to expel the country from AGOA. Another intersect was between South Africa's non-alignment policy and how that would impact its international relations. Moreover, themes evolved and either lost or gained prominence as the conflict unfolded. For instance, in the early stages of the war, the criticism and implications themes dominated news reports. As attention turned to the BRICS Summit and the African Peace Mission, the BRICS and African agency and influence themes became more salient. There were a few instances where stories would reflect a positive and negative theme, likely in an attempt to provide a balanced account of an issue. Finally, themes in the eight stories sourced from wire agencies did not differ significantly from staff reports.

5.4.1. Theme 1: Implications

The overarching theme that emerged in the media texts pertained to implications of the war for South Africa. The texts were categorised into three sub-themes – economic, legal, geopolitical and food insecurity – to allow for a granular analysis.

Economic implications

The economic implications of South Africa's support for Russia was the most prominent sub-theme. Reports highlighted that the government's stance undermined South Africa's economic interests and raised concerns about its future trade relations, especially with the United States. The *Financial Mail* reported at length on fears that AGOA "could end up being sacrificed on the altar of the ANC's mystifying loyalty to Russia" (Appendix, Article 5). These fears came to a head in media reports in May 2023, when the US falsely accused South Africa of illegally supplying ammunition to Russia. At the time, *News24* (Appendix, Article 14) reported that government "now risks losing billions of rand of investments and thousands of jobs" and blamed it for "ignoring" US intelligence reports. An interesting point to note here is that America's version of events surrounding the Lady R saga was given more prominence than the South African government's account. Some reports gave significantly more airtime to the US ambassador to SA, Reuben Brigety, compared to local government officials (Appendix, Article 14).

Think tank sources generally agreed that South Africa was in a precarious position. They were often quoted to indicate that South Africa's economic ties with Russia were miniscule compared to its trade

with the US and the EU (Appendix, Articles 3,5, 9, 20). They also warned that government must navigate a delicate balancing act between its relations with Russia and the US, especially concerning specific agreements like AGOA.

Coverage was predominantly negative in tone, with the exception of Article 7 (Appendix), which framed the Russia-Ukraine war as “an opportunity” for African countries to become “more interconnected”, develop their production and manufacturing capabilities, and therefore become “less reliant” on other regions for trade.

Geopolitical implications

The geopolitical polarisation that had occurred in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict featured as a strong theme in the media texts. The world appeared divided into states that were opposed to Russia – mainly those in the West – and states that were ‘nonaligned’ or supportive of it. South Africa had positioned itself in the latter camp and, reports suggested, would have to face the consequences of falling out of favour with its Western allies. Its strained relations with the United States, one report said, reflected broader “Western disquiet with South Africa” (Appendix, Article 5). Think tank sources generally stressed that the country would face diplomatic ramifications for its pro-Russian stance, with one warning that the government did not “realise the potential backlash” of hosting joint navy exercises with Moscow in February 2023 (Appendix, Article 34).

On the other hand, this theme also expressed shifting alliances in international relations. African states were no longer deferring to the West and were instead actively cultivating relations with states that could better serve their interests and with whom they were more ideologically aligned (Appendix, Article 41). Besides Russia, articles under this theme represented China as a competing force for the West to reckon with. It was described as South Africa’s “anti-colonial ally” and “top bilateral trading partner” (Appendix, Article 8). Think tank experts emphasised that South Africa’s pivot towards China and Russia should also be understood as an aspiration to create “alternatives to Western hegemony” (Appendix, Article 8). They explained that the country’s foreign policy manoeuvres – such as building stronger Sino-African and Russo-African ties, along with a larger BRICS bloc – were geared towards a “rebalance” of the world order (Appendix, Articles 13, 43), even while South Africa sought to retain its relations with Western superpowers.

Legal implications

This sub-theme focused on a legal conundrum: would the South African government execute the arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for Putin if he attended the BRICS

Summit in Pretoria? The media attention on this issue overshadowed coverage of the summit itself, until it was announced that Putin would not be in attendance. Media reports indicated that the government was struggling to reconcile its obligations to the ICC with its support for Russia as a historical ally and fellow member of the BRICS (Appendix, Article 18). This was compounded by pressure from the Democratic Alliance, who had applied for a declaratory court order to compel the government to execute the arrest. One report noted the previous debacle surrounding former Sudanese president Omar Al-Bashir, who visited South Africa in 2015 and was not arrested by authorities despite their international obligations to do so (Appendix, Article 18).

Think tanks were of the view that the situation posed a moral dilemma for South Africa, with the only win being if Putin agreed to attend the summit virtually. One expert (Appendix, Article 3) suggested that the situation had been deliberately contrived by Putin: “He will not travel such a long distance, I don’t believe he will come — he’s playing South Africa.” This fed into the narrative of the Russian president as a mischievous, and perhaps malicious, ally for South Africa.

Food insecurity

The global fallout of the conflict in terms of disruptions to the supply and transport of wheat and oil, which caused a surge in food and commodity prices, featured regularly in news coverage. Reports honed in on the impact of the war on food security in Africa specifically (Appendix, Articles 1, 16, 33). The conflict had led to grain shortages in countries like Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, which relied on Russia and Ukraine for cereal imports but could no longer access grain due to supply problems. Think tank experts were interviewed about negotiations at the Russia-Africa Summit in July 2023, where African leaders aimed to convince President Putin to reinstate a UN-brokered deal to allow Ukraine to export grain through the Black Sea (Appendix, Article 33). They framed the issue of food insecurity as a strain on the relationship between Putin and African leaders (Appendix, Articles 1, 23, 33), but did not consider it to be a dealbreaker.

5.4.2. Theme 2: Criticism of South Africa’s foreign policy

The South African government was widely rebuked in news reports for both adopting a non-aligned policy on the war and also contradicting it by overtly expressing support for Russia. Criticism of its foreign policy was standard across all three media outlets, and featured in both in-house and wire agency-produced stories.

The media framed the government’s policy of nonalignment as “wishful thinking” and an “outright deception” (Appendix, Article 5) and amplified views that accorded with that sentiment. Think tanks

and political analysts were frequently called on to explain the government's non-aligned stance. While some were neutral in their explanations, others were critical of it. Speaking to the *Daily Maverick*, a think tank source said that non-alignment was "more a useful tool than a fundamental principle" (Appendix, Article 39) that the ruling party deployed to avoid censuring Russia.

Criticism of the government was amplified during key events in which South Africa acted in contradiction to its foreign policy. These included hosting joint military exercises with Russia and China on the one-year anniversary of the war; ANC officials' visit to Moscow for a high-level meeting with Putin's United Russia party; and abstentions from voting against Russia in UN resolutions.

The language used in headlines and blurbs was generally emotive, often invoked metaphors and, on a few occasions, made a moral judgment. A *Daily Maverick* story about the South African navy holding joint exercises with Russia and China was headlined: "Exercise in obscenity: South Africa only helps Vladimir Putin by hosting naval drills off Durban" (Appendix, Article 35). *News24* covered the same event with an article headlined "War games: Naval exercise a boon for Russian PR; a political conundrum for SA" (Appendix, Article 17). Russian President Vladimir Putin was depicted as an obdurate leader, villain and aggressor throughout the news reports on the conflict. Article 21 (Appendix) focused on the negative perceptions of Western leaders, who had labelled him a "dictator" and "war criminal".

Internal divisions in the ANC regarding its foreign policy position on the war emerged as a sub-theme. The *Financial Mail* (Appendix, Article 8) revealed rifts between "moderates" in the party who were concerned about the economic fallout for South Africa if it alienated the US and the EU, and "hardliners" who were staunchly supportive of Russia. Government officials who were opposed to the ANC's pro-Russian stance were quoted anonymously, and served to underscore how a foreign conflict had fuelled political divisions within the ruling party.

In a few articles, reporters connected the Russia-Ukraine conflict to general criticism of the government and reminded readers of the arms deal, the power crisis, corruption scandals and governance failures that surround the ANC (Appendix, Articles 5, 40). Article 5 sarcastically noted there were "plenty opportunities for ANC-style bumbling to take centre stage" as the country prepared for the Russia-Africa and BRICS summits. The following excerpt from Article 17 (Appendix), which covered the navy drills South Africa conducted with Russia and China in February 2023, illustrates how wider criticism of the ANC was woven into some of the coverage:

Investigator Paul Holden said military exercises like this do not inspire confidence in South Africans. He said part of the reason the SA military was in chaos was due to the arms deal procurement corruption.

"I do feel like South Africans are a little embarrassed by [the military] because it's pretty shambolic. It's shambolic for all sorts of reasons. It doesn't inspire," he said.

News24 attempted to draw a conclusive link between Russian investment in a local gas plant and mines and the government's stance on the conflict (Appendix, Article 20). The lead read:

The involvement of Russian money in a number of projects in South Africa, as well as historical ties, may explain why South Africa has been hesitant to condemn the war in Ukraine.

The story featured two sources: a former UN official turned political correspondent who alleged that ANC officials have been accepting bribes from Russian owners to buy local mines; and a think tank expert who disagreed that South Africa was "captured" by Russia. Despite the divergent views in the story, the headline suggested a false consensus among the experts quoted: "'No compunction about paying bribes' - experts on Russian influence in SA".

5.4.3. Theme 3: Agency in international affairs

In contrast to the implications theme, the agency theme emphasised a different angle on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which was discernible in two media narratives. The first highlighted that South Africa was a sovereign state that dictated its own foreign policy. The second focused on increasing opportunities for African states to partner with countries of their choice in pursuit of their national interests.

With regard to state sovereignty, media quoted the official line from government ministries: "South Africa, like any independent and sovereign state, has a right to conduct its foreign relations in line with its own diplomatic relations and national interests" (Appendix, Articles 34, 41). This defence came to the fore in reports of its joint military drills with Russia and China, and an ANC delegation's visit to Moscow. Government sources frequently expressed that South Africa was exerting its autonomy in the international system and would not buckle under pressure from Western powers. Think tank sources were utilised to explain the government's line of argument and provide reasons for its pursuit of non-Western allegiances. In this regard, the BRICS and talk of a new world order featured prominently.

Additionally, through the African Peace Mission to Ukraine, the continent was signalling that “it is not a marginal player, it will not sit on the sidelines when a war takes place in another region” (Appendix, Article 16). While a few experts expressed reservations about whether the mission would yield tangible outcomes (Appendix, Article 38), others stressed its significance in positioning Africa as an active player in international diplomacy (Appendix, Article 16).

The second narrative related to the US, EU, China and Russia competing for influence and support on the African continent. With headlines such as “Money for Africa: How the EU and China are trying to win affection on the continent” (Appendix, Article 38); “Yellen Has Tough Act to Follow as Russia, China Woo Africa” (Appendix, Article 41); and “Southern Africa leverages Russia-US tussle for influence” (Appendix, Article 9), the media created a parallel narrative of South Africa’s global influence, which was in stark juxtaposition to criticism of its foreign policy.

Under this theme, there was a general consensus that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has “intensified long-standing great power competition for access to Africa’s abundant natural resources” (Appendix, Article 9). Reports contrasted the Biden administration’s pledges to secure new investments in Africa with China’s massive infrastructure financing and Russia’s renewed bid to forge economic and military ties with African states (Appendix, Article 38). Additionally, it was widely reported that African states were divided on the Russia-Ukraine resolutions at the United Nations, and both Moscow and Washington were eager to secure the 54 UN votes held by the continent in their favour. Reports framed Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and US treasury secretary Janet Yellen’s diplomatic visits to South Africa and neighbouring states in early 2023 as a “moment of rare diplomatic leverage” (Appendix, Article 9).

Under this theme, the three news outlets used think tank experts to decode the shifting power dynamics between Africa and the West. Think tanks described these visits as an “opportunity” for South Africa to “play one side off against the other to get concessions; to get more aid, more trade” (Appendix, Article 9). An IGD expert stressed the issue of African agency:

The key for African nations is to extract the best they can from these various geopolitical rivals, rather than aligning themselves with any of them. Countries must not allow these big geopolitical actors to dictate to them but to act in their own best interests (Appendix, Article 41).

5.4.4. Theme 4: BRICS vs the West

Coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the South African press intersected with reporting on the BRICS, as both Russia and South Africa actively participate in the bloc. Furthermore, South Africa hosted the 2023 BRICS Summit in Pretoria, to which Putin was invited. News reports frequently referenced South Africa's aspirations for increased global influence through its BRICS membership, emphasising the bloc's aim to “forge itself into a counterweight to Western geopolitical dominance in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine” (Appendix, Article 6).

Two sub-themes emerged in the coverage of the BRICS. The first was positive, acknowledging the BRICS’ potential to challenge Western hegemony both ideologically and economically, especially if oil-producing states like Saudi Arabia and Venezuela were admitted as members in the near future (Appendix, Articles 3, 6, 31). Think tank sources featured prominently in accordance with this view, which intersected with the agency theme. Reports ahead of the BRICS Summit speculated about whether the bloc would reject the US dollar as the standard currency in the world’s financial systems and opt to trade in their own currencies. On this issue, think tanks explained that discussions about de-dollarisation would be an intricate endeavour. It was an attempt to “break away from the current global architecture” and “counter the ability [of the West] to weaponize the dollar for sanctions” against countries like Russia (Appendix, Article 12). Under this theme, most think tank experts were positive about the BRICS and its role in the global system.

The second sub-theme was critical, with headlines like "More member states may mean little more than a few extra BRICS in the wall" (Appendix, Article 42) expressing scepticism about the effectiveness of the bloc and its ability to meaningfully counter the status quo. A think tank expert noted: “Concrete achievements for BRICS are difficult to find. Lots of talk. Much less action” (Appendix, Article 43). Reports said that the BRICS had delivered little economic benefit for South Africa compared to the US. A quote from Article 9 (Appendix) read: "But SA’s exports to Russia were \$587m in 2020, while its exports to the US in the same year were \$10.2bn, data from The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) shows.”

5.4.5. Theme 5: Russia’s relations with Africa

This theme reflected the media’s ongoing attempts to rationalise South Africa’s “Russian romance” and decode the “ANC’s mystifying loyalty” to Russia (Appendix, Article 5). In explanations of why the country was “prepared to risk so much” by engaging with Moscow (Appendix, Article 4), the historical ties between the two states were proffered as the obvious and overarching reason. From the outset

of the war in February 2022, the press was puzzled by Russia's ties to South Africa. Reports – from the news outlets and those reproduced from the wire agencies – latched on to historical ties as the primary explanation. All three news sites shared the view that Russia's support for African independence from colonialism and apartheid was a powerful influence on its foreign policy decisions. Citing its provision of arms to South Africa during the liberation struggle, Pandor was quoted as saying: "We have made it clear that Russia is a friend, and we have had cooperative partnerships for many, many years" (Appendix, Article 23).

An additional explanation focused on Russia's global ambitions and self-interest. Experts suggested that Moscow was reinvigorating its ties with African states because it needed new markets after having lost access to Europe because of Western sanctions (Appendix, Article 37). Linked to this was the argument that Putin wanted to show the world that Russia was not isolated, despite being treated as a pariah state by the West (Appendix, Article 10).

While the *Daily Maverick* suggested that African leaders were easily susceptible to Putin's manoeuvres, *News24* offered a different perspective. Its reporting on the Russia-Africa Summit highlighted the complex relationship between Russia and the continent. On the issue of Putin's promise to provide free grain to African countries hard-hit by food insecurity, Ramaphosa was quoted as saying: "We did not come here to ask for any 'gifts' for the African continent" (Appendix, Article 23). Think tank experts were utilised to explain the mixed responses to Russia's propositions, and repudiated the idea that African leaders were naïve in their diplomatic negotiations with Russia. Instead, they noted that African states were "not buying into what Russia is saying without reflection and criticism" (Appendix, Article 23), and were pushing for sustainable policies rather than handouts.

Notwithstanding minor variations in coverage, all media outlets reflected widespread disapproval of South Africa's decision to align with Russia. Firstly, they highlighted that South Africa's pivot towards Russia lacked economic logic. The country's trade volumes with Russia were contrasted with its trade with the US and the EU to illustrate that the government's choice to side with the former and alienate the latter was ill-conceived. For instance, Article 34 (Appendix) noted:

Two-way trade with the EU amounted to about \$53bn in 2022, according to SA data, compared to a little more than \$750m with Russia. Domestic critics of SA's push to deepen ties with Russia and China say that economic reality alone should be enough to give the government serious pause.

Secondly, Russia was consistently depicted as an ominous power on the continent. Reports speculated that in return for support from African states, Putin could provide military backing to authoritarian regimes in Africa without regard for their human rights records (Appendix, Article 11). The controversial operations of the Wagner group – a private Russian military force – in countries like the Central African Republic and Mali also came to light. Reports mentioned the atrocities the group had committed against African civilians and its plunder of mineral-rich West African states in exchange for security guarantees (Appendix, Articles 36, 38). Through these articles, the media conveyed the idea that Russia's influence on the African continent was destabilising democracy and that South Africa was tainted by association.

5.4.6. Summary of thematic analysis

Based on these themes, coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict reflected a multifaceted narrative of economic interests and implications, international diplomacy, historical alliances, shifting power dynamics and Africa's agency in its relations with other states. This was achieved through sourcing practices and routines that privileged elite sources drawn from think tanks, government, opposition parties, regional bodies, academia and other experts. Furthermore, while criticism of the South African government was undoubtedly a common thread across the sample, the salience of the agency and influence and BRICS themes, in which think tanks were strongly visible as sources, counterbalanced it.

The thematic analysis revealed a couple of interesting omissions. Firstly, the media focused on Russia and Putin while largely ignoring the other key player. Ukraine barely received attention in the news stories, and was treated as a minor, fleeting character. Out of the 43 stories, only one (Appendix, Article 10) focused on the Ukrainian perspective on the conflict and its foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba's attempts to secure Africa's support. The voices of Ukrainian experts were few and far between, with only a government official, academic and a spokesperson for the Ukrainian Association of South Africa featuring as sources. President Volodymyr Zelensky was mentioned a handful of times and indirectly quoted on three occasions, in contrast to Putin who appeared over 200 times in the sample and was quoted at length. In contrast to Ukraine, the United States and China were represented as influential powers whose actions and responses held more economic and geopolitical weight. This finding correlates with research by Radebe (2022) who observed that South African media have prioritised coverage of more powerful states and overlooked Ukraine, which equates to a form of 'media imperialism'.

Secondly, humanitarian concerns were either absent or relegated to the margins of media coverage, which is surprising given that they are usually a prominent theme in war coverage (Taylor 1997). Only two stories (Appendix, Articles 11, 37) noted civilian deaths, destruction of homes and the dangers facing Ukrainians; while one report (Appendix, Article 17) briefly quoted UN statistics on the number of refugees and internally displaced persons. The de-personalisation of the conflict in the South African media – a trend also identified in Chinese news reporting of the war (Ran and Liu 2023) – indicates that economic and political angles were afforded priority over human impact stories. The lack of access to first-hand sources, given that South African newsrooms did not have correspondents on the ground, was plausibly a contributing factor to this.

5.5. Part II: Findings from interviews

This section presents the findings from interviews with media and think tank professionals. It begins with an account from journalists and editors on their position on the conflict and the challenges they experienced while covering it. This provides insights into where they obtained their information from, and why they utilised think tanks' expertise and content. Along with the thematic analysis in the preceding section, the findings respond to RQ1: How has the South African media utilised think tanks in their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war? and RQ2: What factors influence journalists' and editors' decisions when choosing which think tanks to engage with?

The focus then shifts to think tanks. The chapter outlines experts' perceptions of the media based on their interactions with journalists during the war, and examines the communication channels these institutes used to raise their public profile. These findings address RQ3: How did South African think tanks perceive the media, and what strategies did they use to influence coverage based on those perceptions?

The section concludes by addressing RQ4: What insights do the interactions between media and think tanks during the Russia-Ukraine war offer into their overall relationship?

5.5.1. Media's position on the conflict

When queried about their editorial coverage of the war, participants from all three media outlets described it as critical of both Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the South African government's foreign policy position on the war. It was important that “we called out the hypocrisy of the ANC government in that while they say they are neutral, they have shown unequivocal support for Russia,” a *News24* editor (J4) said. Participants believed that opposition to Russia's invasion and criticism of

government's pro-Putin stance was "unanimous" and "consistent" across South African mainstream media. However, they emphasised that this criticism did not translate into an official editorial policy. Reporters were not expected to toe a political or ideological line on the conflict. J1 said:

There is no particular stance at *News24*. I'm very appreciative that I'll say what I want to say or write what I want to write... there's never been a case where any editor has asked me to relook at something I filed because it's slanted in a particular way.

They added that the editorial checks and balances on their Russia-Ukraine copy were no different than those applied to any other story, and entailed steps like verification of their sources. J2, a freelancer who wrote for the *Business Day*, similarly said:

There was never heavy editing of my story. I didn't get the impression that they're leaning towards a specific side in their reporting. [News editors] were not prescriptive about what I should write or that I should edit the work to soften something.

J5, a *Daily Maverick* editor, noted that while the outlet's editorials were clearly critical and it was "not a lackey for Russia", the newsroom prioritised facts and encouraged a plurality of viewpoints:

Our editorial policy is to be independent and balanced. As long as [the content] meets our editorial standards in terms of responses then we will publish it...We believe we need to keep the voices going so people can make up their own minds about the conflict.

Participants expressed appreciation for South Africa's free and independent media and its safeguards against censorship. They confirmed that reporting critically on the government's non-aligned policy did not hamper their access to the Presidency, DIRCO or other government sources, although some would only engage with them on condition of anonymity.

5.5.2. Challenges in reporting on the Russia-Ukraine war

Russia's invasion of Ukraine posed various difficulties for South African media. Journalists agreed that they were far-flung from the locus of the conflict and had to come to grips with complex historical dynamics, economic and security implications of the war, and geopolitics. In addition to the physical distance and labyrinthine dimensions of the war, they cited specific constraints on their reporting. These warrant attention as they provide context for journalists' sourcing decisions and editors' publishing choices.

The first and immediate challenge that newsrooms faced was a lack of editorial capacity. J4 said there was insufficient time and resources to “properly cover and reflect the crisis” or to dispatch reporters to where the action was taking place. *News24* did not have specialist foreign policy or international relations reporters, so they turned to their political team to cover the South African angles of the conflict. “A senior political reporter who covers the presidency will cover DIRCO and international relations; a parliamentary reporter will cover it playing out in parliament, and a normal political reporter will cover it from a political party perspective of the ANC or DA,” J4 explained. At the *Daily Maverick*, a political reporter and freelance foreign correspondent produced in-house coverage of the war, mainly through an African and South African lens. Editors at the two outlets noted that a reliance on wire copy from Bloomberg, Reuters and AFP was necessary in order to provide coverage of the conflict on a daily or regular basis.

The second challenge lay in identifying experts who 1. had the requisite credentials to weigh in on the conflict and South Africa’s foreign policy and 2. were objective and impartial. J1 said they used social media to search for analysts, academics and journalists in Russia and Ukraine, or were given these contacts by their colleagues. Clarifying information with Russian and Ukrainian sources often proved tricky for reporters due to linguistic, cultural and contextual gaps. As J1 explained:

It’s a challenge because [I] don’t understand the nuance of what they’re saying... but also, I did not understand the history of their lived experience, or the context of what [was] currently happening.

A third and related challenge for journalists entailed navigating biases and agendas of sources, including fellow media counterparts. J2 said they found it risky to trust information from Russian and the Ukrainian media, as “there was propaganda from both sides”. They added:

It’s always very difficult to verify facts in a war zone. If someone says 10 people have died, how do journalists go in there and verify that? Or when somebody says they’re winning the war, how do you assess that they are in fact winning the war?

The *Daily Maverick* and *News24* rejected op eds relating to the conflict that fell short of their editorial policies. The opinion desks enforced rules around accuracy, fairness and disclosures regarding conflicts of interest assiduously, J4 and J5 said.

With the abovementioned challenges in mind, a look at whether, how and why think tanks were preferred sources for these outlets follows.

5.5.3. Factors influencing journalists' use of think tanks

Expertise

The media used expertise as the primary criteria for selecting experts such as think tanks and academics in their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war. In particular, editors noted think tanks “have the time and the resources to dedicate to particular conflicts” (J4), as opposed to newsrooms that lack the manpower and economic muscle to do the same. The media were familiar with the work of the IGD, ISS and SAIIA and described these institutes as “trusted”, “reputable” and “credible” experts on foreign policy. J4 at *News24* said:

In terms of commentary of South Africa's position in relation to the war, we did rely on think tanks. And that's because we often needed an independent or third voice to add context and to make sense of the developments.

SAIIA and the ISS were two preferred organisations who were approached for op eds as they were considered to be among the “well-known, authoritative voices” on the issue. The *Daily Maverick* published approximately 40 op eds from the Institute for Security Studies that related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict during February 2022 to September 2023. J5 noted that these contributions “fill a need”:

The ISS covers a lot of developments in Africa, they also focus on Europe. Most of our reporters are locally based.... they provide perspectives on issues that we would not be able to easily cover on our own.

Additionally, editors considered the professional reputations of think tanks when deciding institutes to give coverage to. J4 at *News24* said:

We have to be discerning in terms of our editorial strategy and the press code - we don't need to publish everyone and everything... So yes, who are behind certain think tanks and their credentials definitely influences our decisions to use their content or to use them as sources.

However, when asked if they conducted background research in terms of think tanks' sources of funding or their political ideologies, none of the participants indicated that they did.

Value

There was a shared perception among media participants that think tank experts elevated the quality of news coverage. J2 said they were “not just people with opinions”, but “knowledgeable sources” who were au fait with the inner workings of South African politics and could transmit those insights appropriately. Reflecting on think tanks’ presence in *News24*’s coverage, J4 said:

These are people who understand international relations, understand global conflict, understand geopolitics, and that's why we quote them. When I'm editing a story and appraising sources that have been used, I have to answer the important question, which is why do we quote this person? And for me, the most important thing is that this person adds value to the story.

For J2, using analysts allowed them to convey a perspective that could be construed as subjective or biased if it came from them directly: “They help you say things that you can't say in reporting. You can't say ‘Oh, this war is terrible!’ when you report a story, but you can get an analyst to say it.”

Familiarity

A pre-existing familiarity with think tanks further explains their strong presence as sources in the aforementioned coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war. Most of the journalists had engaged with think tank researchers in previous stories they had worked on, such as South Africa’s crime statistics (the ISS), China-Africa relations (SAIIA) and local politics (IGD). Additionally, all the journalists interviewed said they had read some of the research produced by think tanks – on Russia-Africa and other policy issues – and attended their past events as members of the press. A few of the journalists were even invited to participate in these events as speakers or panellists. Senior journalists said they had a good sense of which researchers to turn to for their reporting needs, and were in contact with them on email and WhatsApp. J3 noted that familiarity was a precondition for successful interviews:

[The working relationship] benefits me in the sense that I think I'm trusted [by them]. There's a kind of confidence as in off-the-record stuff which you probably wouldn't get if you didn't know the person quite well and, more pertinently, if they didn't know you well.

However, this does not mean that newsrooms give think tanks an editorial free pass due to previous engagements with them. At the *Daily Maverick*, J5 noted that ISS Today op eds are subject to the newsroom’s standard editing procedures before they are republished from the institute’s website,

even though the ISS is a long-standing and trusted content partner. Similarly, J1 said they always check an expert's credentials before approaching them for an interview:

I look at their research and what they've done in the preceding years, as well as their qualifications... I also look at their social media accounts. Social media is not a huge criterion for me but it is a verification check in a sense. So if somebody is actively posting about [Russia or Ukraine], you can tell whether they are up to date about the most current news or analysis on that issue.

Educational resource

Given the complexities of the conflict and the resource constraints newsrooms faced, journalists turned to think tanks for more than sound bites and op ed contributions. All journalists said they approached experts from these institutes to inform their understanding of the war, South Africa's foreign policy and matters of international law. For J1, think tanks were "primary sources" from whom they sought background information, context and clarification on complex matters. This was corroborated by a few of the think tank experts interviewed. One expert from the IGD (T2) explained that they played an educational role to the press:

I've had interviews with a few local media houses where a journalist or anchor is preparing a story on, let's say, the African Peace Initiative. I'd sit with them for an hour or so, just trying to explain the dynamics of South African foreign policy decision making, the key role players, so they have some longer-term memory of the evolution of our foreign policy. Obviously they will just use very small snippets from our discussion. For them, it's about just trying to improve their own understanding of South African foreign policy before they actually work on whatever news item on the war that they are preparing. Some of this would be off the record, while some would be on the record.

Deadline-driven demands

Practical considerations related to responsiveness and deadlines also influenced which think tanks journalists used in their stories. One participant noted that in a fast-news cycle, it helped to have connections to researchers who could "think on their feet" and respond quickly to interview requests. J1 conceded that their source selection was often determined by expedience. If it was an urgent file, they would first approach the "best person" for an interview, but there were cases where they would have to go with "the person who is available right now".

Journalists preferred to approach think tank researchers who had the ability to provide the right kind of information. J2 explained:

I used those who could give me the kind of quotes that I knew would resonate well, because it's no use that somebody's very clever and very knowledgeable, but they don't know how to give you a sound bite. And some analysts are better at that than others.

5.5.4. Think tanks' perceptions of the media

The following section provides findings on the media-source dynamic from the point of view of think tanks. A caveat to bear in mind is that researchers from the IGD, ISS and SAIIA reflected on their engagements with South African media – print, broadcast and digital – generally; they did not refer to the *Daily Maverick*, *News24* and *BusinessLIVE* specifically. Direct quotes from participants have been slightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Ill-equipped

Experts from all three institutes found South African journalists to be ill-equipped to cover the conflict in a manner that conveyed nuances of the issues they were reporting on. In their view, this was because journalists generally “did not have a grasp of foreign policy” (T1). They noted there were very few specialist reporters who understood the complexities of the conflict. T4 commented:

I don't think journalists were as knowledgeable about the complexity as they could have been. I'm not suggesting they were delinquent, but I am suggesting that this [war] was a very complex issue with a long history... considerations about broader Soviet history, NATO expansion and fragmentation of the global system were missing.

T6 found that the media's lack of knowledgeability impacted the quality of interviews:

Journalists were generally not well informed. I don't think they have the time and the capacity to follow developments as in depth as we do. So, yes, it was a challenge, especially on live broadcasts, and especially with journalists who were affiliated with a state broadcaster or who have a particular position or line that they're trying to push.

Think tanks found that reporters with international news outlets were better prepared to engage on the geopolitical dimensions of the conflict and steered away from the obvious questions. Comparing

their experience of being interviewed by local journalists and anchors to those with international media such as *BBC*, *CNN* and *Al Jazeera*, T3 reflected:

I definitely think there's a difference. My sense is that in Africa or South Africa, people had no clue about Russia, and so there was a learning curve. It's hard to define, but the level of sophistication of the questions, the obvious thought behind them, the different angles that were coming up.... it was clear to me that international media were more clued up.

Experts also expressed frustration about the editing of pre-recorded interviews, where their responses were condensed to such an extent that they amounted to a misinterpretation. T6 at the ISS noted:

Pre-recorded video and audio interviews are the most problematic because depending on how the editor cuts, you can always be taken out of context. They generally just want a sound bite. When that happened, I would share the article on my Twitter platform and just clarify what I meant as best I could.

Some of the broadcast media were singled out by think tanks for sorely lacking subject knowledge and sticking to pre-selected interview questions that recycled tired arguments. "In some interviews I could sense that they just don't have a clue. If I deviated from the script and introduced a new point, they wouldn't know how to respond," T3 said.

Anti-government

Five of the seven think tank experts said that journalists pushed an anti-government line of questioning in their interviews. T4 described the questions posed to them as "monolithic", "coming from the perspective of whatever South Africa has done is wrong", and "based on one-dimensional understandings" of the issues at play. Similarly, T1 found some interviewers to be overtly critical of the state:

They want you to say that South Africa has dropped the ball on foreign policy. They want you to take a position that fits with their narrative, which is a constant lambasting of South Africa for not doing the right thing... The media in South Africa have domesticated foreign policy based on not their reaction to whether there's substance or inconsistency, but it's based on a reaction to the party. it's a reaction to the state. And because everything in the state is broken, everything else must be broken as well.

The above corresponds with findings in the thematic analysis, where criticism of the South African navy's training exercises with Russia was used as an opportunity to lambast the performance of the military and governance in general.

A few experts noted that in polarised media environments and when dealing with sensitive topics like the Russia-Ukraine conflict, it made sense to take measures against misinterpretation. T3 adopted a few strategies:

I sometimes ask if I can at least read my quotes that the journalist is going to use in a story – not all the time; only when I get a gut feeling that ‘wow, this could go wrong’. Answering questions by email is a safeguard since you cannot be misquoted and you can refine your comments. And voice notes are great and convenient... you have a record of what you've said.

In navigating media interviews, think tanks were wary of providing “compensatory legitimacy” (Albæk 2011) to journalists' pre-conceived notions of the conflict. Experts said they refused to respond in “black and white” terms. Rather, they aimed to make “evidence-based” and “passionless” conclusions and eschew “populist” approaches.

On the whole, think tanks were concerned about not being cast as overly critical of government and aimed to “toe an objective, neutral line” (T3). SAILA, for instance, held weekly team meetings in the first few months following the war to discuss their public messaging. “It was important to not come across as shrill against the South African government and not play into what the media sometimes wanted you to play into,” T4 noted.

International media biases

Think tanks believed that foreign news outlets were more aggressive in pushing geopolitical narratives that supported their home government's stance than the South African media was. “We're in the age of media wars,” T3 noted. Importantly, the institutes actively rejected being used as proxies by media who were supportive of America's foreign policy, but not South Africa's.

In interactions with American conservative media network *Fox News*, T6 noted that they would approach the interview with the aim of steering the debate towards the centre:

Fox News, we all know, is right wing. Their coverage is very critical of South Africa – the line was South Africa is not following an American kind of approach or policy position when it comes to Ukraine. So I went into the interviews knowing that those are the kinds of questions that would come out and I would need to spend a bit more time trying to explain the nuance and the context of all of the issues that inform South Africa's foreign policy position.

For some experts, interviews with *Russia Today* (RT), the state-controlled and state-funded television channel, proved particularly tricky to navigate. T3 recounted their experience of attempted coercion by a journalist:

I was phoned up by a reporter at RT who said, 'OK, the issue is this, and you will please say that'. And I refused to. I said, 'I won't actually say what you want me to say because it's not the case.' They still insisted that my response must be anti this American policy. And for me that crosses the line between news and propaganda.

Another expert (T6) chose to decline interviews with Russian media outlets because of “the very clear ways in which those engagements could be manipulated in Russian media and jeopardise my own personal and institutional relations with donors and with my peers in South Africa”.

5.5.5 Think tanks and their media strategies

Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, there was an increased media demand for credible expertise and content on the implications of the war and South Africa's foreign policy. When responding to this demand, the IGD, ISS and SAILA were aware that the conflict was a crucial opportunity for them to advance their broader objectives. Findings pertaining to the importance of media exposure for think tanks and the range of communication strategies they employed are presented below.

For SAILA, media engagements helped fulfil the institute's mandate to foster a “globally engaged” citizenry. To paraphrase T3 and T4:

Our efforts on the media front are about positioning SAILA in the ongoing debates about Russia, BRICS, Africa and the G20, and so on. We understand that it is part of our very DNA to providing a platform for debate on international relations issues. Part of that is trying to

explain the issues as well as you can to the public and bring different perspectives that they may not have been exposed to before.

An ISS expert similarly noted that producing research “is not enough; it’s not the end goal. It’s really about engaging in and changing public discourse in some way, and to do that, you have to build a public profile. So there is certainly value for the ISS in having consistent engagements with media.”

The IGD said it makes use of media opportunities to dismantle problematic, hegemonic discourses about South Africa and the continent. On the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the institute thought it was crucial to “introduce perspectives that highlight the role of African agency in international affairs” to the public. T2 noted:

When we talk about South Africa’s position on the conflict in Ukraine, audiences here and in Europe and in the US must understand that this is not just some simplistic thing of ‘Oh, the Russians must have bribed these African decision makers’. And it’s important that a voice that emphasises Africa’s own agency and pushes back on certain narratives comes from the IGD.

By nurturing connections with the local press, South African think tanks hoped to counter the dominance of Western experts in global discourses about domestic and African issues. A few of the think tank experts said that South African journalists tended to favour foreign experts over local ones when reporting on the continent. T1 reflected:

Local media houses look to the think tanks like Chatham House and the London School of Economics as being the experts on everything. They don't trust think tanks who are from Africa, or they think our education is subpar. So it's time to reclaim our voice... to reconfigure the narratives about what we as think tanks in the Global South and Africa do, and the importance of our contributions ... Hopefully our relationship with media helps us do this.

At the IGD, which does not have a communications department at present, researchers lead the outreach and dissemination of their work, and are expected to be actively involved in how they communicate their outputs. At the ISS and SAIIA, the communications teams work closely with researchers to develop and implement dissemination strategies for each project. With regard to engagements with the media, SAIIA prefers a centralised approach: its communications department serves as a bridge between researchers and journalists by co-ordinating all interview requests and

pitching op eds on behalf of their experts. Staff at IGD and the ISS, on the other hand, handle their own media engagements.

Personal relationships

The think tanks emphasised the importance of individual relationships with media over institutional ties. T7 from the ISS communications team noted:

At ISS, the focus is on our researchers building their own relationships with media... we're aware that journalists have connections with particular experts who then become their go-to sources. Researchers also make the call on which media requests they'll respond to because they know their policy space better than we do.

In a similar vein, T3 from SAIIA noted the reciprocal benefits that stem from their interactions with reporters:

If you can make a journalist's life easier and help them with a story, they remember that, and they may be able to return the favour to you... it's built up into personal relationships. I can now easily pick up the phone to several journalists in South Africa because I have a rapport with them. We'll be asking each other 'have you heard this?' or 'do you have information about that?' It's definitely beneficial to me as a researcher.

Information subsidies

All three think tanks identified the provision of information subsidies – i.e. media interviews and op eds – as the most common way in which they were able to draw attention to their research products and expertise.

The ISS's digital analysis hub merits particular attention. Known as ISS Today, the hub publishes daily analyses from ISS experts that break down dense research and tackle current policy debates circulating in the media. The work is subject to the institute's internal peer review and editing processes, and has enjoyed wide appeal because of its non-academic language and similarities to journalistic style conventions. The platform reaches a million readers, but the ISS has secured an exponentially larger audience by making the content available to selected media houses for republication.

In South Africa, the *Daily Maverick* has exclusive rights to republish ISS Today material. By the researcher's count, the news outlet utilised approximately 185 analysis pieces from the platform during the 20-month duration of this study. Of these, 40 were related to the Russia-Ukraine war and its attendant implications for geopolitical stability and Africa and South Africa's ties with the West. The rest pertained to crime in South Africa, political and military conflicts in Africa, human trafficking, violent extremism, the AU, BRICS, and peacebuilding – issues that are part of the ISS's wider research agenda.

The ISS Today initiative is particularly interesting as it illustrates how think tanks can subvert the status quo by becoming trusted content providers: instead of pitching content to the media and hoping it is accepted, the ISS receives frequent requests from news outlets across the continent to use its material. "We very rarely push things out to media. They come to us," T7 explained.

Selective partnering

Think tanks strategically selected media outlets for engagement, considering both their media visibility goals and broader institutional objectives. The ISS's decision to offer exclusive republishing rights to the *Daily Maverick* for all content on its ISS Today platform was based on two reasons. According to T7, the news outlet was an attractive media partner since it was one of the few news sites in South Africa whose content was not behind a paywall. A second factor was the *Daily Maverick's* status as a reputable and independent media outlet with an audience that the ISS "identified with".

Think tanks expressed a strong preference for the likes of the *Daily Maverick*, *Mail & Guardian* and the business publications as they considered them to be the publications of choice for policymakers. T4 explained:

The Cabinet reads the *Business Day*. They probably read the *Daily Maverick*. If you get something into the *Financial Times*, that also just gives you weight... so it's about positioning SAIIA and in the process showing that we have something to say and that we can be listened to.

However, all three institutes said they also accepted requests from smaller outlets, including community radio stations. T2 at the IGD reflected:

We are not just talking to major outlets. You've also got community radio stations that are eager to have this discussion on this conflict. It's not that you give priority necessarily to a

Newzroom Afrika but when you get a request from a community radio station you ignore it. You might even have more impact actually speaking to community radio stations than others at times.

Behind-the-scenes engagement

The IGD's interactions with journalists on the Russia-Ukraine war was premised on treating the media as a stakeholder rather than a dissemination channel. In addition to news interviews and op eds, some of its engagements with journalists took place behind the scenes. T2 explained:

We initiated engagement with the media to discuss issues like South Africa's position in a changing international landscape and this allows for much more frank discussions... Some of the events are closed discussions under Chatham House rules⁷ but we also engage through public forums which are on the record. For instance, when we host our South Africa in the World event, we consistently have someone with a journalistic background as a panellist... it's about getting their perspectives too.

Think tank experts confirmed that journalists often requested interviews with them to obtain background information and clarify their own understanding of issues; the questions were not always linked to a breaking news event. T1 said they preferred these types of interactions even if the information was not attributed to them in the story:

My role as a policy practitioner is to explain, analyse, break down information so it's understandable... that's more important than providing sound bites. Sure, it's a lovely ego trip when I go to the supermarket and someone says they saw me on TV last night, but that's not my core function.

Investing in digital platforms

All three think haves have developed websites, newsletters and social media channels to profile their work. In order to sustain these platforms, the IGD and the ISS encourage their staff to provide content for their organisations' websites, and prefer to publish op eds and analyses internally rather than pitching them to media outlets. T7 from the ISS explained:

⁷ Under the Chatham House rule, one may report on or use information shared with them, but cannot reveal the identity of the person who provided that information. The rule is often invoked in forums that deal with sensitive topics. See <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule> (Accessed November 8, 2023)

First prize is always having the op eds published on our own website [ISS today]. We know that it will automatically be picked up by at least two media houses and there'll be other media who will read it and write about it.

The IGD focuses on a steady supply of content from its research staff in order to organically increase traffic to its own channels. T2 noted:

We insist on all our researchers providing content for the website, whether that's a blog, policy brief, or outcomes from conference discussion. It's not a perfect science, but when you see more people from across the world visiting your website and wanting to be on your database without you necessarily prompting them, I think that also communicates something.

Additionally, the IGD hosts a regular podcast on geopolitical issues where its experts unpack policy debates and connect them to current news events.

Exploring new formats and social media

The three institutes adapt their research material for greater uptake by media, policymakers and the wider public. This is done by 'repackaging' policy papers into shorter articles, explainers, infographics and videos, and then disseminating them on multiple platforms.

The institutes maintain an active presence on the major platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter), LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram. In addition to profiling their research, the think tanks use social media to "humanise" their work. They share photographs from events, profiles of their staff and institutional achievements to connect with the public, T5 noted.

The ISS and SALLA occasionally pay for social media adverts to promote their research products, but expressed reservations about its effectiveness. For all three think tanks, quality trumped quantity in their communication efforts. The institutes aimed for engagements with specific media outlets rather than mass targeting campaigns, and preferred organic growth over paid marketing strategies to increase their visibility.

5.5.6. Relationship between the media and think tanks

During the Russia-Ukraine war, think tanks and the media in South Africa interacted regularly with each other in pursuit of their respective needs. The arrangement benefited both sides: the institutes gained exposure for their research, and media outlets obtained much-needed information subsidies

in the form of news interviews and op ed contributions. In T1's words, this was a "quid pro quo situation". Journalists' and editors' preference for think tanks was influenced not only by their credibility and expertise on the war, but by the lack of in-house resources and expertise in their newsrooms. As J4 noted: "Think tanks are playing an almost compensatory role for the shrinking media landscape in South Africa."

Think tank experts' accounts of their experiences with journalists on the Russia-Ukraine conflict suggest a fraught relationship with media. On the one hand, experts acknowledged that there were individual and institutional benefits to media exposure: it guaranteed that their research got the attention of policymakers and wider audiences; it strengthened their personal career prospects; and it offered a personal ego boost. However, they were cautious – even distrustful – of certain outlets due to their anti-government biases and the reputational risks that could arise if they were misrepresented in the press. T3 said:

You have to have your wits about you and your guard up. Yes, the media are very important for the reasons we've spoken about, but we have to be careful not to be used and abused by them; and certainly not to fall into the traps they set [to get us to say certain things].

Reflecting on how ISS screens requests from wider African media to republish their content, T7 said: "We don't want to get into formal arrangements with media who may be state-sponsored or may be aligned or may be inclined to misuse our information."

For think tanks, then, their relationship with the media is more complex than a transactional exchange of content for coverage, and requires prudent management.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This study has delved into the relationship between media and think tanks in South Africa, using the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a lens. Through a thematic content analysis of news reports and in-depth interviews with journalists and think tank experts, it identified ways in which the media utilised think tanks and how that came to influence coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war. Think tanks' perceptions of journalists and vice versa revealed rich insights into the inner workings of media-source relations. These findings are discussed below.

6.1. Utilisation of think tanks

The first question underpinning this study asked: How has the South African media utilised think tanks in their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war? The analysis of think tanks' media coverage showed that the media relied on two primary types of information subsidies from think tanks: news interviews and op ed pieces. The provision of these information subsidies is a common way for think tanks to shape political discourse, as seen in Sweden (Allern and Pollack 2016), the United States (Rich and Weaver 2000), and Britain (Pautz 2011). This study's findings provide strong evidence that the same arrangement exists between these institutes and the media in South Africa.

A quantitative examination of media texts found that journalists utilised expert sources – think tanks, academics and other political and economic analysts respectively – more than government sources in their news reporting. A disaggregation and ranking of the expert sources revealed that think tanks were most prominent, which strongly indicates their role as 'primary definers'. This term, coined by Hall et al. (1978), refers to accredited voices who are frequently granted access to the media, which enables them to set the initial and enduring frames of an issue. What sets them apart from other sources is their ability to provide "more accurate or more specialised information on particular topics than the majority of the population" (Hall et al. 1978, 58).

Findings from the thematic analysis of the media texts and from the interviews with think tank experts suggest that some of the angles and perspectives of the conflict may have been significantly shaped by think tanks. The think tank sources in the news sample were either neutral or restrainedly critical of South Africa for its contradictory non-aligned stance, but never sensationalist or excoriating. When expressing reservations about some of the government's decisions – such as hosting joint military exercises with Russia and China or snubbing the West – they would often be quoted explaining the contextual drivers behind it. These included South Africa asserting its agency as an independent state

and drifting away from Western powers in a bid to expand its options when it comes to trade and development. Importantly, think tanks would also underscore the role of the BRICS in creating an alternative to a Western-dominated global system, with South Africa and Russia as enthusiastic proponents. Both of these stood out as prominent themes in media coverage. In interviews, think tanks explained that they sought to bring these exact nuances into public debate on the war and South African foreign policy. Therefore, the salience of these themes in the news sample can be taken as an indication of their agenda-building influence.

While most of the literature on think tanks' media influence has been confined to their public media record, this study has importantly identified two types of invisible influence. The first was that journalists utilised think tanks as educational resources. They sought out experts from these institutions for background interviews in order to deepen their understanding of foreign policy, international law and geopolitical issues surrounding the conflict, and then drew on that information in their reporting without necessarily attributing their sources. The findings are consistent with Rashid's (2013, 187) study which showed that think tanks assist with "media capacity building".

The second was that think tanks initiated private, off-the-record engagements with journalists during the war in a bid to provide an African perspective on the geopolitical tensions emanating from the conflict. These engagements ranged from WhatsApp conversations to formal briefings. They suggest that think tanks possess significantly more interpretive power as agenda builders on the Russia-Ukraine war than what a count of their media mentions captured. If we apply Hall et al.'s (1978) concept of primary definition in this scenario, it is likely that think tank experts set the initial frames of reference on the war and South Africa's foreign policy and "inspired" the news topics and angles (Malling 2023, 684) that became salient in media coverage.

6.2. Factors influencing the media's use of think tanks

RQ2 asked: What factors influence journalists' and editors' decisions when choosing which think tanks to engage with? This study identified expertise, credibility, economic constraints and familiarity as the main factors driving the media's utilisation of think tanks.

Most newsrooms – except for the *Daily Maverick*, which uses a veteran freelance foreign correspondent – assigned their general news and political reporters to cover the domestic and regional dimensions of the Russia-Ukraine war. Local reporters said they struggled to get to grips with the complexities of the issues unfolding. Because the IGD, ISS and SAIIA had a track record in relevant

foreign policy research, and the time and resources to track the conflict closely, journalists were readily inclined to draw on them to fill knowledge gaps. A similar scenario exists in Finland, where financial journalists have a strong preference for economic think tank sources due to their subject knowledge and experience in economic policy (Harjuniemi 2022). The thematic analysis in this study found that journalists failed to cultivate a diverse range of sources in their reporting, which is in keeping with what appears to be a globally entrenched practice (Schudson 1989; Hall et al. 1978), whether deliberate or not.

In the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, it is very conceivable that government and experts were the only reliable informants on policy issues. However, the over-use of official and expert sources and the scarcity of civic voices in the media coverage analysed resulted in the war being refracted through an exclusively geopolitical and economic lens with barely any consideration of the humanitarian implications.

On the issue of credibility, studies by Rich and Weaver (2000) and Rashid (2013) confirm that when covering highly politicised and polarising events, the media lean towards ideologically neutral think tanks rather than institutes with a distinct partisan bias. Not only are impartiality and objectivity central tenets of journalism (Hall et al. 1978), but they are paramount for think tanks too (Stone 2007). Media professionals interviewed in this study expressed similar reasons for their decision to utilise experts from the ISS, IGD and SAIIA. Moreover, the findings are in sync with the view that experts are valuable to the media because they provide “compensatory legitimacy” for journalists’ own perspectives (Harjuniemi 2022; Albæk 2011). A journalist interviewed in this study illustrated this point by explaining: “You can’t say ‘Oh, this war is terrible!’ when you report a story, but you can get an analyst to say it.”

The third factor relates to economic constraints. Newsrooms in South Africa are operating with fewer resources and less experienced reporters, which hampers their ability to provide quality and informed coverage (Chuma et al. 2017). In this context, media participants confirmed that there was a great demand for knowledgeable sources such as think tanks who could inform their reporting on the Russia-Ukraine war. These experts were afforded access to the media sphere because they possessed the requisite and relevant knowledge that journalists did not, or could not, obtain themselves. The ISS, for instance, supplied the *Daily Maverick* with 40 op eds pertaining to the conflict during the period under review. Experts from SAIIA and the IGD conducted a total of 29 and seven interviews respectively with reporters from the *Daily Maverick*, *News24* and *BusinessLIVE*. These findings support

Powers' (2016) assertion that resource constraints in the media industry are opening up pathways for civil society actors to serve as newsmakers and plug content gaps.

Journalists also tended to approach think tanks that they previously engaged with and with whom they enjoyed a productive working relationship. There was a general consensus that these sources were easier to interact with, not only because there was a pre-established understanding based on trust, but also because they were more likely to conform to "news logics" (Waisbord 2011): they were quick to respond to interview requests, provided compelling quotes or soundbites, and essentially eased the pressures facing journalists, especially those working in fast news cycles.

Importantly, none of the journalists considered ideological or economic independence as a factor when selecting think tanks as sources. While a few reporters conducted rudimentary checks on the experts they were interviewing, they did not question who funds these think tanks or what their ideological positioning is. This is largely in keeping with media practices in other countries (Dunlap and Jacques 2013; Rashid 2013) and suggests that think tank sources are not scrutinised to the same degree as political sources or other interest groups are.

6.3. Think tanks' perceptions of the media and related strategies

Research Question 3 was concerned with how South African think tanks perceive the media, and what strategies they employ to influence media coverage based on those perceptions. This study found that think tankers regarded most of the national media who they interacted with to be ill-equipped and biased in their coverage of the war. They described the questions posed to them as monolithic, one-dimensional, and pushing an anti-government agenda. In contrast, their interviews with international journalists were more fruitful as they were more knowledgeable about the conflict and appeared better prepared to engage with its nuances. Yet think tank experts also encountered foreign media with strong pro-American or pro-Russian biases, making these interactions particularly challenging. The findings here have implications for journalists' credibility and their relationships with key sources. As the interviews revealed, think tanks were often frustrated with local journalists' intellectual limitations, and they were hesitant to engage with those they regarded as overly partisan since it could compromise their professional image.

These findings echo lingering concerns about journalistic credibility and the erosion of public trust in the media. As far back as two decades ago, a skills audit found that South African journalists were lacking crucial skills in reporting, writing and accuracy which, considering their public interest

responsibilities, was a disservice in a developing democracy (Steyn and De Beer 2004). Hadland (2007, 15) similarly contends that the “deterioration of journalistic professionalism” in terms of the quality and skills of journalists and ethical blunders has disgraced the profession. A more recent report into journalistic ethics and credibility highlights that systematic issues are undermining the media landscape (Satchwell, Bikitsha and Mkhondo 2021). Revenue challenges and a lack of resources for editorial training and professional development sit at the top of the list (Satchwell, Bikitsha and Mkhondo 2021).

Given that think tanks did not always agree with the media’s approach to the conflict, how did they navigate the climate to generate visibility for their work and ideas? Rather than aiming for maximum exposure, these institutes preferred to communicate strategically with select prominent news organisations known for upholding journalistic standards like objectivity and accuracy, and for having a policymaking audience. Experts singled out the *Mail & Guardian*, *News24*, the *Daily Maverick* and the *Business Day* for ticking both boxes. Think tanks did not regard all media coverage as equal: citations in prominent outlets were more beneficial for their brand image. It also reduced the risks of negative exposure since they perceived the journalists working there to be bound to a higher standard of professionalism and less likely to get a story wrong.

6.4. Think tank-media relations

The final research question (RQ4) addresses the overall relationship between media and think tanks based on their interactions during coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war. Consistent with previous research on the media-think tank nexus (Pautz 2018; Rashid 2013; McGann 2017), this study has found that, on the whole, South African media and think tanks enjoy a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship that is underpinned by the exchange of expertise for media exposure. However, most studies have retained a fixed lens on the media perspective and neglected exploring the media-source relationship from the point of view of think tanks. By adopting this unique approach, this study has identified ambiguities in the relationship.

Firstly, while think tanks are dependent on the media for exposure and opportunities to shape public discourse, they are, at the same, extremely circumspect when engaging with them. In the context of a highly politicised and polarising issue such as the Russia-Ukraine war, the think tanks displayed an eagerness to mediate debate, but were wary of being used as tools by journalists who they mainly regarded as ill-equipped, lacking expertise and displaying an anti-government bias. Experts were assessing journalists on their expertise and impartiality when engaging with them, while journalists

were likely doing the same. Think tanks would opt into relationships with media houses they found to be credible and professional; and opt out of interactions with those they considered unethical or partisan.

A second finding supports Curran (2000)'s observation that political, economic and news-gathering resources are shifting away from journalists towards sources. The IGD, ISS and SAIIA, in a bid to extend their reach and control the messaging of their research and expertise, are investing in their own media assets such as websites, podcasts, newsletters and a robust social media presence. At present, these activities run in parallel with their efforts to secure mainstream media exposure. Fisher (2018) has argued that digital platforms could reconfigure power relations between journalists and experts, as the latter can bypass the traditional gatekeepers and build their own channels of communication. Already, the ISS is enjoying unprecedented exposure through its digital analysis hub, on which it publishes daily topical analyses that reach at least a million readers. The IGD similarly prefers to publish its op eds and blogs on its own website rather than pitching them to the media. These findings indicate that agenda-setting power on particular issues may be already shifting to media-savvy and well-resourced think tanks, while journalism continues to buckle under financial pressures.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

While Western think tanks and their attempts to shape policy and public debate have been widely studied, South African institutes have to date remained below the scholarly radar. To address this gap, this research focused on examining the relationship between the media and think tanks in order to explore the latter's influence over narratives of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This study found that think tanks served as i) news sources in media interviews that were either on or off the record; ii) content producers who supplied op eds and synthesised research reports to the media; and iii) educational resources that journalists used to fill their own knowledge gaps. These interactions were mainly media-initiated, indicating a reliance on think tanks for their relative expertise and content. Media participants corroborated this, noting that staffing constraints and time pressures meant they lacked the resources to cover the conflict adequately.

Taylor (1997, 100) reminds us that when the media cover distant conflicts – “other people’s wars” – they are still prone to taking a side. Along with myriad factors – personal values, political dispositions, organisational demands, and the political economy of news production – their relationships with sources have been identified as a crucial factor that shapes coverage of war (Ran and Liu 2023). The key findings of this study demonstrate that journalists and think tank experts are locked in a mutually beneficial exchange that characterises typical media-source relations. However, think tanks in this study appeared to have the upper hand because of a high demand for their specific expertise, and their ability to opt out of media relationships that were poorly aligned with their interests.

How did the media's interactions with think tanks shape coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war? This question cannot be answered conclusively, but what is clear is that think tanks were the most prominent expert sources in the news coverage analysed. On the one hand, the coverage pointed to a critical press that stood strongly opposed to the South African government's foreign policy on Russia and constantly underscored the economic and geopolitical consequences thereof. On the other, the same coverage drew attention to the contextual factors guiding South Africa's non-aligned position. These included assertion of its sovereignty, its historical ties with Russia, its rising influence in geopolitics, and its clear attempts, along with other BRICS countries, to contest the West's dominance over economic and global governance. Importantly, think tanks also interacted with the press behind the scenes during private briefings and off-the-record conversations. This study identified visible and invisible forms of influence that revealed think tanks' ability to prompt a multifaceted exploration of the Russia-Ukraine war in the South African press.

Medvetz (2010) defines think tanks as hybrid actors who inhabit multiple roles including that of media specialists. This research validates that conceptualisation by highlighting how the IGD, the ISS and SAIIA are engaging strategically with prominent news outlets, producing podcasts and analysis hubs and growing their own audiences using digital and social media technologies. While think tanks in South Africa are investing more resources in their communication activities, the opposite trend appears to be unfolding in newsrooms, where severe financial pressures are curtailing the media's ability to provide quality coverage, thereby necessitating a reliance on external sources to fill editorial gaps. This research therefore raises pertinent questions about the increasing agenda-building capabilities of experts, and how power is shifting and mutating in traditional media-source relationships.

7.1. Research limitations

This study was confined to the media coverage of three think tanks in three South African news outlets during a 20-month period of a major geopolitical conflict. The generalisability of the findings is therefore limited in several ways.

The small sample size in terms of the news outlets selected and the articles analysed meant that the study did not capture the full breadth of the IGD, ISS and SAIIA's media appearances on the Russia-Ukraine war. Think tank participants confirmed that they conducted more interviews with radio and television journalists than with those working in online printed news. As the study did not engage with a significant amount of their media coverage, it may have also missed nuances such as whether think tanks adapted their messaging to suit different mediums.

Given the parameters of the topic, this study focused on three think tanks with established reputations in foreign policy research. However, factors that influence media engagement such as expertise, credibility and resources might vary significantly across the think tank sector in South Africa. Research involving a wider cohort of institutes would provide a diversity of perspectives in terms of their role perceptions, media strategies and how they compete for influence in the marketplace of ideas.

Analysing think tanks' media coverage during a globally newsworthy event like the Russia-Ukraine war might not capture the general dynamics of think tank-media engagement in South Africa. The conflict garnered exceptional media and government attention, and may have made reporters more reliant on and responsive to expert sources. More research, including longitudinal studies, is needed to

determine whether these institutes are able to achieve similar levels of media visibility on long-term and less newsworthy issues.

7.2. Suggestions for future research

Scholars can build on this study to provide regional, global and comparative perspectives of think tanks operating in different political and media systems. Such research would be particularly valuable in the African context, where think tank-media relations are largely shrouded in obscurity.

A tangential finding of this study related to the asymmetrical transfer of knowledge from Western experts and international news agencies into the local press. To pursue this further, an intermedia agenda-setting approach would contribute to a greater understanding of the dominant perspectives impacting South African media narratives of war.

Additionally, this research provides fresh impetus for examining the role of the media in informing public understanding of South Africa's foreign policy towards conflict. Conducting a needs assessment of local newsrooms to identify the resources required to support in-depth and responsible conflict reporting would be a practical first step.

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APPENDIX

No.	Title of Article	Publication Date	Published in
1.	Russia's African summit shows waning influence	27 Jul 2023	BusinessLIVE
2.	Comical moments highlight deep panic over Putin's visit	30 Apr 2023	BusinessLIVE
3.	ANC launches global charm offensive	29 Jun 2023	BusinessLIVE
4.	Why SA is prepared to risk so much for Russia	10 Aug 2022	BusinessLIVE
5.	Agoa'ing, going, gone: Why SA's Russian romance could poison relations with US	22 Jun 2023	BusinessLIVE
6.	Brics ministers meet in push to establish group as balance to West	01 Jun 2023	BusinessLIVE
7.	Trade area may shield Africa from Russia fallout	23 Apr 2023	BusinessLIVE
8.	How much damage to SA will its naval exercise with Russia do?	17 Feb 2023	BusinessLIVE
9.	Southern Africa leverages Russia-US tussle for influence	26 Jan 2023	BusinessLIVE
10.	Ukraine foreign minister woos African support	23 Jun 2022	BusinessLIVE
11.	Ukraine crisis: 'There will be much less aid' - experts on how it will affect Africa	25 Feb 2022	News24
12.	Vladimir Putin will 'actively participate' in BRICS talks in SA on ditching the dollar, says Pandor	8 Aug 2023	News24
13.	LadyRussiagate: Highly unlikely SA supplied weapons to Russia, say experts	12 May 2023	News24
14.	#LadyRussiagate SA 'ignored' US intelligence on Simon's Town arms deal as diplomatic talks deadlock	12 May 2023	News24
15.	Ukraine UN vote: 'SA's foreign policy suits autocrats and despots' - expert	14 Oct 2023	News24
16.	Africa peace mission a step towards more balanced foreign policy from SA – expert	21 Jun 2023	News24
17.	War games: Naval exercise a boon for Russian PR; a political conundrum for SA	22 Feb 2023	News24
18.	War talk aside, Ramaphosa and Putin to meet face-to-face	26 Jul 2023	News24
19.	Russia-Africa summit: Putin promises 'free grain' to six African countries	28 Jul 2023	News24
20.	'No compunction about paying bribes' - experts on Russian influence in SA	29 Mar 2022	News24
21.	Five ways Russia's Ukraine invasion upended world order	2 Jun 2022	News24
22.	Mutiny in Russia could force Putin to stay home and save SA BRICS blushes	27 Jun 2023	News24
23.	Why Russia's attempts to woo African leaders may not have gone according to plan	02 Aug 2023	News24
24.	ANC delegation in Moscow pushes for closer relations with Putin's United Russia party	3 Apr 2023	News24

No.	Title of Article	Publication Date	Published in
25.	BRICS summit: Debate on new financial order and common currency going nowhere, analysts say	22 Aug 2023	News24
26.	Russia is committed to making 'a real contribution' on continent, Putin tells African leaders	28 Jul 2023	News24
27.	Sticking to its guns: SA reportedly preventing defence industry from selling arms to Poland	05 Jul 2023	News24
28.	Polish palaver: EFF demands that South Africa downgrade Poland embassy after being 'undermined'	19 Jun 2023	News24
29.	No distress signal flagged for Russian ship that left as mysteriously as it berthed at SA naval base	10 Dec 2022	News24
30.	SA could run afoul of US sanctions over Russian cargo ship docked in Simon's Town	09 Dec 2022	News24
31.	BRICS 2023: Two talking points expected to dominate the conversation	21 Aug 2023	News24
32.	More options on the table to deal with Putin visit conundrum	01 Jun 2023	News24
33.	R30 for a litre of petrol? Ukraine crisis may hit South Africa at the pumps, says expert	23 Feb 2022	News24
34.	South Africa's naval exercise with Russia, China raises Western alarm	17 Feb 2023	Daily Maverick
35.	Exercise in obscurity: South Africa only helps Vladimir Putin by hosting naval drills off Durban	19 Jan 2023	Daily Maverick
36.	After a day of high drama, Yevgeny Prigozhin makes a deal with Putin, orders Wagner mercenary army U-turn	24 Jun 2023	Daily Maverick
37.	BRICS expansion adds clout to bloc, but also imports new tensions	24 Aug 2023	Daily Maverick
38.	Money for Africa: How the EU and China are trying to win affection on the continent	23 Feb 2022	Daily Maverick
39.	Non-alignment' is not a real ANC policy, just a useful tool	21 May 2023	Daily Maverick
40.	Russia-Ukraine conflict 'far from being ripe for mediation' as African delegation heads to Europe, say experts	18 May 2023	Daily Maverick
41.	Yellen Has Tough Act to Follow as Russia, China Woo Africa	01 Jan 2023	Daily Maverick
42.	More member states may mean little more than a few extra BRICS in the wall	08 Aug 2022	Daily Maverick
43.	BRICS expansion hopefuls seek to rebalance world order, but grouping's shortcomings are in the spotlight	21 Aug 2023	Daily Maverick