



Journalists in the Storm of Cognitive Warfare: Between Digital Trenches, Drones, and the Crisis of War Reporting

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From Severodonetsk to Popasna, from Avdivka to Bakhmut and on to Pokrovsk, on Ukraine's front lines **soldiers have long advised removing the white "Press" label from body armor**. The reason is not only the physical threat posed by snipers and drones, which turn **reporters into designated targets**, but the fact that conflict coverage has now been drawn into a full-fledged **cognitive war**. From the rubble of Donbass to Gaza and Lebanon, firsthand journalism is facing a profound crisis, overwhelmed by fighters posing as reporters, digital influencers, regime bloggers, and even artificial intelligence-driven Lego animations.

The gray zone: when information becomes a cognitive weapon

Veteran reporter **Toni Capuozzo** stresses that the traditional war correspondent is now «**as rare as a panda**», with no successors to the great narratives of the past. But the crucial problem of cognitive warfare lies in the **hybridization of roles**.

In the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military (IDF) exposed dozens of alleged journalists — formally contributors to international agencies and major networks such as Reuters, AFP, AP, CNN, BBC and *Le Monde* — who were in fact armed operatives of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, some of whom were directly involved in the October 7 massacre. This scenario raises enormous questions about the scale of global disinformation spread during the conflict.

The digital domain: influencers, Z-bloggers, and the eighth front

Information has shifted radically online, described by Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** as «**the eighth front of war**». Faced with Gaza's closure to the foreign press, efforts to impose a "counter-narrative" through Western influencers (such as Xaviaer Du Rousseau or Brooke Goldstein) **have failed to reverse the global perception of the Jewish state**, even being outstripped by the viral impact of independent documentary films and multimedia productions.

Cognitive warfare also has other fronts at its center:

- **In Ukraine and Russia:** Telegram channels and military bloggers (the so-called **Z-bloggers** such as Semyon Pegov of *War Gonzo*, Alexander Kots, and Mikhail Zvinchuk) have revolutionized the information ecosystem, even prompting the Russian state to introduce strict mandatory registration requirements to control the flow of news and donations.
- **In Iran:** The Pasdaran counter the opposing narrative through pop culture and digital provocation, using Lego animations enhanced by artificial intelligence on TikTok and social media.

The resilience of the witness

Where journalists once enjoyed relative protection and the warring parties courted reporters to gain visibility, the trend today is to shoot those documenting events, both in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Despite cognitive manipulation, **relentless propaganda, and the unstoppable rise of algorithms, memes, and influencers, Toni Capuozzo's conclusion reaffirms the irreplaceable value of the human element:** «The field correspondent's craft will not disappear. There will always be a need for an essential and valuable witness».

Source: www.panorama.it