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## MILITARIZATION IN BRITISH PRESS DURING THE PANDEMIC

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### Abstract:

In this work, we focus on the language used in the press during the COVID-19 health crisis, using Great Britain as an example. Through content analysis, we examine a sample of three popular British newspapers to identify the use of military language, paying special attention to references to World War II. We trace how the target language has changed over four crucial periods within the two-year pandemic, using our custom database of 9118 articles with the words "covid" and "coronavirus" in headlines. Our findings show that the militarization of language in newspapers with links to World War II (vicarious militarization) reduces negative vocabulary and creates an upbeat tone for media discourse. Additionally, our study confirms that references to heroic feats from World War II are an effective tool for reducing anxiety, although this effect is short-lived.

**Keywords:** pandemic, COVID, British press, content analysis, militarization, coronavirus, World War Two, vicarious identification

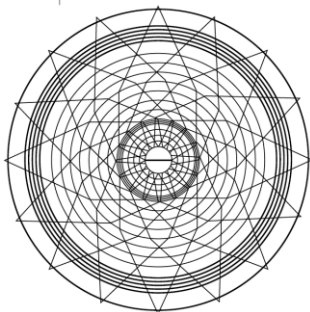
### Introduction

Territory has always been a pillar of sovereignty, and this demarcation defines the scope of state prerogatives. This logic has come to prevail in cyberspace, which is considered an open space without borders. We can speak of a growing awareness at the state level. Revelations about surveillance practices on the internet have played a major role in this awakening. States are now beginning to worry about the future of their data. They are concerned about where it is stored and how it is processed.

The use of militaristic language by political leaders and journalists at times of crises is not novel. No wonder that the extreme period of SARS also incited a lavish usage of militaristic vocabulary by many politicians and media people. At the same time, speaking about vicarious<sup>1</sup> militarization (when achievements of war years are projected onto a non-

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<sup>1</sup> Vicarious – experienced as a result of watching, listening to, or reading about the activities of other people, rather than by doing the activities yourself.



military situation, forcing society to psychologically join the exploits, live them through in their imagination, emotionally connect to the experience of accomplishing the feat) in media language, we can say that it didn't take place in every country that experienced a struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in Russian media coverage of SARS we can barely trace any examples of vicarious militarization (references to the Second World War or other glorious historical collective memories). To explore how media language militarizes during crises and the secondary militarization in the press, we chose Great Britain as our case study. First of all, it allows us to look at the problem somewhat from the outside, without being directly in the symbolic space of society. In this case, it represents a laboratory in which the linguistic culture of a period of social upheaval can be reflected deeply and vividly. The case of Britain is also appealing to us because of its insular character, having the geographical features of an island. The uniqueness to the situation with the pandemic in Britain was also enhanced by the convergence of COVID-19 and Brexit, which officially concluded at midnight CET on January 31, 2020. Concurrently, the UK was confronted with the first cases of coronavirus. Thus Britain, having lost support of Europe had to find its own inner strength and "to stand alone" against a new enemy – SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. The situation itself symbolically resembles the year 1939, the beginning of the Second World War, which gives us assumption of lavish vicarious militarization in language.

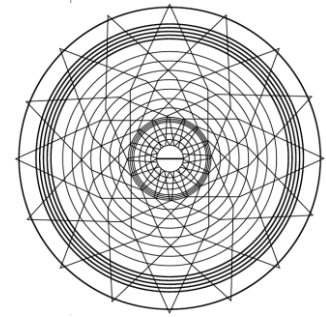
### **Literature Review**

Many scholars devoted their works to militarization of media discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. S.A. Malakhova draws attention to militarized language in British press, emphasizing the military metaphor: "In modern English, metaphors construct the image of the disease as an image of an enemy, and the interaction between a person and the disease is described in terms of war, struggle and disaster," "the virus is attacking, they are fighting the virus, entering the battle with it" (Malakhova, 2021, p. 149). N.A. Kupina talks about metaphorization of language in Russian media in her article "Coronavirus Pandemic: Metaphorical Diagnosis of an Alarming Reality in Media Texts," which also mentions the metaphor of war: "Coronavirus is thought of as a protracted Third World War: When and how will the world war against coronavirus end?" (Kupina, 2020, p. 8). Scholars O. Polonskaya (Polonskaya, 2023), Dadueva A.S. (Dadueva, 2024), Sizykh M.M. (Sizykh, 2020), Yakovleva E.B. (Yakovleva, 2021) also devote their works to militarized language of the pandemic time media. Durdu Biderkesen et al. (2020) analyze Russian media in their article "Use of Military Vocabulary as a Manipulation Tool During the Pandemic" where they state that "Military terms often play the role of a language tool to intimidate the addressee" (Biderkesen et al., 2020, p. 73). The authors claim that

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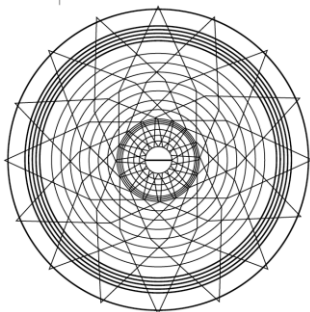
journalists do it “to increase the rating of the publication” (Biderkesen et al., 2020, p. 74). They remind that “journalists should understand that by using a military word, they negatively affect the minds of readers” (Biderkesen et al., 2020, p. 74). The same idea is expressed by Georgios P. Georgiou in his article on public health where he claims that “...alarming and militaristic language during a pandemic not only spreads fear, <...> but it can also affect the mental health of people by leading them to think more gloomily” (Georgiou, 2021, p. 4).

Whereas Connor M. Chapman and DeMond Shondell Miller studied the war metaphor in political discourse in the USA at the beginning of the pandemic and claimed that it was used “...to frame perceived social problems, to both mobilize support and demobilize opposition.” (Chapman & Miller, 2020, p. 1107). Dr. Matilda Gillis from the University of Cambridge states that the war time rhetoric during the pandemic was serving to justify “legislative measures imposed by governments as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic” and “to mobilize widespread acceptance and compliance with the relevant legislative measures” (Gillis, 2020, p. 136).

A lot of articles were written on the topic of the unique New Zealand’s experience during the pandemic based on the analysis of press-conferences of the then former prime minister Jacinda Ardern: “... Ardern relies most of all on a war scenario to talk about COVID-19 in terms of an (invisible) enemy to be eliminated” (Degani, 2023, p. 6).

German scholars Julia Schnepf and Ursula Christmann studied the initial stage of the pandemic in two countries - Germany and the United States on the subject of a war metaphor. The results of their empirical data analysis show that “using militaristic metaphors when talking about the pandemic risks the negative side effect of shifting responsibility from the individual to the governmental level” (Schnepf & Christmann, 2022, p. 108) in both above mentioned countries. An interesting finding was that in the USA “the use of militaristic compared to non-militaristic metaphors reduced threat perceptions of the virus, especially among Republicans” ((Schnepf & Christmann, 2022, p. 122).

As for the Second World War references in public discourse, British scholar Cat Mahoney in her chapter from the book “Covid-19, the Second World War and the Idea of Britishness” calls the phenomenon of World War II parallels with the pandemic “mobilisation of prosthetic memories” (Mahoney, 2021, p. 247) borrowing Landsberg’s term (Landsberg, 1995). For its analysis she also uses Silverman’s model of palimpsestic memory (Silverman, 2003) at places. Mahoney says that dominant representations of the WWII in narratives of the pandemic “are those that confirm the stoicism, reliance and eventual triumph of the British nation” (Mahoney, 2021, p. 254). According to Dr Mahoney, the phenomenon also has “memory-in-the-making” function: “It suggests a vision for our



future in which we have overcome COVID-19 and in which traditional constructions of Britishness are not only intact but are remembered as vital to that victory” (Mahoney, 2021, p. 254).

In the current work though, we will look at the WWII references through the notion of vicarious memory and will use the term “vicarious militarization” in this context. The concept of “vicarious militarism” was developed by British scholars Christopher Browning and Joseph Haigh. Before the term “vicarious” had mainly been used in psychology. The scientists wrote several works on the topic, including the article “Hierarchies of Heroism: Captain Tom, Spitfires, and the Limits of Militarized Vicarious Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic” (Browning & Haigh, 2022) about vicarious identification with ancestral experiences through symbols of WWI and WW2.

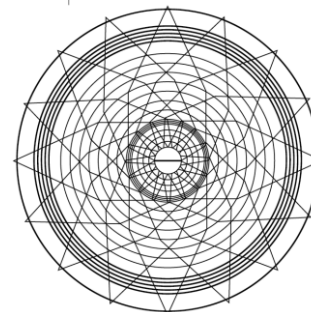
As we can see, scholars tried to identify the role of media language militarization and in each country it might be different. At the same time, we noticed that most works belong to and describe the initial stage of the pandemic, thus they are not assessing changes in this language militarization throughout the whole period, which we find crucial for understanding the role of it more precisely.

### **Procedure**

Assuming that with the advent of the pandemic, the language of the media had been changing, we split the period into four-time spans, hypothetically assuming that the language picture of the pandemic was different in different periods of time. Considering that there were two waves of the pandemic in the UK, as well as the starting and the ending points, we outlined four-time intervals:

1. The beginning of the pandemic in the UK (February 1-7, 2020), when the first case of coronavirus infection was confirmed in the country
2. Peak of the first wave of coronavirus in the UK (22-28 March 2020)
3. Peak of the second wave of the pandemic in the UK (7-13 January 2021)
4. Mandatory testing and self-isolation abolition (February 22-28, 2022), which can roughly be called the end of the pandemic in the UK

The source of the empirical data was electronic archives of periodicals *The Times* (former broadsheet, right of center), *The Independent* (former broadsheet, left leaning) and *Daily Mail* (middle market tabloid, right of center) downloaded from the official websites of the papers for the time periods defined above. We included all types of news coverage (such as opinion pieces, letters, editorials, news, features). The principle of material selection is the presence of the words *coronavirus* and *covid* in the title of the article. The sample comprised 9118 text units (February 1-7, 2020 - 756 articles, March 22-28, 2020 - 5882 articles, March 22-28, 2020 - 1979 articles, February 22-28, 2022 - 501 articles).



In this survey we use quantitative frequency analysis of content units of the texts (individual words and combinations), as well as qualitative non-frequency analysis that considers the context around the recording units (when varying a context unit from one word before/after a coding unit to a sentence containing it), with the help of computer-coded content analysis.

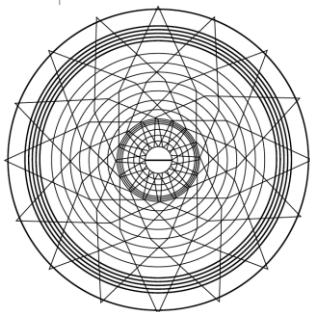
For our analysis we compiled two dictionaries. We used problem-driven approach motivated by our research question in developing the coding scheme. To extract militarized lexicon from our media texts, measure it and trace its changes at each period, we compiled “Militarization” dictionary. It consists of general military vocabulary units (57 key words and phrases) and has a category “World War II” with 55 units – 112 word entries altogether. The latter helps us to focus on the Second World War references, assess them, work with key words in context to better understand their special role in media text.

**Table 1.**

Military words and word combinations of general character  
from the “Militarization” dictionary

war	army	belligerent
soldier	troop	attacking force
frontline	ambush	reconnaissance
battle	mine field	reinforcement
hero	weapon	barrage
fight	march	reinforce
enem	trench	COVID-19 attack
bomb	land mine	virus attack
veteran	combat	corps
flypast	command	dog fight
militar	counteroffensive	fuselage
armed force	fortification	defence
armoured	fortif	infantry
warfare	flank	invasion
battalion	frontage	defeat
regiment	mobilize	blockade
adjutant	commander	surrender
mobilise	cavalry	ally
airman	armament	airmen

During the process of pre-test and post-test dictionary design we marked several words as a “whole word only”: *war*, *airman/airmen*, *trench*, *regiment*, *ally*, *bomb*. It was made to avoid counting units of the type: *warry*, *ward*, *warn*, *chairman*, *impairment*, *bombshell*, *retrench*, *entrench*, *regimented*, *finally*, *really* etc. Some words were reduced to base forms: “enem” (for *enemy*, *enemies*), “militar” (*military*, *militaristic*, *militarized* etc.),



“fortif” (*fortify, fortified*) to make word counting wider and more precise. *March* was marked as a “lowercase word only” to exclude the name of the month from the frequency list.

**Table 2.**

Special category of the “Militarization” dictionary set of 55-word units devoted to the “World War II”

Chirchill	Spitfire	Morse code
Luftwaffe	Battle of Britain	navy
Blitz	Battle of the Bulge	Stalin
nazi	World War Two	Axis
Hitler	World War II	Holocaust
fascism	RAF	Kriegsmarine
fascist	RASC	U-boat
WWII	Royal Navy	Wehrmacht
Second World War	gas mask	Maginot Line
WW2	Roosevelt	Nuremberg Laws
D-Day	Battle of the Atlantic	Neutrality Act
V-Day	air raid	Chamberlain
V Day	siren	1939
VE Day	Allies	1940
Tom Moore	blackout	1941
Captain Tom	billets	1942
Royal Air Force	conscription	1943
Hawker Hurricane	doodlebug	1944
		1945

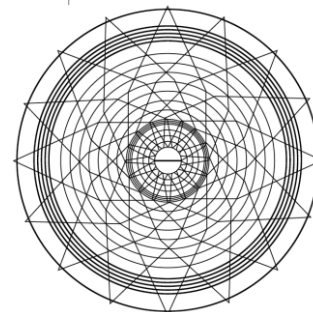
Here, we also adjusted the coding after several runs through the samples to correct any coding problems. First of all, acronyms *RAF* (Royal Air Force) and *RASC* (Royal Army Service Corps) were marked to be searched as “whole words only” to avoid miscalculations with units like *aircraft*, *traffic*, *draft*, *craft*, as well as *ABRASCO*. It was crucial to tick words *Axis* and *Stalin* as “whole words only” as well to avoid getting units - *taxis*, *profilaxis*, *Kristalina* and alike. This dictionary improvement approach was possible only with qualitative content analysis, considering a keyword in context. For units *Axis* and *Allies* it was very important to adjust the setting with a capital letter to eliminate possible irrelevant context (e.g. *Trump and his allies*). Inserting the years 1939-1945 into the dictionary, we adjusted them as “whole words only” not to get extraneous figures (COVID toll rates, for example).

In attempt to understand the role of the militarized vocabulary in the articles about coronavirus, we decided to assess the overall tone of them and then compare it with the degree of media language militarization per period. For this purpose, we made the

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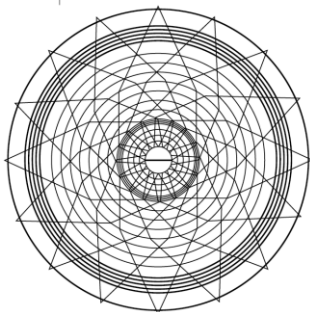


second dictionary “Alarming Messages” (192 word entries). It includes three categories of somewhat negatively loaded words: “Disease”, “Death”, “Reaction”. Words for the categories were entered from our frequency lists occurrences. For the “Disease” category though, *COVID-19 Glossary* from the UK Parliament official website was used<sup>2</sup>.

**Table 3.** Category “Disease” (86 words)

respirator	cold	diagnose
syndrome	fever	surgical
symptom	ill	coronavirus
patient	sick	vaccine
hospital	SARS	treat
infect	quarantine	side effect
desease	viral	intense care
virus	drug	intensive care
hazmat suit	ventilation machine	pneumonia
epidemic	complication	cough
protective suit	incubation	temperature
sore throat	contagious	runny nose
face mask	corona	lung
serial interval	super-spreader	swab test
oxygenation	antibiotics	jab
thrombocytopenia	thrombosis	clot
proning	antibod	booster dose
life support	therap	inflammat
flu	tested positive	side effect
bug	incidence	incubation
clinical	morbidity	PCR
point-of-care test	pooled testing	primary case
protective gear	endemic	respiratory
mutation	pathogen	Alpha
mutant	vaccine	Beta
mute	transmiss	Gamma
contaminate	transmit	Delta
shedding	false negative	Omicron
antigen	false positive	

<sup>2</sup> UK Parliament. (n.d.). \*COVID-19 glossary: Understanding the biology of the virus\*. <https://post.parliament.uk/covid-19-glossary/#Understanding-the-biology-of-the-virus>



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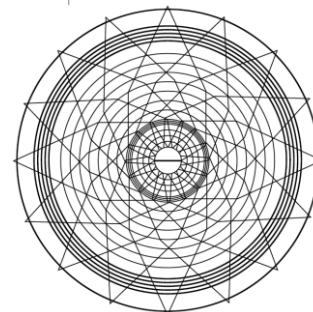
**Table 4.** Category “Death” (55 words)

death	passed away	obituar
fatal	perish	epitaph
dead	posthumous	demise
kill	predecease	cemeter
die	sepulchral	mourn
lethal	coroner	burial
toll	unsurvivable	Grim Reaper
mortal	last breath	mortician
bereave	mortuary	dying
at peace	morgue	eternal rest
bury	autopsy	tomb
buried	coffin	obsequies
decedent	undertaker	pall-bearer
lose life	funeral	pallbearer
lost life	grave	requiem
morbid	hearse	cadaver
morbidity	eulogy	RIP
pass away	cremat	ashes
loss		

**Table 5.** Category “Reaction” (51 words)

outbreak	extreme	prevent
emergency	dangerous	concern
acute	deny	ctisis
severe	lockdown	harm
restrict	risk	banned
evacuation	measure	bans
constrain	distancing	challeng
new case	isolation	banning
index case	isolate	hits
ban	evacuate	harming
fear	hit	harmful
spread	evacuee	harms
panic	epicentre	harmed
critical	alert	hazard
damage	emergency	vulnerab
catastroph	contingenc	disrupt
accident	incident	warn





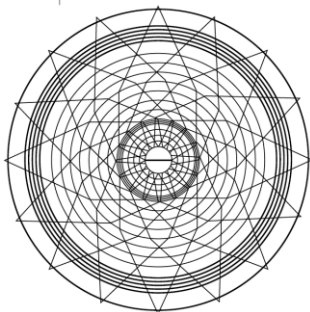
In this dictionary we also made a number of improvements. For example, in “Death” category we marked *ashes* as a “whole word only” in search settings to avoid blunders like *crashes*, *clashes*, *lashes* in frequency list. The same procedure was made with the phrase “at peace” – not to count “that peace” and other different meaning overlaps. Words like *bury*, *tomb*, *RIP* were ticked as case sensitive. Words and phrases found to be ambiguous or incorrect for this study were dropped from the dictionaries. For example, the word *terminal* was originally included in the “Death” category of the dictionary but was found mostly in expressions like “Heathrow terminal”, “airport terminal”. Therefore, it was removed from the list as it was mostly used in another meaning. We could give many other examples of words and phrases that were dropped because they were found to be inaccurate indicators of particular values. To make our dictionary more compact we used lemmatization at places: *obituar*, *therap*, *antibod* etc. The process of refining the dictionaries was repeated until a satisfactory level of validity was achieved. Once the dictionaries were finalized, they were applied to each time interval.

### Results

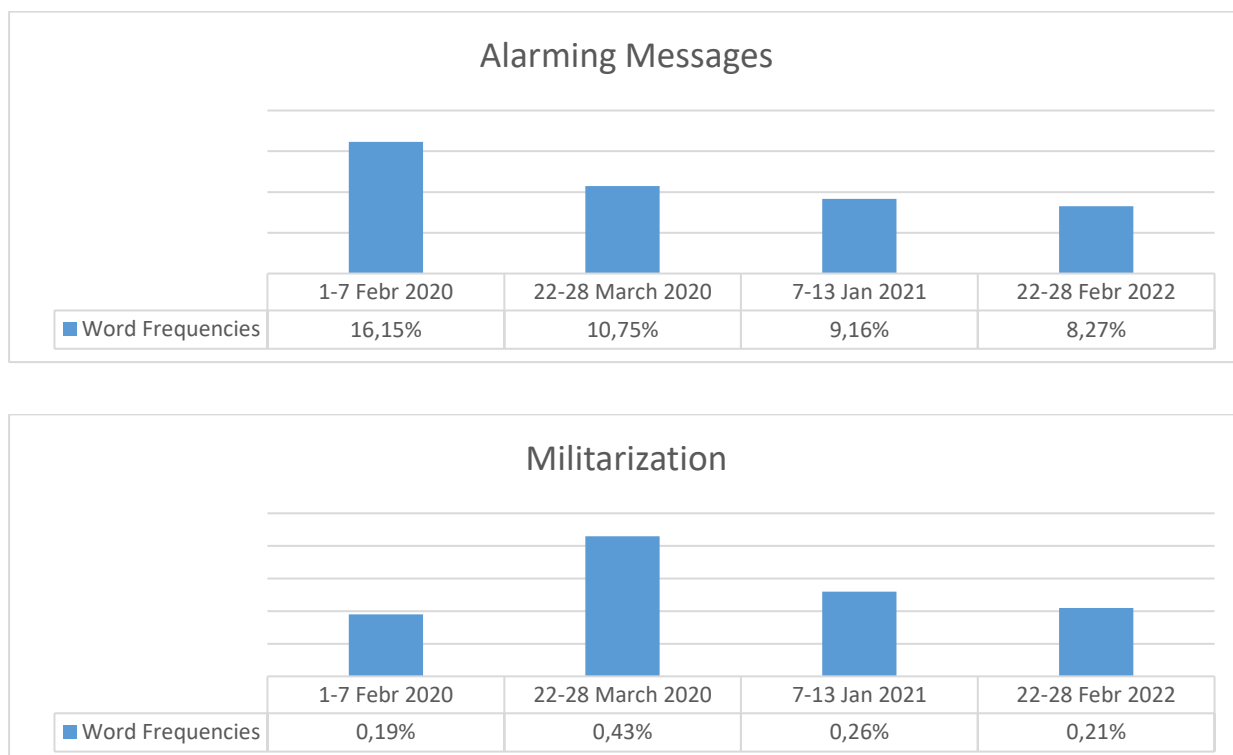
The dictionary-based content analysis revealed the following. The percentage of alarming messages in the media on the topic of COVID during the first period was 16,15%, but at the peak of the first wave of the pandemic it fell by 5.4 percentage points. While application of the “Militarization” dictionary revealed 775 (0.19%) word frequency at the beginning of the pandemic, and 12240 words (0.43%) for the period of March 22-28, 2020. Thus, we can observe a significant militarization of media language with the unfolding of the pandemic over time and a decrease of the alarming messages (See Figure 1). It makes us assume that militarized lexicon influences the whole tone of the articles in a positive way, creating an upbeat mode.

This finding directly correlates with an improvement in the mental state of the population: according to *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* journal, mental disorders among young adults in the UK increased from 55% to 80% in April 2020 compared to 2018-19, but they decreased significantly in July-September 2020 (Gagne et al., 2022, p. 1261–1272).

Moreover, within the first wave period, we can see direct references to World War Two in the articles, words and phrases like: *Second World War* with the frequency 218, *Nazi* - 44, *blitz* – 29. The World War II category counted 1488 units in total out of 2829968 number of words (0,05%). While examination of the first week of the pandemic revealed 148 words from the category out of 396780 words of the sample (0,037%). The context of the use of wartime words and expressions is interesting indeed. These are Boris Johnson's references to Churchill's rousing speeches (“*In times like this you can really see the best in humanity*”), a reminder of the values that united the country against

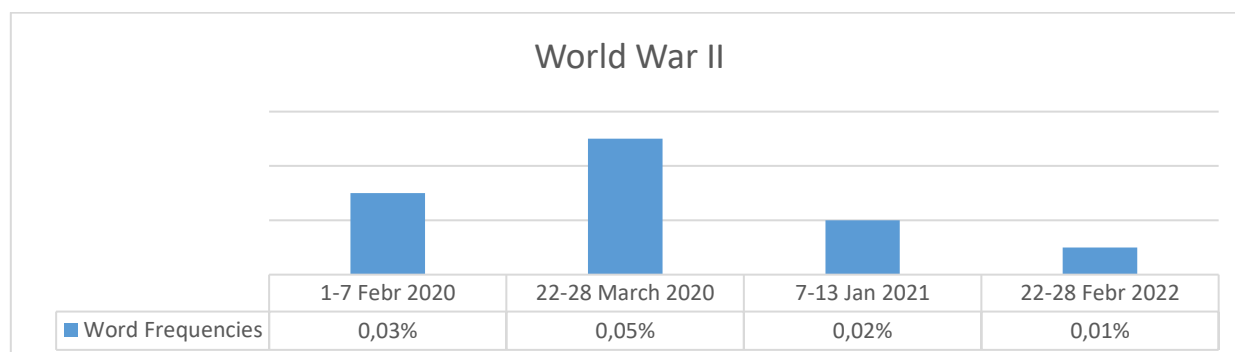
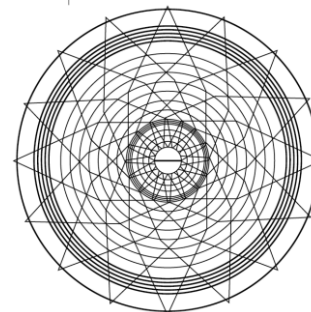


Nazism (“Those values are what got the UK through the Second World War”); reproductions of World War II posters in supermarkets to stop panic buying: (“Lend a hand on the land”), references to jokes from the times of air battles between the RAF and Luftwaffe, lifting the spirit of Brits, etc. Obviously, these World War II references have a special connection to the British context, Cat Mahoney called it “the version of the Second World War <...>that exists only in the imaginary of British culture and institutions” (Mahoney, 2021, p. 247).



**Figure 1.** Results of the Dictionaries “Alarming Messages” and “Militarization” per period given in percentage

In the third chosen time period (the peak of the second wave – January 7–13, 2021), the results were the following – words from the “Alarming messages” dictionary amounted to 9.16% (a gradual decrease is underway), which might indicate adaptation to the crisis. Militarization of media language during the second peak was 0.26%. (the number of the first wave peak halved) (Figure 1). References to the Second World War were only 0.02%, three times less than during the previous period (Figure 2). Based on this, it can be assumed that uplifting the spirit of the nation through vicarious identification with the great predecessors was no longer needed.

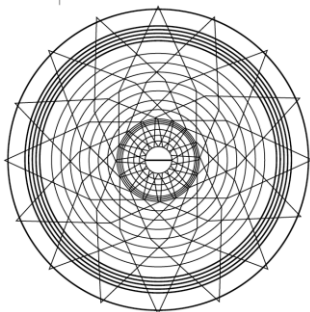


**Figure 2.** Results of the Category “World War Two” from the Dictionary “Militarization” per period in percentage

## Conclusion

Our content analysis produced a profile of frequency changes in the two target lexicons represented by our two dictionaries. The way they are intertwined allows us to trace the role vicarious militarization played in media discourse of the time. The correlations between “Militarization” and “Alarming Messages” variables show that militarized vocabulary in our case raised the upbeat tone, while World War Two references acted especially effectively in British environment activating vicarious identification of Brits with the great generation of winners. Looking at our figures we can see that these references are in the largest amount at the most critical moment (the first peak of COVID infection in the UK) giving a powerful upbeat tone to the whole media text and working as an effective pain killer, but when the adaptation occurred (the second peak of the pandemic), they were no longer needed. Our figures clearly demonstrate “the idea of vicarious identity as rhythmic or episodic, something that may be reached for in times of intense anxiety” (Browning & Haigh, 2022, p. 10) after which “a drifting out of vicarious identification” (Browning & Haigh, 2022, p. 10) is taking place.

With a certain degree of assumption, we suggest that this is a typological model of functioning of the press during a period when society has practically no resources to combat the problem that has befallen it: turning to the heroics of the past to raise ontological security. But it shows itself effective only for a limited period, at the moment of “acute pain”. When society adapts to the situation, this “pain killer” can cause “side effects”, one of which might be the feeling of embracement for the whole pathos these words and analogies carry.



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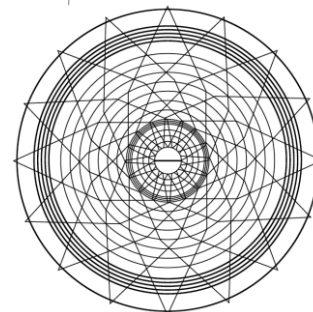
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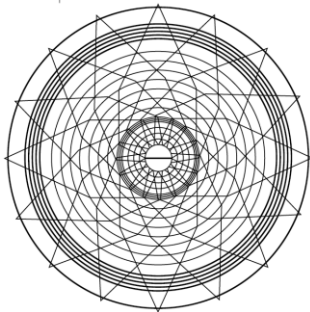
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## МИЛИТАРИЗАЦИЯ В БРИТАНСКОЙ ПРЕССЕ ВО ВРЕМЯ ПАНДЕМИИ

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### **Аннотация:**

В этой работе мы исследуем язык британской прессы в период кризиса здравоохранения, вызванного COVID-19. Мы анализируем три популярных издания, чтобы понять, как военная лексика влияет на медиа-дискурс, особенно в контексте упоминаний о Второй мировой войне. Мы рассматриваем изменения в языке на протяжении двух лет после начала пандемии, оценивая четыре ключевых момента времени. Также мы используем базу данных из 9118 статей, содержащих слова «ковид» и «коронавирус». Результаты показывают, что использование военной лексики, связанной со Второй мировой войной, снижает количество негативных выражений и придает оптимизм медийному дискурсу. В заключении, нужно отметить, что ссылки на героические поступки того времени эффективно, хотя и временно, снижают тревожность.

**Ключевые слова:** пандемия, COVID, британская пресса, контент-анализ, милитаризация, коронавирус, Вторая мировая война, опосредованная идентификация