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“Hybrid war(fare)” in the digital media under the national domain of the Republic of Croatia: a systematic review

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Abstract

Systematic reviews synthesize data from primary sources and offer a different form of insight into the problem. In this regard, the review presented provides results of a detailed analysis of digital media contents, available in national domain of the Republic of Croatia, that used the terms “hybrid war(fare)” – often a label of contemporary wars. It was undertaken in the early 2020 and considers the total of 360 individual contents identified using Google tools. Results provide information regarding the sources, frequencies as well as typical cases and types of information in which the terms appeared. Initially used for the right purpose use of these terms peaked by the end of 2017 when they became a sort of a buzzword that began to be abused. Therefore finally, the authors propose possible measures to efficiently counteract this problem likewise hoping that this evidence-based analysis contributed to the body of knowledge in the field.

Keywords

Analysis, Digital Media, Hybrid war(fare), Republic of Croatia, Systematic Review

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The labels *term* and *concept* will be used interchangeably in the context of the terms under consideration thought the paper.

Introduction

By then, to the general public, mostly unknown terms “hibridni rat” and “hibridno ratovanje”² spread through the Croatian media space by the end of 2017. Although these terms have existed globally for a longer time (Andersson and Tardy, 2015) and were not completely unknown to the public, as they have already been used sporadically (Marović, 2019), the wider audience in Croatia was confronted with their pervasive use only then. Interestingly, after a relatively short period of intense presence in the media, the use of the terms has almost ceased in similar way as it appeared.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the reasons that led to this phenomenon, the context of the situation at that time, and events that triggered this trend, it is interesting to look at both narrower and broader frame that certainly contributed to such developments. During observed time in Croatia, its closer environment and beyond were marked by number of on-going processes, each in its own stage of evolvement and associated intensity. Since a comprehensive listing of these processes is not the subject of this paper, as they here merely serve to give a notion of the circumstances present at that time that were relevant to the Croatian context, at this place we name some of the most important from the authors point of view:

- domestic: the Homeland War, Croatia’s membership and position within Euro-Atlantic integrations, crisis in the Agrokor group³, changes in the ruling coalition, etc.
- surrounding: permanent efforts of the EU aimed at further stabilization of the Balkan region, a continuous pursuit of integration of new members into Euro-Atlantic associations, Russian activity in South East Europe, ongoing disputes with neighbouring countries, the mutual interference in the internal political themes of neighbours, etc.

2 Equivalents of these terms in English language are “hybrid war” and “hybrid warfare”. In the rest of the paper they will be, at places where it is considered appropriate, abbreviated in a form „hybrid war(fare)”.

3 Agrokor was a conglomerate, largely centered in agribusiness, with headquarters in Zagreb, Croatia.

- broader: the apparent calming of the situation in Ukraine, the ongoing conflict in Syria, European migrant crisis, shift of administration in Washington, strengthening of the EU foreign, security and defence policy, etc.

According to the author’s judgment, the aforementioned and other factors formed preconditions that led to the later introduction of the concepts discussed in Croatian media space. In doing so, they did not necessarily directly influence the internal situation but rather led to the creation of an atmosphere in which the use of the above concepts seemed appropriate and soon intensified, which at a given moment resulted in its adoption into the domestic vocabulary.

At once popular and apparently suitable for use to those who have incorporated them into their own vocabulary, these terms have been misused in number of cases with a purpose we can only speculate on. While they were mostly used correctly by the representatives, especially in the initial phase after adoption, in certain cases part of them and the media handled them inappropriately. This was demonstrated also by the results of the analysis that are presented in this paper. Furthermore, posts from the analysed period indicate that these terms were sometimes used by the authors of the media inscriptions even in cases when the original authors whose statements were transmitted did not use them at all, or at least not exactly in that form. Practically, this has led to the frequent general abuse of the terms which are essentially problematic because they necessarily evoke, at least to the general public, primarily negative connotations. In doing so, everyone at that time had to be aware that this could (and probably did) cause a myriad of negative side effects.

Defining Hybrid war(fare)

In order to understand the broader context under discussion, at the beginning it is necessary to clearly define the terms whose occurrence and use are an integral part of the analysis that was conducted. However, already here a potential researcher encounters a problem because the terms “hybrid war” and “hybrid warfare” are not unambiguously defined (Hoffman, 2009;

Caliskan and Cramers, 2018). This should come as no surprise given its root term or concept – the “war” itself is not uniquely defined. In its narrow sense the war is understood as an armed conflict between two or more parties (typically the states or nations) that officially declared war on each other (Kende, 1971), and this type of relationship in the modern era is becoming increasingly rare (Hoffman, 2007). Nevertheless, this term is still used to characterize various conflicts.

Listed below are some of definitions of the terms “hybrid war(fare)” used by the relevant sources:

“New concept (that calls) for greatly expanded roles and missions for ... forces to support the political, informational and economic projections of national power, in addition to conventional military force, to achieve political objectives.” (Bond, 2007)

“We have defined hybrid warfare as conflict involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregular (guerrillas, insurgents, and terrorists), which could include both state and non-state actors, aimed at achieving a common political purpose.” (Murray and Mansoor, 2012)

“Despite the lack of a unified definition, ‘hybrid warfare’ can be characterized as a form of warfare, which comprises a mix of methods – conventional and unconventional, military and non-military, over and covert actions involving cyber and information warfare ‘aimed at creating confusion and ambiguity on the nature, the origin and the objective of these actions’.” (NATO StratCom, 2016)

Basically, a layman confronted with the definitions listed above or similar will easily find themselves in confusion. For sure, the important message received is that we are dealing with something that is heterogeneous in its nature (a “hybrid”), that it is a conflict of an indefinite scale (as there is no clear explanation when the “conflict”⁴ escalates into what we commonly call

4 The *conflict* is typically defined as a competitive or opposing action, mental struggle or the opposition of persons and forces and only then (in an archaic sense) in the context of warfare, as defined by <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conflict>

a “war”⁵) but definitely of a hostile nature, which could potentially pose a severe threat to general security.

Additional problems arise from the following facts: a) different relevant sources use different definitions; b) other various elements, typically complex by themselves and not completely unambiguous, are included in the definitions, and c) some of the definitions contradict other. The first statement is obvious from the definitions provided above. Next, the concepts like “projections of power”, “irregular forces” or “cyber and/or information warfare” already represent an amalgam of possible modes of action. And finally, from the information provided, it is unclear whether these necessarily involve both components, as the keyword “and” suggests (the conventional and unconventional, military and non-military, regular and irregular etc.), or in order to define it as such it is sufficient to have only one of the above mentioned components.

This is important so that it is possible to clearly distinguish when we are dealing with the threat⁶, conflict or some other type of event, and when it has evolved into what is standardly defined as war(fare).

Evolution of this type of war(fare)

The war has accompanied humanity since its earliest days. It is a manifestation of power in its brutal form. Although commonly associated with use of the armed forces and their kinetic modes of action, modern forms of conflict are diverse and do not necessarily take on these patterns. In the war, the modes of the applied force will depend on the goals that aimed to be achieved and the effects it seeks to produce. Therefore, in line with the development of

5 The *war* and *warfare* are defined as a states of open and declared armed hostile conflicts between states or nations, and hence typically imply a form of a military operations between enemies undertaken to weaken or destroy another, as defined by <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/war|warfare>

6 In literature the concept “hybrid threat” is sometimes used interchangeably with concepts “hybrid war(fare)”. This paper assumes that a hybrid threat is the threat that hybrid warfare will be waged by an adversary to another entity, as defined by (Tienhoven, 2016).

human society, modes of war(fare) have evolved as well. They changed from the traditional wars of states and nations to conflicts in which groups and alliances of various kinds, types and scales, joined by particular and common interests or ideas aim to realize their own interests.

However, modifying itself through time according to changing circumstances, in its essence the war(fare) did not change at all. It has always, and so does today, blended *“the violence and hatred, chance and probability and political considerations - elements that play out in the interaction of people, military forces, and governments”* as Clausewitz realized and noted long ago in his famous work *On War* (von Clausewitz, 2006). These can be seen as elements of war, which over time have only been altered and intertwined to take on the form of what we today call the modern war (Glenn, 2009).

Modern war is more than military operation, as it, above all, enlists every aspect of life (Townshend, 2000). The power and sophistication of weapons have increased through technological advancement. Alongside them, tactics and strategies evolved as well, and thus the “war” has become an ever growing threat to humanity. The question that is much more difficult to answer is whether the consciousness of individuals and society overall developed at least at an approximate rate. So, as the boundaries of private and public, national and global as well as the real and virtual faded, various new forms of warfare have developed penetrating into previously elusive spaces. Rapid development of information and communication technology over the past decades significantly changed the war landscape, opening new domains that changed those existing.

What is referred to as cyberspace is enabled and rests on information and communication infrastructure. Although there are isolated parts within it, on a general level it is increasingly interconnected in ways that cross geographical boundaries. This fact provides numerous benefits in terms of ease and speed of communication and other activities but it also raises a number of issues, foremost security ones. Considering that cyberspace operates on levels including that social (Morton, 2010), it has become an excellent platform for projecting a so-called “soft power” (Armitage and Nye, 2007), in time of universal connectivity. By operating through diplomatic,

economic, intelligence and other channels it is possible to achieve measurable objectives, if not greater than, those achieved by “hard” methods of coercion. A key platform and the one that enables action towards a broad audience is definitely the media. The media have always been a convenient mean of conducting information campaigns of every kind, those digital even more so.

Termed either “information operations”, the evermore popular “strategic communications”, by “a great word with an awful reputation – propaganda” or otherwise, which are by no means synonyms, they have always relied on the media as a means of delivering the messages, with the intent of having an effect – whether tactical, operational or strategic – on targeted audience (Ingram, 2016). Within this, the practice of binding of specific terms to certain types of messages by different actors is a known communication technique. The campaign is more likely to be successful if it is synchronized as that way it produces the cumulative effects.

Depending on who initiates it and for what purpose, the information campaigns may not necessarily have negative intentions. They can as well be aimed at informing the public about some important developments, thereby raising general awareness, for the purpose of protecting them. But it can also push the attitudes of majority towards undesirable directions, raise tensions, mislead or else. Irresponsible or hostile coverage by the media can violate even the most meaningful actions, in a way that the messages of those responsible that try to manage the situation become unrecognizable in the deafening flood of information. In these situations it becomes more difficult to distinguish the true information from fake, the essential from irrelevant, or even to take the right attitude towards a particular topic. In this way hostile actions achieve their purpose. Thus, the media can potentially become a platform for conducting hybrid activities.

Notion of the general perception of the terms in Croatia

Domestic scientific community has addressed the topic of hybrid war(fare) in various ways, this is confirmed by the works of several authors (Lesinger, 2017, Brzica, 2018, Ivanjek, 2018). On the other hand there is no formal research available on the perception of these terms in the Republic of Croatia, at least according to the current authors' knowledge. Among other things, this is an indicator how this important issue has been treated. At least the academic community is aware of what this phenomenon is about, but it seems, that for some reason they did not investigate how it had reflected in the general public. This could serve as a guideline for some further research on this topic, as from the academic standpoint it is absolutely necessary to address this question as well.

What we are left with at the moment, or perhaps it is better to say what is available and deals with the issue, is a short article and an associated video of the *ad-hoc* survey conducted on the streets of Croatian capital Zagreb and provided on the site of one domestic portal⁷. The authors of a survey asked random passers-by a simple question: *"Have you heard of hybrid war and do you know what it is?"*. Bellow, we quote some of the answers in the order of their appearance:

- interviewee #1 (lady): *"No."*
- interviewee #2 (young gentleman): *"Nope."*
- interviewees #3 (group of girls): *"We did not. What did you say ...?"*
- interviewee #4 (lady): *"No."*
- interviewee #5 (lady): *"I have not. I haven't heard of it."*
- interviewee #6 (young gentleman): *"Well no. I mean I don't know what it is. The public is not familiar ... It is some story between them. They are at war (simulates quotation marks) and we know nothing."*
- interviewee #7 (lady): *"I have heard but I don't know what that means because I have not heard (from anyone) an explanation of this term."*

⁷ VIDEO: DO YOU KNOW WHAT A HYBRID WAR IS? *"I've heard of hybrid corn, and this is something politicians have invented. Just so there are no hybrid women ... "*, Available at: <https://100posto.jutarnji.hr/news/ne-bojim-se-hibridnog-rata-ni-hibridne-hrane-samo-da-ne-bude-hibridnih-zena> [Accessed March 05, 2020]

- interviewee #8 (gentleman) *“Yes, yes. Well, it’s easy to hide behind some formulations. Beyond that, it can be anything. But I’m not very impressed. It is used by politicians to impress people. It should be taken with ‘caution’.”*
- interviewee #8 (lady): *“That’s ... What is his name ... Todorić complained that everyone conspired against him. Everyone is arguing, SDP, HDZ, whoever ... I have no idea: who, why, how, ... That’s it.”*
- interviewee #9 (gentleman): *“Hybrid war, I know. Yes, yes. Computers ... propaganda ... against the state. They quarrel in parties and like that. That’s it. Giving false information.”*

Based on the answers provided in the interview, considering that it is still an unrepresentative sample of respondents, one can already get the impression that the wider audience: a) for the most part have not heard of the terms “hybrid war(fare)”, b) that they are completely unaware of their exact meaning and/or c) they cannot define the terms clearly enough to be able to reliably judge events related to them. Also, it is apparent that part of the public that was able to recognize the terms is not satisfied with the fact that though heard it i.e. it was used, they were never informed about their exact meaning. Finally, it is evident that some respondents associate the terms with political and economic developments at that moment.

The author’s assumption is that, this perception is at least partially the result of the ways in which the representatives communicated publicly on a range of topics, and sometimes needlessly used these terms. On the other hand it is obvious, as it can be deduced from the analysis of the available contents, that the digital media were the ones that quickly adopted the terms and started to use them in numerous cases uncritically. This way the terms “hybrid war” and “hybrid warfare” became a kind of buzzwords, similar to how this happened elsewhere (Tienhoven, 2016). As it turned out, they were used even in situations when in reality, original content that was transmitted did not mention them, or in reality, other similar terms were used and were afterwards replaced at various places with then popular “hybrid war(fare)”. This caused multiple side effects, and as it is evident from the analysis, one of the most dangerous was the general public confusion.

Terms “Hybrid war(fare)” in Croatian digital media

This section presents the details of a systematic review that has been performed as a part of the research. The research approach followed strict guidelines for conducting analysis of this type. Review protocol applied a content search and extraction pattern, using a popular online search engine that was conducted within the national domain of the Republic of Croatia. In this way authors were able to identify, collect and process the content that provides examples in which the term was used. The review has attempted to collect all available digital media contents within the designated domain that included the terms “hibridni rat” and “hibridno ratovanje”. Therefore it covers the timeframe defined by the time the collecting took place and backwards to the earliest published material found. In addition, the analysis provides the information regarding the sources, frequencies as well as the typical cases in which the terms appeared in the media and other.

Review Protocol

Systematic reviews are performed for the purpose of synthesizing the data from the primary data sources. They are aimed at providing a detailed insight into the state of the topic being analysed. Unlike traditional reviews which typically apply informal methods in order to provide summaries of evidence on a given topic, systematic reviews are conducted in accordance with sound guidelines. This kind of analysis therefore implies a comprehensive search of primary sources related with the topics being analysed, their selection using clear and reproducible criteria and synthesis of results based on a clearly defined goals.

Steps used to conduct systematic review of this kind can be summarized as follows: 1. defining the purpose for conducting the review, 2. establishing strict rules for its implementation, 3. exhaustive search for data sources and their identification, 4. extraction and storing of the data, 5. inspection and alignment of the data, 6. analyses, enrichment and synthesis of the results, and finally their 7. interpretation and reporting of the review results. In case of multiple terms and/or reviewers steps 3-5 are repeated. The protocol used

to conduct this systematic review can therefore be summarized as shown in Figure 1.

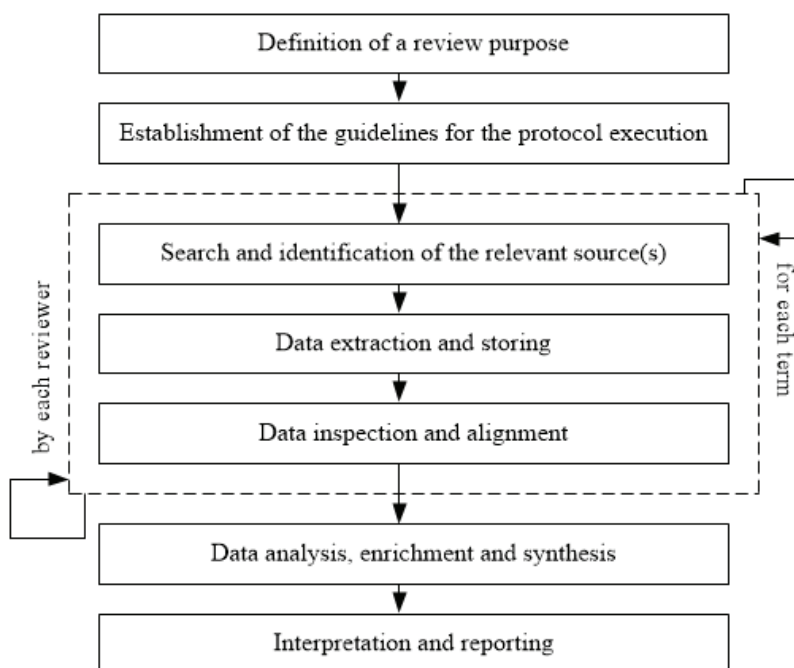


Figure 1. Systematic review protocol

Method and tools

Assuming that majority of the media content today is provided and disseminated in digital format, that resides on the servers remaining mostly and is therefore permanently available to the users either directly (on web portals) or indirectly (via search engines) online, the method used to collect the data for the review was the following.

Initially, it aimed at identifying the interest of general population for the content that includes terms of “hybrid war” and “hybrid warfare”⁸ – for this

⁸ For the purpose of the study at this point both terms in english i.e. „hybrid war“ and „hybrid warfare“ (for the world wide scope) and their Croatian equivalents i.e. „hibridni rat“ and „hibridno ratovanje“ (for the scope of Croatia) were considered.

purpose Google Trends tool was used. It allowed analyses of search queries for all categories, across whole world and specifically for the Croatian region, within the period Jan. 01, 2004 – Mar. 23, 2020. The end date is when the data was collected, while the initial date is the maximum possible backward shift supported by the service. This way it was possible to acquire and compare the specified search magnitudes.

Thereafter, the goal was to identify actual digital contents that included the terms⁹ considered and that was published within national domain of the Republic of Croatia (.hr) and to collect associated metadata. This was performed using the Google Search engine. In order to restrict the search to .hr domain and the contents containing exactly the terms of interests (avoiding other combinations) search queries were structured in the following format: `site:.hr "hibridni rat" / site:.hr "hibridno ratovanje"`. The reasons for using this form of query structuring are evident from the variations of the search results that are presented in the Table 1.

Table 1. Search result in numbers

Query ¹		References ²
hibridni rat hibridno ratovanje	433	109
"hibridni rat" "hibridno ratovanje"	394	99
site:.hr "hibridni rat" site:.hr "hibridno ratovanje"	287 ³	292 ³
	175 ⁴	185 ⁴

¹ Term entered in search form; ² Number of links (URLs);

³ After including omitted search results; ⁴ Duplicates removed

Discussion about the specifics of how Google Search works is not the subject of this paper. However, it is worth noting that it is the most popular web search engine that dominates the market in all counties and on any device (desktop, mobile and tablets). The reason is that Google uses sophisticated algorithms to deliver accurate and trusted search results to the users. Further

⁹ At this point exclusively terms in Croatian language were considered i.e. „hibridni rat“ and „hibridno ratovanje“, as the review at this phase focused on identifying the contents posted and written in .hr domain.

on, the important idea behind its implementation is that websites referenced by other websites deserve higher ranking in search results. The above was an argument that led the authors to select the specified tools and services for the purpose of conducting the research. The content collected and analysed this way is relevant and provides a quality insight into the matter being investigated.

The last concern, before going into detailed analysis of the digital media content, was to collect the metadata related to the contents. Given that we have previously formed queries and obtained the search results (175 for “hibridni rat” and 185 for “hibridno ratovanje”), the prerequisite for any further analyses was to collect URLs that locate the contents. Dealing with a relatively large amount number of results, instead of manual collection, authors took advantage of SEOquake10 plugin capability. This plugin is highly customizable that loads into the Google Chrome browser and allows export of various webpage’s parameters.

For the purpose of this study we used SEOquake just to collect the paths to the content more efficiently, while we left other options aside for some further research. Once this was done, a step further has been taken to collect relevant information for this research such as the names of sites where the content was hosted, time when it was published and so on. An important step was also to associate the posts, based on the preview of the content, to the categories defined for the purpose of this research. Details regarding this will be discussed in more details in the upcoming sections.

Identifying Search Trends

As noted earlier, for the purpose of the study the Google Trends service was used to gain the insight into the search interest of the users for the analysed terms, during the specified time period and over different geographical regions. This service provides information about the popularity of the search queries in Google Search across regions and languages. The data is presented in forms of graphs that compare the search volumes of different

10 More details available at: <https://www.seoquake.com/welcome/index.html#welcome>

queries over time. While interpreting the data, one should keep in mind that these numbers represent the search interest relative to the highest point on the chart. This means that a value of “100” on the graph represents a moment of peak popularity of the term, value of “50” half the popularity and value of “0” indicates no data. Hence, this service does not provide the exact quantities i.e. we don’t know how many queries there were, how many results the users received as we don’t know which results they got – only the dynamics of interest over the time.

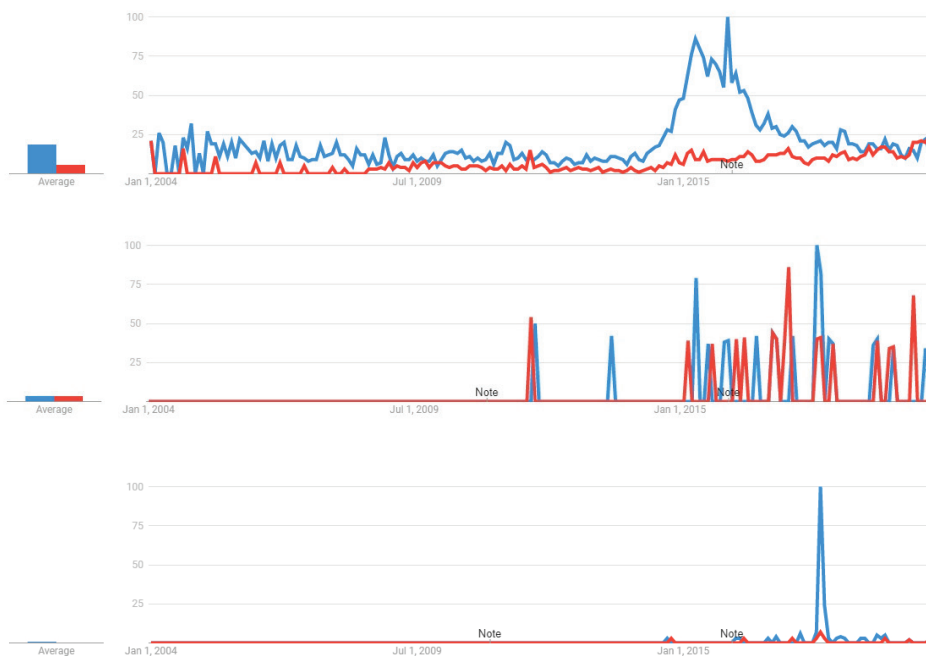


Figure 2.The search trends provided by Google Trends (from top to bottom):
 a) “hybrid war (blue line)/hybrid warfare (red line)” (Worldwide);
 b) “hybrid war(blue line)/hybrid warfare (red line)” (Croatia);
 c) “hibridni rat (blue line)/hibridno ratovanje (red line)” (Croatia).

Search trends reveal that interest for the aforementioned terms appeared in Croatia much later then globally. While trends show a continuous and then upwards trend on a worldwide scale, these terms and associated contents

were seldom searched in Croatia. Then, from the 2015 onwards, such queries for English terms are recorded. In contrast, their equivalents in Croatian language are hardly searched for at all. However, by the end of 2017 the explosion of search interest for these terms was recorded.

All this points to the fact that analysed terms have been unknown to the domestic public for a long time and then, due to certain developments, were imported into the public space and maintained for a certain time becoming a widely used buzzword.

A closer look at the acquired data provides us the information about the average search interest for the analysed terms over the period that the review is considering. Additionally, on the timeline it is possible to determine the dates and the indication of the magnitude of the associated interest. This is summarized in the results presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary result for analysed search trends

Term	GeoLocation	Search interest	
		Average for the period ¹	Highest / on the Date
hybrid war	Worldwide	19	100 / Dec. 2015
hybrid warfare	Worldwide	6	24 / Feb. 2020
hybrid war	Croatia	4	100 / Nov. 2017
hybrid warfare	Croatia	4	86 / Apr. 2017
hibridni rat	Croatia	1	100 / Nov 2017
hibridno ratovanje	Croatia	N/A ²	7 / Nov 2017

¹ Period the review is considering refers to is Jan. 01, 2004 – Mar. 23, 2020; ² information not available

Analyses of the Digital Media Content

This section summarizes the results of the analyses carried out on the collected data. The following indicators were considered: the *timeline* – provides insight into the amount of content published in relation to time; *sites* – lists the sites that hosted the contents, ranked descending based on the

amount of content; *case* – presents data about the association of individual content to a particular context; *conflict* – specifies the type of conflict involved and the *infotype* – classifies the type of information the content primarily belongs to. Details follow in the relevant sections below; note that the analysis provides results for the content associated with search results of both terms considered in the review.

Timeline. The timeline presents the quantity for the identified contents relative to the period the review is considering. It provides an indication of the amount of publicly available content disposed across platforms. This is provided in Figure 3.

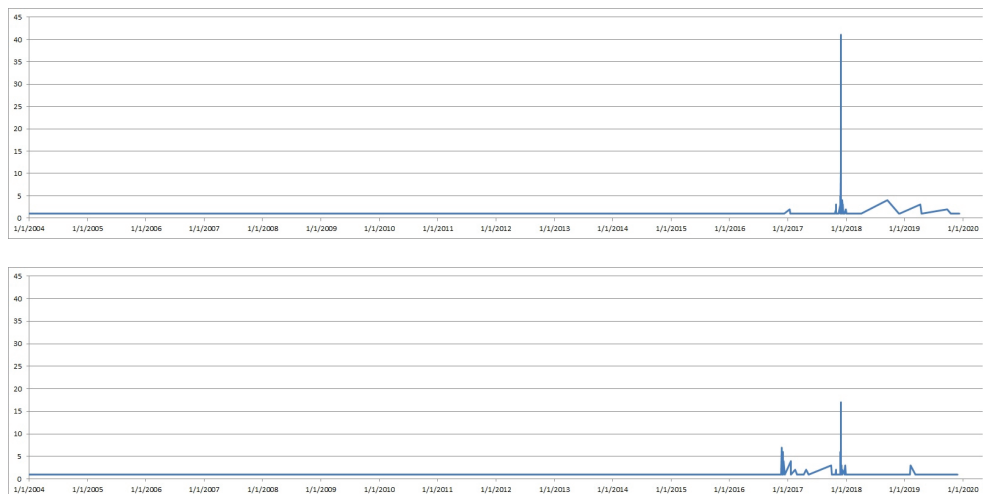


Figure 3. The timeline for both
a) “hibridni rat” (top) and b) “hibridno ratovanje” (bottom)

Comparing these graphs with those generating by Google Trends (Figure 2 c) it is evident that the amount of published content in the observed time generally follows the curve of recorded interest present in Croatia at that time. In case of Google Trends that interest was recorded in a form of the intensity of search trend for the content under consideration.

Sites. This parameter identifies the sites i.e. portals that hosted the identified content. After inspection of the collected records a total of 46 portals were

identified maintaining the posts containing the terms “hibridni rat”, in comparison with 63 portals that hosted the contents associated with the term “hibridno ratovanje”. Representation of the distribution of the contents on corresponding sites is available in Figure 4.

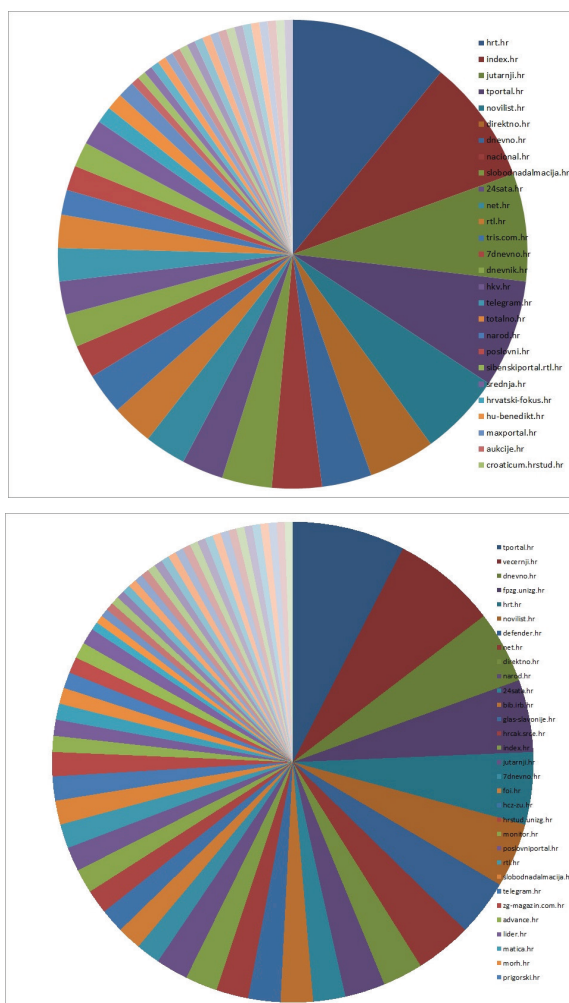


Figure 4. The distribution of sites hosting the contents: a) “hibridni rat” (top) and b) “hibridno ratovanje” (bottom)

At this moment it is not our intention to provide the complete lists of portals, but to note their absolute numbers. What is worth noting is the distribution of content across portals and in this regard their rating with respect to number of published titles that contained analysed terms. Related to this we list the top five portals based on the incidence of both terms: “hibridni rat” – hrt.hr (19); index.hr (15); jutarnji.hr, tportal.hr (13); novilist.hr (10), direktno.hr (8) and for “hibridno ratovanje” – tportal.hr (14); vecernji.hr (13); dnevno.hr, fpzg.unizg.hr, hrt.hr (9); novilist.hr (8); defender.hr, net.hr (7).

It is evident from the lists that the sites involved mainly belonged to the group of news portals, which is in line with the expectations. In both cases, the state news service is highly ranked but it is closely followed by privately owned portals. Also, it is interesting to note that among the group of sites hosting the contents that included the term “hibridno ratovanje”, the web portal of the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Zagreb was highly ranked. This is a clear indication that these topics were not exclusively addressed by news providers but academic community was also actively involved.

Cases. This classification reveals the *cases* that the analysed content indicated in context of the terms “hibridni rat” and “hibridno ratovanje”. The cases were designed and the individual contents associated with them, after a process of their detailed review. They act as a kind of containers of a similar content. This procedure was carried out in three steps: the first step included an initial review of the entire content, the second included detection of the contents that dealt with similar topics. At this place, in order to associate them, the so called “cases” were formed. During the last step, the individual content was assigned to a particular case. Tables 3 and 4 provide lists of the top *cases* and the number of related contents for both terms.

Table 3. Top cases and number of associated contents for “hibridni rat”

Case	[n]	Case	[n]
General	76	RU > UA	2
N/A ¹	19	SSB ³ > HR	2
Agrokor	16	SMS	2
Other ²	11	ME > HR	1
Multiple	9	PL <> RU	1
Diploma	7	RU > EU	1
RU > DE	4	RU > BA	1
BA > HR	3	RU > US	1
RU > West	3	RU > ME	1
? > ME	2	RU and ISIS > EU	1
RS > BA	2	...	
RU > Balkan	2		

¹ not applicable; ² meaningless use of the term; ³ SSB = SI, RS and BA

* Two-letter country codes designate countries by using ISO 3166-1 alpha-2 standard

A significant number of cases belong to the “General” group. These are the contents that use the terms but never refer to any particular entity from which one could determine to whom the activity was directed. This category includes numerous inscriptions that discuss the terms themselves and the meaning behind them. The next two most numerous cases were “N/A”, the one that contains contents that could not be classified, and case “Multiple” as a form of a case that included the contents which could be categorized into multiple categories. So it was decided to create a unique one.

Table 4. Top cases and number of associated contents for “hibridno ratovanje”

Case	[n]	Case	[n]
General	95	Free Media	1
N/A ¹	39	HR and US > BA	1
Multiple	17	Referendum	1
Other ²	4	RU > ChUAW ⁴	1
Hague	2	RU > NATO	1
Parliament	2	RU > PL	1
RU > BA	2	RU > RO	1
RU > EU and NATO	2	RU > UA and fEb ⁴	1
SSB ³ > HR	2	RU > US	1
Budapest	2	RU > West	1
Assets	1	RS > HR	1
East Neighbours > RH	1	...	

¹ not applicable; ² meaningless use of the term; ³ SSB = SI, RS and BA; ⁴ ChUAW = Chechenia, Ukraine and the West; ⁴ fEb = former East bloc countries

* Two-letter country codes designate countries by using ISO 3166-1 alpha-2 standard

Cases were in certain situations named after the topic they are dealing with (typical representative is “Agrokor” case) and more often in a form of a compound tags that indicate the relationship of the hybrid war(fare) activity of one or more states or organizations towards another (here instead of full names abbreviations were used). This relation marker “>” indicating the direction of hybrid activity is mostly unidirectional although there is also an example of mutual type of relationship, like in case of Poland and Russia (marked as “PL <> RU”). Sometimes the content using these terms indicated the hybrid activity towards other entity but without explicitly stating the source from which this activity originated (case “? > ME”) and so forth.

Summing up the total relations that have been determined, it is evident that they can be classified into the categories of the so called *internal* and *external* cases. The “internal” part of the scene was largely dominated by the themes like “Agrokor” and/or disputes between political parties and individuals. On the other hand the “external” cases were mostly filled with the content that dealt with undisputed or claimed Russian influence towards different actors.

Conflicts. The type of conflict basically indicates orientation of the hybrid activity. It was determined by analysing the content after which it became apparent what type of conflict, or at least its indication, we were dealing with. The categories are: “Internal”, “External”, “Mixture”, “Outside-In”, “Inside-Out” and “N/A”. Figure 5 shows the distribution of conflict types over the categories.

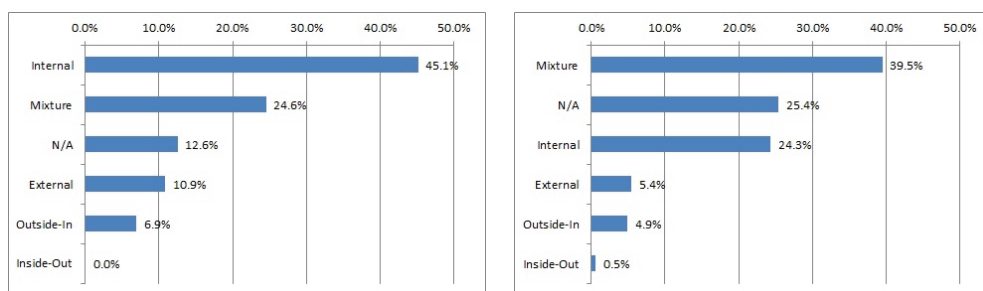


Figure 5. Display of the percentage distribution of conflict types for defined categories, for: a) “hibridni rat” (left) and b) “hibridno ratovanje” (right)

Defined categories are explained next. The category “Internal” indicates the content dealing with internal Croatian issues. Typical representative of this category are posts that used the terms “hibridni rat” or “hibridno ratovanje”, and sometimes both, in clashes among different political parties or fractions of a particular party. “External” category refers to the contents dealing with foreign factors (states, groups, etc.) that do not explicitly include Croatia. The “Outside-In” category is assigned to the content that uses the terms in context of foreign threat directed towards Croatia. On the opposite side, the category “Inside-Out” belongs to the content mentioning Croatia in the context of acting towards someone else. Clearly, “N/A” is reserved for the cases that cannot be assigned to any of the types listed.

InfoTypes. The last classification separates the content based on the type of information in question (Figure 6), the division is as follows. The “Comment” was the most numerous category of the information type, that represented the content posted in the media including the analysed terms, and that was written by journalists or authors known as editors, bloggers, etc. The authors of a comment typically discussed the particular topic related to the terms in question.

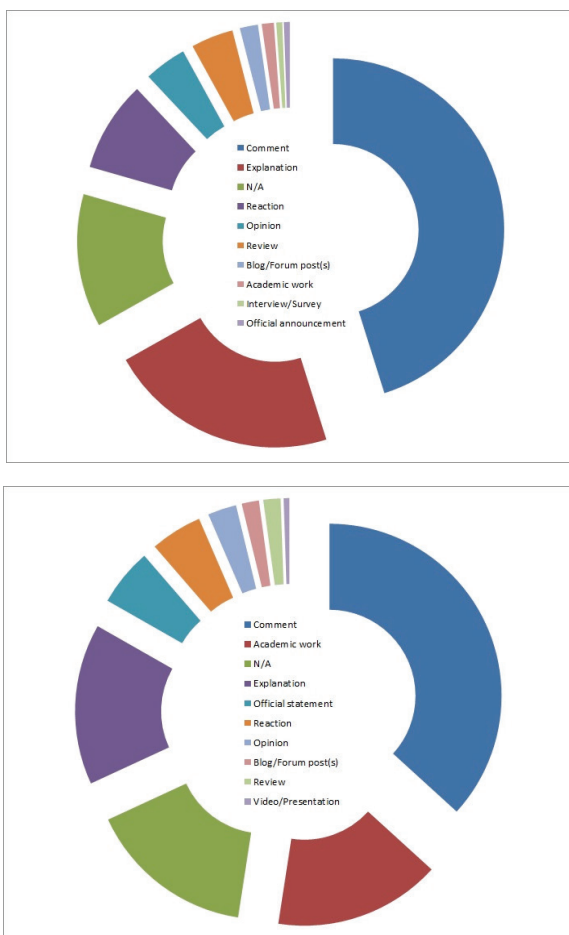


Figure 6. The types of information provided by the contents for: a) “hibridni rat” (top) and b) “hibridno ratovanje” (bottom)

The “explanation” refers to the (point of) view or opinion usually presented by the expert in the field. The experts who “explained” usually came from the ranks of university professors, security experts, scientists, etc. The “reaction” is a verbal or written response of, typically an individual, to an event, media caption, callout or the like containing the analysed terms. The “opinion” is someone’s (usually politician’s, member of a parliamentary party, association, etc.) expressed judgment in the media in which the terms discussed appeared. The “review” category stands for a type of content that is a form of a formal assessment i.e. evaluation of statement, event, or similar, related to the terms considered. Other “InfoTypes” such as “blog/forum posts”, “academic work”, “interviews” and “surveys” are types of information believed to be self-explanatory and familiar to the reader.

Discussion

Based on the review performed the authors want to point at the development of the usage of these terms, as they have entered the media space and how they became a sort of a buzzword that started to be abused. Furthermore, the authors will try to determine whether a hybrid war(fare) was actually present in Croatia at the observed time and finally emphasize the limitations of the review.

Use of the Terms

From the outcomes of the performed analysis we can conclude that in early stages, that is, initially when they were just beginning to enter the vocabulary, these terms were used in the proper context. At a time, they were mostly used by government officials in an attempt to point out certain existing activities, events and phenomena. Essentially, it was about presenting initiatives that came from the European Union level, aiming at protecting its space from hybrid activities. The primary concern here was the protection against Russian influence which it had faced in recent years. Such announcements were not so numerous but they had a strong resonance within the general public. In part, the reason for this was that most of ordinary citizens only

then were confronted with the use of terms “hibridni rat” and “hibridno ratovanje”. Partly astonished and partly surprised many sought clarification of their meaning.

What followed was a series of materials and discussions as well as television shows that including a number of experts invited to explain what this was really about. As expected, a numerous reactions followed as more and more both public and media became interested and involved in discussion. At that moment the exponential increase of published materials was filling the media space. This took place in the last months of 2017. At that time, most of the content still maintained the required level of objectivity.

Unfortunately, this period was followed by what conditionally can be called the third and last phase. It was characterized by the general decline in expertise and professionalism in approaching the problem. At that moment numerous media began to abuse the terms involved, simply because citing them was a great way to gain attention. In the flood of the contents of various types, the impression of relevance of the problem was lost. This coincided with the moment of peak number of publications per time during the observed period. This way the important message was somehow “drowned” in the overall noise present at that time. As in many cases, once consumed, such messages simply lost their potential for the popular media. This brought it back to a virtually similar position it initially had – and that is back into the hands of experts who are competent to deal with the issue. The analysed content dominantly remains available online thanks to the technological platform through which it was published.

Hybrid War(fare) is (not) present in Croatia

Strictly speaking, and given the criteria that every conflict has to fulfil in order to be considered a “war(fare)” (Cullen and Reichborn-Kjennerud, 2017; Mladenović, 2016), the authors of this paper can claim with a considerable certainty that there were no events of that kind in Croatia during the period this research is considering. This premise is primarily based on the fact that the presence of armed forces of other countries, either regular or irregular, was not detected at Croatian territory or at least was not publicly disclosed.

In short, if there are no occupation troops on the ground nor the state of war declared, there are no elements to claim the presence of war in its classical sense.

On the other hand, considering the nature of a modern war(fare), the same situation can be viewed differently. As we stated in the introductory part of the paper, within the observed period, the situation not only on Croatian territory but also in a number of other state aspects (diplomatic, economic, etc.) was characterized by a number of circumstances and events that can be characterized as threats. Some of these can undoubtedly be related to what is in literature termed as a projection of “soft power” (Nye, 2009) which in addition to the aforementioned forms of war, may also include media, intelligence and various other activities. The advancement of society, primarily in the technological segment, has made this type of activities possible and increasingly present, while at the same time difficult to identify, especially when compared with what is considered as traditional modes of war(fare).

Given that and considering the nature of contemporary conflicts, the authors take the right to conclude that within the observed circumstances it is not convenient to talk about the acts of war in its narrow sense. What can be argued, with a sufficient amount of certainty, is that within the analysed period it was possible to detect elements of what can be characterized as a form of influence operations targeted towards general public. Since these fit into the so called hybrid modes of action, it can be stated that hybrid activates were present at a time.

Limitations of the Study

Before moving on to the concluding part of the paper, authors consider it necessary to point out certain limitations of this study. They serve to emphasize the boundaries of this work but also to provide guidelines and encourage future research in this field.

First, the review intended to analyse the contents under the Croatian national domain (.hr). This way only a segment of the content existing in the digital media space of the Republic of Croatia was identified. A significant amount

of other contents that uses the terms “hibridni rat” and “hibridno ratovanje” is hosted elsewhere, especially on platforms of neighbouring countries. For the purpose of this study the analysis had to be narrowed primarily due to the fact that wider analysis would require significantly greater resources and effort not available at the moment.

Another important limitation is the fact that search was performed using the terms “hibridni rat” and “hibridno ratovanje”. Due to the fact that Croatian language has seven cases the search has not been performed for the different forms of these collocations. Their forms are: “hibridnog rata”, “hibridnom ratu”, etc. ... as well as “hibridnog ratovanja”, “hibridnom ratovanju”, etc. Identification of the digital contents that uses these terms requires additional analysis.

Finally, the identification of the contents was based on the results acquired using Google services. They were selected based on the functionality they provide, which was suitable for implementation of this study, as well as their popularity. Certainly a similar research could have been conducted using some other services. Comparison of the results would certainly be interesting, so this is also guidance for potential future work.

Instead of conclusions

Analysing the statements primarily provided by the government representatives we can conclude that the terms “hybrid war” and “hybrid warfare” were used in the digital media space at that time primarily with purpose of drawing attention to certain facts and ongoing events that characterized that period. Viewed from the time distance, their application was probably aimed at raising public awareness and kind of mobilization of the public for the purpose of protecting national interest. Undoubtedly, in the confusion that was created, there were statements that could have been communicated more properly. Most of these are result of live access to media, usually in the form of answers to direct questions at press conferences and similar events, at which an immediate response was expected. It is understandable that in these situations a lack of wording or formulations may occur, which are later perpetuated in the media.

On the other hand, the media’s approach to this topic was quite diverse. From the content it is evident that the part of the media sought to convey the messages in their original form. Some posts were accompanied by an unbiased view of either authors or invited commentators concerning the topic. In these cases, the commentators were competent professionals such as university professors, analysts, or experts of various profiles specialized in the field. This formed what we may refer to as relevant and thus desirable volume of media contents. On the other hand, the review detected a certain amount of irrelevant content that followed in which terms were misused.

Based on the above, it is possible to provide a form of guidance or better to say suggestions for dealing with the situation similar to the one described. At first place it can be argued that by strengthening state and government mechanisms through institutions, regulations, services, etc. it is possible to efficiently tackle the problem of hybrid threats. It is clear that the ongoing overload with contents and the continuous flow of information is hard to cope with, even for the media. However, the best way to oppose the negative intentions wherever they came from is through professionalism, objectivity, source verification and above all, the critical approach of each individual. Development of skills that enable us to distinguish between others’ opinions or fake *info* from what the actual truth is seems to be the best way to protect ourselves and the community at large. This requires everyone to remain informed but critical consumers, the ones that constantly review and reassess facts.

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