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FOREWORD

The Spring of 2018 has brought into sharp focus how differently states pursue strategic communications. One particular incident, more spy novel than grand politics, would have far reaching consequences beyond its original intent. In March a former Russian double agent and his daughter were poisoned using the military-grade nerve agent Novichok, apparently smeared on the door handle of his home in Salisbury, England. Sergei Skripal, a retired colonel with Russian military intelligence, had previously been sentenced to prison in Moscow for 13 years as a British spy. Subsequently, he was exchanged in a spy swap. As dramatic as the murder attempt was, the aftermath would prove even more revealing.

In a letter to NATO's Jens Stoltenberg, the UK's National Security Adviser, Sir Mark Sedwill concluded that it was 'highly likely' that Russia was responsible. Only they, he suggested, had the 'technical means, operational experience and the motive'. Events had anyway already taken their rapid course. 23 Russian diplomats were expelled from Britain. Moscow responded in kind, expelling the same number of British representatives while closing Britain's public diplomacy arm, the British Council. A further 20 Western nations, including European Union countries, expressed solidarity with Britain, expelling Russian diplomatic staff. The US alone sent 60 home, identifying them as intelligence agents.

This diplomatic merry-go-round of signalling needs to be understood in the wider context of how states seek to shape the discursive environment

and influence international audiences. According to the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, some 32 divergent accounts explaining the Skripal attack are in circulation, ranging from the bizarre to the bewildering. They can be traced to Russia's information services, experts reveal. In earlier issues of Defence Strategic Communications, authors have discussed the strategies behind Russian disinformation campaigns. These are understood by many scholars and practitioners to aim at clouding the facts rather than direct rebuttal. Having been offered competing versions of the truth, wrapped in a post-modernist justification that argues no single truth can exist, audiences will presumably be wrong-footed in attributing cause to effect. At least, sufficient numbers of people could be misled to undermine the value of evidence-based reporting.

Another event followed soon after the Skripal affair during the Spring of 2018. The government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad carried out chemical attacks on its own citizens in Douma, a rebel-held town northeast of Damascus. Civil society observers noted two bombardments by the Syrian Air Force, and journalists interviewed survivors. Hundreds of victims were brought to medical facilities, suffering the apparent effects of chemical poisoning; some died. Video footage appeared to support the accusation. The following week the US, UK, and France responded by launching more than 100 missiles against sites in Syria thought to be chemical weapons facilities. This in turn drew condemnation from Russia's President Vladimir Putin, who characterised the strikes as an 'act of aggression', predicting they would have 'a destructive effect on the entire system of international relations'. Some analysts suggested the timing and targeting of these strikes had been undertaken following consultation between US and Russian militaries, presumably with the intention of avoiding Russian casualties and limiting any geopolitical escalation. In short, performance politics.

Meanwhile, the Syrian president, commenting on claims he had targeted his population, declared 'It was a lie...This did not happen'. Apparently, the government had not bombed its own people with chemical weapons. And Moscow was swift to corroborate his statement. Sergei Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister claimed to have 'irrefutable evidence' of 'yet another attack staged with the participation of special services of one state that is striving to be at the forefront of the Russophobic campaign.' In late April, both Syrian and Russian diplomats presented in The Hague to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the body that scientifically verifies any use of chemical weapons. In a briefing that included as witnesses, citizens from Douma

and an 11 year-old boy who had been famously captured on camera while being hosed down for chemical contamination, allegations of a chemical attack were refuted.

What these episodes highlight for contributors and readers of this journal is the rapidly changing use of information, misinformation, and disinformation at the heart of contemporary politics. Indeed, connecting the local to the national to the geopolitical. Where once we focused on the message and the messenger, increasingly our attention should turn to where overlapping discursive environments are being contested. This development calls for more than separating truth from untruth. Rather it is about appreciating that the perception of truth determines what is believed—right or wrong—and the consequent relationship between governments' hard won credibility and their legitimacy. In this era of mass-distributed consumer devices, ownership of smartphones will soon become universal. How global populations as producers and receivers of communications engage with governments then becomes critical. Political developments witnessed during the Spring of 2018 have been all too glibly labelled Information Wars. This is to misunderstand the complexity of what is unfolding before our eyes. A multi-tiered yet frequently organic positioning of ideas and values. Power in today's world is multipolar. The national interest increasingly informs how states choose to exercise it. For too long strategic communications as a field of inquiry has been unduly concerned with tactics, techniques, even technologies. Yet it is the dynamic interplay between strategy and tactics—how to influence the bigger picture—and contiguous, multiple communications environments that today invites greater reflection from scholars, policy makers, and practitioners.

This fourth issue of Defence Strategic Communications continues our mission to develop the field of strategic communications by digging more rigorous and critical foundations. Only then can we develop the richer thinking necessary to address those questions for which we are currently underprepared. In these pages we present an eclectic blend of original research. Between 2011 and 2017, the CNN journalist Robyn Kriel experienced at close quarters Somalia's al-Shabaab communicators. Her insights into how the insurgent group uses Twitter, and more pointedly how it has shaped a forward-thinking approach to engage with journalists, only highlights how Somalia's successive governments and intervention forces, like the UN-backed African Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), have failed to make similar gains in public support. The Kenyan military's denial

of its casualties on the ground is frequently undermined by evidence recorded as part of al-Shabaab's visualisation of the conflict. States seem slower than their challengers to learn the lesson from political communications that credibility is key. Kriel points to a striking failure on their part as much as to any inspired success of al-Shabaab.

Alastair Reed and Jennifer Dowling of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) pick up the theme of insurgent communications, turning their attention to how extremist groups use historical narratives when shaping their propaganda. Employing the analytical lens of a 'competitive system of meaning', they highlight the interaction between two constructs—in-group/out-group identity, and crisis/solution. These work in mutually reinforcing dichotomies to create a credible account of a movement's history and *raison d'être*.

Using newly accessible archives, historian Gatis Krūmiņš offers a World War 2 and Cold War perspective on how the Soviet Union expropriated the economic benefits of Latvia's economy to the advantage of Moscow. Contributions from Latvia's industrial output to its own national economy were downplayed. By re-categorising, then reframing its industrial-agricultural balance, Latvia was portrayed bureaucratically, then publicly as a rural economy in need of Moscow's munificence.

Humour is one of the less familiar tools discussed in the world of strategic communications. But for scholars Žaneta Ozoliņa, Jurgis Šķilters, and Sigita Struberga, it is one of the most potent. They argue that political humour coalesces a shared knowledge among the viewership, and they profile *Rossija 1* [Россия 1] television's cabaret-style broadcast—*Novogodnij parad zvezd* or The New Year's Parade of Stars. Central to the success of the programme is the reinforcement of a 'common historical memory and an understanding of social structure based on the elements of the Soviet system [that] are the common ground upon which the idea of the "Russian World" is built', perhaps understandable for a national celebration of New Year's Eve that dates back to the days of Stalin's Great Purge. Today, however, the authors conclude that the show is used as a way of strengthening perceived legitimacy of the government and of weakening any external enemy in line with Russia's foreign policy.

Media researcher Natalya Kovaleva looks at Russia's information space with a fresh eye, especially to Western readers. She combs the archive to chart

the vigorous debates inside Russia's universities around different ways of conceptualising the Russian information space, a pressing issue at a time when networked forms of globalised media disseminate ideas and information, and challenge hierarchical state structures of command and control. The author identifies a tension between more conceptual ways of theorising how information flows in today's world and the demands of sovereignty still defined by its geographical borders.

Nitin Agarwal and Kiran Kumar Bandeli draw on their research in information and computer sciences to examine how blogs that operate in the virtual space create disinformation campaigns before disseminating them through social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and VKontakte. Using cyber forensics and social network analysis, their work reveals what they describe as a 'massive disinformation campaign pertaining to the Baltic region'.

Two review essays tackle timely topics. Communications and policy adviser John Williams makes a plea for us to understand the idea of 'non-information' or the absence of information—a critical factor, which he identifies at the heart of Britain's Brexit crisis. Much attention has been paid to information, misinformation (unwittingly spreading erroneous information), and disinformation (deliberately spreading erroneous information to subvert the political status quo)—see *Fake News: A Roadmap* by King's Centre for Strategic Communications & the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. But the absence of reliable evidence on which populations are expected to make historic decisions about their democracies has gone relatively unnoticed.

Meanwhile Charles Kriel, an adviser to the British Parliament, looks at the growing divergence between Europe and the rest of the world around data protection for the individual whether in private, professional, or public life. He characterises the European model as one driven by human rights; others, including states such as the USA and China, see privacy and data protection from the perspective of industrial sectors—by contrast, consumer rights. This line of inquiry leads him to a discussion of China's new Social Credit System. In a society of accelerating digital surveillance, each individual's behaviour will carry a score of rewards and demerits. Each citizen will shape their conduct to maintain the highest credit score in the eyes of the state. For many, it paints the picture of an Orwellian future with its dystopian social contract. What message this sends out from a Chinese President who has already predicted the end of Democracy as a form of governance, not only to his own population but to the

rest of the world, will be explored in coming issues of the journal.

Surveying geopolitics in the Spring of 2018, we can only conclude that states are choosing to communicate strategically in quite different ways.

Dr Neville Bolt, Editor-in-Chief
Spring 2018

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TV, TWITTER, AND TELEGRAM: AL-SHABAAB'S ATTEMPTS TO INFLUENCE MASS MEDIA

Robyn Kriel

Abstract

This research paper examines and assesses how members of the Somali jihadi-insurgent group al-Shabaab have attempted to influence the mass media for strategic communications purposes. Using the group's activities between the years 2005 and 2017 as a case study, this paper asserts that al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media for news coverage purposes, despite its own operational security concerns since it withdrew from Mogadishu in 2011, is forward-looking, fast-paced, aggressive, and by and large successful. But the conclusions also assert that despite the group's focused strategic communications and its opportunistic use of Propaganda of the Deed, its successes correlate directly to the failure of the poor and generally uncoordinated communications efforts of the international coalition working to counter it.

The generally poor handling of strategic communications by an expensive combination of the Somali government, the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), the United Nations (UN), and some members of the international community has allowed the strategic communications of al-Shabaab a relatively free, unchecked, and unchallenged passage.¹ In some cases related to major

¹ Paul Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007–2017* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Chapter 11.

attacks, al-Shabaab's strategic communications are even viewed by members of the mass media as more authentic, realistic, timely, and truthful, than those of those of the coalition working to counter it.²

Keywords— *Al-Shabaab, social media, traditional media, mass media, influence, audience, terrorism, strategic communication, strategic communications*

About the Author

Robyn Kriel is a freelance news anchor and correspondent currently working for CNN International at their headquarters in Atlanta, USA. Robyn previously spent eight years reporting in East and southern Africa. She was born and raised in Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Bilal: You mentioned that jihadists have cut off the media and developed their own media outlets. But (the mass media) can damage their publicity.

Author: So you believe it's unnecessary for jihadi groups to use traditional media?

Bilal: Yes, if we consider the fact that societies that support the cause don't trust or rely on traditional media. But the neutral public can be affected by the media, and that can cause the jihadists a great deal of harm if they don't prove the media wrong on the ground. That's because legitimacy is crucial to the jihadi cause.³

The above exchange is between Bilal, a self-proclaimed member of the Somali jihadi-insurgent group al-Shabaab, and the author working in her capacity as a journalist. The conversation took place over an encrypted electronic messaging application called Telegram.

.....
² Tristan McConnell, email interview with author, 21 February 2017.

³ Bilal, Telegram messages to the author, 2014–2016.

In 2011, worried about journalists being followed by security services, or phone calls being traced and subsequent attacks being delivered from the air as a consequence, members of the militant group insisted that they could no longer conduct interviews with journalists via mobile phone or in person. Thus, in December of that year, after being driven from the capital, Mogadishu, al-Shabaab began its first known forays into networking electronically through social media, addressing and engaging members of the mass media, both hostile and sympathetic.

These electronic conversations, such as the one above, highlight an important shift in al-Shabaab's operational security and how members of the jihadi-insurgent group strategically communicate with members of the press when they can no longer do so in person. While jihadi insurgents using the Internet is not a new phenomenon, and the symbiotic,⁴ oxygenic⁵ relationship between the media and insurgents is well documented, just *how* jihadi insurgents attempt to influence members of the mass media for news coverage purposes has not been as closely interrogated.

This article asserts that al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media, by exploiting its successes and distorting its setbacks, and simultaneously minimising the successes and emphasising the setbacks of its enemies, is extremely aggressive, forward-looking, opportunistic, fast-paced, and focused, particularly on its target audience, or *audiences*, at the time of dissemination. Especially considering the group's decreasing size and resources since its withdrawal from Mogadishu.

However, al-Shabaab's communications capabilities are in no way remarkable. They are only bolstered by the fact that its foremost enemies at the time, in this case the UN-backed AU Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), and elements of the international community, have had generally poor and uncoordinated strategic communications efforts. In short, AMISOM and its partners have failed to counter effectively al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media, despite not having the same operational security concerns and constraints as the militant group. An even more concerning consequence is that AMISOM and its partners have at times proved even less credible in the eyes of the news media and the public than the

.....
4 Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 56, 201.

5 Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech to American Bar Association', South Kensington, Central London, 15 July 1985.

jihadi-insurgent group they pledge to fight.

This article will explore the better-known dissemination techniques used by al-Shabaab's jihadi insurgents to ensure maximum mass media coverage or interest, most notably through terror attacks, as well as the tools used to document and spread word of their terror or Propaganda of the Deed (POTD). In the past such tools have included radio broadcasts, press releases via audio file and e-mail, battlefield updates, and still photographs. However, here particular attention is paid to more modern electronic techniques that members of the group have more recently employed, namely its made-for-TV-news video production through its media arm Al Kata'ib News Channel and its cyberspace operations, most notably its use of Twitter.⁶ The author will also investigate the effectiveness of the lesser-examined one-on-one approaches jihadi-insurgent groups make to journalists via encrypted messaging applications, in this case Telegram, to ostensibly alert journalists of upcoming soon-to-be published material, but also to sharpen their relationship with members of the media or to explain their cause(s). Finally, al-Shabaab's murky use of disinformation and fabricated online personas to influence the mass media to maximise coverage of incidents of POTD will be examined.

Al-Shabaab serves as a useful case study because 'a lot of what ISIS is doing now, Shabaab did first', and there are critical lessons to be learned from the successes and failures of al-Shabaab's strategic communications operations when it comes to its attempts to influence the mass media, some of which shall be explored in the conclusion.⁷

Methodology

This research relied much on personal experiences and contacts of the author in her capacity as a journalist in East Africa, covering Somalia and al-Shabaab, from 2011 to 2017. Primary resources such as videos, press releases, and tweets produced by al-Shabaab during this time period, most of which the author saved since those Twitter accounts have since been deactivated, were used extensively, as were the daily monitoring reports via email from a strategic communications expert working on the ground in Somalia to counter al-Shabaab and promote the work of the Somali government. In addition to these primary sources, the author

6 Al-Shabaab Communiqué, NEW: AL KATA'IB NEWS CHANNEL. (2010).

7 Christopher Anzalone. Stig Jarle Hansen. Bronwyn Bruton, 'Continuity and Change: al-Shabaab's Media Insurgency', Atlantic Council Webcast, Washington DC, 10 November 2016.

also spoke to four international journalists on the record, and several more off the record, who are currently based in Nairobi, Kenya, and cover Somalia and al-Shabaab. The author also interviewed two strategic communications experts and one security expert, all working to counter the group. The author also spoke to one Somali journalist, working for an international news organisation, who wished to remain anonymous, as well as exchanging more than a thousand messages online with an alleged member of al-Shabaab in Somalia via Twitter and Telegram from 2014 to 2016. Portions of these conversations are featured in this article. News articles in their online form, written by journalists from traditional international mass media outlets such as Reuters, BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, AFP, and AP, featuring al-Shabaab and their attacks or instances of POTD from 2007 to the present, were also consulted. A clearer delineation of what the author means by the phrase ‘mass media’ is included below. The author selected these outlets because they are regarded as having very high international reporting and ethical standards, and are also considered by many Somali experts as having the most accurate and reliable international coverage of Somalia and its neighbours.⁸

Literature Review

Previous academic and other research and analysis on Somalia, al-Shabaab, and AMISOM has been utilised throughout this article. In particular, the work of Stig Jarle Hansen, who authored the sole book on al-Shabaab, Christopher Anzalone, who has written much on al-Shabaab’s media operations, and Paul Williams, who has critiqued AMISOM and its troop-contributing countries’ efforts since AMISOM’s inception, have been both primary and secondary sources. In his recent book *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, Williams is quite critical of AMISOM’s efforts to counter al-Shabaab’s information operations, saying ‘deploying a mission without the capabilities to wage an effective strategic communications campaign is a major error’.⁹

All of the above writers looked thoroughly into al-Shabaab’s methods to disseminate its own strategic communications, their effectiveness, and the group’s agility and ability to reach their target audiences, and on the other hand AMISOM’s effectiveness in countering the group’s communications. However, they all stopped short of examining al-Shabaab’s *specific* attempts, both overt

.....
⁸ Paul Kellett, Whatsapp conversation with the author, 22 May 2018.

⁹ Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, Chapter 11.

and covert, to influence members of the media. The mass media should be considered one of al-Shabaab's key target audiences; it is here that this paper hopes to shed some light.

The majority of researchers in the field broadly agree that despite the group's diminishing size and resources, their communications efforts remain very effective, disciplined, and fast-paced, albeit opportunistic. They also all agree that the poor handling of communications by the anti-Shabaab coalition forces simply adds credence to the jihadis' cause. However, there is some contention over whether al-Shabaab's goals are essentially national or global.

More generally, much has been written about the relationship between terrorism and the media, as well as how jihadi insurgents use social media to communicate. Neville Bolt's theory that 'today's revolutionary uses the weight of the media against the media' is especially pertinent to this paper,¹⁰ as are Philip Taylor's comments on today's news media, particularly television, being suited to report on terror attacks because of its 'pre-disposition to simplify'.¹¹ Bolt, David Betz, and Jaz Azari analyse Propaganda of the Deed as highly symbolic in the digital age of media, and something that permeates every facet of society; they view jihadi insurgent strategic communications and POTD as 'political marketing'.¹² In the light of their work, we can adopt Williams's formulation of the conclusion that 'an organisation at war would seek to market itself and its communications wherever it can and use whatever means at its disposal'.¹³

Several papers have been written about al-Shabaab's use of Twitter, particularly during the Nairobi Westgate attack, as well as an enlightening unpublished empirical survey examining the usefulness of al-Shabaab's tweets by journalists, by East-Africa-based correspondent Pete Martell. In particular, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens's research paper 'Lights, Camera, Jihad' investigated the use of the language in al-Shabaab's tweets. He found the operators of the account to be promoting unity and 'present[ing] an image of a just and honourable organisation', which was useful to this study and could be more thoroughly

10 Neville Bolt, *The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. xviii.

11 Philip Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present day*, Third Edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 274.

12 Neville Bolt, David Betz and Jaz Azari, 'Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Understanding the Phenomenon', RUSI Whitehall Report, 11 September 2008, p. 8.

13 Paul Williams, Twitter Direct Message, 6 March 2017.

investigated, looking at a wider range of al-Shabaab's strategic communications.¹⁴

The research question 'how does al-Shabaab attempt to influence the mass media?' is appropriately narrow, due to the sheer volume of information collected during the research phase. It could potentially be expanded to '*how* and *how effectively* do jihadi-insurgent groups attempt to influence the mass media?', but this would likely warrant some quantitative research into whether al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media yielded positive or negative depictions of the group, or increased the number of news stories about it.

This article seeks to engage a mix of theoretical frameworks. These include the theories of insurgency and political communications, set squarely 'at the heart of the contemporary Information Age',¹⁵ which, since the advent of social media, now has a 'direct route to the population'.¹⁶ Al-Shabaab's media strategy, almost from its inception, 'became an integral part of its insurgency'.¹⁷ Over the next decade the organisation ran a capable and adept, multi-faceted media and information operations campaign'.¹⁸ The author agrees with the premise that the efforts of insurgent groups such as al-Shabaab 'are directed towards winning over and controlling a variety of locally and sometimes globally dispersed sympathisers and target populations',¹⁹ but, with the advent of globalisation, the effects of the Internet, Somalia's decades-long civil war, and the ensuing refugee crisis, both al-Shabaab's target audiences and its narratives have shifted over time. Those groups seeking to counter it have not been as successful in this regard, says Williams; '[a]s circumstances changed, however, so AMISOM's strategic communications needed to evolve'.²⁰ The author agrees with the assessment that they have not and delves further into some of those challenges evolving from the changing and *globalising* media landscape, of which it is observed that its 'most salient feature is instantaneous connectivity, promoting cultural overlap and fragmentation'²¹ and what that means for both sides of the fight. Both sides of the *communications* war in Somalia are 'engaged just as intensely in a

14 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Shiraz Maher, James Sheehan, *Lights, Camera, Jihad: Al Shabaab's Western Media Strategy*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. (London: King's College London, 2012) p. 33.

15 Daniel Bell in 1999, quoted in Bolt, *The Violent Image*.

16 Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. 8

17 Christopher Anzalone, 'Continuity and Change: The Evolution and Resilience of al-Shabaab's Media Insurgency 2016–2017', Hate Speech International, November 2016, p. 4.

18 Anzalone (2016) p. 38 as quoted in Paul Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, Chapter 11.

19 Bolt, *The Violent Image* p. 46.

20 Williams, *Fighting for Peace*, Chapter 11.

21 Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. 12.

propaganda war as [...] in a traditional military war',²² because so much of the success in this war is based on public opinion worldwide and not only on the opinions the Somali people.

While this article looks at all facets of how al-Shabaab works to influence the mass media, certain logistical limitations have meant that it will focus mainly on how al-Shabaab attempts to influence the international or foreign press, as explained below. How al-Shabaab has attempted to influence members of the Somali press writing in the local language is also certainly a topic for future study.

Definitions

The RAND Corporation's research group notes that Somalia is 'a case that defies definitions' for a number of reasons.²³ First, al-Shabaab's goals have been to overthrow the Somali government, to rid the country of foreign forces, and to rule Somalia themselves as a 'fundamentalist Islamic state';²⁴ the fact is that for many years Somalia has 'lacked any semblance of a central government' to overthrow.²⁵ Second, in addition to the newly formed Somali government and its forces, al-Shabaab is also battling an internationally-backed African Union peacekeeping mission with more than twenty-two thousand 'peacekeepers' on the ground in Somalia from various African nations, a mission that is really engaged in peace-enforcement operations against al-Shabaab.²⁶ This tenuous situation has led in the past to accidental civilian deaths in combat,²⁷ a tragedy that al-Shabaab delights in exploiting.²⁸

» Propaganda or Strategic Communications?

The use of the word 'propaganda' is contentious amongst political scientists, particularly because of its negative historical connotations with organising public opinion and because of its 'wide catchment area'.²⁹ Bolt prefers thinking

.....
22 John Mackinlay and Alison Al-Baddawy, *Rethinking Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2008), p. x.

23 Seth G. Jones, Andrew Liepman, and Nathan Chandler, *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia: Assessing the Campaign Against al-Shabaab* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2016) p. 6.

24 Claire Felter, Jonathan Masters, and Mohammed Aly Sergie, 'Al-Shabaab Backgrounder' Council on Foreign Relations. 9 January 2018.

25 Jones, Liepman & Chandler, *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia*, p. 6.

26 AMISOM Mandate, African Union Mission in Somalia Website.

27 AMISOM, 'Statement on Death of Civilian in Mogadishu' 15 December 2016.

28 @Daudoo Tweet: 'BREAKING: 6 Somali civilians killed (5 men, 1 woman) after #AMISOM forces attacked their minibus near #Qoryoley town- Residents #Somalia' (18 December 2016)

29 Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. 33.

of the insurgent as a political marketer or strategic communicator, rather than a propagandist, which this author also finds accurate.³⁰ POTD is loosely defined as a political action meant to be an example to others; and in the case of al-Shabaab this usually translates into large and small scale attacks. POTD and strategic communications are commonly analysed in terms of the narrative, the deed, and the audience. This study examines the decisions al-Shabaab has made to publicise and exploit certain events in the mass media and to downplay and mute others, by assessing the narrative, the deed, *the medium*, *the tools*, and the audience(s).

» **Mass Media**

‘Mass media’ is used in this context to include traditional news media, such as independent and government-controlled radio and television broadcasts, wire agencies, newspapers, and online news publications, all operated by professional journalists.

While in theory the phrase ‘mass media’ includes members of the hugely important local Somali press as well as the international journalists covering Somalia and al-Shabaab, we will focus mostly on the work of al-Shabaab’s strategic communicators in relation to members of the international press. This is largely because of the language and communication barriers faced by the author, as well as her inability to verify the credentials of some local Somali journalists working either independently or for various local media, a few of which have been accused of having questionable agendas. The author did interview a renowned and respected Somali journalist employed by an international organisation, who provided invaluable insight into how al-Shabaab deals with the local press; small portions of this interview are included in this text, however the journalist wishes to remain anonymous.

The phrase ‘mass media’ does *not* include self-proclaimed journalists who post only on Twitter, Facebook, or small blogs; these accounts sometimes cannot be verified, and the users could be sympathetic or vulnerable to either al-Shabaab or to coalition forces fighting the insurgent group. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, therefore, are referred to as *tools* journalists use to do their job, and not included in the definition of mass media.

.....
³⁰ Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. xxi.

» Target Audience

Al-Shabaab has more than one target audience, but this article will focus on al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media as a target audience. In the study of psychological operations (PSYOPS), the United States military analyses and identifies a target audience by looking at its common characteristics. While PSYOPS is an outdated term—the US military no longer refers to their influence operations as PSYOPS—elements of the basic definition are appropriate in this case.

[P]otential target audiences are [i]dentified and analysed for *power* (their ability or capacity to perform effectively), for *accessibility* (by U.S. PSYOP media), and for *susceptibility* [and vulnerability] (the degree to which they may be manipulated).³¹

The *power* of the mass media is fairly apparent. They can choose to disseminate news of a suicide bombing in a small market in Baidoa to 100 people, or to a million. Although the advent of the Internet and the jihadi insurgents' increased use of social media, where 'images spread virally, exponentially like self-generating epidemics',³² may seem to have eroded this power, the coming chapters provide evidence of just how important jihadi insurgents still find the traditional media for their strategic communications.

The *susceptibilities*, or vulnerabilities, of the media include journalists' multiple deadlines, the demand to fill the 24-hour news cycle with information, and the 'commoditisation [...] and tabloidisation'³³ of whatever their medium is, for example TV, that is specifically suited to reporting on terror attacks.³⁴ Bolt neatly refers to it as 'today's image-driven media ecology'.³⁵ Journalists' susceptibilities or vulnerabilities include financial constraints, possible equipment shortages, technical failures or transmission problems, the media's requirement to get both sides of the story, and the inevitable dilemma that reporting on terror incidents arguably serves as the spread of fear and sometimes terror ideology.³⁶ For local Somali journalists especially, safety is their main vulnerability. Sixty-

31 US Army, *Field Manual 33-1-1 Psychological Operations: Techniques and Procedures*, May 1994, Chapter 6, 'Target Audience Analysis'.

32 Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. 8.

33 Neville Bolt, David Betz and Jaz Azari, 'Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Understanding the Phenomenon', RUSI Whitehall Report, 11 September 2008, p. 12.

34 Taylor, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, p. 274.

35 Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. 9.

36 Michael Jetter, 'Terrorism and the Media', Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA) Discussion Paper No. 8497, Bonn, Germany, September 2014, p. 2.

two journalists have been killed in Somalia since 1992, making it one of the deadliest places for journalists in the world.³⁷ Local journalists often cannot afford the armed security that foreign journalists use. If they report on sensitive or unpopular issues, they too run the risk of becoming targets of al-Shabaab or other armed groups, including in the past even the Somali government.³⁸

The mass media's accessibility, or access to information, is also a major factor at play in Somalia, often in favour of al-Shabaab. The jihadi insurgent group provides information in various ways to journalists about events as they happen. With a few rare exceptions, the jihadi insurgents cannot risk meeting journalists in person. AMISOM and the Somali government do not have those same operational security concerns, yet AMISOM still often avoids interacting with members of the media, much to their own detriment.³⁹ Although more willing to indulge journalists, the government of Somalia frequently provides them with inaccurate or conflicting information, albeit sometimes unintentionally.

Al-Shabaab's Significance

While this article focuses on al-Shabaab's strategic communications capacities and the way they interact with the mass media, it is important to mention that 'most insurgent groups are inherently imitative', and therefore some of al-Shabaab's communications strategies and techniques are relevant to other salafi-jihadi groups.⁴⁰ Most importantly, al-Shabaab's narrative has often imitated that of al-Qaeda Central's (AQC), , sometimes despite its own particular strategic objectives.⁴¹ This is important because just as insurgent groups copy one another, so can the groups or coalitions working to counter them.

In 2012, al-Shabaab and AQC announced their allegiance in a video disseminated online;⁴² thus al-Shabaab formally became part of the global jihad movement, although documents seized during the Osama Bin Laden operation revealed

37 Committee to Protect Journalists, 'Report on Somalia: Impunity Index—Getting Away with Murder', 22 February 2017.

38 Abdi Sheikh, 'Somali Government Shuts Down Newspaper, Arrests Journalist', Reuters News Agency, 17 October 2016.

39 Jamal Osman, 'Exclusive: Inside an al-Shabaab Training Camp', Channel 4 News, 16 December 2013.

40 Charlie Winter, *Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare*, (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, King's College London, 2017), p. 7.

41 Anzalone, *Continuity and Change*. AQC refers to the original Al Qaeda organisation, hereafter referred to as AQC.

42 Nelly Lahoud, 'The Merger of Al-Shabaab and Qa'idat al-Jihad', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 5. Issue 2, February 2012, p. 3.

that he was in touch and advising al-Shabaab's leadership well before then.⁴³ Al-Shabaab's media division uses AQC's training techniques and sponges off its dissemination capability. 'By doing this, al-Shabaab has maintained and perhaps even increased public perceptions of its capabilities.'⁴⁴

One reason the study of al-Shabaab is fascinating and relevant is that despite an aggressive US-led programme to degrade and eradicate the group, including the use of air and ground forces, al-Shabaab has proved effective and resilient,⁴⁵ albeit opportunistic. Although it is a small organisation, al-Shabaab is extremely agile, well structured, and tightly organised; therefore their communications efforts define their successes.⁴⁶ Al-Shabaab began as a small insurgent group, but soon controlled large swathes of Somalia, behaving, according to most experts, more like a government than an insurgency. The capacity of their media division for dynamic information operations adapted as the organisation changed, flourishing with its victories and often waning quietly with its defeats. However, the group failed to advertise sufficiently its successes early on to the people in the rural Somali heartlands where it first began.⁴⁷

Another reason for al-Shabaab's significance as a case study is due to the implementation of a 'tailored engagement'⁴⁸ model by US, EU, UN, and UK forces in Somalia, mirrored elsewhere on the African continent such as in the campaigns against ISIS in Libya and against Boko-Haram in Nigeria. This tailored engagement model is a 'low investment, light footprint'⁴⁹ approach to counterterrorism, helping 'Africans solve African problems'⁵⁰ by equipping, training, and mentoring those African armies perceived as friendly. These tailored engagements, along with the presence of well-resourced Special Operations forces on the ground, are being emulated elsewhere in the world by coalition forces. The jihadi insurgents, however, are fighting back with equally, if not *more* advanced information operations, responding to these 'tailored engagements' by producing messages directed against Western nations and third-party counterinsurgency forces. Those messages have inspired attacks abroad, including attacks by ISIS and AQC in Europe and the US. In al-Shabaab's case,

43 Osama Bin Laden, 'Letter to Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr, English Translation, 7 August 2010.

44 Stephen Harley, e-mail interview with the author, 18 February 2017.

45 Anzalone, *Continuity and Change*, p. 13.

46 Kellett, Paul. Skype interview with author, 25 February 2017.

47 Ibid.

48 Jones et al., *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia*, p. 33.

49 Greg Jaffe, 'White House Officials Defend Somalia Strategy as Counterterrorism Model' *Washington Post*, 3 April 2015.

50 Eric Schmitt, 'US Army Hones Antiterror Strategy for Africa, in Kansas', *New York Times*, 18 October 2013.

attacks have been launched in AMISOM member countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Djibouti.

Al-Shabaab has also waged communications wars with competing jihadi insurgent groups in Somalia, such as the Islamic State, led by al-Shabaab defector Abdulqadr Mu'min.

A Brief History of al-Shabaab's Communications

Al-Shabaab has transformed quickly from a small group of roughly thirty people in the centre of the country in 2005–2006⁵¹ to a 'de-facto authority, governing [...] some 40 thousand square kilometres including the capital Mogadishu'⁵² with approximately 10 to 15 thousand soldiers at most.⁵³ Once expelled from the capital in 2011 it morphed once again into the smaller, guerrilla-style movement it is today. Al-Shabaab is still able to launch devastating, complex, hit-and-run style attacks within both Somalia and its neighbouring countries, but it 'no longer [poses] a strategic threat to the existence of the Somali Government', it neither controls nor governs a significant territory.⁵⁴

When AMISOM troops entered Mogadishu in 2007, al-Shabaab shifted the targeting of its strategic communications from Somali government members, the Ethiopians, and their international supporters, to the troop-contributing countries of AMISOM, which were mainly Uganda and Burundi at that time. The group consistently labelled them as Christian invaders, 'crusaders' and 'kāfirs' [non-believers]. Al-Shabaab accused the foreign soldiers of being corrupt⁵⁵ and killing innocent Muslims. The group consistently utilised language that suggested 'the war in Somalia [is] part of a wider global "clash of civilizations"'.⁵⁶ AMISOM had very little to offer in return in terms of strategic communications.

The years 2011 and 2012 marked a turning point for al-Shabaab; its losses of territory, particularly the major cities, caused revenue collections for the group to slow drastically. When the US designated al-Shabaab as a Foreign Terrorist

51 Williams and Anzalone both maintain that the exact timing of the formation of al-Shabaab is disputed because the group was operating clandestinely.

52 Paul Williams, *Al-Shabaab's Information Operations 2005-2015: A Concise Overview*, Unpublished Paper. Draft Version. (Washington DC, USA, 2015), p. 1.

53 Anzalone, *Continuity and Change*, p. 13.

54 Williams, *Al-Shabaab's Information Operations*, p. 1.

55 Al-Shabaab Film, 'Badr al-Sūmāl', 2006.

56 Williams, *Al-Shabaab's Information Operations*, p. 5.

Organisation its revenue streams from abroad were seriously affected; as more stringent checks and balances were initiated at airports, the arrival of foreign fighters to join al-Shabaab was curtailed.

In February 2011, AMISOM and the Somali government began a series of offensives against the militant group; al-Shabaab withdrew from Mogadishu in August. Kenya and Ethiopia joined AMISOM at the end of 2011, and by 2012 nearly all of al-Shabaab's major finance-generating hubs had been captured and were under AMISOM and Somali government control. It was here, amidst the constant threat of US bombardment from the air and UK surveillance and reconnaissance missions, that al-Shabaab stopped communicating with journalists by phone, and, with a few notable exceptions,⁵⁷ stopped communicating face-to-face as well. The jihadi insurgents went underground and their strategic communications tactics transformed accordingly. Its media division began releasing videos featuring the group's asymmetric warfare⁵⁸ 'including pinpoint mass assaults on isolated AMISOM [and] Somali government'⁵⁹ positions. Anzalone also states that the 'pace of insurgent media production [...] slowed periodically'⁶⁰ although its strategic communicators were still able to release 'polished'⁶¹ videos throughout this period. Just as their battlefield techniques had to change, so did their communications strategy. It was then that they began to 'pioneer'⁶² the jihadi insurgent use of Twitter, Facebook, and other electronic communications techniques to capture the attention of the press, particularly but not limited to the foreign press.

In early 2010, a severe drought struck East Africa, ravaging in particular the southern part of Somalia. It was the militant group's handling of the crisis and the resulting famine that is one of the factors attributable to the group's decline, as it served to severely undermine al-Shabaab's support base.⁶³ This is one example of al-Shabaab's inability to influence the mass media or other target audiences.

Despite these setbacks, it is also no coincidence that it was around this time that the African Union/United Nations Information Support Team (IST) was

57 Mohamed Hamza, 'Exclusive: Al-Shabaab Moves in on Central Somalia', Al Jazeera English, 14 November 2016.

58 Al-Shabaab Film, 'The Burundian Bloodbath: Battle of Daynille', 2010.

59 Anzalone, *Continuity and Change*, p. 21

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Stig Jarle Hansen, Skype interview with the author, 6 March 2017.

63 Jones et al., *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia*, p. 53.

formed ‘in support of the AMISOM operations from 2010 onwards’.⁶⁴ The IST, contracted to the private public relations firms Albany Associates and Bell Pottinger, successfully brought in numerous international media and strategic communications experts and ‘changed the narrative of AMISOM, previously viewed as murderous Christian mercenary invaders [by much of the Somali public] and created the space for the move from the transitional government to the Federal Government of Somalia’.⁶⁵ The contract is described by a former IST employee, Richard Bailey, as ‘a desperate and ultimately very successful attempt to reverse the appalling headlines emanating from Mogadishu about AMISOM’.⁶⁶

The IST also facilitated embedded reporting trips with AMISOM troops for many journalists, generating much-needed local, regional, and international press coverage of the organisation. Journalists were finally able to visit a now ‘liberated’ Mogadishu and the areas around it again, and cover more stories from AMISOM’s perspective with sufficient operational security. This worked directly against al-Shabaab, who were unable to converse with journalists, even by phone, to provide their perspective. The IST, however, experienced severe setbacks after the private firms lost their UN contract at the end of 2014.

Al-Shabaab’s foreign fighter pool also began to dry up in 2013 for two reasons: one, because potential recruits started to travel to Iraq and Syria to fight rather than to Somalia, ‘severely constrict[ing] a once-important recruitment pool for al-Shabaab’⁶⁷ and two, because of al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Godane’s perceived internal purge of foreign fighters to ensure what he believed would be the group’s longevity.⁶⁸ Godane believed the foreign fighters, most conspicuously Omar Hammami, had brought unwelcome attention to al-Shabaab from the international community through their online influence on members of the mass media; and he thought that al-Shabaab’s POTD were having a ‘scatter-gun marketing’ effect on subsequent news coverage, simply because of the foreign involvement.⁶⁹

Godane was killed in a US drone strike almost one year to the day after the attack on Nairobi’s Westgate Mall in Kenya. It was around that time that al-

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64 Harley, e-mail.

65 Ibid.

66 Richard Bailey, e-mail to the author, 3 March 2017.

67 Jones et al., *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia*, p. 52.

68 Kellett. Skype.

69 Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed 2008*, p. 12.

Shabaab's recruitment campaign began to focus more regionally, attempting, it would seem, to attract Muslims in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, appealing to them in their native languages through 'refined' videos, while lamenting the poor treatment of Muslims in their respective countries.⁷⁰ Al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media also became more focused on promoting its attacks on AMISOM, decrying the 'lying' governments of its contributing countries and promoting attacks on Kenyan 'Christian' targets, such as the Mpeketoni attack in 2014,⁷¹ and the Garissa University attack in 2015.⁷²

In October 2017, al-Shabaab launched its most devastating attack to date, at a crowded junction in the centre of Mogadishu. According to one watchdog group, more than 500 people, mostly civilians, died in that attack,⁷³ which al-Shabaab is yet to publicly claim. Most experts and the general public, however, believe the militant group is responsible.

'The Lion Must Learn to Speak'⁷⁴

An African proverb states that 'until the lion learns to speak, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter'. This is true of al-Shabaab's strategic communications capabilities when compared to those of its enemies. Al-Shabaab continues to present a major challenge to AMISOM and the Somali government because the militants repeatedly demonstrate that they can neither be contained nor eradicated, thus making their enemies look incompetent. Al-Shabaab does this by its consistent use of high-profile attacks and the media coverage that follows them. The group's hard targets include AMISOM, Somali army bases, and the Somali government's secure sites, such as the presidential palace and the prime minister's residence. Their soft targets include hotels housing government officials, restaurants, and markets, which the group claims are frequented by Somali security forces.

The media coverage that follows depends on the instance of POTD the group employs. The desired narrative, audience, medium, and therefore the required

70 Hansen, Skype.

71 Staff Writer, 'Kenya Attack: Mpeketoni near Lamu hit by al-Shabaab Raid', *BBC*, 16 June 2014.

72 Alexander Smith and Robert Windrem, 'Kenya Attack: al-Shabaab Targets Christians at Garissa University College', *NBC News*, 2 April 2015.

73 Abdi Sheikh, 'Somali Government Shuts Down Newspaper, Arrests Journalist', *Reuters*, 17 October 2016.

74 Patrick Gathara, e-mail to the author, 14 April 2016.

(Note: this E-mail interview was initially conducted for a CNN story about the same subject. See reference for 'Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre' under secondary online sources. Portions of the interview, not used in the CNN report, were featured in this article with Gathara's permission.)

tools, together dictate whether the group will receive what they see as positive or negative coverage. Positive coverage might be coverage that leads to increased notoriety for the group, more credibility on the global terror stage, an upsurge in recruitment, an increase in public support from the Somali diaspora, as well as the all-important support from the local population. Negative media coverage of an event, effectively negative publicity, potentially leads to negative public opinion; ‘the average person can explain away the targeted assassination of an oppressive political leader [b]ut the indiscriminate blow-out from a bomb in a public place, that is different’.⁷⁵ Negative publicity might also lead to an increased response or a crackdown, meaning tighter security in the capital and fewer chances for al-Shabaab to employ POTD, thus leading to a downturn in recruitment and a loss of support from the Somali diaspora because of tougher measures imposed by the international community, which would mean fewer resources, fewer safe havens, and inevitably much less help. Al-Shabaab aims to avoid this type of negative publicity, as does AMISOM and the Federal Government of Somalia, but both sides hope to exploit the misdeeds of the other side in the eyes of the public.

The counter-narrative is also extremely important and can be exploited just as astutely. Attacking a beachfront or park filled with Somali civilians, women, and children, will undoubtedly, if exploited by enemies of al-Shabaab, have negative blowback from the local population; more civilians would be willing to inform on the group’s activities, and fewer would be willing to join the group because of their perceived anti-Somali, anti-Muslim brutality. But, if news of the attack is not carefully and quickly managed and disseminated by Somali security forces and the Somali government, then it will take on a narrative of its own, or, even worse, it will take on the narrative of al-Shabaab’s communicators. Al-Shabaab frequently claims that its soft targets are chosen because they house or host Somali government forces, members of the Somali government, or foreign troops. However, dozens of civilians are also killed in attacks by al-Shabaab and often these don’t get sufficient mention, if any, during the ensuing news coverage. These stark and important omissions were highlighted in Jason Warner and Ellen Chapin’s research paper that studied the effectiveness and targeting of al-Shabaab suicide bombers. Basing much of their research data from information contained in online traditional media stories, they asserted that ‘al-Shabaab’s suicide bombing efforts appear to be tactically planned to

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⁷⁵ Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed* 2008, p. 3.

target and degrade specific enemy institutions and especially personnel, and not simply to generally engender shock and awe in civilian populations'.⁷⁶ If the news media continues to report that al-Shabaab solely attacks institutions that cater to al-Shabaab's enemies, and fails to report and address adequately the fact that there were numerous civilian casualties as well, if this is indeed the case, then this is a significant failure by the coalition working to counter al-Shabaab's communications campaign. Attacking an AMISOM military base, on the other hand, as shall be examined later in this section, can serve to boost the pro-al-Shabaab, anti-foreign invasion sentiment. But so much of this depends on how events are depicted in the media.

» **Mall Attack, Nairobi, Kenya, 2013**

On the 21 September 2013, four al-Shabaab militants carrying AK-47s and hand grenades stormed the upscale Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, killing sixty-seven people, including more than a dozen foreigners. The media swooped in, reporting live on the ensuing hostage situation, which lasted for eighty hours. The terror generated by al-Shabaab from this attack was felt around the world, with breaking news coverage reported around the clock from the scene. In al-Shabaab's usual fast-paced style, the group's media division used Twitter to get their message out, 'live-tweeting' the attack and posting audio online, allegedly of phone calls with the attackers inside the mall, who explained that Kenyan troops needed to leave Somalia and stop 'killing [their] children'.⁷⁷

The coverage of the attack was a victory for the militant group in general, and generated extremely negative publicity for its enemy, Kenya. The Kenyan government mismanaged nearly every aspect of the incident under the scrutiny of the world's media,⁷⁸ consistently releasing inaccurate information, and handling their strategic communications unilaterally with no help from AMISOM's IST. They claimed, for example, that there were thirteen–fifteen attackers inside the mall and then said all the attackers were dead. The Kenyan response to retake the mall during the attack also lacked any semblance of a tactical plan and generated terrible publicity.⁷⁹

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⁷⁶ Jason Warner and Ellen Chapin, 'Targeted Terror, the Suicide Bombers of al-Shabaab', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 13 February 2018, p. 12.

⁷⁷ Staff Writer, 'After Kenya Mall Attack, Children Scarred with Trauma', Associated Press Appearing in *USA Today*, 13 October 2013.

⁷⁸ Daniel Howden, 'Terror in Nairobi: the Full Story of al-Shabaab's mall attack', *Guardian*, 4 October 2013.

⁷⁹ Kellett, Skype.

Once the fight was over, and the attackers dead, the army proceeded to loot the shops at the mall and drink alcohol at the various restaurants, at times stepping over bodies with shopping bags of stolen goods in tow.⁸⁰ Most of this was captured on CCTV footage, which was seized by the Kenyan security services and later leaked to the media. Al-Shabaab used the video and news clips from the attack in anti-Kenyan messaging, labelling the government and troops as corrupt liars, cowards, drunks, and thieves.⁸¹ Al-Shabaab's live-tweeting and quick claims of responsibility, versus the government's inaccurate and slow responses, also highlighted al-Shabaab's adeptness at improvising publicity.

It was a powerful, 'viscerally repugnant' message of insecurity for Kenya.⁸² The fallout devastated Kenya's tourism industry.⁸³ The country's economy and, most importantly, the perception of security by Kenya's own citizens, took major blows. The calls for Kenya to withdraw its troops from Somalia had begun and would only get louder.⁸⁴ This was a smashing strategic communications win for al-Shabaab.

» **El Adde, Somalia, 2016**

Early in the morning of 15 January 2016, al-Shabaab attacked a Kenyan military base in El Adde, southern Somalia. This proved not only a military disaster for the Kenyans, with an estimated 170 dead, but also proved to be a public relations debacle for the military and government. Yet it generated, at least initially, extremely limited media coverage. In what had become a standard method of attack, al-Shabaab drove a car packed with explosives into the base, after which some 300 to 500 militant fighters breached the base's perimeter. This was a tried and tested method, extremely effective on small AMISOM outposts too far away from any major hub that might be able to assist with a quick reaction force. Al-Shabaab had successfully used the same modus operandi on a Burundian base,⁸⁵ a Ugandan base,⁸⁶ and an Ethiopian base,⁸⁷ all of which yielded high death tolls of AMISOM soldiers.

80 Staff Writer, 'Westgate Attack: Kenya CCTV Shows Soldiers Looting', *BBC News*, 21 October 2013.

81 Al-Shabaab Film, 'The Westgate Siege: Retributive Justice', 2015.

82 Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed*, p. 3

83 Jacob Kushner, 'Mall Attack to Cost Kenya \$200 Million in Tourism', Associated Press, appearing in *USA Today*, 1 October 2013.

84 Faith Karimi, 'Kenyans Debate: Time to get Troops out of Somalia?', *CNN*, 28 September 2013.

85 Staff Writer, 'Al-Shabaab Kills Dozens of African Union Troops at Base in Somalia.' Agence France-Presse for *Guardian*, 26 June 2015.

86 Staff Writer, 'Al-Shabaab Kills Dozens of African Union Troops at Base in Somalia.' Agence France-Presse for *The Guardian*, 26 June 2015.

87 Robyn Kriel, 'Ethiopia Seeks Leadership Role in Fight with al-Shabaab', *CNN*, 26 July 2015.

In El Adde, the Kenyans were surprised, quickly overwhelmed, and massacred.⁸⁸ Al-Shabaab filtered news of the attack through its radio stations, claiming responsibility for the attack, and advertising the high death toll. They also emailed press releases to select journalists and spread the news through Twitter accounts suspected to be sympathetic to al-Shabaab.⁸⁹ Local Somali journalists eventually got information from villagers and Somali soldiers operating nearby, but given the remoteness of the location it was some time before international and Kenyan media could verify reports of the attack. Initially, in a written statement, the Kenyan Ministry of Defence said that the base was occupied solely by Somali government troops, and that the Kenyan soldiers had simply rushed to help them. But, as soon as that was disputed by diplomatic sources working with AMISOM, the Kenyans went silent. Like many of the jihadi insurgent's military operations before that, al-Shabaab documented the attack using video and still photographs. The photographs were quickly posted online, showing numerous Kenyan fatalities and equipment that had been seized or destroyed. Eventually it was proven that at least 141 Kenyans died that day;⁹⁰ however sources say the death toll was closer to 170. This is the highest death toll incurred in a military operation in Kenya's history. The Kenyan government never admitted this, avoiding journalists' calls for comments. Once the huge death toll was proven, Kenya was once again delegitimised in the eyes of the international community, media, and their own citizens, and accused of a cover-up.

The success of the attack also made clear just how uncoordinated AMISOM was in terms of operational security, information sharing, and strategic communications. Instead of strategic communications being managed centrally by AMISOM's IST, public relations were handled unilaterally by Kenya. The media were left in the dark by the Kenyan military, and once again had to rely instead on al-Shabaab for information. 'Not only was AMISOM deployed without the capacity to conduct an information campaign, its contributing countries were not always willing to implement the communications strategy that was subsequently developed',⁹¹ writes Williams. Veteran British journalist Tristan McConnell, who has been covering al-Shabaab for more than a decade from Nairobi, states: 'the tendency of Kenya in particular to lie in its press

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88 Robyn Kriel and Briana Duggan, 'Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre', CNN, 31 May 2016.

89 Stephen Harley, 'Daily Media Monitoring Report', e-mails, 2015–2017.

90 Kriel and Duggan, 'Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre.'

91 Paul Williams, 'Strategic Communications for Peace Operations: The African Union's Information War Against al-Shabaab', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 7 (1) P3 (2018). Abstract.

statements means that we've reached the thoroughly disheartening situation in which the terrorists seem more honest than the government'.⁹² This is a textbook example of insurgent theorist David Galula's famous advice, that 'the insurgent [...] is free to use every trick; if necessary, he can lie [...]. The counterinsurgent is tied to his responsibilities [...]. If he lies, [...] he may achieve some temporary successes, but at the price of being discredited for good'.⁹³ Again this provides perfect strategic communications ammunition for al-Shabaab's communications war. 'To compete effectively in the media arena, the Kenyan Defence Force must learn to be fast, first and provide accurate facts', Patrick Gathara said. 'Even, and perhaps especially, when it is bad news. Better the public hear it from KDF and not from al-Shabaab. Our lion must learn to speak.'⁹⁴

Counter Narrative Failures

The problem in Somalia may be not as much the effectiveness of al-Shabaab's strategic communications, as the failure of AMISOM's IST to counter them.⁹⁵ Stephen Harley is a strategic communications expert and a founding member of the IST, credited for many of the initial successes of anti-al-Shabaab communications. He blames the success of al-Shabaab's influence on the mass media on a 'collective' failure of AMISOM, the Somali government, and the donor nations, to recognise the critical importance of communications at a counterinsurgency level.⁹⁶ According to Harley, the IST also suffered from a lack of resources, a high turnover of personnel, and the inappropriate hiring of professionals who lacked knowledge of the local languages and a solid understanding of Somali culture. These are all important reasons why the influence of AMISOM and the government of Somalia has dwindled. 'AMISOM should move away from the 1980s control messaging: deny, deny and maybe lie. Al-Shabaab has consistently proven it will release convincing video of the attacks, yet individual governments still attempt to deny what happened,' Harley says.⁹⁷

Another failure of the anti-al-Shabaab coalition's counter narrative to overcome the jihadis' strategic communications is their lack of understanding of the needs

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92 McConnell, e-mail.

93 Galula, David, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (London: Praeger, 1964), pp. 14–15.

94 Gathara, Patrick, e-mail to the author, 14 April 2016.

95 IST was reformed when the UN/AU contract was awarded in a bidding process from Albany & Associates/Bell Pottinger to another organisation

96 Harley, e-mail.

97 Harley, e-mail.

of their own target audience, namely journalists. Deadlines, timeliness, access to accurate and reliable information and relevant material, to name a few. Perhaps, with more access to these tools, journalists would be more likely to report from the perspectives of AMISOM and the Somali government, and in essence be more influenced by them, and less by al-Shabaab. ‘Al-Shabaab gets their message out fast. Their claim [of responsibility] is fast. They call journalists as the attack is happening to drive their line of events [...]. They record audio during the attack and air it on local radio.’⁹⁸ With gunshots sounding in the background of those calls, it makes for gripping news coverage. In order to control the counter narrative, AMISOM and the Somali government need to do the same, or better.

A stark example of where counter messaging tried and failed was the response to the October 2017 bombing of a junction in Mogadishu that killed close to 500 people, most of whom were civilians. Interestingly, al-Shabaab did not ever publicly claim responsibility for that bombing, most likely due to the public outcry that ensued. However the impetus to use this bombing to show the true brutality of al-Shabaab was quickly lost. Initially, crowds of young people took to the streets to show their anger towards the insurgent group, and people wore red ribbons to show their disgust at al-Shabaab’s cruelty and to honour the victims. First responders were hugged and kissed by the demonstrators and hailed as heroes. But the movement did not gain enough traction because it was quickly politicised by members of the Somali government. Without journalists on the ground, it was difficult for media houses, many of which don’t have permanent offices in Mogadishu, to put names to the victims. Many deem Mogadishu too dangerous to send their personnel without adequate security and time to plan. As a result, the pictures of the bombing site and closed circuit television footage of the truck laden with detonating explosives, dominated the media space on television and online. Despite the death toll making this one of the worst suicide attacks in history, many international media houses moved on too quickly, about 24 hours after the bombings, to other news stories located in places easier for their journalists to access than Mogadishu. Today, not even a memorial exists for the victims of that atrocity.

Another example of a *missed* counter-narrative opportunity was responding to the revelation that al-Shabaab was recruiting young children to fight in some of their bloodiest battles.⁹⁹ Despite being given ample time to respond to the story,

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⁹⁸ Anonymous Somali Journalist, e-mails, Twitter, and direct messages, 9 March 2017.

⁹⁹ Kriel and Duggan, ‘Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre.’

it took two weeks for AMISOM to formulate a counter-message, by which stage the story had already been published and the momentum was lost.¹⁰⁰ Often, too, al-Shabaab's communicators would merge dangerous lies with elements of truth, saying, for example, that an aerial strike, or a Somali Army or Kenyan ambush, had 'killed innocent villagers'. But, when met with silence from AMISOM and the Somali government, such lies take on a life of their own.¹⁰¹ The coalition fighting al-Shabaab would do better to follow this advice: 'Gaining momentum means dominating the news agenda [...]. You must always rebut a political attack [...]. You must do it instantly, within minutes at best, within hours at worst, and with a defence supported by the facts'.¹⁰²

A final missing component to the lack of counter-narrative comes from one key member of the international community, the United States. 'There is intense secrecy around the government and international community's [offensive] strikes against al-Shabaab: no video footage from drones, no helmet camera footage from Somali Special Forces raids [often working with US and other support]. Often strikes are left unattributed and unexplained.'¹⁰³ While operational security needs to be maintained, the US often tries to downplay its role in Somalia through its tailored engagement approach. Most, if not all, anti-al-Shabaab reporting is reactionary and by the time it goes to press, it is too little too late. The ensuing narrative becomes more about 'America's secret war'¹⁰⁴ than anything that can be used to combat al-Shabaab's media campaign substantively.

Al-Shabaab and TV: Jihadi Journalism¹⁰⁵

Al-Shabaab's video releases, produced by its media channel al-Katā'ib, are believed to be edited in Canada,¹⁰⁶ but bases have also been identified in Scandinavia in the past.¹⁰⁷ The videos are published online with secret, downloadable links to file-sharing sites. Sometimes they are loaded onto public platforms such as YouTube, but there they are usually taken down quickly by authorities. Because

100 AMISOM, 'Al-Shabaab Violating Human Rights by Recruiting Child Soldiers', Video News Release, 18 April 2016.

101 @HSMPress Tweet: 'bombs dropped from #Kenyan aircraft pulverized the home of poor 67-year old man & his family. He died & his only daughter is severely injured', (8 December 2011)

102 Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London: Abacus, 1998), p. 294.

103 Harley, e-mail.

104 Colum Lynch, 'Is the U.S. Ramping Up a Secret War in Somalia?', *Foreign Policy*, July 23, 2013.

105 Anzalone, 'Continuity and Change', p. 1.

106 Anzalone, Atlantic Council Webcast.

107 Hansen, Skype.

of the remoteness, lack of infrastructure, and inherent danger, many parts of Somalia have been long inaccessible to the press. Al-Shabaab's videos are among the group's most powerful strategic communications tools, and they are hugely useful to the media as evidence that what al-Shabaab claims happened actually did happen, despite AMISOM's denials. These videos also make up a major part of the scanty material from inside Somalia that can be used to depict the story of the war against al-Shabaab, unless AMISOM releases video footage, which is extremely rare, and often outdated or lacking newsworthiness.¹⁰⁸ Television news, which is described as having a 'built-in bias'¹⁰⁹ towards reporting on 'any conflict in terms of the visible brutality',¹¹⁰ is extremely suited to reporting on issues of terrorism. This works in favour of the jihadi insurgents because of the tendency of the medium to simplify stories into good and evil, black and white, and to focus on negative rather than positive coverage.¹¹¹

The ever-increasing number of deadlines journalists must now meet also play into the hands of the jihadi insurgents. The media, particularly TV, are caught 'in the shrinking time and space [...] an ever-shrinking timeline between event and broadcast' that the forces fighting al-Shabaab have thus far failed to take advantage of.¹¹² Not to say that AMISOM and the Somali government don't *ever* release information, it is just not always information the news industry can use. 'AMISOM and the Somali government shared [stories] we weren't interested in—such as your typical PR products, ribbon-cutting, ceremonies, etc.—and suppressed the things we were, often because it made them look bad, incompetent or beaten,' McConnell says.¹¹³

Al-Shabaab often documents attacks for the purpose of legitimating them. The 'deed' is filmed by jihadis, often with more than one camera wielded by fairly skilled operators. These films, particularly those with English narrative, appeal to al-Shabaab's international audience; they are narrated by a well-spoken jihadi with a pleasant voice and a British accent. The footage is compelling, well edited, clearly presented, and with good natural sound. Anzalone coined the phrase

108 E-mails from AMISOM newsroom: thenewsroom@auunist.org featuring press conferences, 27 February 2016 and 9 March 2017.

109 Robin Day, 'On Television Warfare', 1970, quoted in Philip Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the present day*. Third Edition. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 274

110 Ibid.

111 Richard Bailey, e-mail to the author, 3 March 2017.

112 Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed*, p. 12.

113 McConnell, e-mail.

‘jihadi journalism’ to describe such productions.¹¹⁴ It is easy to see why they might appeal to a potential recruit living a quiet life on the other side of the world, looking for community acceptance, as well as purpose, excitement, and drama.

Al-Shabaab, Twitter and Fake News

» @HSMPress

Between 2010 and 2011, the group ‘spearheaded the jihadi use of Twitter’ using the handle @HSMPress; the account was shut down numerous times, and reopened under similar usernames.¹¹⁵ This real-time social media platform was an excellent way for the group to provide up-to-the-minute information about what they were doing, allowing the jihadis to deliver messages during various ongoing events. The account-holder or holders tweeted in English, and almost always responded to tweets from people located outside of Somalia.¹¹⁶ During an eight month period in 2011 and 2012, Pete Martell analysed al-Shabaab’s usage of Twitter to communicate with Somali and international journalists. He found that Twitter ‘allowed a swift and easy connection with reporters [...] while having freed terrorists from the need to rely on traditional media to self-broadcast their message’.¹¹⁷ Although it cannot be proven that the group’s access to and engagement with mostly foreign media on theological or operational grounds led to an *increase in positive reporting* on the group, it did lead to *increased reporting* and, at the very least, increased attention and arguably a more sympathetic understanding of the group.¹¹⁸ In fact, in 2014, ‘the phrase “al-Shabaab Twitter Feed” was one of the suggested searches in the Google search engine when the name al-Shabaab [was] entered’.¹¹⁹

With more than 15 000 followers at one time, @HSMPress’s ‘audience’, in the form of Twitter followers, included dozens of foreign journalists. In addition to live-tweeting the Westgate attack, the account was also known to spar with

114 Anzalone, ‘Continuity and Change’, p. 1.

115 Anzalone, ‘Continuity and Change’, p. 22.

116 Pete Martell, *Somalia’s Al-Shabaab’s Other War: Examining a Terrorist Group’s Engagement with ‘Hostile’ Media*, Unpublished Paper (Centre for the Study of Political Violence, University of St. Andrews, 2012).

117 Ibid.

118 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Shiraz Maher, James Sheehan, *Lights, Caera, Jihad: Al Shabaab’s Western Media Strategy*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. (London: King’s College London, 2012) p. 33.

119 Stewart Bertram and Keith Ellison, ‘Sub Saharan African Terrorist Groups’ Use of the Internet’, *Journal of Terrorism Research*, Volume 5, Issue 1 (Special Issue), Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, February 2014, p. 1.

journalists; in fact two of the top ten accounts @HSMPress exchanged tweets with during the period Martell researched were international journalists.¹²⁰ Al-Shabaab also tweeted battlefield updates, claims of responsibility for attacks on AMISOM and Somali government troops, and short press releases. Another account that featured in al-Shabaab's 'top tweeted' list was Major Emmanuel Chirchir, spokesman for the Kenyan Defense Forces. Towards the end of 2011, after Kenyan forces began fighting al-Shabaab, @HSMPress engaged in several public arguments or 'twars' (Twitter wars) with Major Chirchir, even spontaneously hijacking questions from journalists to promote their own opinions.¹²¹ @HSMPress was often successful in making the Major appear extremely volatile and, in some instances, bumbling and misinformed. '[Al-Shabaab] was able to influence news coverage of Somalia and the ongoing conflict [...] particularly during periods of crisis, and successfully manipulate the media environment.'¹²²

» **@Daudoo: Live From Mogadishu**

Another sophisticated use of Twitter is the maintenance of accounts that are suspected to belong to sympathisers or agents of al-Shabaab posing as eyewitnesses or journalists. The account user **@Daudoo** is a fascinating example. A prolific tweeter, suspected of being more than one person, or at least a funded account,¹²³ the account-user describes himself as a 'freelance journalist in Somalia [...] specializing in al-Shabaab and global conflict updates'.¹²⁴ But he has neither published any work, nor linked to any work he has published. When contacted by the author, he said that his name was Daud, but refused to give further information, claiming fears for his safety. No journalist the author has spoken to knows his true identity or any of his writing. Strategic communications specialists working in Somalia accuse **@Daudoo** of being a 'pro-al-Shabaab tweeter', but it has never been proven outright that he is involved with the group, nor has he ever openly declared sympathy or support for them.¹²⁵ A one-week, rudimentary analysis of **@Daudoo's** tweets in February 2017¹²⁶ revealed

120 Martell, *Somalia's Al-Shabaab's Other War*.

121 **@author Tweet** "@MajirEChirchir AS claims it has attacked a #Kenyan convoy in lower juba region today killing several Kenyans can you confirm/deny?" *In Response: HSMPress HSM Press Office* "**@author** The Major seems to have fatfingered the pin on his recently acquired smartphone as he fumbled with the keys, and might not answer." (19 March 2012)

122 Anzalone, *Continuity and Change*, p. 22.

123 Harley, e-mail.

124 Twitter account **@Daudoo**

125 Stephen Harley, 'Daily Media Monitoring Report', e-mails, 2015–2017, 18 January 2016.

126 Tweets from **@Daudoo** 13 February to 19 February 2017

the following: **@Daudoo** routinely breaks news of attacks in all major towns and the rural areas of Somalia.¹²⁷ He also breaks news of al-Shabaab's claims of responsibility for such attacks and provides exclusive, regular news on the group in the form of press releases¹²⁸ and battlefield updates,¹²⁹ all the while claiming that his information comes from witnesses or from sources within the group.¹³⁰ He also disseminates anti-Somali government and AMISOM messages,¹³¹ as well as messages that contain negative sentiments about foreign involvement in Somalia;¹³² he seems particularly hostile towards the US.¹³³ In addition, **@Daudoo** routinely releases photographs and other forms of clearly pro-al-Shabaab strategic communications. One example of this is a photo tweeted by the account in March 2017, showing an alleged food distribution centre set up by al-Shabaab to help those affected by the drought that gripped the country.¹³⁴

Each of **@Daudoo's** tweets receives dozens of 'retweets' and 'favourites' from journalists covering Somalia and from the public, thus spreading the messages very effectively. By keeping his tweets neutral and dispassionate, with somewhat crude journalistic lingo, **@Daudoo** acts as a gatherer and disseminator of information, albeit solely on Twitter. He can still broadcast the message just as a spokesman might, but with an added veneer of neutrality. By maintaining the persona of a journalist, the account user avoids the risk of having his account shut down by Twitter authorities.

At best, **@Daudoo** is indeed a journalist who is clearly sympathetic towards al-Shabaab, operating nearly 24 hours every day, completely in secret, with sources

.....
127 @Daudoo Tweet: 'BREAKING: Massive car bomb kills atleast 25 ppl, incl. soldiers & civilians in #Mogadishu's Wadajir dist. Death toll could be higher. #Somalia' <<https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/833280987748499456>> (19 February 2017).

128 @Daudoo Tweet: 'BREAKING: In its first official comment, #AlShabaab describes #Somalia's new President as "apostate", vows to keep fighting against his govt' <<https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/833217167080427521>> (19 February 2017).

129 @Daudoo Tweet: 'Convoy of #Somalia and #US troops heading towards @AlShabaab controlled town of Harardhere in Mudug region. Drones hovering over town-Source' <<https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/831582433288060928>> (14 February 2017).

130 @Daudoo Tweet: 'BREAKING: Senior #Somalia intelligence official, Hassan Dhere, wounded in drive-by shooting in #Mogadishu. Bodyguard killed- Witnesses' <<https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/832879355831447552>> (18 February 2017).

131 @Daudoo Tweet: 'A traditional elder assassinated in #Mogadishu this evening, 8-yr-old boy also killed after being run over by a #Somalia army vehicle' <<https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/831947082487459841>> (15 February 2017).

132 @Daudoo Tweet: '#Somalia govt plans to file legal complaint against #UAW over #Somaliland military base #Berbera' <<https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/832163146810916865>> (16 February 2007).

133 @Daudoo Tweet: 'BREAKING: Senior #Alshabaab leader, Hassan Yakub says #Farmajo is 'American puppet' &they will fight against his govt & its allies. #Somalia' <<https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/833226226584150017>> (19 February 2017).

134 @Daudoo Tweet: '#Alshabaab distributes emergency food aid in drought hit areas under its control in Lower Shabelle region #Somalia' <<https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/838491685655052288>> (5 March 2017).

across Somalia. At worst, **@Daudoo** is an outright supporter of the group and is only pretending to be a journalist. If the latter is accurate, then it is an extremely clever way of disseminating pro-al-Shabaab information without the media catching on.

At his peak, **@Daudoo** had 73 000 followers, but his account was shut down in late 2017. He quickly opened another account under a slightly different username; this new account has also been shut down, but in the interim he published archives of tweets from his former account.

» Looks Like Real News

In January 2017, al-Shabaab attacked the Dayah Hotel in Mogadishu, where a political meeting of parliamentarians was being held. Harley noted that the group seemed to use a new tactic: a ‘communications plan that was pre-prepared, and activated once the attack was successfully underway’.¹³⁵ The link, provided by Harley, was to an ordinary-looking website, in the Somali language, that featured alleged interviews with the attackers inside the hotel.¹³⁶ On closer inspection the stories were all distinctly biased towards al-Shabaab and in opposition to AMISOM, the Somali government, and the West. Because there are fewer checks and balances in Somalia due to a lack of experienced independent journalists and the small number of international media located there, news from such a website—eyewitness accounts and pieces by local journalists or fixers—could filter through and make it into the international domain. ‘There is a consistent failure to message in any way against al-Shabaab’s high-profile attacks. There is no preparatory work in terms of reporting suspicions, no rapid response messaging once the incident starts [and] no follow-up messaging to clarify what happened,’ Harley criticises.¹³⁷

Al-Shabaab and Telegram: The One-on-One Approach

In October of 2014, in her capacity as a journalist, the author encountered what she believes to be a very effective method by which al-Shabaab attempts to influence media for strategic communications purposes. A Twitter user called **@somalaffairs** disagreed with her reporting on Somalia, and the two began to Direct Message or DM. The account user, calling himself ‘Bilal’, eventually

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135 Stephen Harley, ‘Daily Media Monitoring Report’, e-mails, 2015–2017, 25 January 2017.

136 Somali Memo Website, ‘[Al-Shabaab Claims Responsibility for Attack on Mogadishu Hotel](#)’, in Somali, translation available online, 25 January 2017.

137 Harley, e-mail.

identified himself as a member of the Somali diaspora who had returned to Somalia as a jihadi fighting for al-Shabaab. The author could not independently verify this until January 2017, when she authenticated Bilal's identity with another reporter from a prominent US newspaper who had also been communicating with him after the two were introduced by a senior member of al-Qaeda. Bilal has proven useful to the author providing her with insider information, links to new videos, ideological and theological information, and context regarding the inner-workings of the group.

Like a typical political marketer,¹³⁸ Bilal sought to establish a rapport with the author so that she could better understand the jihadi mindset. Communication with Bilal spanned a range of issues, from the jihadi life, the ISIS influence in Somalia, and what Bilal called the 'accidental' killing of civilians in al-Shabaab's guerilla-style attacks, which he claimed he did not condone. This communication lasted until April 2016. It first took place via Twitter and later via the encrypted messaging application Telegram, after an alleged friend of Bilal's contacted the author to explain that he had been summoned by al-Shabaab's leadership and killed. The friend claimed that al-Shabaab's leaders were unhappy with Bilal for helping another jihadi leave the country during its purge of ISIS supporters and accused him of defecting to ISIS.

Obviously this story is nearly impossible to verify, but the information Bilal passed on always proved accurate, and his insights were at times helpful in understanding what drives a group like al-Shabaab and its jihadi insurgents. It is uncertain whether this electronic outreach to journalists was coordinated by al-Shabaab's leadership, or if Bilal was in contact with members of the press of his own volition without their knowledge and consent. Nonetheless, this method of attempting to influence members of the mass media is extremely forward-looking. Above all, it allows for a timely and 'direct, professional exchange' between journalist and jihadi insurgent.¹³⁹

Conclusion

It is only reasonable that an organisation at war would seek to use any means possible to market itself; al-Shabaab is no exception. In order to ensure maximum news coverage, the group's strategic communicators employ a variety of means.

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¹³⁸ Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed*, p. 8.

¹³⁹ Aaron Lammer. [Longform Podcast #129, Part 1](#), 18 February 2015.

Some are quiet and surreptitious, such as electronic approaches to individual journalists or posing as journalists or eyewitnesses on Twitter; others are more overt and headline-grabbing, such as large-scale suicide attacks. In its attempts to influence the mass media, al-Shabaab's strategic communicators are fast-paced, forward-looking, and focused, despite the group's decreasing size and resources. As the group has lost territory and funding over the last few years, the pace of their strategic communications has slowed, but they remain impressively resilient. However, al-Shabaab's information operations would not be nearly as impressive were it not for the poorly coordinated strategic communications emanating from the coalition forces of AMISOM, the Somali government, and members of the international community.

The author, however, acknowledges the important role the traditional media play in aiding jihadi-insurgent communications via POTD, with their wall-to-wall coverage of large-scale terror attacks, particularly suicide attacks.¹⁴⁰ But the fact is that this is unlikely to cease, because it makes for compelling coverage and ultimately boosts ratings.¹⁴¹ The onus falls, therefore, on those working to counter the narratives of militant groups. They must try to dominate the communications space during these attacks and other crises, and harness the wall-to-wall media coverage for their own messaging purposes. 'Insurgent planners and TV news editors recognise that violence sells: "if it bleeds, it leads"'. Both depend on the viewer loyalty to further their aims', and it would be useful if strategic communicators for the Somali government and AMISOM recognised that too.¹⁴² Providing timely and newsworthy information to journalists and allowing them access are keys to success. Williams states that 'effective strategic communications in AMISOM required an expeditionary mindset and a willingness to take risks, including to generate and support media access in difficult circumstances'.¹⁴³ He also states the importance of dependability in the eyes of the media, saying 'to be effective also means building trust and remaining credible'.¹⁴⁴

The coalition has missed many valuable opportunities to capitalise on al-Shabaab's brutality and weaknesses and leverage its own successes. And it

140 Bruce Hoffman, 'The Logic of Suicide Terrorism', *Atlantic*, June 2003.

141 John Koblin, 'Coverage of Paris Terror Attacks Lifts Network News Ratings', *New York Times*, 24 November 2015.

142 Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed*, p. 5

143 Paul Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007–2017* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Chapter 11.

144 *Ibid.*

is the Somali people who have suffered most, for a prolonged period, as a result. Kenya, too, will have significant problems in future unless its strategic communications are not refocused from the very highest levels. This becomes even more apposite if al-Shabaab continues to launch devastating attacks across its border and recruit disenfranchised Kenyan Muslims to join its ranks. If Bilal is to be believed, legitimacy is crucial to a jihadi's cause. AMISOM, the Somali government, and the international community would be wise to assume that it is crucial to *their* cause as well.

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SOVIET ECONOMIC GASLIGHTING OF LATVIA AND THE BALTIC STATES

Gatis Krūmiņš

Abstract

In declaring Russia the successor state to the USSR in 1991, the Kremlin sought to retain and restore its political and economic influence in the so-called post-Soviet area—Central Europe, the Baltic countries, and Central Asia. The Kremlin-controlled media are currently engaged in strengthening the myth of the Soviet Union as a success story. In today's Russia, and in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, the three Baltic countries occupied by the USSR after the Second World War, a narrative combining the ideas of 'Soviet investment' and 'ungrateful Baltic people' is being popularised: the Baltic states are clearly demonstrating their lack of gratitude for generous Soviet era policies, while attempts to describe the Soviet occupation from the Baltic point of view are dismissed as falsification of history.

The purpose of this article is to describe the main directions used in Soviet propaganda to deceive society about the socio-economic situation in Latvia, and in the Baltic states in general, during the first decade of the Soviet occupation (1940–1950). The article also offers insight into the socio-economic realities of the period of occupation and the current topicality of the issue—links between Soviet propaganda and the current communications policy of the Russian Federation.

Keywords—*Latvia, Baltic states, USSR, Russia, Soviet propaganda, myths, strategic communications*

About the Author

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Introduction

The USSR ceased to exist a quarter of a century ago. However, the ruins of this lost empire continue to weigh on today's Russian ruling political elite, which has built its strategic communications with the outside world in large part by returning to the rhetoric of the USSR. Russia's status as the successor state to the USSR was quickly recognised by the international community, since a successor was a legal necessity. At the time of its dissolution, the 'Commonwealth of Independent States' (CIS) was organised as an alternative, more flexible cooperation platform for former Soviet 'republics'. The three Baltic countries, with newly elected parliaments, declared the restoration of their independence in 1990, one and a half years before the dissolution of the USSR. Hoping to rejoin the West as quickly as possible, the Baltic states refused to join the CIS, as membership also carried a strong implication of orientation toward Moscow. The Kremlin was clearly trying to preserve major elements of the Soviet legacy, and therefore also some form of the myth of the Soviet Union as a success story—not only in Russia but also in the non-Russian territories once occupied by the USSR. This tendency has become much stronger in the twenty-first century, under the leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has repeatedly expressed his regret regarding the collapse of the USSR.

The gravity of the current situation cannot be underestimated, as Soviet propaganda was once a great success. By deliberately spreading disinformation about the situation in the occupied Baltic states, the Soviet regime managed to deceive a significant part of Baltic society, and now that propaganda has transformed into various myths and narratives. It provides sufficiently fertile ground to successfully continue the work of influencing society in its favour by adding a new dose of disinformation. The purpose of this article is to describe the main tactics employed in Soviet propaganda to deceive the Baltic people

about the socio-economic situation in Latvia and in the Baltic states in general during the first decade of the Soviet occupation (1940–1950). The article also offers insight into the socio-economic reality of the Soviet occupation period and the current topicality of the issue.

Background

The economic woes brought on by the Depression led to the establishment of dictatorial governments in many European countries, and Latvia was among them. In 1934, the Prime Minister, Kārlis Ulmanis staged a bloodless coup, suspended the Constitution, the political parties, and the Parliament, and assumed power. About 500 political opponents were arrested and placed in a concentration camp. Most of them were released shortly thereafter, and a few were required to serve three-year sentences. Ulmanis claimed he was saving the country from coups by both right- and left-wing extremists, and was able to persuade a considerable part of the population that he was doing the right thing. He had no ideology, but rather promulgated a ‘personality cult’. He was eager to avoid conflict with the neighbouring totalitarian giants, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, who were bitter enemies at that time, waging propaganda campaigns and even a proxy war in Spain against one another.

After a secret agreement on 23 August 1939, the two totalitarian powers—the Communist Soviet Union and Nazi Germany—coordinated their geopolitical ambitions in East Central Europe and the Baltic region. This was a dramatic turnaround, considering their long-standing enmity; now, for almost two years, they acted as friends. Poland was divided between them on 1 September 1939, causing the start of the Second World War. From autumn 1939 to summer 1940, the USSR implemented a series of aggressive measures in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. First, the Baltic countries were forced to allow the USSR to establish military bases on their territory; then, in June of 1940, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were occupied and their independent statehood destroyed. The Soviet Union unsuccessfully attempted to legalise its occupation of the Baltic states at the international level by organising pseudo-elections in their territories based on Soviet standards, with a single list of candidates and prescribed election results. These ‘parliaments’ proclaimed Soviet sovereignty in the Baltic countries and requested admission into the USSR. The international community, however, did not recognise the legitimacy of the annexation of the Baltic states. Nevertheless, the USSR did significantly better with the real subjugation of the Baltic states, which remained under occupation for five decades. The Baltic countries managed to restore their de facto independence only in 1991, fifty-one years

later.¹ Throughout the occupation period, the Soviet regime tried not only to justify the legitimacy of the Baltic annexation in its communication with both the international community and the Soviet population, but also strove to create the impression that the Baltic states had a special socio-economic status—that they received special assistance and support from the USSR, and only thanks to this help was the quality of life in the Baltic states better than in the rest of the USSR.

The First Year of Soviet Occupation—Early Attempts to Use Propaganda to Distort the Socio-economic Reality of the Baltic states

The level of socio-economic development was significantly higher in Latvia at the time of the Soviet occupation in 1940 than in the rest of the USSR. It is often impossible to compare statistical indicators between Latvia and the USSR directly, because each country used a different economic model. However, using the results of modern research comparing the development of different countries and regions at different times, we can conclude that GDP per capita in Latvia at the end of the 1930s was 40–50 per cent higher than in the USSR.² The quality of life of an average citizen differed even more significantly. While in Latvia all types of services, food products, and manufactured consumer goods were available in almost unlimited quantities (some limits for the purchase of retail goods were introduced after the start of the war, as trade with Great Britain, France, and other countries became much more difficult), while in the USSR a satisfactory supply of goods was available only to a privileged few—the inner circle of the Communist Party and those close to it. The rest of the population had to look for other options to obtain the goods they needed. When Latvia was occupied in 1940, the exchange rate for Soviet ruble (RUB) to the Latvian lat (LVL) was introduced at a ratio of 1 to 1. But the real purchasing power of the ruble was considerably lower, and if we compare market prices, it is clear that they differed significantly.³

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1 Inesis Feldmanis (ed.), *Latvia: Toward 100 Years* (Riga: Jumava, 2014), pp. 431–58.

2 Norkus, Zenonas, 'A Comparison of the Economic Growth of the Baltic states between the Two World Wars', *World Political Sciences*, Vol. 12, 2016.

3 For more about economic developments in Latvia in the first year of Soviet occupation year see: Gatis Krūminis, *Economic and Monetary developments in Latvia During World War II* (Riga: Bank of Latvia, 2012), pp. 87–112.

Product	Price in Latvia (LVL) ¹	Price in Smolensk (RUB) ²	Market price in the USSR against the relevant price in Latvia (%)
Beef (kg)	1,15	18	1565
Milk (litre)	0,22	3,5	1590
Butter (kg)	2,40–2,70	40	1568
Eggs (10)	0,9–1,1	14	1400
Potatoes (kg)	0,07	3,50	5000

Table 1. Comparison between Latvian market prices and Smolensk kolkhoz market prices (July 1940)

Table 1 shows that a Soviet citizen arriving in Latvia from the Russian city of Smolensk in the summer of 1940 to ‘build socialism’ could buy 15 times more meat, butter, or milk for one ruble in a local Latvian market than he could back home. This opportunity was used extensively by people coming from Russia and elsewhere in the pre-1940 USSR, such as civil servants and officials of the occupying army; they purchased goods in Latvia and sent them home to their friends and family to use or to sell. It is worth pointing out that a similar policy was also used by the Nazis, through the introduction of disproportionate German and local exchange rates in the countries they had occupied, in effect subjecting these territories to ‘legal thievery’.⁴

One of the Soviet ‘propaganda success stories’ during both the first year of occupation (1940–1941) and after the Second World War was the presentation of pre-war independent Latvia as underdeveloped agrarian state. From the first months of the occupation, ‘industrialization’ was offered as an ideological alternative to the development of the national economy. In this respect, the ideological doctrine of Ulmanis’ authoritarian regime (1934–1940) was used very skilfully, namely that Latvia was a nation of peasants and its priority economic sector was agriculture. This was largely due to Ulmanis’ political background—he was the leader of the Latvian Farmers’ Union before the 1934 coup d’état. However, the economic reality in Latvia was quite different: in the second half of the ‘thirties, industry had developed much faster than agriculture. On the eve of the occupation, Ķegums Power Station—the most modern hydroelectric power plant in the Baltics at the time—was opened.

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⁴ Alexander Dallin, *German rule in Russia, 1941-1945: a study of occupation policies*, (London: Macmillan, 1957), p. 393.

Airplanes, cars, and sophisticated agricultural machinery were manufactured in Latvia, and the electronics industry was generating world-class products. Radio and photo equipment manufactured in Latvia was internationally recognised. For example, 43,700 radios were produced in ‘agrarian’ Latvia in 1939, about one third as many as were produced in the entire ‘industrial’ Soviet Union the same year.⁵ However, Ulmanis’ authoritarian regime kept silent about these industrial achievements and emphasised the importance of agricultural production and exports. The Soviet regime unequivocally agreed with Ulmanis that Latvia had been an agrarian country before the occupation. Only the word ‘agrarian’ was supplemented by the word ‘underdeveloped’, and Latvian industry was represented as the result of the investments made by the USSR.

At the end of 1940, it was announced that a decision had been made in Moscow at the Communist Party conference (other sources have made reference to the orders of Joseph Stalin)⁶ that Latvia was to be transformed from an underdeveloped agrarian country into an industrial Soviet republic in four or five years time. The devaluation of the Latvian lat (LVL) and its equalisation to Soviet ruble (RUB) in 1940 was used to manipulate the statistical data, and in the spring of 1941 it was announced that the total industrial production (calculated in RUB) during the first quarter of 1941 as compared to the fourth quarter of 1940 had grown from RUB 312 m to RUB 744 m.⁷ A similar method was used to compare production during the first period of Latvian independence to that of Soviet-occupied Latvia, claiming, of course, enormous gains for the latter. A good example is the comparison of the output of the engineering and metalworking industries between 1940 and 1980 with the total production in 1980 presented as 573 times higher.⁸

Manipulative communication was often used as a tool for Sovietisation—the imposition of Soviet culture and its models for economics and governance on the occupied territories. The reforms made to Latvia’s agrarian sector are a striking example. An agrarian reform was announced in 1940. It was an absolutely meaningless measure from the economic point of view, but the results were

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5 Gatis Krūmiņš (ed.), *Latvijas tautsaimniecības vēsture* [The History of Latvian National Economy], (Rīga: Apgāds Jumava, 2017), p. 233.

6 ‘VK(b)P CK un PSRS Tautas Komisāru Padomes pilnvarotā pie Latvijas PSR TKP biedra Derevjanska runa LK(b)P IX kongresā’ [Speech by comrade Derevjansky, representative of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Council of People’s Commissars in Latvia to the 9th Congress of the Communist Party of Latvia] *Padomju Latvija*, December 1940, p. 4. [accessed 17 July 2017]

7 LNA, F. 101 (Documents of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia) descr. 1 1940–41) f. 49, p. 57 (Report for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—About the Results of Work of Latvian Industry, First Quarter, 1941).

8 Gulan, P[ēter], *Latvija v sistēme narodnogo hozjajstva SSSR* [Latvia in the Soviet Economic Model] (Rīga: Zinatne, 1982), in Russian.

immediately used by the occupation forces to their advantage: agricultural workers on the largest farms were transformed from employees with a stable income into small landholders, each of them placed in the unenviable position of receiving 10 hectares of land to work, in most cases without residential or farm buildings, and no livestock or agricultural equipment. In reality the Soviet regime had created a rural population condemned to poverty, and fragmented Latvian farmland, while at the same time striking a heavy blow toward the largest market- and export-oriented farms, depriving them of both land and labour. This economic absurdity was skilfully used to initiate the Sovietisation of rural Latvia and to create the impression that the Soviets were providing assistance to the poor. In order to ensure land granted to landless farmers was transformed into collective farms, Machinery and Tractor Stations and Machinery and Horse Rental Points were established in the rural areas. The infrastructure of these service companies was based on the most successful farms—one ‘model farm’ was left untouched in each district and the owners of these farms were simply evicted later on.⁹ These were the first steps towards the collectivisation of agriculture. The occupying power demonstrated its ‘assistance’ by adopting a decision of the Communist Party leadership in February 1941 to eradicate poverty and ‘farms without cows’ in Latvia; this was widely reported in the press and later described in Soviet historical literature.¹⁰ It must be re-emphasised that these poor farms had been created by the occupying power itself a few months before!

It cannot be denied that part of the Latvian population initially believed this Soviet propaganda, including that about the high level of prosperity in the USSR. There were several reasons for this, one of the most important being that the level of trust in media was traditionally rather high. Although Latvia’s authoritarian government had introduced censorship after Ulmanis’ coup d’état in 1934, it almost exclusively targeted open criticism of political power. Articles were published in the media and in literature openly discussing both the international situation and problems of an economic character. In general, censorship in independent Latvia was manifested by the neglect of certain topics, but no lies or disinformation about the economic situation were ever disseminated. The suppressed topics included the growing complexity of Latvia’s internal and external political situation at the beginning of the Second World War. The government did not dare tell its people that the agreement made with the USSR in October 1939 regarding the deployment of Soviet military bases in Latvia was a manifestation of the threat posed by the

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⁹ Gatis Kruminis, *Economic and Monetary developments in Latvia During World War II* (Riga: Bank of Latvia, 2012), pp. 98–99.

¹⁰ *Latvijas PSR vēsture* [History of the Latvian SSR], Vol. 3, (Riga: Latvijas PSR Zinātņu akadēmijas izdevniecība, 1959), pp. 412–13.

USSR to occupy Latvia. When Ulmanis addressed the people in October 1939, he wanted to give the impression that Latvia would not be endangered by these agreements in any way: 'I must say that the pact, as it is customary in the pacts of the Soviet Union, stands out with its clarity and certainty, as well as the recognition of and respect for the interests of the other party, and is truly mutual.'¹¹ Similarly, Ulmanis explained away the departure of the Baltic German community—about 60,000 Latvian citizens—to territories controlled by Nazi Germany; this was arranged in Berlin in order to remove them from areas that Hitler knew were about to be overrun by the USSR. Ulmanis, however, denied that it was in any way related to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed on 23 August 1939:

Certain turmoil in the society has also been created by the German departure movement. I must say that they would do the right thing if they would firmly stand up against this agitation for their own good. The malicious idea that the emigration of Germans is in some way related to the new treaty with the Soviet Union is absolutely wrong.¹²

By deceiving the public, Ulmanis' authoritarian regime solved its short-term problems—the people were calmed. However, from the perspective of strategic communications it was a fundamental mistake for the long run, as those who constituted the biggest geopolitical threats to Latvia were represented as friends. The treaties imposed by the USSR, which authorised the presence of the Soviet army in Latvia, were presented to the people as wisdom and foresight. In June 1940, when the USSR took the next steps to annex Latvia, Ulmanis was at an impasse. In a radio address at the moment of occupation, Ulmanis was unable to acknowledge his mistakes and tell the truth, so he called the arriving occupation troops 'the army of a friendly country'. This statement confused local society, and from the strategic communication point of view, Ulmanis made his greatest mistake—not even a diplomatic protest was announced about the situation.

After the occupation of Latvia, all media were subject to strict centralised control, and the information space was flooded with disinformation about the good intentions of the USSR and its leaders in the Baltics. Many intellectual leaders who held more or less important positions in various institutions initially believed in the good intentions of the USSR and agreed to cooperate with the occupying regime. The managers of the agricultural sector requested

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¹¹ *Rīgas Vēstnesis* [Riga Herald], 'Ja grib lai brauc, bet—uz neatgriešanās' [If they want to leave, let them, but—without returning], 19 October 1939. [Accessed 10 July 2017, Latvian National Library]
¹² *Ibid.*

equipment from the Soviet authorities, and officials of the new Latvian SSR who prepared the first draft budget for the year 1941 were very optimistic about investments from the new government. All requests were rejected, and what actually happened was quite the opposite—a brutal exploitation of the Latvian economy in the interests of the USSR. During the first year of the occupation (1940–1941), Latvia was turned into a military base for the USSR, and almost all resources were channelled primarily into strengthening its military power.¹³

Soviet Propaganda in the Post-war Years

After the occupation period by Nazi Germany (1941–1944, part of Latvia until 1945), Latvia fell once more under Soviet control, and during this period Soviet propaganda began to operate with new force. The creation of an impression of Soviet support to Latvia was strengthened. The resources of the territory and its population were exploited, but the official information sources declared the opposite—that the USSR was investing in the Latvian economy and socio-economic processes. The press and radio, and later television, as well as scientific and popular-science publications, were used to strengthen this deliberately skewed interpretation and to misinform Latvian society. Particular attention was paid to the education system. For example, in a history book on the Latvian SSR published in 1959, the post-war period was characterised as follows:

The actions of the Latvian nation in restoring the national economy became possible thanks to that huge assistance provided by the Soviet government, the Soviet Union Communist Party Central Committee, the fraternal Soviet republics, and the Soviet army.¹⁴

Special attention was paid to the teaching of Latvian history in schools, and history was ‘rewritten’ just after the end of the Second World War. In 1945, an expert from Moscow¹⁵ evaluated the content of the new 7th grade Latvian history textbook and concluded:

- The programme poorly reflects the friendly attitude of the Russian nation towards the Latvian people and its assistance to the Latvian people in different periods of history [...]. Nothing is said about the role of the Russian proletariat’s advanced guard in the liberation of the oppressed

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13 Gatis Kruminis, *Economic and Monetary developments in Latvia During World War II* (Riga: Bank of Latvia, 2012), p. 100.

14 Kārlis Strazdiņš (ed.), *Latvijas PSR vēsture* [History of Latvian SSR] (Riga: Latvijas PSR Zinātņu akadēmijas izdevniecība, 1953–1959). Volume 3 (1959), p. 485.

15 Head of the School Sector of the All-Union Communist (Bolshevik) Party Central Committee

nations from autocracy, including the liberation of Latvians from the dictatorship of tsarism and the bourgeoisie.

- During the period of tsarism, German barons were to blame for serfdom.
- The economic tendency of Latvia towards Russia, the dependence of cultural and economic development, are not reflected.¹⁶

The Soviet regime treated the ‘correct’ interpretation of history as an integral part of its propaganda and regarded it as very important. Soviet historical narratives were purposefully designed to ensure that any national issue was permeated by a single message—our country is multinational, but in previous centuries and in the present it is Russia and the Russian people who have played the leading role. This idea permeates the historical literature of the entire period of Soviet occupation. One of the first examples is the third volume of *History of the USSR for Secondary Schools*,¹⁷ translated from Russian into Latvian in 1945, in which representatives of several nations are described as war heroes, but the book closes with a clear message:

The Soviet state, which came into being under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin as a result of the centuries-long liberation struggle of the great Russian people, the greatest leaders of mankind, turned our land into an unshakeable fortress during a brief period of history.¹⁸

No matter what the time period, Russia’s territorial expansion is always characterised as the ‘liberation’ of other nations for their own benefit. Already in 1940, when the new political and socio-economic changes were being explained to the Latvian people, the USSR’s readiness to ‘help’ this border region was emphasised:

The Soviet Union is such a big and powerful factor in international relations that without its participation the capitalist world cannot solve any problems. The Soviet Union is so powerful that it can bestow peace, not only in its own country even while the second imperialist war rages all around, but it can help its bordering countries escape the horrors of war, shake off the capitalist yoke, and acquire the Soviet power it longs for. This is a new determinant with great historical significance that

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16 Archive of the Socio-political History of the Russian Federation, f. 600 (Documents of the Latvian Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), descr. 1, f. 3, pp. 85–91.

17 Anna Pankratova (ed.) *PSRS Vēsture. Mācību grāmata vidusskolas X klasei. 3 daļa*. [History of the USSR for Secondary Schools. Volume 3] (Riga: APP, 1945).

18 *Ibid.*, p. 363.

can open new and happy prospects for oppressed nations and all progressive humanity worn out by imperialism.¹⁹

As can be seen, the ‘special rights’ of neighbouring countries, which from time to time are demonstrated by the Russian political elite in their strategic communications today (for example, in relations with Ukraine), is a product of Stalin’s totalitarian USSR.

It is no surprise that the political elite approved the former Soviet anthem as the anthem of the Russian Federation in 2000. By using the same melody, albeit with different words, they created an unambiguous message about their ambition to restore the former superpower. Why is the anthem considered important for strategic communications? In the Soviet version, still ringing in the minds of the older generation, the first four lines of the anthem send a very clear strategic message: ‘The indestructible union of free Soviet republics has forever been united by mighty Russia.’ Despite the fact that the USSR positioned itself as a multinational ‘family of nations’ in both its external and internal communications, it is important to understand that the emphasis was always clearly on the dominant role of Russia and Russians. Similar messages were integrated into the symbols of the Soviet republics. A parallel idea was embedded in the words of the Latvian SSR anthem: ‘Only together with the great Russian people did we become a power that conquered the enemy.’ To strengthen the narrative of the special role of Russians, the authorities used essays lauding the ‘friendship of nations’ (which invariably meant the alleged role of Russia in providing neighbouring nations with both the example and the impetus to develop their own economies and cultures) and historical narratives embodying the aforementioned interpretations of history. This essay by Janis Sudrabkalns, written in 1959, was widely disseminated:

The friendship of nations is the strongest power of the Soviet family, its greatest treasure. From ancient times the Slavs and Balts, Russians and Latvians have been neighbours and friends. Around the mighty Russian oak, a rich grove of Soviet nations has spread. The Russian language, one of the leading languages in the new world, is also the language of friendship and cooperation of the whole Soviet family [...].²⁰

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19 LNA, F. 101 (Documents of Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia) descr. 2 (1940–41) f. 430 (Materials for Propagandists), p.1.

20 Aleksandrs Drīzulis (ed.), *Latvijas PSR vēsture vidusskolām* [History of the Latvian SSR for Secondary Schools] (Rīga: Zvaigzne, 1988), p. 237, in Latvian.

Soviet interpretations of history grew broader and more spurious. For example, *History of the Latvian SSR*, published in 1960, made the unjustifiable claim that during the 5th–9th centuries the Baltic tribes developed more slowly than the Eastern Slavs, and some influence of the ‘Old Russian State’ that had a positive effect on the territory of Latvia for centuries to come was pointed out in all contexts. The history of Livonia was interpreted in a similar way:

Russia, the great and trustworthy Eastern neighbour of the Baltic nations, experienced a period of feudal fragmentation. Its forces were involved in a dire struggle against the Mongols. Although the Germans conquered the Baltics, the historic friendship between the Latvian and Russian nations did not disappear. In the long and difficult struggle with their German conquerors, the Latvian people always sought help from the great Russian nation. In the heroic struggles of the 13th century against the Germans and other invaders, the friendship between the Russian, Latvian, and Estonian nations grew stronger, and they began to better understand the coherence and unity of their political interests.²¹

Anyone familiar with the region’s history might now find these claims absurd, but this interpretation of history was imposed on the Latvian people for almost half a century. The histories of Lithuania and Estonia were similarly rewritten, and the role of the Russian language in their national cultures was exaggerated.²² The impression is given that the ‘high culture’ from which the Baltic people took cues was Russian. In fact, for the Lithuanians it was Polish, and for the Latvians and Estonians German and Scandinavian (while for the Russians of the 18th and 19th centuries it was French).

Industrialisation was also a widely publicised topic; Latvian industrial achievements were ignored, and Latvia was described using the derogatory epithet ‘the agrarian adjunct of imperialist countries’. By contrast, the alternative view and its origin were clearly defined:

Owing to extensive help from the other Soviet republics and the cooperation between Soviet nations, the industrialisation of the Latvian SSR began in the early post-war years.²³

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21 Jānis Zutis (ed.), *Latvijas PSR vēsture*. [History of Latvian SSR] (Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 1960), p. 25
22 Epp Annus, ‘Between Arts and Politics: A Postcolonial View on Baltic Cultures of the Soviet Era’, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 47, № 1 (January 2016), pp. 1–13.

23 Kārlis Strazdiņš (ed.), *Latvijas PSR vēsture* [History of Latvian SSR] (Rīga: Latvijas PSR Zinātņu akadēmijas izdevniecība, 1953–1959). Volume 3 (1959) p. 496.

The Latvian people were also disinformed about financial policy and budgetary priorities. At a time when, in reality, almost half of all expenditures went to the military,²⁴ a story was constructed about extensive investments in the national economy to assuage the needs of the population:

The second session of the second convocation of the Latvian SSR Supreme Council in March 1948 endorsed the republican budget for the year 1948: RUB 1 bn 454,1 m [...] Approximately one third of all budget expenditures (RUB 463.6 m) for the republic were allocated for the development of the national economy. In addition, large amounts from the budget of the USSR were redirected for the building and reconstruction [...] of the republic's largest enterprises and construction objects. [...] 89.3% of total budget resources were allocated for the further development of the national economy and the domestic and cultural needs of the inhabitants.²⁵

The claim that Latvia was receiving great material benefits after the occupation was also inserted into all reference books, including the *Latvian Soviet Encyclopaedia* published during the last decade of the occupation: 'Admitted to the family of the united Soviet republics, the LSSR received great, selfless help from all Soviet nations.'²⁶

The *Latvian Soviet Encyclopaedia* does not even mention Soviet budgetary expenditures in Latvian territory; only the Latvian SSR budget revenue and expenditure is analysed (however, the encyclopaedia does state that the budget of the Latvian SSR is part of the USSR budget in compliance with Leninist and democratic centralist principles).²⁷ The relationship between the Latvian SSR budget and the USSR budget is not explained in any way.²⁸

The occupying regime largely avoided characterising the Soviet financial policy with actual figures, confining itself to general phrases about 'generous assistance'. Soviet budgetary expenditures in Latvia, even investments in

24 I.N.A.F. 202 (Documents of the Bank of the USSR, Latvian Branch in Riga), Descr. 1-a (secret documents), f 1 (Accounting Reports Regarding Revenues and Expenditures of the Soviet Central Budget in the Latvian SSR—secret documents, 1946–65).

25 Ibid., pp. 500–01.

26 Pēteris Jērāns (ed.), *Latvijas Padomju enciklopēdija* [Latvian Soviet Encyclopedia], Vol. 5-2, (Riga: Galvenā enciklopēdiju redakcija, 1984), p. 332.

27 The occupying Soviet regime broadly described itself using expressions that characterised a democratic state structure. However, in reality principles of democratic governance were ignored. The USSR had no free elections and no freedom of the press, nor did it have any other features of a democratic society.

28 Ibid., pp. 432–33.

industry, were never made public. The only publicly available source was the republican budget, which included the heading 'USSR budget allocation' within annual revenue. Data on Latvian revenues forwarded to the USSR budget, and the data on the part of the revenue which returned and the purposes it was used for, have not been found in the historical literature until now.

Financial and Economic Realities of the Post-war Years

After the independence of the Baltic states was restored in 1991, the accounting documents of the USSR State Bank branches, the record that makes it possible to analyse the financial policy of the USSR occupation regime in the Baltic states in detail, were declassified. The documents found in the archives of the Baltic countries made it possible to calculate revenues and expenditure in the Baltic states during the Soviet occupation, including the expenditures of the occupying Soviet regime for military purposes and the funding for repressive institutions. Having these unique documents, we are now able to assess the economic processes in the territory of the Baltic states and to provide answers to many hitherto unanswered questions, and thus to refute the idea constructed during the occupation period of an extensive Soviet investment in the Baltic countries.

During the post-war years, about a quarter of the revenue generated in Latvia by taxes and fees were directed to the Latvian SSR budget. The rest were diverted to the USSR budget, where the revenue was allocated in accordance with the priorities of the central government. As already mentioned, there was no official information in Latvia regarding the budgetary revenues and expenditure of the USSR, except for a certain amount transferred from the USSR budget to the Latvian SSR budget each year. This information created the false impression that the Soviet Union had financially invested in Latvia. In the later years of the Soviet era, the authorities had skilfully sustained the myth that the elimination of war damage and the renewed industrial development in Latvia had been made possible by USSR investments.

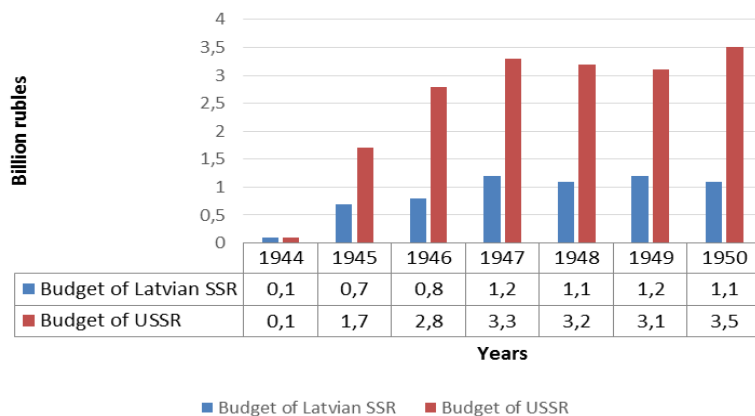


Figure 1. Revenue from the territory of Latvia split between the budgets of the Latvian SSR and the USSR (1945–1950, in billions of RUB)²⁹

Most of the revenue consisted of a variety of taxes, of which the largest was the ‘Turnover Tax’, which brought in up to two thirds of total state income during the post-war years (Table 2). The Turnover tax was applied to all goods produced in the USSR that entered the market. Government loans (or bonds) also had particular significance, and the money thus ‘borrowed’ could be added to tax revenues. Residents were forced to ‘lend’ money to the state with a long repayment period, on a ‘voluntary basis’. The plan for these loans was carefully developed and implemented in regard to certain farms and citizens; the process was carefully controlled, and refusal to participate was classified as sabotage.³⁰

²⁹ LNA F. 202 (Documents of the Bank of the USSR, Latvian Branch in Riga), descr. 1-a (Secret Documents), f. 1 (Accounting Reports Regarding Revenues and Expenditures of the Soviet Central Budget in the Latvian SSR—secret documents, 1946–65), and descr. 2 (Accounting and Financial reports), f. 512 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1946–47), f. 517 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1948), f. 545 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1949); LNA F. 327 (Ministry of Finances of the Latvian SSR), descr. 20 (Accounting and Financial Reports), f. 208 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1950).

³⁰ LNA, F. 327 (Ministry of Finance of the Latvian SSR), descr. 1-a (Secret Documents), f. 3 (Reports Regarding Financial Policy), p. 59.

Type of tax	1946	1947	1948	1949	1950
Turnover Tax	2568	3392	2804	2755	2830
State Loans ³	186	185	209	307	344
Taxes from Residents (total)	356	511 ⁴	666	425	400
Incl. income Tax	164	195	206	221	233
Incl. agricultural Tax	128	316	361	99	59
Incl. bachelor Tax	64	—	99	105	108

Table 2. The most significant revenues from the territory of Latvia in the budgets of the USSR and the Latvian SSR (in millions of RUB, total)³¹

In 1945, Latvia was an active war zone and military spending was not particularly recorded, but the accounting reports regarding the implementation of the budget during the post-war years confirm that the funds were systematically channelled to other regions of the USSR, and a large part of the financial resources did not return to Latvia, even in relation to military expenditures. This is contrary to the myth cultivated during the entire Soviet period that the Latvian economy was restored by extensive investments from the USSR. The financial settlements confirm the contrary—the Soviet economy outside Latvia was renewed on funds obtained and taxes collected in Latvia, not vice versa. The fact remains that in the 1940s Latvia was the economic donor of the USSR.

After the Second World War Latvia became a border zone of a totalitarian country; in addition to that, it was in a region where the countries on the other side of the border were considered potential enemies by the USSR leadership. Riga was at the centre of the Baltic military district, and the territory of Latvia was highly militarised. Large amounts of money were also spent on internal affairs and national security structures, mostly because of the active national resistance movement that the Soviet regime wanted to suppress at all costs.³² The USSR spent large sums on military and security institutions (Table 3, next page).

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 31 LNA F. 202. (Documents of Bank of USSR, Latvian branch in Riga), descr. 2 (Accounting and Financial Reports), f. 512 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1946–47), f. 517 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1948), f. 545 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1949); LNA F. 327 (Ministry of Finance of the Latvian SSR), descr. 20 (Accounting and Financial Reports), f. 208 (Revenues and Expenditures of the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1950). LNA F. 202, descr. 1-a, f. 1, and F. 327, descr. 4 (Revenues and Expenditures in Latvian Territory).

32 Inesis Feldmanis (ed.), *Latvia: Toward 100 Years* (Riga: Jumava, 2014), pp. 316–21.

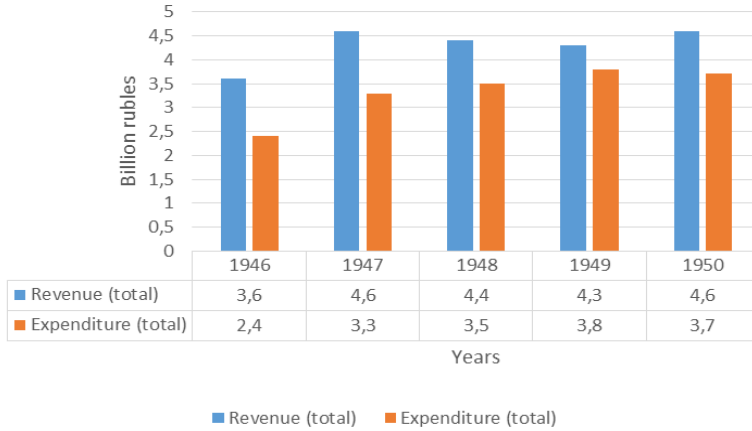


Figure 2. The total revenues and expenditures in Latvia 1945–1950 (Latvian SSR and USSR budgets, in billions of RUB)³³

Heading of the USSR budget expenditure	Amount in rubles
Ministry of War and Naval Enterprise Construction	RUB 4 855 725
The USSR Ministry of Armed Forces	RUB 1 034 140 577
The USSR Ministry of Armed Forces (pensions)	RUB 11 869 486
The USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs	RUB 144 442 309
The USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs (pensions)	RUB 1 756 568
The USSR Ministry of State Security	RUB 23 559 312
The USSR Ministry of State Security (pensions)	RUB 362 791
Total	RUB 1 220 986 770

Table 3. Expenditures of the USSR military and repressive ministries in Latvia in 1946 (in RUB)³⁴

33 Calculations of author, source: LNA F. 202. (Documents of Bank of USSR, Latvian branch in Riga), descr. 1-a (Secret documents), f. 1. (Accounting reports about revenue and expenditures of Soviet central budget in Latvian SSR – secret part, years 1946 -1965) and descr. 2 (Accounting and financial reports), f. 512 (Revenue and expenditures from Latvian SSR – Latvian SSR un USSR budgets, years 1946 -1947), f. 517 (Revenue and expenditures from Latvian SSR – Latvian SSR un USSR budgets, year 1948), f. 545 (Revenue and expenditures from Latvian SSR – Latvian SSR un USSR budgets, year 1949); LNA F. 327. (Ministry of Finances of Latvian SSR), descr. 20. (Accounting and financial reports), f. 208. (Revenue and expenditures from Latvian SSR – Latvian SSR un USSR budgets, year 1950).

34 Ibid.

For comparison, the Latvian SSR budgetary expenditure in 1946 was only RUB 763 m, but all-Union budget spent in this year for military needs more than RUB 1, 2 billion.³⁵ Most of the money spent came from the all-Union budget, as result of the high degree of centralisation of economic policy (a high proportion of centrally controlled funds, and a corresponding reduction of the funds of ‘Union Republics’).

Analysing the structure of expenditures in Latvia, it must be concluded that the militarisation and subjugation of the territory was the main priority of the Soviet regime in the 1940s, as the proportion of these expenses within the total expenditure (of the Latvian SSR and the USSR budget together) reached as high as 50% at the end of the forties (Figure 3).

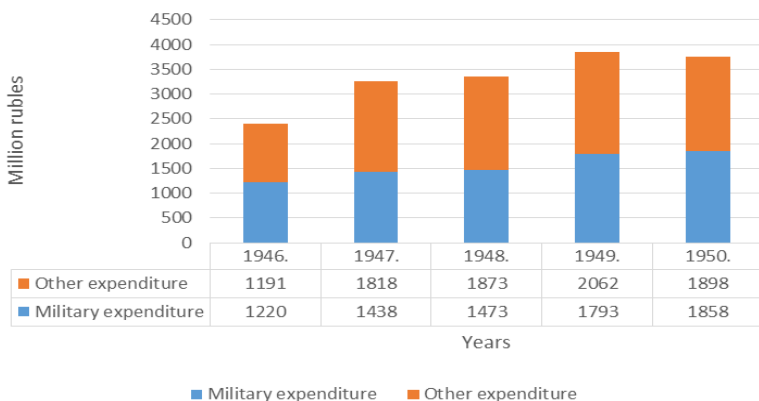


Figure 3. Amount and proportion of expenditures for the military and repressive ministries in the total expenditures in the territory of Latvia 1946–1950 (Latvian SSR and USSR budgets, in millions of RUB)³⁶

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 35 LNA F. 202. (Documents of Bank of USSR, Latvian branch in Riga), descr. 1-a (Secret documents), f. 1. (Accounting reports about revenue and expenditures of Soviet central budget in Latvian SSR – secret part, years 1946 -1965), descr. 2 (Accounting and financial reports), f. 512 (Revenue and expenditures from Latvian SSR – Latvian SSR un USSR budgets, years 1946 -1947).

36 Author’s calculations, source: LNA F. 202 (Documents of the Bank of the USSR, Latvian branch in Riga), descr. 1-a (Secret Documents), f. 1 (Accounting Reports Regarding Revenues and Expenditures of the Soviet Central Budget in the Latvian SSR—secret documents, 1946–65), and descr. 2 (Accounting and Financial Reports), f. 512 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1946–47), f. 517 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1948), f. 545 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1949); LNA F. 327 (Ministry of Finance of the Latvian SSR), descr. 20 (Accounting and Financial Reports), f. 208 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1950).

Expenditure heading	Amount in RUB
Ministry of War and Naval Enterprise Construction—bonuses and allowances to forestry and other workers for timber supply and exportation	10,000.00
USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs, Motorway Administration, and Central Road Administration	27,864,000.00
Ministry of Food and Material Reserve—increase of current assets and other expenditures	42,809,028.0
Ministry of Food and Material Reserve	578,493.23
USSR Ministry of Armed Forces	17,593,714.10
USSR Ministry of Armed Forces, pensions	11,343,886.61
USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs	205,999,366.71
USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs, pensions	2,061,816.58
USSR Ministry of State Security	304,288,407.35
USSR Ministry of State Security, pensions	878,595.29
Other expenditures of USSR ministries and departments	414,892,659.00
Total	1,183,319,966.95

Table 4. USSR budgetary expenditures in Lithuania (1948, in RUB)³⁷

The USSR occupation regime policy was similar in the other Baltic states, Lithuania and Estonia, although some aspects differed. In Lithuania much higher amounts were spent on the financing of internal affairs (repressive ministries) than in Latvia and Estonia. This is due to the country's very active national resistance activities against the occupying regime in the post-war years (more extensive forest and swamp lands in Lithuania enabled the anti-Soviet resistance to hold out longer there). In 1948 more than half a billion rubles were spent on the needs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of State Security in Lithuania, which is more than in Latvia and Estonia together in the same year. By contrast, the total military expenditure compared to Latvia was significantly lower.

Lithuania's economic situation, both at the time of the occupation and during the post-war years, was considerably worse than that of Latvia and Estonia,

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³⁷ Lithuanian National Archive, F R-871 (Documents of the Bank of the USSR, Lithuanian Branch in Vilnius), descr. 6. (Accounting Reports), f. 3 (Accounting Reports Regarding Revenues and Expenditures of the Soviet Central Budget in the Lithuanian SSR—secret documents, 1948), pp. 8–9.

but Lithuania also transferred larger amounts to the USSR budget than those returning to Lithuania. Thus, from the Lithuanian earnings the Soviet regime not only funded the fight against the national resistance movement, but also channelled some of the money for achieving other purposes outside the territory of Lithuania. In 1949, the revenue of the Lithuanian territory (the USSR and the Lithuanian SSR budgets taken together) was RUB 2,617 m, while the expenditures in Lithuania, including the military and repressive institutions, were RUB 2,458 m. Thus, RUB 159 m were channelled outside the territory of Lithuania.³⁸ In Estonia in 1949, the situation was quite similar—the total revenue was RUB 2,642 m, while the expenditures were RUB 2,503 m, so the ‘profit’ of the Soviet regime was RUB 139 m.³⁹ Comparatively the largest amount that year— RUB 526 m—was invested in the Soviet central budget by Latvia; thus in total the Baltic states in 1949 covered not only the expenditure of all the military and repressive forces on their own territories, but sponsored the Soviet central budget with RUB 824 m.⁴⁰ The Soviet budgeting system, in which the republican budgets were part of the USSR budget, allowed Moscow to control all financial flows and payments. As a result, the Baltic ‘republics’ had no autonomy in budgeting and planning, much less any possibility of independently building their own budget policy, planning budget revenues and expenditures, or forecasting possible surpluses or deficits.

The emphasis in Soviet propaganda on Russia and the Russian historical role has already been extensively described, but this was not the only aspect. In addition to the ideological Russification mentioned before, actual Russification also took place in Latvia in two ways: the numbers of the Russian-speaking population significantly increased as a result of immigration, and the role of the Russian language in everyday life and in the education system grew significantly.

Changes in the national composition of Latvia were dramatic—half a century after the loss of independence the number of Latvians was smaller than in 1940. By contrast, the number of Russian-nationality inhabitants had increased more than five times, and the number of Belarusians more than four times. The portion of Latvians had shrunk to 52% of the population of Latvia. Despite

38 Ibid., f. 4 (Accounting Reports Regarding Revenues and Expenditures of the Soviet Central Budget in the Lithuanian SSR—secret documents, 1949), pp. 2–4.

39 National Archives of Estonia, F R-26. (Documents of the Bank of the USSR, Estonian Branch in Tallinn), descr. 4 (Accounting reports), descr. 4 (Accounting reports about revenue and expenditures of Soviet central budget in Estonian SSR—secret documents, 1949), pp. 33–34.

40 Author’s calculations, source: LNA F. 202 (Documents of the Bank of the USSR, Latvian Branch in Riga), descr. 1-a (Secret Documents), f. 1 (Accounting Reports Regarding Revenues and Expenditures of the Soviet Central Budget in the Latvian SSR—secret documents, 1946–65) and descr. 2 (Accounting and Financial Reports), f. 545 (Revenues and Expenditures from the Latvian SSR—Latvian SSR and USSR Budgets, 1949).

the prolonged domination of the Russian language in many areas of life, it should be noted that the Latvian part of the population did not lose its national identity—97.4% of Latvians in 1989 indicated that Latvian was their mother tongue.

Nationality	1940	1989	1989 vs. 1940
Latvian	1490.0	1387.8	-102.2
Russian	171.6	905.5	733.9
Belorussian	28.3	119.7	91.4
Ukrainian	---	92.1	92.1
Polish	49.0	60.4	11.4
Jewish	93.0	22.9	-70.1
Lithuanian	24.5	34.6	10.1
Other	29.6	43.6	14.0
Total	1886.0	2666.6	780.6

Table 5. National composition of the population of Latvia in 1940 and in 1989 (in thousands)⁴¹

Changes in individual cities and municipalities were also significant. Most immigrants arrived as factory workers, and in cities where industry grew rapidly, the proportion of Latvians fell almost as fast. In the capital, Riga, the proportion of Latvians in 1989 was only 36 per cent; even in Jurmala and Ventspils, where in the 40s the proportion of Latvians exceeded 90 per cent, it was less than half. The situation was relatively better in rural areas, where the population was still dominantly Latvian.

Those who came to Latvia from other regions of the USSR should not be blamed for purposeful colonisation with a goal of destroying the national identity of Latvia. Nor can we find documents proving that the main goal of immigration was the colonisation of the territory by people of other nationalities. A large proportion of immigrants fled from socio-economic disaster that the USSR regime had brought to the pre-WWII territory of the USSR; others were deliberately sent to provide labour to a disproportionately expanding industry.

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 41 Pārsla Eglīte and Ilmārs Mežs, 'The colonization of Latvia and causes of changes in ethnic composition 1944–1990', *Articles by the Commission of the Historians of Latvia. Occupation regimes in Latvia from 1940 to 1956*, Volume 7, Riga, 2002, p. 416.

But unwittingly these people became an instrument for implementing the policy of the Soviet regime.

The education system also became a tool for Russification, although it should be acknowledged that the imposition of the Russian language that took place during the Russian empire at the beginning of the 20th century did not occur during the Soviet occupation. Nevertheless, in 1945, 78–79% of all secondary school students in Latvia studied in the Latvian language, but in the following years, as the number of immigrants increased, the number of Russian-speaking students increased accordingly. There was no integration in the Latvian-speaking environment, quite the contrary—following the suppression of the national communist movement (1959), there was a particularly sharp increase in the number of Russian students. Between 1959 and 1965, the number of Russian students grew by about six thousand each year, increasing from 39% to 45%, which suggests that a significant number of Latvian children were forced to study in Russian that year.⁴² In 1988, only 52 per cent of children studied in the Latvian language. However, the Russian language had penetrated the education system of the 1980s much more deeply than the official statistics showed. In 1983–1985, following instructions from Moscow, the republics of the associated countries were required to carry out a reform of educational content and methodology aimed at strengthening the teaching of Russian to all age groups. In February 1985, the leader of the Communist Party of Latvia, Boris Pugo, sent a comprehensive report to Moscow, outlining the progress in integrating the Russian language at all stages of education, from kindergartens to universities. In vocational education, a number of subjects began to be taught only in the Russian language (in schools that were using Latvian as a teaching language!). The number of such schools was increased, providing ‘in-depth’ Russian language teaching—namely, teaching a large part of the study content in Russian only. In 1985, the procedure for obtaining higher education in a number of social sciences related to the ideology of the USSR was changed: in History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Marxist-Leninist Philosophy, Political Economy, and Scientific Communism, entrance exams were organised only in Russian.⁴³

.....
42 *Ibid.*, p. 434

43 LNA F 101 (Documents of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia) descr. 55 (Documents from the year 1985), f. 28 (Secret Reports to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Soviet Union), pp. 12–13.

USSR Investments in the Baltics: Today's Myths

Contrasting Soviet views to those of the present government of Russia, we find that much of the same Soviet propaganda is also being used today, in a somewhat transformed version, as it fits well with the strategic communications of the ruling political elite of today's Russia and their efforts to restore influence in the Baltic countries.⁴⁴ Thus, Russian-funded media quite often offer articles entitled 'Why the Baltic Economy was Good Only in the USSR',⁴⁵ and 'How Much Did the USSR Invest in the Baltics?'.⁴⁶ Moscow interprets today's situation on the basis of false or misleading information created by the Soviet regime. Its visions of the future are designed with only one scenario, namely, a strategic rapprochement of the Baltic states with Russia in order to receive financial assistance as allegedly happened in Soviet times.⁴⁷

Not all myths created during the Soviet occupation can be transferred to the present. In a number of cases, the economic and social reality is so radically different from the ideological doctrines and the official propaganda of the Soviet period that even the most eager supporters of the USSR have renounced their use. During the Soviet era, the USSR was declared to be the most democratic country in the world, with the most extensive welfare system; today this is not mentioned because these statements were so obviously different from reality. Similarly, the 'success story' of Soviet collective farming, at least in the Baltic region, is no longer emphasised. Although official Russian circles generally refuse to acknowledge the fact of the Baltic occupation, no one speaks about a 'socialist revolution'. And although the referenda by which the Baltic states joined the USSR are still claimed to have been valid, Russian media avoid speaking of an initiative of the Baltic states to join the USSR voluntarily.

In its strategic communications, today's Russia does not put forward the historical right to somehow influence or regain the Baltic states. The central point, rather, is the idea of the 'ungrateful Baltic people'. The Baltic states are criticised for two reasons: first, they do not appreciate that the USSR (Russia) liberated the Baltic states from Nazism (not mentioning the fact that the Baltics were

44 Thomas, Timothy, 'Russia's 21st Century Information War: Working to Undermine and Destabilize Populations', *Defence Strategic Communications* (Riga, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2015), pp. 10–11.

45 'Počemu ekonomika Pribaltiki byla xoroša tol'ko v sostave SSSR?' [Why was the Baltic Economy Good Only in the USSR?], *Stena.ee*, 23 August 2016 [accessed 12 July 2017]

46 'Skol'ko SSSR Vložil v Pribaltiku?' [How Much Did the USSR Invest in the Baltics?], *RuBaltic.ru*, 14 March 2016. [accessed 12 July 2017]

47 'Ekspert: 2020 god stannet dlja Pribaltiki perelomnym' [Expert: 2020 Will be a Turning Point for the Baltic states], *RuBaltic.ru*, 30 September 2016. [accessed 12 July 2017]

occupied first by the USSR, but accusing the Baltic people of active cooperation with the Nazis and alleged war crimes in the territory of the USSR), and second, the large investment of the USSR in the Baltic states is not appreciated. The reality of the investment issue has been extensively analysed above, but the historical archive is not allowed to undermine the Kremlin-controlled media's wide use of a variety of unproven figures that supposedly attest that a number of Soviet republics 'parasitised' at the expense of the Russian Federation. A striking example is the reference to the publication in the newspaper *Soviet Russia* in 1992, of a table showing the volume of goods 'produced' and 'consumed' in each Soviet republic between 1985 and 1990.⁴⁸ There are no references to sources; there is no explanation of the method of calculation; but this table is often used as an argument to prove that the Baltic states have 'consumed' more than they contributed to the USSR. It is not surprising that Russia and Belarus are the largest donors according to this table, while the Baltic states are among the largest consumers. For example, according to this table, Latvia produced \$16.5 k per capita in 1990, but consumed \$26.9 k. In Lithuania the corresponding figures are respectively, \$13k and \$23.3k, and in Estonia \$15.8k and \$35.8k. There is no explanation of what was produced and consumed. Despite the apparent lack of credible sources and exaggerated figures, these indicators are widely used as a serious argument in various discussions.⁴⁹

Following Soviet tradition, researchers are also employed to strengthen these narratives. In Moscow at the end of 2015, a collection of documents was published entitled *The Soviet Economic Model: The Union Centre and the Baltic Republics 1953–March 1965*.⁵⁰ This publication of more than a thousand pages is drawn almost exclusively from a variety of archival documents, but it does not change the fact that the scope of the document is insufficient to draw objective conclusions about the economic relations between the Soviet central power and the occupied Baltics during this period. Critically, the collection does not include documents providing a comprehensive breakdown of the financial revenue comparing the local republican budgets and the USSR budget, not to mention any documents that describe Soviet military spending in the Baltics. With the help of certain documents, the publication does offer an insight into

48 Republished by Politrussia.com: 'Strany byvshego SSSR: kto, komu i skol'ko dolžen' [Countries of the Former Soviet Union: Who Owes Whom and How Much?], 26 April, 2016, <http://politrussia.com/world/pribaltika-i-russiya-299/> [accessed 27 June 2018]

49 For more on this topic, see the video: Gatis Krūmiņš, 'Keep permanently', video, Vidzemes Augstskola, 18 March 2017.

50 Elena. Jur'evna Zubkova, *Sovetskaja model' ekonomiki—sojuznyj centr i respubliky pribaltiki 1953 g.—mart 1965 g.* [The Soviet Economic Model—The Union Centre and the Baltic Republics 1953–March 1965] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnij fond "Demokratija", 2015)

many investment projects. But without an overall picture (a comparative analysis of the total revenue and expenditure) this method is rather unsuccessful if its goal was really an objective assessment of the relationship between the central power and the occupied Baltics. It is difficult to comment on what motivated the authors to publish these particular documents—a subjective approach and document selection according to a certain political position, or perhaps unavailability of other documents (possibly still having a secret status) in the Russian archives. The responsible compiler and author of the introduction to the edition is historian Elena Zubkova—the author of an objective book based on documents *The Baltic Countries and the Kremlin*.⁵¹

However, it is clear that the collection of documents and the subsequent conclusions fully satisfy the Kremlin in its misleading analysis. Consequently, it is not surprising that Russian government-funded media described the release of the collection with such expressions as ‘Archive Facts Strike at the “Occupation Myth” of the Baltic states’.⁵² The book does not particularly emphasise the ‘voluntary’ accession of the Baltics in the USSR, but the term Zubkova used in 2008—‘occupation’—is no longer mentioned. It has been replaced by the terms ‘incorporation’ and ‘accession’. Nevertheless, there are no attempts to prove that the Baltic countries were poor and underdeveloped at the time of the occupation. Zubkova acknowledges in the introduction that ‘the economic and social development equalization policy implemented by the USSR was not topical in the Baltics, since the quality of life of its population before the inclusion in the USSR was relatively high compared to other Soviet republics’.⁵³ But already in the next paragraph the author overturns this thesis, referring to the classics of Soviet propaganda:

The Baltic states had to be converted from raw-material and agrarian adjuncts of Western countries to highly developed industrialized agrarian republics.⁵⁴ The author goes on to explain that ‘it was a wide-scale investment project that changed the structure of the national economy sectors, provided radical changes in the infrastructure and increased the living standards of the Baltic population. The implementation of it required large capital investments from the Union centre.

51 Elena Jur'evna Zubkova, *Pribaltika i Kreml': 1940–1953* [The Baltic Countries and the Kremlin: 1940–1953] (Moscow: Rossijskaja političeskaja ěnciklopedija, 2008).

52 ‘Po “okkupacionnomu mifu” Pribaltiki udarili arxivnymi faktami’ [Archival Facts Strike at the ‘Occupation Myth’ of the Baltic states], *RuBaltic.ru*, 17 December 2015.

53 Elena. Jur'evna Zubkova, *Sovetskaja model' ěkonomiki—sojuznyj centr i respubliki pribaltiki 1953 g.–mart 1965 g.* [The Soviet Economic Model—The Union Centre and the Baltic Republics 1953–March 1965] (Moscow: Mezdunarodnij fond “Demokratija”, 2015)

54 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

The author tries to justify her theory on major investments of the USSR in the Baltic states by the statistics from the year 1956—the national income per capita in Latvia was RUB 647, in Estonia RUB 636, and in Lithuania RUB 459 (the average in the USSR—RUB 535). Yet the author does not comment on why Lithuania was so immune to these ‘investments’, presenting significantly weaker results. The explanation for this disparity is to be found by going back to 1940—at the time Latvia and Estonia were more developed than both the USSR and Lithuania, and this difference remained in 1956 and persisted in later years before gradually disappearing. By contrast, there was no investment from the USSR in the 1940s, nor was there any at a later stage.

Conclusions and Summary

The Soviet propaganda interpretation of the economic situation of Latvia (and of the Baltic states as a whole) during and after the Second World War is an excellent example of how to create narratives that are partly in line with the real situation, but are generally misleading, by manipulating the historical record and adding targeted disinformation. Information now available about actual conditions during the Second World War and the post-war period confirms that the quality of life in Latvia was significantly higher than elsewhere in the USSR. However, USSR propaganda attributed this difference to alleged investments by the USSR in the region, although in reality the wealth was acquired prior to Soviet occupation. Upon arrival in the Baltic region from other regions of the USSR, people could easily observe that the standard of living in the Baltics was higher, and that the supply of basic necessities and of consumer goods was relatively better. It made a large part of the USSR population believe that the Baltic Soviet republics were a special investment project aimed at creating a ‘model region’ of the USSR.

The USSR was not afraid to spread disinformation that clearly differed from reality; it used an integrated approach in distributing its propaganda through a variety of channels, ranging from educational institutions and scientific and reference literature to extensive use of the popular media (the arts and entertainment industries, which are not discussed in this article, but were also used extensively).

Today a narrative is being created in Russia in which the ‘ungrateful Baltic people’ factor is added to the ‘Soviet investment’ content: Baltic states are currently demonstrating blatant ingratitude toward the policy of the Soviet period, while attempts to describe the Soviet occupation from the perspective of the Baltic

states are interpreted as rewriting history and falsification.

Both during the Soviet occupation and today, spreading disinformation about the socio-economic situation in the Baltic states during the Soviet occupation can be regarded as part of a policy intended to divide society; that part of society (or their predecessors) that lived in Latvia before the occupation was more immune to Soviet propaganda, since they were able to confront it with their own (or their family's) historical memory. Those who arrived in the Baltic states after the Soviet occupation did not have such historical memory. The same can be said of the people of today's Russia, who in most cases cannot critically evaluate the information offered to them in the past and also today.

The narratives of 20th-century history (which in many cases can already be regarded as myths) remain one of the cornerstones of the strategic communications of today's Russian Federation, when speaking directly about socio-economic history and when comparing (confronting) it with the present. Narratives based on knowingly distorted history are used to justify and explain many current activities. Given the high proportion of falsehoods, these narratives should largely be considered as deliberate disinformation.

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THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN EXTREMIST PROPAGANDA

Alastair Reed, Jennifer Dowling

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of historical narratives in extremist propaganda, seeking to show how and why they are used to enhance the impact of such propaganda. To that end we use the concept of the ‘competitive system of meaning’, which lies at the heart of extremist propaganda and forms their grand overarching narrative. Through the use of two constructs, in-group/out-group identity and crisis/solution, propagandists form a cylindrically reinforcing narrative. This paper is exploratory in nature, and is envisaged as the first step in much more detailed research into the role of historical narratives in extremist propaganda. It seeks to show the importance of historical narratives to propaganda by identifying and exploring five ways in which such narratives are exploited to reinforce the extremists’ ‘competitive system of meaning’.

Keywords—*terrorism, violent extremism, propaganda, strategic communications*

About the Authors

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Introduction

History is a powerful weapon, and some of the fiercest battles are fought over how it is interpreted. Although extremist groups are fighting in the present, historical narratives are often used to justify their ongoing causes, and as a result feature prominently in their propaganda output.¹ A phenomenon that has been highlighted in recent years in the extensive propaganda output of the Islamic State (IS). At the heart of Islamic State propaganda is the notion that the Muslim world is in crisis—facing an existential struggle for survival against the West. Throughout their propaganda they connect the current conflict to historic struggles with the West from the crusades to colonisation. Thereby they strengthen the sense of crisis, by presenting it as an ongoing and never-ending conflict. Conversely, the solution they propose, a return to the Caliphate, is also drawn from the past. The use of historical narratives to strengthen propaganda is, however, not unique to IS, or even to other militant Islamist groups. Other groups with different ideological, motivational, and operational tactics, from a national to a supra-national view, also rely heavily on history as justification across their propaganda. A central feature of The Provisional IRA's multi-dimensional communication strategy,² with its republican, nationalist agenda, was the consistent reiteration that the centuries of British oppression and occupation were the root cause of the 'Irish problem'. The ultimate removal of the foreign force was seen as the only solution to their perpetual crisis. Likewise, far-right groups, such as the Christian-identity movement, stake their foundation and justification on historical narratives and extensive biblical genealogies, to justify their in-group/out-group dynamic and the history of conflict between the groups. Across the whole spectrum of diverse and different extremist groups, historical narratives are often prominent in their propaganda. The question this paper seeks to ask is: How and why is history used in extremist propaganda?

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1 The term propaganda has many negative connotations, but is used pragmatically in this paper to refer to messaging designed to influence the behaviour and attitudes of a target audience to achieve politico-military ends during conflict.

2 John Horgan and Max Taylor, 'The provisional Irish republican army: Command and functional structure', in *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9 (3)(1997): 1–32 ; In this article the authors praise the Provisional IRA for the group's publicity wing, which formed an intrinsic part of the group's advanced command and functional structure.

This paper aims to examine the role of historical narratives used in propaganda by extremist groups, looking beyond mere justification, to see how and why they are used to enhance the impact of such propaganda. How are historical narratives deployed as a communication technique in extremist propaganda? This paper uses the concept of the ‘competitive system of meaning’, which, lying at the heart of extremist propaganda, forms their grand overarching narrative through the use of in-group/out-group identity and crisis/solution constructs to form a cylindrically reinforcing narrative. It seeks to identify five ways in which historical narratives are exploited to re-inforce the extremists’ ‘competitive system of meaning’. First, crisis expansion—connecting current events to greater historical trajectories to magnify the depth and resonance of the ‘crisis’. Second, solution support—using historical narratives to strengthen the case for the proposed ‘solution’. Third, deepening the in-group/out-group dynamic—exacerbating the distinction between group identities and demonstrating that this is the result of a larger historical trend. Fourth, group legitimacy—drawing on history for cultural appropriation to bolster the claim to legitimacy. And finally, justification—using historical prophecies to connect the present to the future and generate motivation for action.

As this research is explorative, looking into the role historical narratives play in extremist propaganda, rather than focusing on the propaganda used by one particular group, this paper will draw on examples from across a variety of extremist groups.³ We will explore examples from three different types of groups, chosen primarily for their illustrative nature. The groups whose propaganda we analyse include: militant Islamist groups (al-Qaeda, Islamic State), a national-separatist group (the Provisional IRA), and right-wing extremists (Nazi, Christian Identity). It is crucial to note that these groups vary in almost every aspect—ideology, motivation, and operational level—and are not comparable beyond the use of historical narratives in their propaganda. We selected them primarily because they demonstrate compelling examples of the use of historical narratives in propaganda, each in its own distinct way; and second, for their differences, to highlight that this technique is used by the broadest spectrum of groups and movements. The objective here is to demonstrate the role that historical narratives play across extremist propaganda, regardless of ideology and motivation. Whilst the five ways historical narratives are exploited in propaganda outlined above are invariably employed by many extremist groups, the examples chosen here have been selected simply for their explanatory value,

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³ Given the scope of this paper the narratives projected by the opponents’ of these extremist groups’ narratives will not be explored, but could in the future be a suggestion for a similar analysis, as there have been numerous examples of charismatic political leaders who have similarly drawn on historical narratives to construct and strengthen their political narratives. Such a comparative analysis would provide a more holistic understanding of the narratives being projected by these extremist groups being analysed in this paper.

not to demonstrate that they have a particular application by one or another type of extremist group. Furthermore, it should be noted that this technique is not unique to extremist groups, and could be as equally prevalent in political rhetoric and government counter-messaging. We hope this paper provides the groundwork for more in-depth future research into the use of historical narrative by individual groups, and potentially by their opponents as well.

What is the system of meaning?

We build on frameworks of analysis developed within the Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications (CTSC) research project,⁴ in particular work by Dr Haroro Ingram and J.M. Berger.

In his linkage-based approach, Ingram outlines a core structure based on two interlocking dichotomies at the heart of extremist propaganda. Together they form a ‘competitive system of meaning’ that brings the reader into an extremist world view and provides a lens through which to view and interpret the world as prescribed by a particular group. Although the scope of the article does not allow us to go into detail, these groups use the interplay of in-group/out-group identities and crisis/solution constructs, which are ‘linked’ together to create cyclically self-reinforcing narratives.⁵

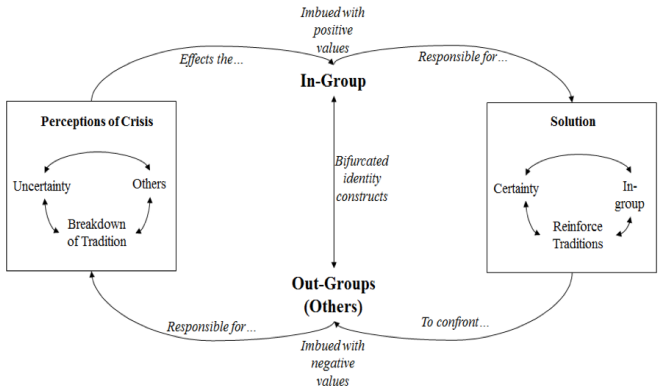


Figure 1. The cyclically reinforcing dynamic of extremist propaganda⁶

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4 For more information see: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, *The Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications (CTSC) Project*.

5 Ingram, ‘Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility & Behavioural Change’, (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, September 2016).

6 Ingram, 2016

We can see here a three step process: first, the in-group/out-group dichotomy construct is established; then come the dichotomous crisis/solution constructs; and finally the messages that connect the crisis to the out-group, and the solution to the in-group. What may appear to be disparate messaging across many subjects and types of media, is in reality centered on deepening the two dichotomies and strengthening the connections, linking together and mutually reinforcing each other to provide the overarching grand narrative. Hence, Ingram calls his method the 'linkage' approach, referring to how the constructs that make up the system of meaning are 'linked' together to create the core narrative. Identifying the links is the key to dissecting and understanding the core narrative.

In terms of militant Islamist propaganda, Ingram summarises the core narrative as typically declaring: 'we are the champions and protectors of (appropriately aligned) Sunni Muslims (i.e. the in-group identity), everyone outside of this narrow category are [sic] enemies (i.e. out-group identities) responsible for the *ummah's*⁷ crises, so support us and our solutions (i.e. the in-group's politico-military agenda)'. Whilst the intricacies of the in-group/out-group and crisis/solution constructs may vary for different groups, the central dynamics remain roughly the same. As Ingram observes, this approach is not unique to militant Islamist propaganda; rather, a similarly constructed system of meaning is at the heart of most successful extremist propaganda, although imbued with the particulars of the narrative of each group's cause. Indeed, as he explains 'it is broadly echoed in [Mao] Tse-Tung's (2000 [1937]) *On Guerrilla Warfare*, the Irish Republican Army's (1985 [c.1950s]) *Handbook for Volunteers*, Guevara's (2007 [1961]) *Guerrilla Warfare* and al-Muqrin's (2009 [2003]) *A Practical Course for Guerrilla War*'.⁸

At the highest level, extremists link a specific out-group to a crisis or crises, and connect the in-group to solutions. But these high-level constructs can be unbundled into a series of more complex links enhanced by a variety of propaganda strategies. This paper focuses specifically on historical narratives as a lever for effective propaganda.

The Power of History

J.M. Berger builds on Ingram's linkage approach to explore how such linkages can be 'bundled together' to form high-level constructs that forge a single idea.

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⁷ The term *ummah* is generally taken to mean the collective or overall community of adherents to Islam.

⁸ Ingram, Haroro, 'An Analysis of Islamic State's *Dabiq Magazine*', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Volume 51, Issue 3 (2016): 458–77.

Berger demonstrates how extremist propagandists package together multiple sources of ‘evidence’ to create an apparently self-reinforcing argument that is presented as an historical ‘proof’, which then is accepted as ‘the truth’ for a particular scenario. Narratives are constructed through combining historical events with folklore, mythology, religious scriptures, and symbolism, to create the illusion of a sound argument. As Berger explains, an example of such a bundle ‘would be an ideological argument that draws connections between a conspiracy theory, a scriptural reference, a folkloric tradition, and a real historical event, representing the bundled product simply as “history”’.⁹ These bundles can then be linked with other bundles to construct highly complex, interconnected concepts that support an overarching narrative. Working backwards from a group’s core narrative, these concepts can be de-constructed by examining linkages and bundles to untangle the complex web that makes up the system of meaning. We use this approach to identify how historical narratives are exploited to support the construction of the system of meaning at the heart of extremist propaganda.

History, it is often said, is written by the winners, and some of the fiercest battles are often over the interpretation of history, and how its narratives are constructed. ‘History’ is used extensively by extremist propagandists as evidence to support their narratives, and the use of such ‘historical evidence’ can have the false appearance of scholarly rigour, which can add to the apparent persuasive power of the narrative.

We will explore how historical narratives are used in extremist propaganda through the lens of the system of meaning, setting out five different ways in which historical narratives have been employed to enhance and reinforce the system of meaning at the heart of extremist propaganda.

Crisis Expansion

At the heart of the crisis/solution dichotomy is the need to escalate the sense of crisis. The greater the perception of crisis the greater the call to action; and the greater the crisis the easier it is to justify extreme solutions, and so on. One way extremist propaganda has sought to increase the sense of crisis is to stretch it beyond the here and now by connecting it to a wider historical struggle. Such manipulation presents the view that the extent of the crisis transcends the current situation, which is merely the current manifestation of an ongoing historical, and possibly existential, conflict.

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⁹ J. M. Berger, ‘Extremist Construction of Identity: How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics’ Vol. 8, № 7 (2017) (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism).

This connection of past and present crises is particularly obvious in militant Islamist propaganda. Al-Qaeda and IS invariably refer to ‘the West’ generically as the ‘crusaders’ throughout their propaganda output. They seek to conflate the western Christian crusades, almost a millennium ago, with what they perceive as the war currently being waged on the Muslim world by the West. Using this narrative, IS portrayed the West’s campaign against their group in Syria as a continuation of the crusades, writing for example in *Dabiq*: ‘It is yet another crusade just like the former crusades led by Richard the Lionheart, Barbarossa of Germany, and Louis of France. Likewise today, when Bush raised the cross, the crusader countries immediately scrambled.’¹⁰

Narratives about the crusades of the distant past are, in turn, woven together with narratives about Western colonialism in Muslim countries over the last few centuries, building to a perception of the Muslim world in perpetual struggle against subjugation by ‘the West’. One of IS’s most resonant videos from the period in which they rose to predominance was entitled ‘The End of Sykes-Picot’,¹¹ which featured IS fighters demolishing border posts between Syria and Iraq. The border, a remnant of the Sykes-Picot agreement between colonial France and Britain to divide up the Arab lands after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, is seen as a symbol of Western ‘crusader’ control and the deliberate division of Muslim lands, and a roadblock to the return of the Caliphate. In an article called ‘The Birth of Two New Wilayat’ in *Dabiq* Issue 4, sums up this idea:

After demolishing the Syrian/Iraqi border set up by the crusaders to divide and disunite the Muslims, and carve up their lands in order to consolidate their control of the region, the mujāhidīn of the Khilāfah delivered yet another blow to nationalism and the Sykes-Picot-inspired borders that define it. The establishment of a new wilāyah, Wilāyat al-Furāt, was announced this month by the Islamic State in an effort to eliminate any remaining traces of the kufri, nationalistic borders from the hearts of the Muslims.¹²

IS’s military advances and re-establishment of the Caliphate are depicted as rolling back old colonial injustices imposed on the Middle East.

¹⁰ ‘Foreword’, *Dabiq*, Issue 7, 2015, p. 3.

¹¹ Al-Hayat Media Centre, ‘The End of Sykes-Picot’, video, 2014.

¹² ‘The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour’, *Dabiq*, Issue 4 (2014) p. 17.

It was perhaps Bin Laden who was the most eloquent in his portrayal of the War on Terror as the continuation of history. In a letter to *Al Jazeera* in November 2001, Bin Laden clearly set out his arguments to brand the USA's response to 9/11, particularly the American-led invasion of Afghanistan, as a 'Crusade against Islam', citing president Bush's description of the war as a Crusade to make his point.¹³ Before going on to ask:

Is it a single, unrelated event, or is it part of a long series of Crusader wars against the Islamic world? Since World War One, which ended over 83 years ago, the entire Islamic world has fallen under the Crusader banners, under the British, French, and Italian governments. They divided up the whole world between them, and Palestine fell into the hands of the British.¹⁴

Bin Laden presents a perspective through which to view the Afghan invasion—not as a single event, but as the latest in a long line of allegedly anti-Muslim actions by the West. Having deepened the narrative by connecting the current conflict to a long chain of historical events, he next broadens it citing a litany of violence committed by the 'Crusaders' in recent history against multiple countries in the Muslim world, including Kashmir, Iraq, Palestine, Chechnya, the Philippines, and East Timor, before concluding his argument: 'We should therefore see events not as isolated incidents, but as part of a long chain of conspiracies, a war of annihilation in all senses of the word'.¹⁵ Bin Laden exploits historical narratives to both broaden and deepen the sense of crisis.

The device of connecting past and present crises also lies at the heart of the narratives used by the Provisional Irish Republican Movement, or the 'Provos'.¹⁶ The idea of the Irish engaged in a continuous struggle throughout their history,

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13 Osama Bin Laden, Bruce B. Lawrence (ed.), and James Howarth (trans.), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 128.

14 Bin Laden, p. 136.

15 Bin Laden, p. 137.

16 The Provisional Irish Republican Movement is the branch of the Irish resistance that was formed after Sinn Féin (and its military wing, the Irish Republican Army) split in 1970, after violent riots erupted among Catholics protesting repression in Northern Ireland in 1969. It consisted of the Provisional Sinn Féin (its political wing) and the Provisional IRA (its military wing). The Provisional branches split off from the original Sinn Féin and IRA because they refused to recognise the legitimacy of Leinster (Leinster House, Dublin, metonym for the government of the Republic of Ireland), Stormont (Stormont House, Belfast, metonym for the parliament of Northern Ireland, and Westminster (Westminster Palace, London, metonym for the parliament of the United Kingdom), demanding that Northern Ireland be separated from the UK and fully integrated into the Republic of Ireland. According to Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, then caretaker executive of Sinn Féin, recognising any of these governments was an 'act of treachery'; he is quoted in *An Phoblacht*, Issue 2, 1970 (see note 17). The official policy of the IRA had been one of non-violence until 'the Troubles', a period of unrest in Northern Ireland that lasted from 1968 to 1998. On 30 January 1972, also known as Bloody Sunday, the British shot down peaceful protesters demonstrating against the internment of dissidents. This event was a catalyst for increased violence on the part of the resistance as well as government repressions.

a theme endemic to the Irish national identity, was renewed in Northern Ireland during the late 1960's, when the Irish Republican Army justified its actions by exploiting existing nationalist ideologies, beliefs, and traditions. As James Downey¹⁷ noted, "The claim of a Provo supporter, that the Provos are fighting the last campaign to end eight hundred years of British oppression may seem equally unreal; but there has been enough real oppression over the centuries to give force to that belief."¹⁸ This quote describes the ideology of the Provisional Movement, which successfully drew on historical claims throughout their campaign.¹⁹ Throwing off the yoke of the occupying force has been intrinsic to the Irish struggle, and one the Provisional branch consistently reiterated in their public communications as the only solution to the 'Irish Question'. This was clearly illustrated in the Éire Nua²⁰ policy document: 'Sinn Féin has never looked on the ending of British Rule in Ireland as the end in itself, but rather as a means to restore the ownership of Ireland to the people of Ireland'.²¹

This idea was reiterated in the first issue of *An Phoblacht*,²² published in January 1970, immediately after the split in the Republican Movement. The headline on page one read 'On this we stand, the rock of the Republic',²³ signalling they would not be moved. In short, the Provisional IRA framed the 'Troubles' as a continuation of the centuries-old fight against British occupation.

Summary

In order to expand the sense of crisis, propagandists exploit historical narratives by means of 'temporal stretching'. Through connecting a current crisis to past events, the propagandist can present the current crisis as something bigger, the latest manifestation of an ongoing struggle. Thus the narratives in militant Islamism and the Irish Republican movement both portray their struggles as

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¹⁷ James Downey was a former London editor of the *Irish Times*, whose work focused on the politics of Northern Ireland.

¹⁸ James Downey, *Them & Us: Britain-Ireland and the Northern Question 1969–1982*, (Dublin: Ward River Press, 1983), p. 18.

¹⁹ Robert A. White, *Out of the Ashes: An Oral History of the Provisional Irish Republican Movement*, (Kildare: Merlion Press, 2017).

²⁰ Éire Nua [New Ireland]: *The Social and Economic Program of Sinn Féin*, policy document first published in January 1971, proposed a plan for uniting Northern Ireland with the Republic while instituting a devolution and federalisation of government to allow some home rule to the Ulster Protestant and unionist population. Éire Nua was reprinted in *Freedom Struggle*, a book published under the pseudonym P. O'Neill by the (Provisional) Irish Republican Publicity Bureau, [Dublin], 1973.

²¹ Éire Nua Booklet (Dublin: Irish Republican Publicity Bureau, 1972), p. 3.

²² *An Phoblacht* [The Republic] was the newspaper published by the (Provisional) Irish Republican Publicity Bureau, funded by those who formed the new Provisional wing of Sinn Féin; Ruairí Ó Brádaigh (Chairman) made it his mission to get the publication out quickly, before the split, to publicise the branch's objectives; see White, *Out of the Ashes*.

²³ 'On This We Stand: The Rock of the Republic', *An Phoblacht*, February 1970, p. 1.

the latest stage of centuries- old conflicts. Doing so heightens the perception of crisis: current events are not viewed in isolation, but as part of a broader historical struggle. This in turn allows the framing of crisis as something that is not transient, but a perpetual state, and hence only extreme action will be able to overcome it.

Solution Support

Thus far we have concentrated on the crisis; however, the crisis/solution dichotomy relies equally on the believability of the ‘solution’. The propagandist must demonstrate beyond doubt that the ‘solution’ is feasible and presents a practical alternative to the status quo. Here again, historical narratives can play a key role, invariably by allowing the propaganda to point to a time in history when the proposed ‘solution’ had been in place, thus providing evidence that it is feasible and effective—as acute as the crisis is now, and may have been in the past, it has been overcome before and therefore can be overcome again.

At the heart of IS propaganda, juxtaposed against the existential crisis Islam faces in its war against the crusader West, is the group’s solution, the restoration of the Caliphate. It is endemic throughout their propaganda that re-establishing the Caliphate is not only the central objective, but is necessary for achieving all of their other objectives. As stated in the first issue of *Dabiq*, ‘The goal of establishing the Khilafah [Caliphate] has always been one that occupied the hearts of the mujahidin since the revival of jihad this century.’²⁴ Similarly, the author of the article ‘Khilafah Declared’, which celebrates the re-establishment of the Caliphate in the parts of Syria/Iraq it controlled, jubilantly exclaims, ‘O Muslims everywhere, glad tidings to you and expect good. Raise your head high, for today—by Allah’s grace—you have a state and Khilafah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership.’²⁵

IS propaganda constantly refers to the Prophet Mohammed and the foundation of the original Caliphate, presenting this period as the ideal to return to, for it was a time of military and cultural dominance for the Islamic ummah. The first Caliphate is frequently praised, for example in *Dabiq* 14:

[B]y the time of the death of Allah’s Messenger, the tribes of Arabia were almost completely united with all traces of idolatry in the region virtually erased, a phenomenon unknown to

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24 ‘From Hijrah to Khilafah’ *Dabiq*, Issue 1, 2014, p. 34.
25 ‘Khilafah Declared’, *Dabiq*, Issue 1, 2014, p. 7.

historians before that time. Within decades, the impoverished and malnourished few thousand herders, date palm farmers, and trading travelers—the greatest, most knowledgeable, and most pious generations of the Ummah—plowed through the Roman and Persian empires to become literal masters of lands and people from the Iberian Peninsula to the Himalayas.²⁶

The parallels drawn here are clear: when the first Caliphate was declared the impossible became possible, and this can happen again. The re-establishment of the Caliphate is the first step to victory. This is further elaborated upon in an article in issue 13 of *Rumiyah*:

In other words, the religion of Allah became manifest and triumphant over the kuffar when a state was established for the Muslims whose foundations were laid down and fixed firmly by Allah's Messenger and then the rightly-guided khulafa after him. And likewise, the Khalifah of the Muslims and his soldiers undertake this matter today, with the support of Allah, so the achievement of victory and honor for the Muslims cannot be imagined without the establishment of the Islamic State, which has revived the rightly-guided Khilafah.²⁷

IS draws upon the greatest achievements of the Islamic empire for their recruitment narratives to instill the idea that it can re-establish the glorious period under which the ummah overcame the Crusaders.

To strengthen the appeal of an IS-run Caliphate, the group's propaganda draws on previous Islamic Caliphates, often taking specific examples from different Caliphates as alternatives to the current international system. For example, in an article referencing the economic crisis of the West at the time and in particular currency instability, IS announces the establishment of their own currency, the gold Dinar, citing the Islamic Dinar of the Umayyad empire:

The Islamic dinar appeared in 696 AD, when the Umayyad empire—based in Damascus—stretched from the Iberian peninsula to the Indus River in South Asia [...]. Last month the Islamic State announced plans to mint their own range of gold dinars and silver dirhams in a move to separate themselves from dollar-linked fiat currencies and to establish their own money, a currency that has intrinsic value.²⁸

26 'Kill the Imams of Kufr in the West', *Dabiq*, Issue 14, 2016, p. 12.

27 *Rumiyah*, 'The Position of Imamah in Religion', Issue 13, 2017, p. 17.

28 *Dabiq*, 'Meltdown – John Cantlie', Issue 6, 2014, p. 58.

By aligning themselves with the Umayyad Caliphate, IS position themselves as a legitimate state.

Proposing a solution to the current crisis was also intrinsic to the appeal of the Provisional IRA. The solution they put forward drew on the vision mapped out by their Republican predecessors, one that called for the restoration of Ireland's four provinces, otherwise known as the 'Four Green Fields'.²⁹ In *Éire Nua*, the Provisionals presented a solution that proposed four democratically elected provincial governments (based on the historical Irish provinces of Dáil Laighean, Uladh, Mumhan, and Connacht, anglicised as Leinster, Ulster, Munster, and Connacht). The Provisionals' proposals picked holes in the existing status quo and presented an inclusive solution they believed none of the governments in Dublin, Stormont, or Westminster could provide. Their political solution, which proposed 'Catholic, Protestant, Orange and Green, Left and Right'³⁰ to be represented within this provincial system, echoes that of Theobald Wolfe Tone's vision for the island a century past, in which a 'Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter could retain their identity and still find common identity in Irishmen'.³¹

Summary

As shown above, historical narratives can be used to support the called-for solution. Historical examples are brought forward to support and legitimise grounds for the proposed solution. Furthermore, historical examples can be used to strengthen the case that the proposed solution is actually feasible. The more plausible the solution appears when juxtaposed against the Crisis, the greater the dichotomy.

Reinforcing the In-group/Out-group Dynamic

The second of the two dichotomies in the system of meaning is the in-group/out-group dynamic. As with the crisis/solution construct, the greater the dichotomy appears, the stronger the impact. Here again, history provides a reservoir of evidence that can be cherry-picked and exploited in support of the extremist narrative. In particular, there are two ways in which historical narratives can be employed to strengthen the in-group/out-group dynamic: the

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29 The Four Green Fields is an Irish folk song widely known, where the 'four green fields' are a reference to Ireland's four historic provinces on the island.

30 *Éire Nua* [translated as 'New Ireland'] p.2, policy document published in July 1972 by the Provisional movement's publicity bureau outlining their proposed plans for political, social and economic progression in their vision of a unified federalised Irish state.

31 *An Phoblacht*, 1972, Issue 4, p. 8, this very quote from Wolfe Tone was reiterated again in *An Phoblacht* issue that year.

first is to provide evidence of the lineage of the two groups, and the second is to show the historical nature of the struggle between them. The latter has obvious parallels to the crisis-expansion narratives outlined above, where a crisis is portrayed as part of an ongoing historical struggle; it is slightly different in that it often focuses on demonstrating the ‘characters’ of the opposing groups.

At the root of most nationalist movements is a narrative of a separate ethnic identity that marks the foundation of the nation. Invariably, history is drawn upon to show the uniqueness of this ethnic group and often its superiority to other nations or races. In his infamous book *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler outlines his Nazi ideology, writing at length of the German people descending from the Aryan race, and drawing examples from history to support his claim of their superiority. In Chapter 11, on ‘Race and People’, he asserts: ‘History furnishes us with innumerable instances that prove this law. It shows, with a startling clarity, that whenever Aryans have mingled their blood with that of an inferior race the result has been the downfall of the people who were the standard-bearers of a higher culture.’ As evidence, he claims that North America has come to dominate the the American continents because ‘in North America the Teutonic element, [...] has kept its racial stock pure and did not mix it with any other racial stock’, in contrast to Central and South America.³²

This narrative of in-group superiority was completed by pitching the assigned out-group, the common enemy—the Jew. Hitler declared: ‘The Jew offers the most striking contrast to the Aryan.’³³ The ‘inferiority’ and the ‘treachery’ of the Jews is constantly contrasted with the superiority of the Aryan race, cementing the in-group/out-group dynamic. Hitler draws upon numerous examples from history to demonise the Jews as the out-group, and to impress upon the reader that this alleged nature of the Jews is not a new phenomenon, but has remained unchanged through history, a permanent, immutable, and indisputable fact. He connects the alleged actions of the Jews in the present to biblical stories. For instance, he writes: ‘the Founder of Christianity made no secret indeed of His estimation of the Jewish people. When He found it necessary He drove those enemies of the human race out of the Temple of God; because then, as always, they used religion as a means of advancing their commercial interests.’³⁴ Hitler consistently attempted to show alleged Jewish prejudices of his own day as a permanent fact, unchanging through history.

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32 Hitler, Adolf, James Murphy (trans.), *‘Mein Kampf’*, Volume 1: Chapter 11 (London: Hurst and Blackett Ltd., 1939)

33 Hitler, p. 170.

34 Hitler, p. 174.

We see, then, that in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler uses historical narratives effectively to strengthen the in-group/out-group dynamic. By tracing the lineage of the German people back to the Aryans, he employs a historical narrative to define the in-group, firmly drawing the line dividing them from the out-group—there are no shades of grey. Furthermore, he uses historical examples as evidence to support the superiority of the German people. Next, he clearly defines the Jews as the out-group and uses historical examples to demonise them. He subjectively draws his examples from history to give the perception of the ‘Jewish character’ as fixed; that they have always been this way, and by inference they will always be this way, and are unable to change. The reference to Jesus driving the Jews out of the temple is used to connect an event two millennia ago to the present-day Jews.

Another good example of reinforcing the in-group/out-group dynamic using historical narratives can be found in British Israelism, which became more extreme over time, mutating into Christian Identity extremist groups. At the heart of the Christian Identity narrative is the belief that Anglo-Saxons are the true heirs of God’s covenant, and are his chosen people rather than the Jews. What started out as a belief that the Anglo-Saxons were one of lost tribes of Israel, evolved over time into the belief that they are the only true heirs as God’s chosen people, and that the ‘Jews’ are imposters. As J.M. Berger sums up: ‘While there are many variations on the ideology, adherents of Christian Identity broadly believe members of the “white race” are the Chosen People of God described in the Christian Bible, and that other races are impure and part of a genetic lineage that can be traced directly to Satan or to Satanic influences.’³⁵

Christian Identity uses a narrative based on historical events, folklore, scripture, and biblical genealogies to justify the in-group/out-group dynamic. On the one hand it is used to legitimise the in-group, the Anglo-Saxons, and on the other hand to de-legitimise the out-group, the Jews (and later, other races). To demonstrate that the Anglo-Saxons are indeed God’s chosen people, a complex historical theory was woven: that one of the lost tribes of Israel migrated westward, and from them, unknowingly, the Anglo-Saxons are descended. The lost tribes are distinct from the present day Jewish people, and as such they are the true heirs to God’s promises. In short, through pseudo-scholarly techniques, the adherents of Christian Identity aimed to increase their in-group legitimacy by ‘demonstrating’ that the Anglo-Saxons are in reality the true heirs to the

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³⁵ Berger, ‘Extremist Construction of Identity’, p. 9.

‘biblical covenants and promises of greatness’.³⁶ In delegitimising, and ultimately demonising the out-group, Christian Identity maintains that the Jewish people are in reality descended from Satan—the ‘seed of the serpent’. They argue that the Jews are descended from Cain, the Bible’s first murderer, and Cain was not the son of Adam, but the offspring of Eve and the serpent from the Garden of Eden, Satan himself.³⁷ Satanic descent is ultimately expanded to include all non-Anglo-Saxon races as descended from the same line.

In short, by writing their own interpretation of history, the Christian Identity theorists provide an apparently solid structure for their pre-defined in-group and out-group. History provides the linkage to connect today’s in-group and out-group back to the Bible. This process imbues the Christian Identity doctrine with the cultural capital of being derived from such a sacred text. It deepens the notion of the division of the in-group from the out-group by tracing it back to the beginning of time, simultaneously specifying with exactness who belongs to which group—there is no grey zone.

In their own way, the provisional IRA also used history to reinforce the in-group/out-group dynamic, through on the one hand portraying their fight as the continued historic struggle of the Irish against the British occupiers, and on the other providing a historical narrative arguing that the foundation of many problems in the island of Ireland are due to external interference by the British over the last centuries. Throughout the literature of the Provisional movement, there was consistent reference to the English coloniser, the imperial occupier, as the ultimate root of all Ireland’s problems.

Examples such as the Norman and English wars of conquest from 1100 to 1850 continued to provide a source of legitimation to the Republican movement for generations.³⁸ Crisis re-enforcing narratives added weight to these claims by depicting all of Ireland’s problems as coming from these earlier waves of colonisation. Similarly, the great Irish famine of the 1840s is often cited as a result of English ‘maladministration’, which allowed a cruel culling of half of Ireland’s population.³⁹ Crops continued to be exported from a deprived population to feed the interests of the occupier, something a ‘native’ administration would have never allowed.⁴⁰ By connecting these past events to the out-group, the British occupier, the narrative creates the perception of a pattern of behaviour.

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36 Ibid., p. 11.

37 Ibid., p. 33.

38 White, *Out of the Ashes*.

39 Downey, *Them & Us*, p. 32.

40 Ibid.

This re-enforces the in-group/ out-group dynamic by connecting the present to the past, creating a sense of permanence for the in-group/out-group divide.

Summary

Historical narratives can be used to strengthen the in-group/out-group dynamic in two main ways. First, the narrative is used to provide the lineage of both groups in order to define clearly which people belong to which group. Second, by connecting the current conflict to historical events, the narrative establishes a perception of permanence—that such an in/out group dynamic is unchanging and the normal order of things. The implication is that if it has always been like this, only extreme action will make a change.

Legitimacy and Credibility—Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

The source of information, and particularly the credibility of the source, play an important role in the effectiveness of communications—the messenger is as important as the message. The foundations of effective strategic communications at the macro-level are the three Rs—Reach, Relevance, and Resonance. This in turn relies on the meso-level comprised of the Messenger, Message, and Medium of the communications; all three aspects are required for communications to be effective.⁴¹ There is much supporting research across several fields exploring how the perception of the source of information can shape the way the message itself is interpreted and processed.⁴²

Hence an important aspect of extremist propaganda is to present the extremists, and especially their leaders, as credible messengers. Extremist groups are often lead by ‘charismatic leaders’, who present themselves as powerful and credible messengers. Such leaders often emphasise developing their identity and image, to increase their charismatic appeal. One way of doing this is to build on the charismatic capital of previous leaders, by drawing linkages through symbolism or quotations between past and present leaders. In this way they can claim to belong to a lineage of revered leaders. Ingram labels this ‘transformative charisma’, in which the charismatic capital of past leaders is drawn upon to bolster current leaders.⁴³

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41 For a full discussion see: Haroro Ingram and Alastair Reed, ‘Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications’, The Hague International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016.

42 Haroro Ingram, ‘Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility & Behavioural Change’, The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Vol. 7, № 9, (2016): 19.

43 Haroro Ingram, *The Charismatic Leadership Phenomenon in Radical and Militant Islamism* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013).

In his book *The Charismatic Leadership Phenomenon in Radical and Militant Islamism*, Ingram traces a long line of charismatic leaders within militant Islamism, who have all built on the charismatic capital of their predecessors to enhance their image and identity, and so come to embody the system of meaning. Ingram explains that al-Qaeda founder Bin Laden ‘emerged by not only drawing upon charismatic predecessors such as Azzam and Qutb but by surrounding himself with older Islamists with decades of experience in their regionally-based struggles (for example, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Muhammad Atef) to increase his own charismatic capital’.⁴⁴ Similarly, Bin Laden would cite medieval theologian Ibn Taymiyyah to back up his assertions and create an aura of legitimacy. More directly, he also deliberately tried to embody the warrior-scholar image of his mentor Azzam.⁴⁵

These trends are still prevalent in contemporary Islamist groups. Both al-Qaeda and IS constantly refer to leaders from decades and centuries past to appropriate their charismatic capital, weaving past and present into one continuity of identity. This technique is used in *Inspire* magazine (published by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP]), in the sections on ‘History and Strategy’, and in *Dabiq* magazine (published by IS), in ‘From the Pages of History’. For example, *Inspire* carries a regular feature called ‘Words of Wisdom’ presenting quotations from prominent Jihadi leaders, including such revered past leaders as sheikh Abdallah Azzam, Sayyed Qutb, and the ‘blind sheikh’ Umar Abdul Rahman.⁴⁶ This is a clear attempt to situate AQAP as the heirs to their work.

In the same section, prominent Islamist ideologue and strategist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri writes a series of articles called ‘The Jihadi Experiences’.⁴⁷ Here, he provides a critique of past jihadist campaigns in ‘*Jihādī Current (1963–2001)*’, in which he identifies successful and unsuccessful strategies. Al-Suri promotes the strategies used in Chechnya, Bosnia, and Afghanistan, and outlines his military theory of the Global Islamic Resistance Call. These articles portray the efforts of AQAP as a continuation of the same struggle of the last six decades of Jihad.

Similarly, in IS’s *Dabiq*, articles ‘From the Pages of History’ give other examples. The article, ‘Lessons from the Fitnah of the Mongols’, from *Dabiq* 14, provides selected quotes from influential 13th century theologian Shaykh ul-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah from the time of the Mongol invasion, in which ‘[t]he shaykh draws

.....
44 Ibid., p. 193.

45 Ibid., p. 193–94.

46 See ‘Words of Wisdom’, *Inspire*, Issues 11, 13, 14, 15, and 17.

47 See ‘The Jihadi Experiences’, in *Inspire*, Issues 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 12

comparisons between the Battle of al-Ahzāb in the time of the Prophet and the fitnah of Ghazan, presenting lessons for the believers that will continue to remain relevant and crucial until the camp of imān defeats the camp of kufr once and for all.⁴⁸ Another article in the same series, ‘The Expeditions, Battles, and Victories of Ramadan’, recounts the victorious battles in which the Prophet participated or led during Ramadan.⁴⁹

The Provisional IRA also drew legitimacy from linking their struggle to those of their predecessors, from Wolfe Tone (1753–98), known as ‘the father of Irish Republicanism’, to the many leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, including James Connolly and Patrick Pearse. Referring to these revolutionary leaders was not exclusive to the Provisional movement; they, like others, used this device to legitimise and strengthen their renewed struggle.

The Provisionals’ claim to be heirs of Wolfe Tone is exemplified in the second issue of *An Phoblacht* (1970), released just prior to the anniversary of the Easter Rising. The article entitled ‘What the 1916 Rising Meant’ makes reference to Wolfe’s ‘gospel’, which was to ‘break the connection with England, the never-failing source of all our political evils’.⁵⁰

The Provisionals here also claim that their Republican counterparts are incapable of being the heirs to this on-going struggle. Thereby they link to the crisis not only the classic out-group (the English), but also members of the in-group (other Irish republicans). This is evidenced in the same column, where they claim:

If, to-day, men hold commemorations of Easter week and at the same time support and uphold the British conquest in Ireland, they are as Pearse would describe them ‘tyrants, hypocrites, liars’. There are a number of groups claiming to be Republican who support the maintenance of two partitioned states.⁵¹

The column ends with a plea to followers to continue supporting only the goals of the Provisional branch: to refuse to recognise any group that should deny Ireland its right to a unified government. ‘So on this Easter Sunday, as we gather around the graves of our martyred dead we should again repudiate all institutions, which would limit the complete sovereignty of Ireland.’⁵²

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48 *Dabiq*, ‘Lessons From The Fitnah of the Mongols’, Issue 14, 2016, pp. 44–49.

49 *Dabiq*, ‘From the Pages of History’, Issue 10, 2015, pp. 26–29.

50 Art O Baoill, ‘What the 1916 Rising Meant’, *An Phoblacht*, March 1970, Volume 1, Issue 2, p. 4.

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Ibid.*

Summary

The messenger is as important as the message, as the perceived legitimacy and credibility of the messenger greatly impact how a message is interpreted. To increase their apparent legitimacy and credibility, the leaders of extremist groups frequently link themselves to past revered leaders, presenting themselves as their heirs. In this way they appropriate ‘cultural capital’ to support their claims of legitimacy.

Back to the Future: The Role of Prophecy

Whilst the previous sections have outlined how historical narratives can be exploited to strengthen different aspects of a system of meaning, sometimes history alone is not enough. Historical narratives are used as evidence to support a group’s arguments and narratives, or to connect the current circumstances to some greater inter-generational struggle—connecting the present to the past. Another technique used by the propagandist is the exploitation of historical prophecies—connecting the present to the future. Together these make a very strong tool: the group is portrayed as rooted in history, looking to the future, and tied to the divine.

The Christian Identity movement exploits biblical prophecies extensively to justify its narrative. First, it re-interprets history through the lens of biblical prophecies, using suitably realised prophecies to assert its legitimacy. For example, early British Israelist J.H. Allen first traced the lineage of the Anglo-Saxons back to the biblical figure of Ephraim, and then interpreted the prophecy that Ephraim would father ‘many nations’⁵³ as a reference to the British Empire. Similarly, he goes on to link the prophecy of another biblical figure, Manasseh, whose descendants would go on to form ‘a great nation’,⁵⁴ to the United States.⁵⁵ Connecting the ‘in-group’ to supposed realised prophecies creates a false sense of truth and legitimacy in their narratives.

As it evolved, the Christian Identity movement became more extreme, and increasingly focussed on the unfulfilled prophecies of the Book of Revelation and on millenarian sentiments fuelled by the recent world wars and the cold war. This new focus connecting unfulfilled apocalyptic prophecies to the present and near future, created a sense of urgency. In his analysis of Christian Identity

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53 Genesis 48:19

54 Ibid.

55 Berger, ‘Extremist Construction of Identity’, p. 11–12.

ideology, J.M. Berger described this combination of historical narratives and future prophecies as producing ‘a sort of Doppler Effect—as adherents rush from an increasingly expansive history toward an increasingly compressed timeline for a near-future upheaval of the world order, imbuing the out-group threat with an apocalyptic sense of urgency’.⁵⁶

When al-Qaeda central (AQC) launched its most recent affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), in September 2014, the narrative they used referred to the hadith⁵⁷ prophecy about *Ghazwa al-Hind* [Battle of India], which foretells the Muslim conquest of India⁵⁸ and promises those who take part the reward of a place in paradise.⁵⁹ The group’s first major attack, at the Naval shipyard in Karachi in September 2014, was heralded as ‘a clear message to India that Ghazwa-e-Hind has only just begun’.⁶⁰ However, the exploitation of this particular narrative is nothing new, and has been a mainstay of Jihadist groups in the sub-continent since 1988, when they emerged in Indian-controlled Kashmir.⁶¹ The prophecy is used to cast the groups’ actions as part of a larger, inevitable conflict, and seemingly demonstrate their legitimacy because they are fulfilling a prophecy.

The *Ghazwa al-Hind* prophecy, is not the only hadith prophecy to be exploited by militant Islamists in South Asia. Husain Haqqani describes the another passage uses in the 1980s Jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan:

During the war against the Soviets and the ensuing Taliban rule, ancient prophecies of Khurasan—which includes modern Afghanistan—resurfaced to inspire jihadists and promise great heavenly rewards. These prophecies foreshadowed the appearance of the Mahdi or Messiah and the final battle between good (pure Islam) and evil before judgement day. According to one Hadith, an army with black flags would emerge from Khurasan to help the Mahdi establish his caliphate at Mecca.⁶²

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⁵⁶ Berger, ‘Extremist Construction of Identity’, p. 46.

⁵⁷ The Hadiths are the oral traditions attributed to the prophet Muhammad.

⁵⁸ The ‘battle for India’ is usually taken to refer to an area far bigger than the modern day nation state of India, including the land today covered by Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Kashmir, Myanmar and Bangladesh (and more).

⁵⁹ Alastair Reed, ‘Al Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent: A New Frontline in the Global Jihadist Movement?’, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, (2016), p. 7; Arif Rafiq, ‘The New Al-Qaeda Group in South Asia Has Nothing To Do With ISIS’, *New Republic*, 5 September 2014; Husain Haqqani, ‘Prophecy and the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent’, Washington DC, *Hudson Institute*, 27 March 2015.

⁶⁰ Reed, *Al Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent*, p. 8; Haqqani, ‘Prophecy and the Jihad’.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Haqqani, ‘Prophecy and the Jihad’.

The emergence of an army waving the black flag of jihad, was thought to support the idea that the Afghan jihad would be the first step toward fulfilling the prophecy.

Perhaps the most infamous use of prophecies in recent extremist propaganda is the Islamic State's use of apocalyptic prophecies drawn from the Koran and Hadiths, which were to play a central role in the group's narrative. One of the group's glossy English language propaganda magazines was called 'Dabiq', itself a direct reference to an end-of-times prophecy according to which Dabiq, a town in northern Syria, is the location of the final confrontation between the Muslim armies and the Roman Crusaders, after which victorious Muslim armies will march on Constantinople and then on Rome, ushering in the end times. The introduction to the first issue of *Dabiq* states:

According to the hadith, the area will play a historical role in the battles leading up to the conquests of Constantinople, then Rome. Presently, Dabiq is under the control of crusader-backed sahwat, close to the warfront between them and the Khilafah. May Allah purify Dabiq from the treachery of the sahwah and raise the flag of the Khilafah over its land.⁶³

This passage links the rise of IS and its present day campaign of violence directly to the prophecy. A quote from AQI founder Abu Mus'ab az-Zarqawi is printed at the start of each issue: 'The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify—by Allah's permission—until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq'.

The temporary defeat and occupation of Dabiq by IS forces provided a propaganda double whammy. First, raising the flag of the Khilafah in Dabiq seemingly proved the group's legitimacy, as it was seen as the first step towards fulfilling the prophecy. Second, this implied the realisation of the prophecy was close at hand; the final battle against the armies of the crusaders and the conquest of Constantinople and Rome were within reach. This belief generated an urgency to act—the time is now, the end times are upon us, action cannot be delayed. To increase this sense of urgency, the group high-lighted other events in the prophecies, such as the restoration of slavery after the declaration of the Caliphate, to strengthen the notion that the prophecies' fulfilment was fast approaching. As laid out in the article 'The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour'

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⁶³ *Dabiq*, 'Introduction', Issue 1, 2014, pp. 3–4.

in *Dabiq* 4, ‘it is interesting to note that slavery has been mentioned as one of the signs of the Hour as well as one of the causes behind al-Malhamah al-Kubrā’.⁶⁴

Summary

Extremist propaganda exploits prophecies in three ways. First, it uses prophecies that seemingly have been realised to establish legitimacy, i.e. prophesied events have come true in the past and will come true again. Second, it uses prophecies to support carrying out a certain type of action, for doing this will fulfil the prophecy, i.e. the use of self-fulfilling prophecy. Third, it uses prophecies to predict an imminent future event, often apocalyptic, to create an urgency to act. While historical narratives are used to support and justify extremist ideology, prophecies can be exploited to create the need to act now!

Conclusions

In this article, we have aimed to provide insight into how historical narratives are exploited by extremist propagandists to strengthen their overarching group narratives. This paper drew on examples of extremist groups, each of which in its own way provides compelling examples of propaganda. The purpose of the paper was not to compare these groups, as they differ greatly in their ideologies, motivations, and operations. Instead, the paper applied Ingram’s linkage approach and concept of a competitive system of meaning as an analytical lens to investigate how each of these disparate groups uses the techniques to strengthen its system of meaning.

This they did in five ways:

- First, in order to expand the sense of crisis, the current crisis is connected to past events to create a sense of temporal stretching in which current events are not viewed in isolation, but as part as something bigger, the latest stage in an on-going historic struggle.
- Second, solution support in which historical examples are used to support the argument for the proposed solution. The examples demonstrate that the ‘solution’ is actually feasible.
- Third, historical narratives can be used to reinforce the in-group/out-group dynamic, in two ways—by using history to trace the lineage of both groups to show who belongs in which group and to provide legitimacy to the in-group’s claims, and by connecting the current

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64 Dabiq, ‘The Revival of Slavery Before The Hour’, Issue 4 (2014), p.14

conflict to past events to reinforce the perception of a permanent struggle between the two groups.

- Fourth, by using historical narratives to strengthen the legitimacy and credibility of the messenger, and therefore the impact of the message. To this end the leadership of extremist groups frequently link themselves to past revered leaders, presenting themselves as their heirs, thus appropriating their 'cultural capital' to support their claims of legitimacy.
- Finally, extremist propaganda can make use of historical prophecies in one of three ways: first, by connecting past events to historical prophecies, the fulfilment of which serves to establish their legitimacy; second to justify carrying out a certain action because this would fulfil a given prophecy, and third, by using an impending crisis predicted by a prophecy to create a sense of urgency, and therefore a need to act now!

As this paper has shown historical narratives are a very potent tool in the hands of extremist propagandists, that can be applied in a number of ways to strengthen the groups' narratives. At its most basic, historical narratives provide a reservoir of evidence or data points that can be interwoven to create supporting arguments to the extremists' view point. However, what gives historical narratives their potency is their temporal characteristics. The ability to connect the present to the past, so that current events are not viewed in isolation but as part of a temporal continuum. In this way today's conflicts are transformed into the latest stage of an historical struggle, and in-group/out-group dynamics, are 'shown' to be not a new dynamic but a continuous or perpetual struggle between two groups. In this way the crisis/solution and in-group/out-group dichotomies are deepened, and the links between Crisis + In-Group and the Solution + Out-Group are strengthened.

Future Research

This paper has been exploratory in nature, aiming to show how historical narratives are appropriated in extremist propaganda. However, we do not pretend that the mechanisms listed above are by any means exhaustive. Further research is needed to explore this dynamic, to examine more extremist groups, and to identify other ways in which historical narratives are incorporated into extremist propaganda. Similarly, as suggested already in this paper, an analysis of the narratives of the opponents' of these extremist groups would be another interesting angle to investigate. The next step would be to apply the ideas described above to a series of in-depth case studies on a number of extremist groups and

their opponents. This would help us to better understand the mechanisms used by particular groups, but would also allow us to compare extremist groups and their opponents. Finally, given the prominence of historical levers in violent extremist propaganda as outlined in this paper, there are also many implications for advice regarding strategic communications policy for Counter Terrorism – Countering Violent Extremism operations.

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HUMOUR AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL: THE CASE OF NEW YEAR'S EVE TELEVISION IN RUSSIA

Žaneta Ozoliņa, Jurgis Škilters, Sigita Struberga

Abstract

Humour entertains, but can also be used for propaganda purposes if it reaches a large audience and influences their emotional response to specific topics. The article focuses on humour as a comprehensive concept: elements of humour that serve a propagandistic function, including shared knowledge, the target audience, the perception of humour, the functions of humour, and the communication process, are identified and analysed in New Year's Eve programming on Russian television.

Keywords—*communication, functions of humour, humour, media settings, perception of humour, shared knowledge*

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Introduction

In 2017, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence published the study *Stratcom Laughs. In search of an analytical framework*.¹ The main goal of the study was to elaborate an analytical tool that could be used to gain an understanding of how humour is constructed and communicated in political settings. The proposed tool could assist in distinguishing humour that fulfils the functions of entertainment from humour that also contributes to certain political goals, thus supporting the narratives directed by the Russian government, intentionally or not. This study caused a wide range of reactions, from appreciation of its innovative methodology to negative, highly politicised comments from Russian authorities and the entertainment industry. At the very least, the richness and diversity of the debate on the main findings of the study highlighted the potential of the approach. The scholars who produced the study brought to light the process of designing and communicating humour for different purposes, including propaganda and counter-propaganda.

This article capitalises on the findings and conclusions of the initial study and expands the theoretical aspects of humour that were not sufficiently presented in the original report. Additionally, a new case study is introduced to illustrate the function of the proposed analytical tool.

Although our work focuses on humour as a tool in Russian propaganda, we assume that both the theoretical framework and the methodology used in the empirical analysis can be generalised and are valid for other socio-political and cultural settings. We do, however, acknowledge that there is a variety of culture-specific features of Russian humour (just as there are specific features characterising humour of other cultures and communities). A closer analysis of those culture-specific features will be the focus of a different study.

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¹ Žaneta Ozoliņa, Ivars Austers, Solvita Denisa-Liepniece, Jurgis Škilters, Sigita Struberga, and Maksym Kyiak, *Stratcom Laughs: In search of an analytical framework*, (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017).

This article begins with a short presentation of the main components constituting humour, including shared knowledge, the target audience, the perception of humour, the functions of humour, and its communication process.² It will also introduce new aspects of the concept of humour, relevant for honing the analytical tool. In the second part of this article, we use the tool to analyse New Year's Eve broadcasts on Russian television. Cabaret-style shows broadcast on holidays, and especially on New Year's Eve, are a deeply-rooted tradition in Russian society, going back to the Soviet era.³ These programmes 'offered an opportunity to explicitly dramatize and reimagine the relationship between state and citizens, cultural authorities and audiences, in heightened, festive setting'.⁴ This framework has been further developed in recent years, as political humour has become an integral part of these shows. We focus on analysing jokes aimed at the most important international events, foreign policies, and key international actors of the year in review. We assess the content of the programmes in order to identify how humour is used to denigrate the Western world. In the final part we draw conclusions from the case study and improve the analytical tool.

Humour: some theoretical considerations

In contemporary research, humour is considered a cross-disciplinary field involving such disciplines as psychology, communication science, political science, and cognitive science. While studies of humour from the perspective of these several disciplines inevitably overlap to some extent, there is substantial diversity in terms of both theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. We propose an open and inclusive approach⁵ in terms of theoretical background. Further, our framework assumes that humour is not only entertaining, funny, satirical, and joke-laden, but is also among the foundations of group identity, and can therefore be a tool for strategic communication. In some cases, humour can be used as a tool for the latent manipulation of groups whose members share certain types of knowledge (e.g. have a shared past).

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2 For a detailed explanation of the analytical framework see: *StratCom Laughs: In Search of an Analytical Framework* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017), pp. 6–45, 140–56.

3 The study does not intend to compare Russian New Years' eve programmes with those of other countries as cultural traditions differ.

4 Christine E. Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 82.

5 This article is an extension of the study *Stratcom Laughs*.

There are several prominent ways of defining humour:

- In *psychoanalytic* traditions humour is often defined as aggression, where telling a joke is taken as an attack on another party.⁶
- In *arousal-safety theory* humour is defined as a tension-resolver. To perceive a joke is to perceive tension between two co-existing meanings; the tension is resolved once the meaning of the joke is discovered.⁷
- When considered within a *frame-shifting model*, humour can be also defined as an *incongruity* between two different and possibly incompatible frames of knowledge.⁸ This model can also be applied to a variety of other semantic phenomena such as metaphor or polysemy.⁹ Seana Coulson explains that 'Frame-shifting is semantic reorganisation that occurs when incoming information is inconsistent with an initial interpretation, and conceptual blending is a set of cognitive operations for combining frames from different domains.'¹⁰
- Humour also seems to involve *analogical reasoning*: something can be perceived as humorous because of the analogy between different (surprising, inconsistent, or incompatible) situations.¹¹

Although these definitions highlight different aspects of humour, they all presuppose shared knowledge between the author or sender and the audience or recipient. Humour is more multifaceted and more context-dependent than any single definition allows. It is thus possible that humour has some aspect of (a) aggression (although this is not always the case) and (b) tension-resolution, but is more likely to involve (c) blending different frames of knowledge according to (d) the principle of analogy. Further, (c) and (d) are possible only because of shared knowledge. Humorous messages are subversive in the sense that they are perceived as less offensive than the same content expressed in a non-humorous way.¹² However, use of a subversive buffer is not unlimited: if the message is radically inconsistent with the attitudes or values of the listener, then it is likely to be rejected and can result in anger or a breakdown of communication.

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6 Dolf Zillmann and Joanne R. Cantor, 'Directionality of transitory dominance as a communication variable affecting humour appreciation', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, No 24, (1972): 191–98.

7 Foubelo M. Yus, 'Humour and the search for relevance', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35, (2003): 1314. Quoted in David Ritchie, 'Frame-shifting in humour and irony', *Metaphor and Symbol*, 20 (4), (2005): 275–94.

8 Viktor Raskin, *Semantic mechanisms of humour* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985).

9 Seana Coulson, *Semantic leaps: Frame-shifting and conceptual blending in meaning construction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Ritchie, 'Frame-shifting'.

10 Coulson, *Semantic leaps*, p. xii.

11 Diedre Gentner, and Linsey A. Smith, 'Analogical learning and reasoning' in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Psychology*, ed. D. Reisberg. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12 Thomas E. Ford, 'Effects of sexist humour on tolerance of sexist events', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26, (2000): 1094–1107; Ritchie, 'Frame-shifting'.

Even in such cases, shared knowledge is a precondition for interpreting the message. Humour is inherently social in the sense that it activates one's sense of belonging to a community. The social aspect of humour derives from shared knowledge among the actors and components of humorous communication, such as laughter. Humour is inherently social and has a communicative role that is always person-oriented.¹³

By studying various concepts of humour it is possible to identify a series of five steps that can be used to analyse the phenomenon. The first step is to identify **shared knowledge**, 'the initial and mandatory domain of knowledge [...] enabling the interpretation of jokes'.¹⁴ The second is to identify the **target audience**. The third step is to analyse how the audience **perceives the humour**. The fourth step is to identify the relevant **functions of humour** from the long list of functions that 'represent a diversity of domains where humour has the greatest capacity for impact [...]'.¹⁵ The last step is to consider the way in which **humour is communicated**.

Shared knowledge is the most important factor enabling recognition of humour (whether or not one agrees with it). Shared knowledge (worldviews, beliefs, practices, assumptions, conventions, and skills) may be implicit (we are not aware of some specific piece of knowledge that determines the way we reason) or explicit (we are aware and can verbalise this knowledge). Furthermore, sometimes shared knowledge is relatively universal or culture-independent (the knowledge prerequisite for humour is not related to some shared social or cultural past). More frequently, however, the knowledge prerequisite for humour is culture-dependent (e.g. a shared socio-cultural and/or political past). This type of shared knowledge (either implicit or explicit) is most efficient in political contexts and can be used as a tool for strategic communication.

Humour that invigorates emotional attachment can be applied to both individuals and groups. Certain characteristics should be taken into consideration when analysing the **target audience**, such as the size of the audience and the age and sex of its members, the strength of the ties between members and existing vertical hierarchies, the degree of dependence exhibited among members of the group, its moral standards (restrictive, permissive), and the impact of existing political and religious structures.

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13 Robert R. Provine, 'Laughing, tickling, and the evolution of speech and self', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 13(6), (2004): 215–18.

14 *Stratcom Laughs*, p. 12.

15 *Ibid*, p. 29.

Shared knowledge has a direct impact on the **perception of humour** by individuals, but more importantly by the groups to which they belong. According to Clark, *culture-dependent* shared knowledge consists of two subgroups. First, culture-dependent shared knowledge consists in part of *inside information* (mutually shared by the members of a community—Group A); this knowledge typically includes shared information related to nationality, religion, political knowledge, culture or subculture, residence, education, age, and language, thus creating the sense of *us*. Second, culture-dependent shared knowledge also consists in part of *outside information* (mutually shared knowledge by Group A—*us*, about some other Group B—*them*; this knowledge is Group A's assumed knowledge about Group B's inside information).¹⁶ The dynamic between *us* (in-group) and *them* (out-group) directly impacts the perception of humour: an event that portrays an out-group member in a substantially more negative light than an in-group member will be perceived as more humorous.

Identifying the **functions of humour** in a particular context helps us to understand the impact of humour on the targeted individuals or groups. The list of functions enumerates what aims can be achieved, what messages have been constructed, and what communication tools have been selected in order to reach a target audience. Among the most important functions are the following: knowledge accumulation and problem-solving, persuasion and strategic-image construction, cultural interaction, aggression and defence/offence, belonging and social balance, stress relief, expressing or suppressing political freedom, support and justification of political leadership and agenda setting, weakening the opponent via soft forms of communication, such as the delegitimisation of leaders. The impact of these functions depends on the extent of and perception of shared knowledge within the target group.

Analysing the functions of humour provides guidance for organising the communication process. The communication of humour consists of four elements: the content of the message (and its level of subversiveness), the delivery of the message (through visual and behavioural codes), the messenger (either an individual or a group), and the setting (in this case, television programmes).¹⁷ The communication of humour is 'a situation-dependent, multidimensional structure containing a message that depends on internal communicative processes such as reference-establishing and coordinating, but also on a variety of media settings and situational features constraining and

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¹⁶ Herbert H. Clark, *Using language* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 101, 103.
¹⁷ *Stratcom Laughs*, p. 33.

transforming the impact of the humour'.¹⁸

To summarise, we have identified five main components of humour—shared knowledge, the target audience, the perception of humour, the functions of humour, and the way in which humour is communicated. In order to test how this analytical framework can be applied, we analyse the New Year's Eve cabaret shows broadcast on Russian television in the next section.

New Year's Eve television shows in Russia: applying the analytical tool

The programme chosen for this case study is *Novogodnij parad zvezd* or *The New Year's Parade of Stars* (hereafter—NYPS) broadcast on the Rossiya 1 [Россия 1] television channel. According to *Mediascope*, a large company that provides businesses with diverse statistical data, for the last three years *The New Year's Parade of Stars* was the second most viewed programme in Russia during the final week of the year (right after the President's New Year Address).¹⁹ In 2016 Rossiya 1 was the most-watched television channel in Russia, with an audience share of 12.9%.²⁰

The period of analysis for this case study is December 2012 to December 2017, covering six years of New Year's Eve programming on the Rossiya 1 channel. We made this choice because a number of international events influencing Russia's position towards its neighbours Ukraine and the Baltic States, and towards the West in general took place within this period (*Euromaidan*, the Ukraine crisis, sanctions against Russia, the deterioration of the US-Russia relationship), making it possible to monitor whether and how these events were reflected in the programmes analysed. We focus on a thematic analysis of constructed narratives, exploring three main components in the representation of the message: how the performance was carried out (including visual aspects), the content of the performance, and the narrative forms used. The results are

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¹⁸ Ibid, p. 38.

¹⁹ According to *Mediascope*, the most watched broadcast in Russia during the week 26.12.2016–31.12.2016 was *Novogodnee obraščenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii V. Putina* [President Vladimir Putin's New Year's Address], broadcast on Russia's central television channels with an audience share of 57.3% (29.8% on Pervyj Kanal and 27.5% on Rossiya 1), followed by *Novogodnij parad zvezd* [The New Year's Parade of Stars, hereafter—NYPS] on Rossiya 1 with an audience share of 22.0%. [Mediascope TV Index survey for the period 26.12.2016–31.12.2016](#). [Accessed 05 April 2017]. In the preceding year, the most watched broadcast during the week 28.12.2015–03.01.2016 was *Prezident Putin's New Year's Address* with an audience share of 59.4% (35.4% on Pervyj Kanal and 26% on Rossiya 1). NYPS obtained an audience share of 19.8%. At the end of 2014 the President's speech attracted an audience share of 60.5% (32.2% and 28.3%), while NYPS ranked second with an audience share of 24.3%. [Mediascope TV Index survey for the period 29.12.2014–04.01.2015](#). [Accessed 05 April 2017]

²⁰ *Federalno'e agencstvo po počati i massovym kommunikacijam, Televidenie v Rosii v 2016 godu Sostojanie, tendencii i perspektivy razvitiija* [Television in Russia in 2016. Layout, Tendencies and the Perspectives for Development], from the website of the [Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications](#). [Accessed 4 December 2017]

presented using the five analytical steps described above—shared knowledge, the target audience, the perception of humour, the functions of humour, and the way in which humour is communicated. These steps allow us to identify how a particular media outlet becomes an instrument of specific foreign policy tactics used by the Russian government, how actors on the international stage are portrayed, and how the humour used either embeds certain actions within a larger cultural context or, alternatively, tries to ground particular issues in a much narrower context than the one in which they should be considered. Our main aim is to describe the content of the message and the forms of communication used to reach the intended audience. Information about the audience serves as background for a deeper understanding of messages and forms of communication chosen by the communicator.

Shared knowledge

Television in Russia today can be considered one of the most important mechanisms supporting the political regime.²¹ Indeed, the extent and impact of Russian television's activities is remarkably wide. As Russian cultural expert and film critic Daniil Dondurei has accurately expressed, it 'holistically shapes the content of human capital, thereby actively influencing various areas of people's lives. [...] This institution is an unprecedented one, when we take into consideration the number of functions it performs, including the creation and popularisation of the basic concepts, and the meaning of life',²² as well as its access to a wide audience. Despite television's loss of its former monopoly on home entertainment, it is still the most accessible mass information medium in Russia.²³

The state has an almost unlimited capacity to influence these processes as it governs the media in general and television assets in particular, and owns the TV network infrastructure, as well as some channels,²⁴ including Rossiya 1. This channel was established in 1991, when the government had to react to structural changes in the media space. Today it is one of the largest national channels in Russia and is part of the *Vserossijskoj gosudarstvennoj televizionnoj radioveščatel'noj*

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21 Ilya Kiriya and Elena Degtereva, 'Russian TV Market: Between State Supervision, Commercial Logic and Simulacrum of Public Service', in *Central European Journal of Communication*, 1 (2010), ISSN 1899-2101, p. 37; Stepan Goncharov and Denis Volkov, *Rossijskij media-landšaft: televidenie, pressa, Internet* [Russian Media Landscape: Television, Press, Internet], from the website of the [Levada Centre](#) for sociological research. [Accessed 20 April 2017]

22 'TV formatiruet Žizn', Vera Zverjeva's interview with Daniil Dondurei, from the webjournal *Iskusstvo Kino*, № 10, 2014. [Accessed 30 April 2017]

23 *Federal'noe agentstvo po pečati*, 2015. [Accessed 17 September 2016]

24 Sigitia Struberga, 'Case Study: Late-Night Shows on Pervyj Kanal and the Discreditation of Western Political Leaders', in *Stratcom Laughs*, p. 48.

kompanii [All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company]. Its broadcast range covers almost all of the territory of the Russian Federation, while the international versions—Rossija in the former Soviet Union including the Baltic States, and RTR-Planeta in Western Europe, North America, the Middle East, North Africa, and China—provide access to secondary target audiences.²⁵

In addition to the news, other popular genres include TV shows, feature films, and entertainment programmes. The content of Russian television can be described as generally entertainment-oriented, but increasingly addressing ideological and political themes.²⁶ To depict how pro-Kremlin discourse is created and distributed within the shows, it is necessary to highlight a number of specific communication techniques used by the state-owned TV channels in Russia. Among the most visible are blurring the lines between truth, half-truth, and untruth, and between fact and fiction; and defining and identifying the (negative) *other* while simultaneously creating a positive self-image.²⁷

Humour has always had a political dimension in Russia.²⁸ During the Soviet period, the regime considered it a means to influence the masses. Television was an effective platform for achieving those goals. In turn, low-brow humour used by ordinary people became a valve through which they expressed their uncensored attitudes toward and ideas about the regime.²⁹ During the post-Soviet period the practices of the Soviet regime were picked up by political campaigners and adapted to fit the new conditions. According to Maria Tagangajeva St. Gallen, ‘many critics of the Putin regime have described the expansion of the entertainment industry as an attempt to demotivate Russians away from political activism. By telling jokes, Russia’s humorous television shows transmit the core values and views of the state system’.³⁰

25 ‘O telekanale’ [About the TV channel], From the Rossija website.

26 Kiriya and Degtereva, ‘Russian TV Market’: 44.

27 Edward Lucas and Peter Pomeranzen, ‘Winning the Information War. Techniques and Counter-strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe’, Center for European Policy Analysis, August 2016; Brian P. Cotter, ‘Russkiy Mir’, *Per Concordiam: Journal of European Security and Defence Studies*. Special Edition: Countering Russian Propaganda. (2016): 32 (30–35); Žaneta Ozoliņa, Gunda Reire, Solvita Denisa-Liepniece, Arturs Kvesko, and Sīgita Struberga, ‘Euro-Atlantic values and Russia’s strategic political communication in the Euro-Atlantic Space’ (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016).

28 *Russkij političeskij fol’klor. Issledovanija i publikacii* [Russian political folklore. Research and publications], ed. A. Pančenko, (Moscow, Novoe izdatel’stvo: 2013); Maria Tagangaeva, ‘Political Humour on Russian Television’, *Russian Analytical Digest*, № 126, 10 April 2013: 11.

29 Tagangajeva, ‘Political Humor’.

30 *Ibid.*

Shared cultural memory and specific allusions are used to achieve transference of cultural, social, and political codes that require knowledge of the Soviet and post-Soviet social structures, and of the accompanying style of linguistic expression. No less important is the conservation of the former Soviet way of thinking and the pro-Russian sentiments of the audience.³¹ These sentiments are tethered to the idea of a 'Russian World' as a factor unifying Russian speakers around the globe, regardless of any other identities they may have. Moreover, common historical memory and an understanding of social structure based on the elements of the Soviet system are the common ground upon which the idea of the 'Russian World' is built. These unifying elements—the shared memories, rituals, and traditions that combine Soviet and modern aspects of social reality—are nourished and maintained via different forms of communication. One of the most important rituals inherited from the Soviet period is a particular way of celebrating the New Year, based in traditions mostly produced by the Soviet regime.

In Russia, the New Year celebration is considered the central and most important holiday of the entire year. According to the *Levada Centre*, an NGO conducting sociological research in Russia, when asked to name their most important holiday 83% of the Russian population named the New Year's celebration. The next most important celebrations were personal birthdays (44 %) and Victory Day on the 9th of May (38 %).³² Similar trends can also be found in other post-Soviet societies,³³ and among those emigrants and their descendants in different parts of the world whose origins are rooted in the Soviet cultural space.³⁴

This is not surprising, as the now iconic NYE celebration was introduced during the Great Purge³⁵ with the intention of uprooting the Christian Christmas. Not

31 Marlene Laruelle, 'The "Russian World": Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination', Center on Global Interests, May 2015; Anna Klyueva and Anna Mikhaylova (2017), 'Building the Russian World: Cultural Diplomacy of the Russian Language and Cultural Identity', *JOMEC Journal* 11:127–43; Idil Osman, ed., 'Diaspora beyond Nationalism'; Orysia Lutsevych, 'The Long Arm of Russian "Soft" Power', *Atlantic Council*, 4 May 2016.

32 *Ežegodnik Obsčestvennoe Mnenie* [The Yearbook of Public Opinion], (2016), p. 264. [Accessed 02 May 2017].

33 For example, when asked to list the most important festivities of the year in Latvia, 69 % of the population named the New Year's celebration, followed by Christmas (64 %) and Midsummer (46%) according to 'DNB Latvijas barometrs: vairākums iedzīvotāju būtu gatavi aizstāvēt Latviju no ieinaidniekiem', [Most Latvians Would be Ready to Protect Latvia from its Enemies], Luminor website, 17 November 2015. [Accessed 14 May 2018].

34 However, in Ukraine 74% of the population consider the New Year to be among the most beloved festivities together with Easter (81%) and Christmas (78%) in 'Samim popul'arnym oficial'nym prazdnikom sredi ukraincev javljaetsja Passxa' [The Most Popular Official Celebration for Ukrainians is Easter], Information Agency UNIAN, 29 April 2016. [Accessed 03 May 2017]

35 For example, Maria Belousova said of the Russian-speaking diaspora in the United States that 'these Russian speakers share an attachment to Russian/Soviet culture and traditions and these customs serve to unite them into social networks in their new home' in Maria Belousova, 'The Russian Diaspora in the US', *Russian Analytical Digest*, № 107, 27 January 2012: 2.

35 The Great Purge or the Great Terror was a campaign of repressions and persecutions in the Soviet Union led by Joseph Stalin. It occurred from 1936 to 1938. The estimated number of executed during this period is 1.2–1.7 million people (data vary from source to source).

unrelated, 'the use of the symbolic capital of the New Year's celebration started during the modernisation period of Stalinism, [...] whereas a festive canon was created at the beginning of the 1960s'.³⁶ It 'became a civic, celebratory holiday, one that was ritually emphasised by the ticking of the clock, champagne, the hymn of the Soviet Union, the exchange of gifts, and big parties'.³⁷ This was accompanied by a number of traditional activities for children, such as waiting for *Ded Moroz* (Grandfather Frost, the Soviet version of Santa), masquerading, and playing games around a decorated spruce. Other rituals, established some years later, include the *President's New Year's Address* broadcast on television five minutes before midnight and the cabaret-style entertainment programmes that are shown on Russian television all evening long on New Year's Eve.³⁸ 'New Year, more effective than any propaganda,³⁹ carried out the task of merging age, social, political and national differences'.⁴⁰ As Rilkin, Kruglova, and Savras point out, this celebration with its attendant rituals is the most important method of creating 'collective bodies':⁴¹ 'while maintaining a private festive aura at home, it also allowed for each individual to share a common experience of the passing of the year, the eternal circle of nature, and a distancing from intense socio-ideological pressure. This celebration like no other contributed to the creation of Soviet society as a flat family'.⁴² Many of these rituals have become part of the modern version of this iconic celebration in Russia and among Russian-speakers who share a common historical memory of the Soviet times. The event is a uniquely significant institutionalised festivity, during which expressions of collective memory are realised, leading to the expression of great emotion.

36 Tat'jana Anatol'evna Kruglova and Natal'ja Vladimirovna Savras, 'Novij god kak prazdničnyi ritual sovetskovo epoxi' [The New Year as Celebrative Ritual of the Soviet Era], *Izvestija Yralskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*. Ser. 2, Gumanitarnye nauki, 2010. № 2 (76): 7.

37 Emily Tamkin, 'How Soviets Came to Celebrate New Year's Like Christmas (and Why Russians Still Do)', *Foreign Policy*, 30 December 2016. [Accessed 15 May 2017].

38 From its inception in 1962, the programme *Goluboj ogon'ek* [The Blue Flame] was transmitted as a musical entertainment on weekends. However, from 1964 it transformed into a traditional Soviet New Year's television programme and was broadcast annually until 1985. More than a decade later, in 1997, it was picked up again by the Rossija television channel and the tradition was restored. Once competing channels were introduced, the entertainment programming on New Year's Eve became much more extensive, and the repertoire of NYPS was also expanded.

39 According to Kruglova and Savras, the celebration of New Year's Eve in the Soviet Union 'at first look may be seen as a "humanised feast" in the totalitarian and later authoritarian Soviet system. However, it is precisely the programme's popularity that requires a closer analytical look, as the pragmatism of the totalitarian system leaves no free space for any kind of cultural phenomenon'.

40 Kruglova and Savras, 'New Year as Celebrative Ritual': 6.

41 Mikhail Rilkin, 'Ot likovanija k gallyucinacij: postsovetskie kollektivnye tela', [From Glee to Hallucination: Post-Soviet Collective Bodies], *Literaturno-filosofskij žurnal TOPOS*. 10 May 2006. [Accessed 23 April 2017]; Kruglova and Savras, 'New Year as Celebrative Ritual': 7.

42 Kruglova and Savras, 'New Year as Celebrative Ritual': 7.

Target audience

According to information provided by Rossiya 1, the principal audience of the channel comprises 98.5 % of the Russian Federation's population.⁴³ According to data provided by the Fond Obščestvennoe mnenie [Public Opinion Foundation], more than 90 % of adults in Russia watch television at least once a week, while 70 % do so on a daily basis. Only 5 % of inhabitants in Russia do not watch television at all.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the secondary target audience is made up of several sectors of viewers in foreign countries, depending on their regional affiliation: the more than 50 million viewers who watch Rossiya 1 in the CIS⁴⁵ and the Baltic States, as well as those who watch RTR-Planeta. According to information provided by the channel itself, its audience is made up of more than 30 million viewers around the world.⁴⁶ It 'broadcasts 24 hours a day in 3 versions with time shift programming specially adapted for viewers from Europe, Asia and North America. RTR-Planeta broadcasts free-to-air from satellites for Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Also the channel is available in the networks of a great number of operators throughout the world including the USA and Canada'.⁴⁷ Additionally, it should be noted that many Russian-speakers in Western and other countries use the opportunities provided by cable, internet, and social media, such as YouTube.⁴⁸ This serves as a limiting factor in obtaining accurate audience measurements.

Traditionally *The New Year's Parade of Stars* is broadcast during prime time, just before the President's New Year's address, a time slot popular with Russian speakers of diverse genders, ages, social roles, status groups, and political and religious orientations.⁴⁹ The Russian-speaking audience that tunes in to watch the NYPS is roughly identical to the population defined as the 'Russian World'. Watching traditional Soviet-style television entertainment programming during *zastol'e* (a feast of favourite Soviet-era dishes)⁵⁰ with family and friends continues

43 'O telekanale'. [Accessed 04 December 2017]

44 Fond Obščestvennoe mnenie [Public Opinion Foundation], cited in 'Televidenie v Rossii v 2015 gody', *Federal'noe agentstvo po pečati*, p. 22. [Accessed 4 December 2017]

45 Russian TV channels are still very popular in Armenia, Belarus, and Moldova. They are far less popular in Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Georgia. In the case of the last two countries, armed conflicts with Russia have caused a notable decline in their popularity (EaP Civil Society) Forum, *Messages of Russian TV: Monitoring Report 2015. Executive Summary and Recommendations*, p.3.

46 'O kanale' [Information about the channel], RTR-Planeta. [Accessed 04 December 2017]

47 'To Advertisers', RTR-Planeta. [Accessed 04 December 2017]

48 For example, Youtube videos of *NYPS 2017* had more than 570 000 reviews by 04 December 2017. [Accessed 04 December 2017]

49 'The New Year has become so ingrained in the society', says [Valentina] Izmirlijeva, 'it is unifying'. In addition, 'It's for those who are not Christian, those who are anti-Christian, or members of other religions. It is still very strong.' Tamkin, *How Soviets Came to Celebrate New Year*. [Accessed 15 May 2017]

50 For example, special salads such as *salata Oliv'e* [Olivier salad] and *Sečedka pod šuboj* [Herring under a fur coat].

to be a unifying collective experience practised by Russian-speakers, who share a common Soviet era influenced memory. When asked how they spent New Year's Eve 2016, 81% of Russians stated that they watched television.⁵¹ And as popular Russian anchor-person Vladimir Solovëv for *The New Year's Parade of Stars 2012* emphasised: 'We are somehow used to it, and whether we want it or not, all our New Year's traditions come from the Soviet past.'⁵²

The experience of a common celebration in which viewing television is of critical importance includes several major elements: watching TV with friends and family at home feels like a private party, but is actually a collective experience designed to achieve certain effects; family members of all generations spend time together, strengthening the bonds between young and old (those too young to remember the Soviet era are taught to regard it as the 'good old days' by participating with their elders);⁵³ certain themes are repeated and developed; 'real life' is temporarily superseded by faith in miracles; and a childlike enjoyment of *Ded Moroz*, the Christmas tree, and other New Year's Eve traditions create a social buffer. Thus, the New Year and Soviet childhood are in equivalent positions within the nostalgic complex⁵⁴ and help activate old and persistent sentiments within a wide audience of Russian-speakers at home and abroad.

All of these factors give substance to Russia's 'nation-building project' and allow the country's official discourse to address a larger number of people through supportive entertainment. At the moment of celebration, the television screen attracts segments of the population who do not usually watch it (young people have moved on to more modern media) or are critical of the usual broadcasts (critics of the existing regime or the apolitical). This provides an opportunity for the television channel to deliver pro-Kremlin narratives using soft forms of communication that might, in other circumstances, be rejected for targeting too wide an audience and being bland in consequence.

Perception of humour

Language, in this case the Russian language, is crucial to understanding verbal humour, including the allusions, sayings, and proverbs upon which many jokes are built. No less important is knowledge of the Soviet and post-Soviet social

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51 Opinion Poll. *Norogodnye Teleperedachi* [New Year's Eve TV programs], Levada Centre, 26 January 2017. [Accessed 18 May 2017]

52 *NYPS 2012*.

53 For example, singers of the younger generation sing together with old (Soviet) performers, demonstrating their respect and readiness to learn. See: Josef Kabzon and Polina Gagarina singing on the *NYPS 2017*.

54 Kruglova and Savras, 'New Year as Celebrative Ritual': 14.

structures, and awareness of political and social codes embedded in social life. In this cultural space, ‘the notions of “stability” and “norms” have traditionally overshadowed the messier discourse of democratic exchange, symbolic authority in language has tended to buttress more readily political ideologies rooted in essentialism, preservation, and restoration’.⁵⁵ This orientation toward ‘stability’, along with political and social values and ideals reflecting prescribed ideological standpoints, have been embodied in political joking and have thus influenced the development of a specific perception of political humour.

Within this framework, the audience’s political and social memory plays an important role, as does their knowledge of Russian pop culture, particularly as the main content of the programmes analysed is closely related to singers (Soviet and contemporary) and other celebrities considered popular among Russian-speakers. This is part of a wider layer of the contemporary cultural space, where communication with secondary target audiences takes place through special concerts, visiting theatre tours, and other cultural events specially designed for Russian-speakers abroad. These activities strengthen a sense of belonging within the group; as group members enjoy familiar cultural tropes and laugh about the same jokes, they share a positive experience that forges social bonds.

Taking a closer look at the jokes, we observe that general entertainment programmes on Russian television can be described as having humorous content directed towards traditional gender, ethnic, racial, and other basic stereotypes and prejudices.⁵⁶ Jokes including gender stereotypes were particularly widespread in the programmes we analysed. They were attributed to all spheres of social activities, including politics. The very traditional social roles of women (mother, housewife, object of sexual desire) in Russian society are perceived as ideal forms of social interaction, deviations from which become a source for humour, especially when addressing women in positions of power equal to men.⁵⁷ As a result, female politicians in Russia are more often subject to

55 Michael S. Gorham, *After Newspeak: Language, Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 198.

56 Struberga, ‘Case Study: Late-Night Shows’, pp. 57–59.

57 For example, jokes about German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s appearance, femininity, and sexuality in *NYPS 2013*. Sketches about three female Western leaders—Angela Merkel, Theresa May, and Hillary Clinton—appeared in *NYPS* in 2016 and 2017. The jokes were based on the premises that a woman’s place is not in politics, but rather behind her man, and that femininity is not compatible with being a political leader; *NYPS 2016*; *NYPS 2017*.

gendered critique and jokes in media content than men.⁵⁸

The effectiveness of such political humour relies in part on reinforcing stereotypical thinking. It resembles pure propaganda, as stereotypical thinking reduces ‘the ability for analytical thinking about political processes and phenomena, and leads to an instantaneous reaction to a stimulus’.⁵⁹

The enjoyment of powerful, unambiguous emotional experiences in reaction to unsophisticated political humour and the attraction of belonging to the dominant social group, demonstrated by ‘laughing in all the right places’, influence the way in which the viewing audience perceives the jokes in the programme.⁶⁰ The annual national catharsis also helps audience members deal with internal and external stressors, from personal tragedies to societal- and state-level issues that influence quality of life for many Russians. This set of factors strongly affects the demand of the audience—bathed in a ‘warm, fuzzy’ emotional atmosphere and encouraged to feel that they are not alone—for humorous content that reaches minimum aesthetic and ethical standards and promotes avoidance of analytical and critical thinking.

Functions of humour as a tool for strategic communication

We have identified several categories of humour present in the case study that may serve as specific encoders of political content in the jokes, and therefore fulfil the functions of strategic communication in accordance with what was intended. Below is a more detailed presentation of the most significant categories.

1. Knowledge accumulation and problem solving

Whenever an international-level political event is mentioned, it has a certain significance for the audience. The following events were highlighted as the most significant over the last five years:

1. the Winter Olympics in Sochi;
2. EU sanctions;

58 D. Tatarkova, ‘Stendap-komik, scenarist sitkoma i ix kollegi o sostojanii jumora v Rossii’, [The stand-up comic—sitcom screenwriters and their colleagues about the state of humour in Russia], 01.04.2015, www.wonderzine.com; Liudmila Voronova (2015), ‘Gendering in Political Journalism in the Framework of Other “ing-s”’: Russian and Swedish Political Journalists about Gender, Ethnicity and Sexual Identity as Politicians’ Characteristics and Political Categories’, ECPR, p. 14.

59 Viktor Savka and Uliana Yatsyshyn, ‘Media as Actors of Propaganda Influence: Portrayal of the Russian-Ukrainian Armed Conflict in Ukrainian Religious Media’, *Media i Spolozhenstvo*, № 5/2015.
60 Struberger, ‘Case Study: Late-Night Shows’, pp. 58–59.

3. the US presidential elections,
4. the economic recession (with particular emphasis on Europe);
5. Conchita Wurst's victory in the Eurovision Song Contest;
6. a decrease in oil and gas prices.

The attitudes present in the jokes indicate to members of the audience how they are expected to react to these international events. On one hand, humour provides 'political information' and 'political education' in a subtle form; on the other it humanises politics, thus making it more accessible and easier to understand.⁶¹ Although this applies directly only to the interpretation of certain events, it also refers to a broader set of positions regarding common in-group values and moral standards—the most acceptable form of governance, the best way to structure society, and the most suitable model for cross-state relations within the Russian Federation. The jokes also imply how individuals should react to international political conflicts. The issue of sanctions is widely discussed in the programmes; the audience is told that, 'many talk about it, but hardly anyone understands',⁶² and the official narrative is that the economic constraints are facilitating economic development.⁶³ The emotions elicited by the featured jokes not only affect how individuals perceive what options are open to them and what the costs and benefits of different options may be, but they also impact future decisions they might make—it is likely that members of this feel-good group will choose to reinforce group membership with their decisions, even to their own detriment.⁶⁴ This example demonstrates how it is possible to turn a topic into nonsense, while simultaneously presenting it as a reason for national pride.

2. Strategic-image construction, belonging, and persuasion.

In reviewing the jokes in the NYE programmes, we found that the humour reflected a particular image of Western leaders and the countries they represent. In the discourse of the jokes, the most influential world leaders are Vladimir

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61 Or easy to understand within the proposed vision of reality.

62 This expression was used by the anchorperson during *NYPS 2014* to assert that although everyone talks about sanctions against Russia, most people do not understand their real meaning and consequences. The following language arrives at the conclusion that nothing has happened and 'no sanctions are intimidating to us', *NYPS 2014*. [Accessed 05 December 2017]

63 For example, the message promoted on *NYPS 2017* was that Russia's economic situation had stabilised, it was out of recession, and that next year would bring improvement in the personal economic situation of its inhabitants *NYPS 2017*.

64 Helena Flam, 'Corporate Emotions and Emotions in Corporations', in Jack Barbalet, ed., *Emotions and Sociology*, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), p. 94.

Putin,⁶⁵ Barack Obama (after the elections—Donald Trump), Angela Merkel, and David Cameron (later—Theresa May); however, Putin is always shown to be superior in all aspects. The jokes not only place Russia among world superpowers,⁶⁶ but also demonstrate its superiority by discrediting the leadership of the other powers.⁶⁷

The image created for Russia's neighbouring countries is noteworthy. In all instances, the jokes emphasise strong historical ties with Russia and the belief that sooner or later there will be a rapprochement between the countries. This is particularly striking in the case of Ukraine: with the help of humour, the current political elite and their politics are ridiculed and discredited,⁶⁸ even as the jokes assert the 'consanguinity' of the two countries and their inevitable future reunion in some form.

The second level of image-construction is associated with the creation of a positive self-image. Here, given that the joke itself anticipates laughter as a collective experience, it automatically promotes a sense of belonging among audience members. One such shared experience is the celebration of New Year's Eve following the traditions described above. An important aspect of the shared experience is how 'Russianness' is conceptualised by the concept of the 'Russian World' and the idea of a common cultural space that Russian-speakers share regardless of national affiliation. Russian language and identity play the main role here, as 'all strata of the Russian World—polytechnic, multi denominational, socially and ideologically heterogeneous, multicultural, geographically segmented—are unified through the recognition of a sense of belonging to Russia'.⁶⁹ Thus borders between states are downplayed, while the idea of an informational and cultural space shared by all Russian-speakers is instilled in the minds of the viewers according to a 'national project'.

The promotion of collective pride is used to boost the self-image of Russian-oriented populations. Russian athletes and their successes on the international stage are widely promoted. The Olympics have been used to bolster collective pride by showing that Russia can organise a successful event far better than

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⁶⁵ Intelligence, knowledge, physical fitness, mental stability.

⁶⁶ For example, this song about the Russia-US relationship, which includes the text 'don't be stupid America, we are two superpowers, two coasts. Just know your place...' *NYPS 2017*.

⁶⁷ For example, sketches about 'weak' Western leaders Theresa May, Angela Merkel, and Hillary Clinton, *NYPS 2016; NYPS 2017*.

⁶⁸ For example, performances dedicated to the Russia-Ukraine relationship, *NYPS 2016; NYPS 2017*.

⁶⁹ Gorham, *After Newspeak*, p. 162.

other countries can, and they beat their competitors in the events as well.⁷⁰ Collective pride and a positive collective emotional experience increase the sense of solidarity and cohesiveness felt by in-group members.⁷¹

3. Support for and justification of Russia's political leadership: setting the agenda

Demonstrating the superiority of Russian President Vladimir Putin is an integral part of the political humour of these programmes. His personal qualities have never been portrayed in a negative light in any context. On the contrary—with the help of various techniques the audience is motivated to accept Russia's political leader as someone who has supremacy in a direct and figurative sense.⁷²

As a result, foreign policies implemented by Russia are presented as legitimate responses to the international challenges the country faces, policies related to the creation of the 'Russian World' are presented as necessary to raise the welfare of the state, and support of them as incumbent upon Russian speakers⁷³ as a duty to their homeland.⁷⁴

Russian TV plays a supportive role for Putin's regime and commonly promotes stories about the power and legacy of the nation in the international system.⁷⁵ The narratives used help to enhance the power of the state and the legitimacy of the regime in its internal and external actions.

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70 In jokes about the Olympics in a 2015 broadcast, it was proposed that for other countries 'winning is not as important as participation', whereas for Russians ('us', indicating the nation as a whole) both winning and participation are important, *NYPs 2015*. The implication is that other countries should get used to losing to Russia.

71 Gavin Brent Sullivan, 'Collective Pride, Happiness, and Celebratory Emotions: Aggregative, Network, and Cultural Models', in Christian von Scheve and Mikko Salmela, eds., *Collective Emotions: Perspectives from Psychology, Philosophy, and Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 277.

72 For example, a sketch by Jurij Stoyanov where US President Donald Trump is ridiculed in a sketch that plays out a phone conversation between him and Vladimir Putin. Putin is portrayed as a competent master of all life's situations, but Trump as clearly inferior *NYPs 2016*; *NYPs 2017*. Stoyanov plays Elton John dropping hints about Putin's skill in determining the course of events, but also his direct link to higher powers. This is in line with general public discourse in Russia: the President is portrayed as prevailing in all spheres of life, not only politics, *NYPs 2015*. It may be described as kind of resurrection and adaptation of the adulation of the Tsars—the Russian president is thought to be blessed by an extraordinary power to control all aspects of life, and is placed above all other people, including the leaders of foreign countries.

73 *NYPs 2015*.

74 This closely correlates with Soviet traditions, when holiday celebrations were 'an essential medium for defining and promoting new revolutionary and Soviet social relations and symbolic systems, for imagining the communist future and bringing it closer'. Then television took a central role in the 'Soviet festive system', Evans, *Between Truth and Time*, p. 83.

75 Interestingly, the programmes reviewed tend to ridicule domestic political problems too, such as corruption, disorganised infrastructure, general irresponsibility, and alcoholism. However, these problems are rarely associated with public administrators.

4. Stress reduction and recreation

New Year celebration rituals designed to intensify and concentrate a sense of joy and pleasure. New Year's broadcasts on television are intended to disseminate this feeling across Russia and abroad. They are conducive to reducing stress with the help of jokes, a general sense of fun, and a festive atmosphere. Broadcasts strive to inspire the audience to a state of euphoria, in which they start believing in a happy future with unlimited possibilities.⁷⁶ *The New Year's Parade of Stars* is a kind of social theatre whose function is to enable the audience to achieve catharsis. By encouraging a free flow of joke telling and spontaneity (supposedly grass-roots and unregulated by government), the socio-structural policies of the existing regime are, in fact, strengthened.

5. Weakening the opponent through soft forms of communication: delegitimising other leaders

In addition to open mockery and challenging political leaders considered unfriendly towards Russia,⁷⁷ some deeper psychological mechanisms are activated by the content of television programmes. They offer an alternative identity for audiences at home and abroad that tend to oppose the current Russian regime, particularly through mild jokes that are acceptable and easy to understand. Russian-speaking minorities residing abroad may have assimilated foreign values and orientations. Sooner or later, mutually competing identities lead to an ideological confrontation. The preservation of the identity of these diasporic groups in accordance with the Russian perspective is directly dependent on the media.⁷⁸ Therefore, it can be argued that humour is being used as an instrument of Soft War.⁷⁹ In other words, the jokes told on entertainment television help Russian-speakers, especially those living abroad, internalise the 'correct' interpretation of significant events. They communicate particular values with the aim of subverting the discourses of foreign governments and producing instability when it is congenial to Russia.

76 Using continuous repetition, as well as appealing to the emotional state of individuals engaged in New Year's celebration, audiences are encouraged to believe that everything is possible and that the New Year will bring positive change.

77 *NYPs 2017*.

78 Daniel Dayan, 'Particularistic Media and Diasporic Communications', in Tamar Liebes and James Curran, eds., *Media, Ritual and Identity* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998): 106–07 (104–13).

79 The Islamic Development Organization (IDO) has defined soft war as: 'Any kind of psychological warfare action and media propaganda which targets the society and induces the opposite side to accept the failure without making any military conflict. The subversion, internet war, creation of radio-television networks and spreading the rumours are the important forms Soft War. This war intends to weaken the ... thought processes of the given society and also causes the socio-political order to be annihilated via the media propaganda. [sic]' Islamic Development Organization cited in Monroe E. Prince, *Free Expression, Globalism and the New Strategic Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 138.

Communicating humour

The setting of *The New Year's Parade of Stars* can be described as a complement to the tradition-rich *Novogodnij Goluboj ogoněk* [New Year's Little Blue Flame], which is still transmitted on Rossija 1 as part of the New Year's programme. The format of these complementary programmes draws on the Soviet analogue *Goluboj ogoněk* [Little Blue Flame]. As in the past (the format of the programme has not changed since the 1960s), musicians, sportsmen, actors, politicians, poets, and other celebrities who were popular during the Soviet period⁸⁰ participate in a cabaret-style show, sitting around tables laden with fruit and champagne, chatting and telling jokes.

Role-playing and masquerades (in which actors play members of the opposite sex and are thought to be particularly funny) are often used in humorous sketches and covers of popular songs adapted to contain humorous content. This not only provides additional fun, but also serves to create the illusion of an imaginary realm where everything is possible, wishes come true, and adults can recapture, just for a moment, the sentimental feelings of childhood. This nostalgia is strengthened by referring to events, personalities, well-known and once popular songs, movies, allusions to shared history, and memorable objects. Many of the songs feature humorous lyrics written especially for the NYE programme. The melodies chosen may be taken from a Soviet children's song, a well-known film, or some other popular song. This form of communication is characterised by the repetition of certain phrases and semiotic codes in order to maximise emotional uplift for the television audience.

Famous Russian television host Vladimir Solovëv hosts the programme. He reviews the important events of the previous year and predicts what is likely to happen in the year to come, providing a capsule foreign policy report for his viewers. He is traditionally accompanied by Russian politicians Gennadij Zjuganov and Vladimir Žirinovskij, who pontificate on what has happened and what may be expected in the future. Thus not only is the political sphere of life personalised, but it connects the government's political agendas with festive performances in the minds of the viewers, creating a sense of continuity and integrity in the daily lives of average Russians.

Significant changes have occurred in the intensity and sharpness of international political jokes featured on the programme between 2012 and the present day. For

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⁸⁰ For example, Iosif Kabzon, Alla Pugačova, Lev Leščenko, Vladimir Vinokur.

example, in *The New Year's Parade of Stars 2012*, other countries or representatives of other nations were mentioned only when depicting scenes of everyday life (discussing Chinese firecrackers, or the French original of the Olivier salad), taking up less than five minutes of the programme overall; politics did not take up significant transmission time.⁸¹ In 2016, the content of *The New Year's Parade of Stars* referred to various countries and people, particularly ridiculing representatives of the Western world, and the total time spent on long sketches referring to Western countries and Ukraine, together with four shorter political sketches, was about 25 % of the programme. The most virulent criticism was directed against Ukraine and its President Petro Poroshenko, stating 'it's about time he befriended his head and his neighbours',⁸² in an attempt to discredit his abilities as the highest representative of Ukraine and emphasising the importance of maintaining good relations with Russia. By 2017, almost half of the overall content was related to international relations, while domestic economic and political problems were left far behind. The most frequently mentioned political entities were the US, Ukraine, and the EU.⁸³

We identified the basic messages delivered through humour by analysing jokes regarding international affairs used in the New Year's broadcasts:

- The Russian Federation plays a central role on the international stage, alongside the US, Germany, and the UK;
- Russia is more powerful and preeminent than the others;
- President Putin is an outstanding leader with extraordinary abilities;
- Western political leaders are weak, with a fairly low level of intelligence;
- Russia is a unique, tradition-rich, and morally pure country. 'One cannot make sense of Russia', therefore foreigners do not understand the Russian people, the soul of this nation;
- Europe is weak, immoral, and burdened with economic and political crises;
- Sanctions against Russia cannot cause it harm; on the contrary, they stimulate economic growth and enhance quality of life;
- Russia provides stability and security in the world;

81 *NYPS 2012*. [Accessed 18 May 2017]

82 *NYPS 2016*. [Accessed 18 May 2017]

83 According to data provided by the Levada Center, in December 2017, 68 % of Russia's inhabitants see the US as an enemy, 29 % see Ukraine as an enemy, and 14 % see Europe, the EU, and the West in general, as adversaries. 'Vragi Rossiï', 10 January 2018. [Accessed 10.01.2018]

- Ukraine has ‘deviated from the right political course’; its actions now are neither logical, nor comprehensive. Sooner or later it will return ‘home’ and the close friendship between the countries will be restored;
- The ‘Russian World’ is a special cultural space that unites all Russian speakers, regardless of national borders. All members must strengthen this space from wherever they are and fulfil their obligations towards the Russian nation.

The above observations suggest a strong trend directed towards instrumentalising the New Year’s broadcasts in accordance with the needs of the regime. Since the political jokes told on the New Year’s programme are focused on the international dimension, they fail to reflect the real concerns of the Russian people.⁸⁴

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to identify the main components of humour and apply them to an analysis of New Year’s Eve television programming in Russia. We identified five interrelated components of humour: shared knowledge, the target audience, the perception of humour, the functions of humour, and the communication process, which constitute the basic elements of the analytical tool we used to investigate entertainment programming on Russian television. The application of the tool with its five components allowed us to identify the main political messages that appeared in the programmes and how they were communicated using humour, making it obvious that the jokes serve Russia’s political establishment and its ideological propositions. The proposed theoretical tool enables scholars to approach humour from a multidisciplinary perspective and to obtain a comprehensive picture of humour.

The celebration of the New Year as a ritualised collective experience that comprises a range of traditions, including viewing particular television broadcasts, has a special significance for the Russian-speaking population. The great popularity of these traditions is made possible by the existence of shared knowledge and shared experience, based at least partly on Soviet habits and

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⁸⁴ According to data provided by the Levada Center, in March 2017 the deterioration of international relations was seen to be a serious problem by only 6% of the population surveyed in Russia, ‘*Samye Ostrye Problemy*’, 07 March 2017. [Accessed 25 April 2017]. According to the Levada Centre, Russians surveyed in December 2016 said the five most important events of the previous year were—price increases and the depreciation of money; Trump’s victory in the US elections; the exclusion of Russian athletes from the Olympic Games/Para-Olympic Games; the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro; and the military conflict in Syria. Of these five, only Donald Trump is mentioned in *NYPs 2016*. Levada Centre, ‘*Važnejšie sobytija goda*’, 22 December 2016. Levada. [Accessed 05 December 2017]

values, which might also be transmitted to younger generations. The shared knowledge encoded in the Soviet past strongly influences the identity of the Russian-speaking audience.

Since the New Year's broadcasts are watched by Russians and Russian-speakers worldwide, the audience reach is wide. These humour shows are targeted at two strategically important but distinct audiences: (a) domestic audiences in Russia, (b) secondary audiences in Post-Soviet countries and the Western countries with Russian or Russian-speaking minorities. Therefore, it may be argued that the authors of the television content are afforded the opportunity to address the widest possible group of geographically dispersed people. These are diverse in age, sex, education, and occupation. However, certain basic psychological features are capable of bringing these groups together: the phenomenon of *nostalgia*, sentimentality, and the shared knowledge that exists among these populations. The analysis of the entertainment programmes broadcast on New Year's Eve in Russia demonstrates the validity of a further theoretical assumption, namely, that the use of humour frequently induces in-group effects and activates a sense of belongingness. This arises from intentional trigger-words such as *we* and *all of us* (the Nation, the Russian World), words that are linked to a shared Soviet or Post-Soviet past and to an identity consisting of allusions to shared narratives and well-known films, personalities, actors, musicians, and events from the Soviet period. Some of these Soviet or Post-Soviet celebrities are featured moderators on Russian Television programmes, and also for pop-culture events in Russia and those that are exported for diaspora.

As far as the *perception of humour* is concerned, the distinction between in-group and out-group is strongly linked to differences in emotional valence: the in-group is portrayed positively, but the out-group—negatively. This corresponds to the value and emotionally positive character ascribed to the in-group: *we* as the correct, truthful group or nation (the 'right Russia') securing real democracy and true values, albeit frequently victimised for embodying the struggle for correct values against the morally doubtful, dangerous, disastrous, and in general negative out-group. Therefore, emotional valence is intentionally attached to the content of jokes and messages according to the strategic aim of generating in-group and out-group divisions among the audience. The result of this communication is a mental model embedded in shared knowledge and consisting of specific components such as ethnic and gender stereotypes, masculinised values, and tolerance of aggression towards out-groups.

Our analysis of the New Year's broadcasts demonstrates the increasing politicisation of television entertainment content. In other words, we can now talk about signs indicating the instrumentalisation of humour in accordance with the needs of the regime. Furthermore, we argue that the specific form of these broadcasts, which stimulates the generation of collective emotions, together with the collective practice of laughter and overall joviality, promotes the intensification of associated and shared emotions. This reinforces the feeling of social ties among the members of the group while they focus on a particular topic presented in the broadcast and share a pre-conditioned emotional response.

The intensification of positive collective emotions in the context of references to a Soviet past mentioned above, fulfil just one of the *functions of humour*—socialisation. Other important functions that are activated through humour are persuasion and strategic image construction; this is done by highlighting real and imagined abilities and by discrediting opponents (countries identified as important 'others', such as the US, Ukraine, the Western allies). Together with supporting and justifying the political leadership, agenda setting, stress reduction, and recreation, these functions can serve as important links in the chain of a common media discourse orientated towards serving the interests of the existing political regime.

It is possible to crystallise the most important *messages* regarding the international environment and Russia's place and role in it. These messages form a basis for desired responses among target audiences towards external and internal processes, such as sanctions against Russia and the effects they produce in the Russian economy. The 'appropriate' reaction entails an avoidance of critical thinking. Instead, messages tend to induce emotionally unidimensional reactions, avoiding critical analysis of their content.⁸⁵ We argue that such shows are used, and in the Russian case may be purposely instrumentalised, to provide a self-defence system for the regime and to strengthen its perceived legitimacy. Concurrently, it is used to discredit and weaken the designated and strategically constructed external enemy, with the aims of achieving foreign policy results and of generating internal public demand for the government's actions.

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85 Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications: 1992): 260–65.

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RUSSIAN INFORMATION SPACE, RUSSIAN SCHOLARSHIP, AND KREMLIN CONTROLS

Natalya Kovaleva

Abstract

Fuelled by Russia's annexation of Crimea, the question of how authoritarian regimes like Russia seek to influence information domains of foreign states has received unprecedented attention within the disciplines of security and strategic communications. However, we have yet to examine more deeply the Russian conceptualisation of information space and the Kremlin's ability to exert control over its domestic information domain. The present study contributes toward filling these gaps by providing a more holistic understanding of the term 'information space' as it appears in Russian scholarship, and by analyzing the effectiveness of the economic and legal tools used by the Kremlin to establish control over the domestic information space. Ultimately, the study finds that whilst the Kremlin has been able to exert considerable influence over content production and distribution in certain spheres of the broader information space, it clearly enjoys only limited control over the new, increasingly Internet-dominated spaces and environments.

Keywords—*Russia, information space, internet, media, Russian scholarship, information control*

About the Author

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Introduction

In the aftermath of Russia's seizure of Crimea in early 2014, the academic and policy debate around the notion of 'information warfare' has received unprecedented attention in the fields of security and strategic communications. Observers have been eager to highlight the apparent potency of authoritarian regimes, that of Russia in particular, to challenge democratic values by employing the latest media technologies.¹ However, there has been astonishingly limited inquiry into the ways in which the Kremlin attempts to control its own information space. Apart from a number of publications on the nature of the 'post-Soviet' Russian media landscape, we still know surprisingly little about the modern Russian information environment, the extent to which it is 'controlled' by the state, and whether or not exerting such influence is at all possible in the age of a globalised and Internet-based information environment.

A wide range of studies has been undertaken to analyse how the Russian media system has evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to describe the relationship between the state and the media under Vladimir Putin.² To date, most analyses describe Russia's information environment as a 'neo-Soviet', authoritarian, or 'neo-authoritarian' space, and focus mainly on the Kremlin's attempts to centralise control over it.³ The recent acceleration of Russia's

1 Peter Pomerantsev, 'The Kremlin's Information War', *Journal of Democracy* 26 № 4, October 2015, pp. 40–50; Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money', *The Interpreter*, Special Report (New York: Institute of Modern Russia, 2014); Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili, *Redefining Euro-Atlantic Values: Russia's Manipulative Techniques* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017).

2 For contributions to this body of literature see Maria Lipman, 'Rethinking Russia: Freedom of expression without freedom of the press', *Journal of International Affairs*, Volume 63, № 2 (2010): 153–69; Sarah Oates, *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Elena Leonidovna Vartanova and Sergei Smirnov, 'A Brief Review of the Condition of the Media Market in Russia: The General Situation' in E. Vartanova, Hannu Nieminen, and Minna-Mari Salminen (eds), *Perspectives to the Media in Russia: Western Interests and Russian Developments*, Aleksanteri Series 4 (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Aleksanteri Institute, 2009), pp. 117–44.

3 Jonathan Becker, 'Lessons from Russia: A Neo-Authoritarian Media System', *European Journal of Communication*, Volume 19, Issue 2, (2004): 139–63; Hedwig De Smaele, 'The Applicability of Western Media Models on the Russian Media System', *European Journal of Communication*, Volume 14, Issue 2 (1999): 73–89; Sarah Oates, 'The Neo-Soviet Model of the Media', *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, № 8 (December 2007): 1279–97.

integration into the global information space through greater domestic Internet usage has received little scholarly attention. This prompts the question. How has the distribution of horizontal communication networks, facilitated by the rise of the Internet and social media, impacted the composition of the Russian information space?⁴

The aim of this article is to analyse the interplay between the vertical power structures the Russian state uses to control its domestic information space and the effects of Internet penetration on the state's ability to exercise this control. It will therefore examine how Russian scholars conceptualise the notion of 'information space', offering an alternative to the 'neo-Soviet' understanding.

Consequently, I argue that for all the Kremlin's success in shaping discourses broadcast by domestic mainstream media outlets, it has been less effective in its attempts to centralise control over discourses disseminated online. Vertical legal and economic structures have controlled mainstream media for over a decade, and continue to be a reliable tool of the state for managing the production and distribution of domestic content. Yet, such tools can not reach far enough to ensure full control of the online sphere, making it increasingly difficult for the Russian state to influence content carried by online platforms, or to regulate access to alternative sources of information.

The first section of this article examines conceptualisations of 'information space' offered by scholars of Russian institutions. The second addresses the Kremlin's view of Russia's information space, identifying vulnerabilities from the government's perspective. Section three examines the tools of control the government exploits to influence the information space domestically, and explores different forms of economic ownership that are shaping the country's media landscape. The final section focuses on the legal instruments the Russian government employs to increase control over the Internet inside Russia's territorial borders.

Conceptualising information space

The period following the end of the Cold War is commonly understood as an ambiguous interval of transition between different forms of society, not just in Russia, but in the wider world as well. Increased speed and volume of communication, proliferation of globalised economic networks, and greater global interconnectedness through digitisation, together have brought about

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⁴ Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 135.

a number of important social, economic, and technological transformations. According to the sociologist Manuel Castells, they gave rise to the new ‘network society’ on both global and local scales.⁵ These developments, so the argument goes, have profoundly affected the nature and dynamics of the communication space, making it ever more open-ended and versatile, as well as encompassing new network-like modes of operation.⁶

While not many scholars of communication contest this point of view, few (especially in the West) choose to apply Castells’ insights when theorising the Russian information space. Instead they place greater emphasis on authoritarian tendencies and structures embedded in the traditional Russian media environment.⁷ Russian research, on the other hand, tends to incorporate perspectives highlighting the globalised and ever-evolving nature of Russia’s information environment, and draws on several semantic nuances and understandings of the term ‘information space’.

The Russian Perspective

The term ‘information space’ was first used by Russian scholars in 1992 in relation to the need to preserve the circulation of print media throughout the country during the devastating economic crisis of the early 1990s.⁸ In 1993–94, arguments in favour of preserving the idea were articulated by Russian information technology experts, who stressed the necessity of developing information and communication infrastructures throughout the country.⁹ This thinking, in turn, informed ‘The Concept of the Formation and Development of the Common Information Space of the Russian Federation and the Corresponding State Information Resources’, published by the government

5 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd edn, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture 1 (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 4.

6 Castells, *Communication Power*, p. 298.

7 Florian Toepfl, ‘Four facets of critical news literacy in a non-democratic regime: How young Russians navigate their news’, *European Journal of Communication* 29, Issue 1 (2014): 69; Becker, ‘Lessons from Russia’, Oates, ‘Neo-Soviet Model of the Media’, Vartanova et al, ‘Media Market in Russia’; On the Kremlin’s approaches to Internet governance see Sheena Chestnut Greitens, ‘Authoritarianism Online: What Can We Learn from Internet Data in Nondemocracies?’, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 46, Issue 2 (2013): 262–70; Seva Gunitsky, ‘Corrupting the Cyber-commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability’, *Perspectives on Politics* 13, Issue 1 (March 2015): 42–54; Katy E. Pearce, ‘Democratizing Kompromat: The Affordances of Social Media for State-Sponsored Harassment’, *Information, Communication & Society* 18, № 10 (2015): 1158–74; Renz B and Sullivan J, ‘Making a connection in the provinces? Russia’s tweeting governors’, *East European Politics* 29(2)(2013): 135–51.

8 Margarita Vladimirovna Katkova, ‘Ponjatie “informacionnoe prostranstvo” v sovremennoj social’noj filosofii’ [The Concept of “Information Space” in Modern Social Philosophy], *Izvestija Saratovskogo universiteta*, Novaja serija—Serija Filosofija, Psixologija, Pedagogika, Volume 2 (2008): 23–26.

9 Iosif Mixajlovič Džjalošinskij, ‘Informacionnoe Prostranstvo Rossii: Političeskaja Metafora ili Nauchnoe Ponjatie’ [Russian Information Space: Political Metaphor or Scientific Concept], *Pravo znal’: istorija, teorija, praktika*, № 7/8 (July–August 2001), pp. 56–57.

in 1995.¹⁰ In this paper, ‘information space’ is defined as ‘a collection of databases and data banks, the technologies for their maintenance and use, and information and telecommunication systems and networks, operating on the basis of common principles and general rules that guarantee the information interactions of organisations and citizens, as well as the satisfaction of their information needs’.¹¹

Rather than providing a vision of what Russian information space should be, the document served as an indication of the need for the mass dissemination of information and communication technologies, the distribution of adequate infrastructures, and the development of the media industry, as well as emphasising the importance of Russia’s integration into the global information space.¹² The years that followed were marked by an increased interest in the concept on the part of Russian scholars, who went on to develop a number of different interpretations of the term ‘information space’.¹³ Drawing on Russian scholarship, five conceptualisations, which Western analysts rarely engage, are described below.¹⁴ The plurality of ideas presented highlight the fact that the Russian state has primarily pursued a territorial approach in developing policy aimed at shaping the country’s information domain.

1. **The territorial approach**, in the broadest sense, defines information space as a specific territory where the main sources of information (e.g. the media), their potential audiences, and the infrastructure that ensures interactions between the two are physically located.¹⁵ This approach is geopolitical, as the sphere of communication (and influence) ends with the state’s zone of geopolitical influence.¹⁶

10 Russian Federation, ‘Konceptcija formirovanija i razvitiija informacionnogo prostranstva Rossii i sootvetstvujuščix gosudarstvennyx informacionnyx resursov [The Concept of the Formation and Development of the Common Information Space of the Russian Federation and the Corresponding State Information Resource] (Novosibirsk: Sibirskoe otdelenie Rossijskoj akademija nauk, 1996).

11 Ibid.

12 Denis Vitol’dovič Čajkovskij, ‘Informacionnoe Prostranstvo: Analiz Opredelenij’ [Information Space: Analysis of Definitions], *Bulletin of the Buryat State University*, Issue 14a: Philosophy, sociology, political science, culturology, (2010): p. 269.

13 Elena Evgen’evna Jusupova, *Informacionnoe prostranstvo SNG: Problemy, tendencii, i perspektivy*. [Information space of the CIS: problems, trends, perspectives]; PhD thesis, Moscow State University of International Relations (MGIMO), Moscow, 2003; Marina Konstantinovna Raskladkina, *Interneti kak sredstvo organizacii informacionno-političeskogo prostranstva Rossii* [The Internet as Means of Organising Information and Political Space in Russia], PhD thesis, Saint-Petersburg State University, 2006; Tat’jana Alekseevna Merkulova, *Social’no-informacionnoe prostranstvo sovremennoj Rossii i tendencii razvitiija* [Social and information space of modern Russia: specifics and development trends], PhD thesis, Moscow State University, 2005.

14 Čajkovskij, ‘Informacionnoe Prostranstvo’, p. 269.

15 Josif Mixajlovič Džjalošinskij, ‘Integrativnyje processy v sovremennyx rossijskix media-sistemax, ili čto proisxodit v rossijskom informacionnom prostranstve’ [Integrative Processes in Modern Russian Media Systems, or What Happens in the Russian Information Space], in *My—sogruždane*, ed. by Lidija Ivanovna Semina, 2 vols (Moscow: Bonfi, 2002), p. 20.

16 Ibid.

Thus, the information space is defined as:

[...] the aggregate of information resources and infrastructures that ensure secure communication between and among the state, organisations, and citizens, with equal access to open sources of information, and with the fullest satisfaction of users' information needs within the state, while maintaining a balance of interests when engaging with the global information space and ensuring national informational sovereignty.¹⁷

In this territorial space, it is the state that acts as the arbiter of spatial informational relations.¹⁸ It strives to ensure integrity and exert control through legislation and ownership of media outlets in the domestic domain of information.¹⁹ Hence, the information space is perceived by the state as the most important strategic asset through which other spheres of public life can be controlled.

- 2. The technological approach** defines information space as the 'structural coexistence and interaction of all possible systems and their components, in a strictly informational sense'.²⁰ Here we are faced with perhaps the most narrow and concrete definition, where everything that concerns information is localised in particular technological structures. In this discourse, emphasis is placed on the technological component of communication, and the phenomenon of information space is perceived as a combination of information resources, computers, and communications facilities.²¹ In other words, the information space is defined by the location of data banks and other means of creating, storing, processing, and transmitting data, in both physical and virtual spaces. Although the Russian scholars who adhere to this approach often refer to physical spaces, a number of them emphasise that in the technological understanding of the term, geographical locations play a diminishing role due to the rise of the Internet and its global virtual domain.²²

17 Jusupova, 'Information Space of the CIS', p. 65.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. 66.

20 Eduard Pavlovič Semenjuk, *Razvitiie informacionnogo prostranstva i progress obščestva* [Development of the Information Space and of Societal Progress], *Naučno-tehničeskaja informacija* (Novosibirskij gosudarstvennyj tehničeskij universitet), Series 1 (Organizacija i metodika informacionnoj raboty), № 1 (1997): 1–12.

21 Čajkovskij, 'Informacionnoe Prostranstvo', p. 270.

22 Ibid.

3. **The social approach** conceptualises the notion of information space as one of social relationships. Information space is here defined as ‘a public domain in which individuals, professional communities, public administrators, and economic and political circles, communicate through information exchange and virtual spaces’.²³ In other words, it is seen as the aggregate of structures (individuals, groups, and organisations), connected by relations of collection, production, distribution, and consumption of information. Hence, in a way, information space represents a social structure established through a system of relations between producers and consumers of mass media and online content.²⁴ Influenced by the writings of Bourdieu, this approach sees information relations as an inseparable part of social relations.²⁵
4. **The evolutionary approach** defines information space as a set of representations and informational reflections (perceptions) that are constructed as a result of the interactions that take place between subjects of communication.²⁶ In other words, the information space is the sum total of the (evolving) mental (conceptual) models used when selecting and processing particular kinds of information.²⁷ As argued by Kalinina, ‘In the process of information transformation, subjects of information space perceive the environment by filtering and processing information through mental models that provide an understanding of the environment’.²⁸ The key feature of this approach is that a subject’s own conceptual model is transformed as a result of the interactions between subjects in space and time.²⁹ The evolutionary approach defines information space as a dynamic, reflexive, and constantly evolving phenomenon.

23 Vladimir Bronislavovič Veprintsev, ‘Informacija v prostranstvennyx i geopolitičeskix kategorijax’ [Information in Spatial and Geopolitical Spaces], *Trendy i upravlenie*, № 3 (2014): 303.

24 Iosif Mixajlovič Džalošinskij, ‘Mediaobrazovanie: rabota s tekstami ili umenie orientirovat’sja v mediaprostranstve?’ [Media Education: Working with Texts or the Ability to Navigate in the Media space?] in *Mediaobrazovanie 2013: Sbornik Trudov Meždunarodnogo Foruma Konferencij. 31 oktjabrja – 2 nojabrja 2013 g.* [Media Education 2013: Collection of Publications from the International Forum of Conferences 31 October – 2 November 2013], (Moscow: Sholokhov State University of Humanities, 2013), p. 11.

25 Feliks Izosimovič Šarkov, *Osnovy teorii komunikacij* [Fundamentals of the Theory of Communication] (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo torgovaja korporacija ‘Daškov i K^o’, 2010); Elena Nikolaevna Judina, *Mediaprostranstvo kak kul’turnaja i social’naja sistema* [Media Space as a Cultural and Social System] (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Prometej, 2005).

26 Vladimir Sergeevič Ignatov and Dina Vladimirovna Pimenova, ‘Informacionnoe Prostranstvo: Struktura i Funkcii’ [Information Space: Structure and Functions] (*Izvestija vyšnix učebnyx zavedenij, Povolžskij region, obščestvennye nauki, Sociologija*, № 3, 2007), p. 5.

27 Ibid.

28 Alla Eduardovna Kalinina, ‘Osnovnye teoretičeskije položenija razvitija informacionnogo prostranstva xozjajstvennoj sistem’ [Main Theoretical Provisions for the Development of the Information Space of Economic Systems] (Volgograd: Volgograd State University, 2005), p. 12.

29 Ibid., p. 14.

5. **The noöspheric approach** is derived from the academic heritage of V.I. Vernadsky, particularly his concept of ‘noosphere’,³⁰ which in recent years has influenced many Russian scholars who theorise about the information space.³¹ According to Vernadsky, the noosphere represents a new global super-system that combines three powerful subsystems: ‘human beings’, ‘production’, and ‘nature’, all of which are interrelated.³² Interactions between these subsystems are understood to be synergetic and non-linear relationships that inevitably bring about a model of social life based on the coevolution of the biosphere and the mind (noösociogenesis).³³ In other words, this model is driven by the ability of the human intellect to interact effectively and harmoniously with the biosphere. This stands in contrast to the ‘technogenic’ model, which is based on the idea of humans in opposition to nature.³⁴ According to the concept of noosphere the human is perceived as the sole owner of knowledge in the Universe, who thus shapes the dialogue (polylogue) between people of various cultures, nations, religions, ages, and genders.³⁵ In the words of the Russian scholar Valentina Voronkova, the ‘noöspheric approach establishes a belief that at the peak of development the human being will be able to create a world that would harmoniously coexist in parallel with nature; not destroying the created world but favoring the harmonious interaction of all spheres of life’.³⁶

Nowadays the noosphere is increasingly associated with the dissemination of global information networks and technologies. Therefore, many have been trying to identify the first signs of the emerging noosphere in the global Internet network. Typically, the

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30 The term ‘noosphere’ itself does not belong to Vernadsky, who was cautious about abusing the literature with ‘unnecessary terms’. It was first used in the articles of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Édouard LeRoy, who were heavily influenced by Vernadsky’s thinking, especially by his lectures on the problems of geochemistry and biogeochemistry delivered in Sorbonne in 1922–1923.

31 See Nikita Nikolaevič Moiseev, *Universum. Informacija. Obščestvo* [Universe. Information. Society]. (Moscow: Ustojčivyj mir, 2001); Arkadij Dmitrievič Ursul, *Peresod Rossii k ustojčivomu razvitiju. Noosfernaja strategija* [Russia’s Transition to Sustainable Development. The Noosphere Strategy] (Moscow: Noosfera, 1998); Arkadij Dmitrievič Ursul and Ta’ana Al’bertovna Ursul, ‘Globalizacija, ustojčivoje razvitie, noosferogenez: informacionnye aspekty’ [Globalization, Sustainable Development, Noöspherogenesis: Information Aspects], Novosibirsk Technological Institute. *Naučno-techničeskaja informacija*, Series 2: *Informacionnye processy i sistemy*, Volume 1, № 4 (2005).

32 Vladimir Ivanovič Vernadsky, *Naučnaja mysl’ kak planetnoje javlenie* [Scientific Thought as a Planetary Phenomenon] (Moscow: Nauka, 1991). Also available in English: *Scientific Thought as a Planetary Phenomenon* (Moscow: Nongovernmental Ecological V.I. Vernadsky Foundation, 1997): 67.

33 Valentina Grigorovna Voronkova (Valentyna Hryhorivna), *Philosophy of Modern Society: Theoretical and Methodological Context*; Monograph, (Zaporizžja: RVV ZDIA, 2012), p. 180.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

emergence of an information society is viewed as the initial stage of the formation of the noösphere.³⁷ Building on Vernadsky's ideas, modern Russian scholars consider the presence of a certain 'Collective Intelligence' or 'Noöspheric Intelligence' as the most important feature of the emerging noösphere.³⁸ As Moiseev noted, the information society cannot emerge and exist without Collective Intelligence on a planetary scale: 'I suppose it is possible to call the planetary society informational', he writes, 'if and only if the Collective Intelligence emerges, which would be able to play a similar role in planetary society to the one that the mind plays in a human body'.³⁹ The emergence of such an Intelligence, in turn, requires the development of an adequate means of accumulation, transmission, and analysis of information.⁴⁰ Thus, the noöspheric approach presupposes the emergence of a new information cloak that 'envelops' the Earth and generates a new state of global being—the planetary noöspheric mind.⁴¹

In this framework, media space is understood as an integral part of the noösphere. It has conditional boundaries created by participants in media processes, whose relationships determine the metric of that media space.⁴² In this context, space is not physical but virtual. All relations in it are 'perfectly symbolic in their nature'.⁴³ The noöspheric approach, as opposed to all others, does not discuss the role of the state in shaping the noösphere. Agency is located at the level of the individual where the 'intelligence of each individual aided by new information technology based on artificial intelligence will join the collective, or integral, intellect of mankind, which will create the basis for global decision-making'.⁴⁴

The variety of semantic nuances that Russian scholars draw upon when theorising the concept of information space highlights the sophistication of the Russian approach to understanding this complex phenomenon. Yet, it is evident that in Russia policy lags behind theory. As the following analysis will demonstrate, Russian authorities predominantly work from the assumption of physical

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37 Ursul, 'Noosphere Strategy', p. 12.

38 Ibid., p. 14.

39 Moiseev, *Universum. Informacija. Obščestvo*, p. 183.

40 Ibid.

41 Čajkovskij, 'Informacionnoe Prostranstvo', p. 272.

42 Dzyalošinskij, 'Media Education', p. 7.

43 Ibid.

44 Ursul and Ursul, 'Globalizacija, ustojčivoe razvitie, noosferogenez', p.13.

territoriality when making policy decisions that affect the processes and networks shaping the Russian information domain.

Upon becoming President in early 2000, Vladimir Putin introduced ‘The Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation’, which aimed to ‘safeguard the national interests of the Russian Federation in the sphere of information’ and defined ‘sources of threat to the information security of the Russian Federation’. This attached the concept of sovereignty to Russia’s information space, which could be challenged by both domestic and foreign actors.⁴⁵ Such a localised view, underpinned by the principle of non-intervention, has been maintained ever since, with the latest version of the Doctrine calling for ‘strengthening the vertical management system and centralising information security forces at the federal, inter-regional, regional, and municipal levels’.⁴⁶

Moscow’s ambition to centralise control over communications is rooted in the Kremlin’s belief that foreign actors (mainly the US and NATO) are seeking to challenge the status quo in ‘countries where the opposition is too weak to mobilise protests’ by using the Internet and other tools of influence.⁴⁷ This view became particularly prominent among Russia’s political and military leadership following the protests of 2011–12, which heightened the fear that the ‘colour revolutions’ could be duplicated in Russia.⁴⁸ Thus, while being concerned with the potential influence of foreign actors in the domestic information space, the Kremlin sees this space as a virtual territory with clearly defined borders that correspond to the physical borders of the Russian state, and (in some cases) to the borders of what the Kremlin perceives to be its strategic ‘spheres of influence’.

The Dangers of the Global Information Space

Not all Russian scholars agree with the government’s view of the domestic information space. Some argue that reducing the idea to purely territorial categories—the geographical borders of a state or the boundaries of territories covered by communication channels—inevitably overlooks the possible influences of global connectivity on local information spaces.⁴⁹ While some elaborate on the benefits of widespread digitisation, others, in line with the

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45 Russian Federation, [The Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation](#), Approved by President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation on 9 September 2000.

46 Russian Federation, [The Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation](#), 5 December 2016.

47 Julian Nocetti, ‘Contest and Conquest: Russia and Global Internet Governance’, *International Affairs* 91, Issue 1 (January 2015): 114.

48 *Ibid.*, p.112.

49 Čajkovskij, ‘Informacionnoe Prostranstvo’, p. 273.

Kremlin, point out that ever-increasing Internet penetration has generated ‘complex problems in the fields of information and national security’.⁵⁰

For instance, some Russian scholars argue that along with expanding the freedom of information exchange, Russia’s entry into the global information space also provided its citizens with free access to a variety of alternative sources of information, some of which are deemed dangerous because of potential ‘targeted’ impact on public opinion and behaviour.⁵¹ ‘Colour revolutions’ in Russia’s geopolitical backyard and recent civil unrest in Ukraine feature in Russian discourse as prime examples of information warfare waged by the United States and European Union against Russia and its allies, with the aim of installing puppet governments in the region.⁵² US policy initiatives, such as democracy promotion and the Internet Freedom Agenda, are thus perceived as the propagation of political agendas beneficial to the US at the expense of Russia’s interests.⁵³ Therefore, Russia’s greater integration into the global information space supposedly creates opportunities for foreign actors to shape Russia’s public discourses in ways unfavourable to the Russian state, while preserving their anonymity in the vast, uncontrollable, and unregulated online domain.⁵⁴

Consequently, certain Russian researchers consider the Internet an increasingly popular alternative to mainstream media among the domestic population. Thus, the Internet represents a threat due to mounting ‘opportunities for the development of an alternative public sphere in Russia’.⁵⁵ With television and print media heavily dominated by state interests, Runet is seen as ‘the only platform for free political discussion’—a virtual space with the potential to reproduce the ‘historic tradition of systemic opposition to the Russian state using Western

50 Aleksandr Mixajlovič Starostin, Sergej Ivanovič Samygin, and Anna Vladimirovna Verešagina, ‘Evol’ucija vojny i mnogoobrazie ee form v uslovijax krizisa nacional’noj identičnosti i dinamiki ugroz informacionnoj bezopasnosti sovremennoj obščestva’ [Evolution of the War and Diversity of its Forms in the Context of the Crisis of National Identity and the Dynamics of Threats to Information Security of Modern Society], *Socium i nast’* № 5 (61) (2016): 52.

51 Aleksandr Alekseevič Vilkov, Sergej Fëdorovič Nekrasov, and Andrej Vladimirovič Rossošanskij, *Političeskaja funkcional’naja sovremennyx Rossijskix SMP* [Political Functionality of Modern Russian Media], (Saratov: Izdatel’skij Centr ‘Nauka’, 2011), p. 34.

52 See Georgij Jur’evič Filimonov and Nikita Sergeevič Danjuk, *Informacionnyj terror: Taktika i strategija informacionnoj vojny* [Information Terror: Tactics and Strategy of Information War] (Moscow: Knižnyj Mir, 2017); Julia Belikova, Aleksander Korol’ov, and Aleksander Kriukov, *Setevye tehnologii v informacionnyx operacijax NATO i zarubežnyx nepravitel’svennyx organizacij v sode cretnyx revolucij i voennyx konfliktov* [Network Technologies in the Information Operations of NATO and Foreign Non-governmental Organisations During Colour Revolutions and Military Conflicts] (Moscow: Akademia Federal’noj služby ohrany Rossijskoj Federacii, 2012).

53 Nocetti, ‘Russia and Global Internet Governance’.

54 Vilkov et al., *Političeskaja funkcional’naja sovremennyx Rossijskix SMP*, p. 36.

55 Aleksandr Gennađ’evič Kuz’min, ‘“Pravij” Internet v Rossii: Specifika razvitija i problemy protivodejstvija’ [“Right-wing” Internet in Russia: The Specifics of Development and the Problems of Counteraction], *Politeks* № 3, (2008), pp. 74–96.

liberal ideas, which is typical for the Russian intelligentsia'.⁵⁶ Vilkov, Nekrasov, and Rossoshansky are concerned that 'the most active and informed part of the audience will fall out from the sphere of mainstream media controlled by the state', and that eventually the process by which domestic audiences receive news will be split into two parallel domains—the mainstream media for passive consumers of news, and the Internet for 'active audiences'.⁵⁷ The authors conclude that 'the nature and direction of protest energy concentrated in the Internet space can be socially dangerous'.⁵⁸

A further concern for Russian scholars is the integrity and security of Russia's national identity and values in the information confrontation with the West.⁵⁹ While Russian discourse has long been marked by ideas celebrating Russia's cultural and ideological exceptionalism, ultraconservative narratives portraying Russia as a stronghold of traditionalist values besieged by the 'morally corrupt' West have become more prevalent during Putin's most recent presidential term (2012–18).⁶⁰ Adopting a law prohibiting LGBTI propaganda and introducing amendments to anti-terrorism legislation (where the authorities are portrayed as the protectors of the Russian population, while Europe is being torn apart by terrorist attacks) played effectively to these narratives.⁶¹ Some Russian scholars, however, insist it is necessary to strengthen the national media system and ensure its openness to the outside world, while at the same time upholding and promoting the principles of Russia's national culture and identity.⁶² Meanwhile it is deemed necessary to strengthen the presence of Russian media in the international arena, as 'in the modern competitive world victory depends on one's ability to effectively influence the minds of foreign populations'.⁶³ Regarding Russia's effective disinformation activities, Starostin, Samygin, and Vereshchagina conclude, contrary to some Western scholars and policy-makers, that Russia is actually losing the 'war of the words' for dominance in the information space. Worse still, that it is now almost impossible to reverse the destructive consequences of lost 'information battles'.⁶⁴

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56 Anna Davidovna Traxtenberg, 'Runet kak "publičnaja sfera": Xabermasiankij ideal i realnost' [Runet as a Public Sphere: The Habermasian Ideal and Reality], *Politeks* № 2, (2006): 167.

57 Vilkov et al., *Političeskaja funkcional'naja sovermennyx rssijskix SMP*, p. 35.

58 Ibid.

59 Starostin et al., 'Evol'ucija vojny', p. 51.

60 Alexey Eremenko, *Weeding Out the Upstarts: The Kremlin's Proxy War on Independent Journalism* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2015), p. 9.

61 Olga Smirnova, *Russian TV: Contesting European Values*, Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper, (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2016), p. 6.

62 Starostin et al., 'Evol'ucija vojny', p. 53.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., p. 54.

As the following analysis will demonstrate, the Kremlin's view of the domestic information space and its perceived vulnerabilities is closer to that of Russian scholars who argue for the protection of national informational sovereignty than to those who foresee the eventual formation of the noosphere. Recent state policies on Internet governance reveal the government's attempts to strengthen its positions in the context of Russia's real or imagined 'information confrontation'.⁶⁵ The aim is to ensure domestic stability while countering foreign information threats. Most notably, attempts have been made in recent months to 'lock down' the Russian segment of the Internet (Runet) and concentrate the ability to throw a 'kill switch' in the hands of government.

Safeguarding the virtual borders of Runet

Unlike China, Russia does not typically use infrastructural and economic barriers, shutdowns, and application-level blocking. Rather, it resorts to censorship and intimidation.⁶⁶ Yet, in recent years, a number of proposals from government officials suggest creating a 'kill switch' for the Russian segment of the Internet. This would allow the government to disconnect Runet from the global network 'in case of crisis'. Legislation fails to specify what such a 'crisis' might look like beyond vague references to Runet being shut off from abroad.⁶⁷ Network shutdowns, either complete or specific to certain protocols and applications, are widely used by governments such as Iran, Kenya, and Turkey to manage information flows during politically resonant events, such as popular protests or elections.⁶⁸ In Russia's case, significant efforts have recently been made by lawmakers to 'protect' Runet from foreign interference and develop mechanisms of restricting access to Runet from abroad.

On 15 August 2017 the Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications released a set of amendments to the *Law On Communications* designed to increase the government's control over Internet infrastructure and traffic in Russia.⁶⁹ The amendments were aimed at transferring control of the national domain zones

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65 Information confrontation is commonly understood in Russian discourse as 'a complex of relations between the subjects of the global community or a political system of society in which certain actors seek to acquire superiority in political, economic and social realms of other entities by actively influencing their information space' in Dmitriy Borisovič Frolov, *Informacionnaja Voina: Evolucija form, sredstv i metodov* [Information War: Evolution of Forms, Means and Methods], *Sociologija Vlasti* [Sociology of Power] № 5, 2005, p. 121.

66 Nathalie Maréchal, 'Networked Authoritarianism and the Geopolitics of Information: Understanding Russian Internet Policy', *Media and Communication* 5, Issue 1, (2017): 31.

67 Natalie Duffy, 'Internet Freedom in Vladimir Putin's Russia: The Noose Tightens', *American Enterprise Institute*, 12 January 2015; Nocetti, 'Russia and Global Internet Governance'.

68 Maréchal, 'Networked Authoritarianism', p. 32; Laura DeNardis, *The Global War for Internet Governance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), p.13.

69 Russian Federation, The Russian Federation Law 'O vnesenii izmenenij v Federal'nyj zakon "O svjazi"' [Federal Law On Amendments to the Federal Law "On Communications"], 2017.

.ru and .рф and the entire system of traffic exchange points to the government. They also sought to expand the operation of the National Information System for Ensuring the Integrity, Stability, and Security of Runet (GIS).⁷⁰ Such changes to the law would increase the autonomy of Runet and concentrate power over it into the hands of the state.⁷¹ The explanatory note to the bill states that such measures are necessary because Runet is supposedly faced with the threat of interference in its infrastructure from abroad.⁷² It goes on to underline the absence of ‘management or control over Internet traffic in the territory of the Russian Federation’, which entails ‘negative effects such as fragmentation and isolation of the online network’.⁷³ Further amendments propose limiting foreign ownership of traffic exchange points to 20%, mirroring the laws on foreign ownership for audiovisual services and mass media.

These proposed changes build on earlier pieces of legislation initiated by the Ministry in 2014, namely, on the amendments to the State Programme ‘Information Society’, which aim to contain 99% of Russian Internet traffic within Russian borders by 2020.; contrast this with 70% in 2014.⁷⁴ A federal official explains that as long as ‘the traffic between Russian systems passes through external points of exchange, there is no way to guarantee their trouble-free operation’. Nor will the proposed plans provide a working system of monitoring Internet traffic, thus ensuring the overall stability of the network.⁷⁵ While many consider such measures a step towards establishing a Chinese Firewall model, Russian experts claim that gaining full control of traffic is an almost impracticable task: it would require substantial financial and technological resources to achieve. Alexey Platonov, head of the Technical Center of the Internet, which provides technical support for Russia’s domain infrastructure, suggests that isolating Runet would have minimal impact given the thousands of new domains put into circulation in the global system each year. So ‘switching Russia off’ from the global web completely would be very difficult, albeit not impossible.⁷⁶

70 Ibid.

71 Roskomsvoboda, ‘“Kitaizacija” Runet vxodit v aktivnuju fazu i načnётся s toček obmena trafikom’ [The ‘China-isation’ of Runet Enters Its Active Phase and Will Start From the Traffic Exchange Points], 18 August 2017.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Russian Federation, ‘State Programme: Information Society, 2011–2020’, 20 October 2012.

75 Roskomsvoboda, ‘“Kitaizacija” Runet’.

76 RBC, ‘“Nameki na Kitaj”: možno li otključit’ Rossiju ot global’nogo interneta?’ [“Hints from China”: Is it Possible to Disconnect Russia from the Global Internet?], 11 February 2016.

The policies of the Ministry of Communications might produce the opposite effect, argues one Russian observer, and lead to greater risks in the field of information security due to the state's aspiration to concentrate in its own hands complete control over the national segment of the Internet infrastructure.⁷⁷ In the event of a purposeful and successful attack, the argument goes, the consequences for national security might be irreparable.⁷⁸ Besides the fact that such policies undermine the constitutional right of free access to information, these changes would inevitably lead to the development of new monopolies. These, in turn, are unlikely to have a positive impact on the development of the Russian information space.⁷⁹

Ultimately, it is evident that the transnational, horizontal, and networked nature of free information flows disseminated through the Internet appears to threaten the Kremlin profoundly because of its potential to empower domestic activism and spread supra- and trans-national influences throughout the domestic political and media space.⁸⁰ US President Barack Obama observed in 2009 that 'the great irony of the information age' is that 'those states that have most successfully adopted and exploited the opportunities afforded by the Internet are also the most vulnerable to a range of threats that accompany it'.⁸¹ This holds true for Russia's government. Its putative success in manipulating audiences through the Internet internationally is matched by observable limitations to full control over the information domain at home.⁸²

How far has the Russian state been able to exert influence over platforms and discourses in the domestic information space? The answer lies partly in key economic and legal instruments employed by the government to effectively manage the domestic sphere of information.

Media Ownership Structures as a Tool of Control

In December 2016, a poll conducted by the Levada Center, an independent Russian sociological research company, found that 91% of the Russian population watches its news on TV 'at least once a week' or more frequently.⁸³ Almost half

77 Roskomsvoboda, '“Kitaizacija” Runet'.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Maréchal, 'Networked Authoritarianism', p. 38.

81 Madeline Carr, *US Power and the Internet in International Relations: The Irony of the Information Age* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 2.

82 While Russia's outward-looking, military conceptualisations of information space are undoubtedly important in the context of this discussion, the current inquiry focuses exclusively on domestic concerns.

83 Denis Aleksandrovič Volkov and Stepan Vladimirovič Gončarov, *Kossijskij media-landšaft, televidenie, pressa, internet* [Russian Media Landscape: Television, Press, Internet] (Moscow: Levada Centre, June 2014), p. 105.

(46%) reads the news on the Internet with the same regularity.⁸⁴ Others get their news from radio (34%) and newspapers (36%).⁸⁵ Hence, most Russians who follow social and political events base their views predominantly on discourses provided by television content, despite the recent growing prominence of web publications.⁸⁶ Television, therefore, continues to be an important strategic asset for the government and its main instrument of political influence in the domestic information space.

State Ownership

Four federal television channels—Pervij Kanal [the First Channel], Rossiya-1, NTV, and Rossiya 24 provide the main sources of news for the majority of the population, with the First Channel reaching 98.8% of audiences across the country.⁸⁷ The state’s micromanagement of political coverage from these outlets and their regional affiliates is extensive, and is achieved primarily through direct economic control of the networks.⁸⁸ This great concentration of influential media outlets in the hands of the state not only provides privileges in terms of airtime and access to the top government officials, but also gives the state an opportunity to influence the distribution of financial resources within the domestic media system.⁸⁹ The three main national channels enjoy substantial state subsidies and successfully compete for advertising income.⁹⁰ The result is better entertainment content, which attracts more viewers who, some studies say, don’t touch the remote control once the news comes on, possibly attracting even more advertisers.⁹¹ This makes it difficult for independent media sources to compete with state-owned outlets. Even worse, Freedom House reports that Russian businesses are reluctant to place advertisements with outlets that are not loyal to the government, so as to avoid complicating their relationships with the state.⁹²

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84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., p. 106.

86 Katja Lehtisaari, ‘Market and Political Factors and the Russian Media’, Working paper, (University of Oxford, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2015), p. 7.

87 RIA Novosti, ‘Komu prinadležat osnovnye SMI v Rossii’ [Who Owns the Main Media Outlets in Russia], 27 January 2012.

88 Nikolaj Petrov, Maria Lipman, and Henry E. Hale, ‘Three Dilemmas of Hybrid Regime Governance: Russia from Putin to Putin’, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30 № 1 (January 2014), p.7.

89 Ibid., p. 8.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Freedom House, ‘Russia’, in *Freedom of the Press 2016* (New York, NY: Freedom House, 2016).

Mixed Ownership

Discussing mixed ownership structures, scholars point to the lack of transparency in the Russian media market as well as to the increasing ambiguity associated with informal patronage networks loyal to the government. Russian communications scholar Vilen Egorov explains that the ‘distinctive problem of the Russian mass media is the ambiguity around its economic viability and the transparency of its activities. Is it possible to say with certainty to whom in fact this or that radio channel or periodical belongs? We do not have such information.’⁹³ Indeed, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between independent voices and state-controlled outlets, given the strong prominence of figures inside Putin’s inner circle in the Russian media market.

To give just one example, 51% of the First Channel, Russia’s most popular TV channel and news source, is owned by the state. The remaining 49% of shares are split between ORT-KB, owned by oligarch Roman Abramovitch (24%), and the National Media Group (25%), the main shareholder of which is businessman Yuri Kovalchuk, famous for his personal ties to President Putin.⁹⁴ A major stakeholder in the Rossiya Bank, which controls a number of companies holding a substantial portfolio of shares in the Russian media industry, Kovalchuk also owns 46.92% of the influential Gazprom Media Holding.⁹⁵ The holding owned jointly by Kovalchuk and the Gazprom Bank operates a wide-ranging collection of news and entertainment television channels, radio, and press outlets, online resources, and advertising companies.⁹⁶ It incorporates seven broadcast TV channels (NTV, TNT, Friday!, TV-3, TNT4, Match TV, and 2x2), the satellite television network NTV-PLUS, ten radio stations, and considerable assets in the Internet segment (Ruform, and the online platforms NOW.ru and Zoomby), publishing houses (Seven Days and Media Press), and film production and distribution outlets (Central Partnership, KIT Film Studio, Comedy Club Production, and Good Story Media).⁹⁷

Much of the ambiguity surrounding the mixed ownership of media outlets is rooted in a number of platforms, considered relatively independent by international observers and by the Russian public; in fact they are controlled

93 Viljonar Vasil’evič Egorov, ‘Na Puti k Informacionnomu Obščestvu’ [Towards an Information Society], (Moscow: Institut Povyšeniia Kvalifikacii Rabotnikov Televideniia I Radioveščaniia, 2006), p. 140.

94 Petrov, Lipman, and Hale, ‘Three Dilemmas’, p. 9.

95 Radio Svoboda, ‘U Naval’nogo rasskazali o druge Putina, kotoryj vladeet ‘vsemi’ SMI’ [Navalny was Told about a Friend of Putin’s Who Owns ‘All’ the Media], 25 May 2017.

96 Gazprom Media website, ‘About Gazprom Media’, 2017.

97 Kseniia Boleckaja, ‘“Gazprom-media” Kupil 7,5% akciij “Nacional’noj Media Gruppy”’ [“Gazprom-Media” Bought 7.5% of Shares in “National Media Group”], *Vedomosti*, 31 March 2016.

by companies and individuals loyal to the state, or by government figures themselves. The Russian-language version of the Euronews channel, often seen as an alternative news source, is owned by VGTRK.⁹⁸ The Ekho Moskvy radio station, which is perceived as ‘relatively independent’ by the authoritative pollster Levada Center, is a member of Gazprom Media Holding. And the seemingly ‘alternative’ REN-TV channel is part of the Russian Media Group.⁹⁹ Some observers rightly point to the fact that ownership of seemingly alternative news outlets gives the state an opportunity to create the impression of diversity of opinions in the media space while retaining operational control over the outlets. Others emphasise that a change in ownership does not necessarily mean a change in editorial policies.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, according to Alexey Venediktov, editor-in-chief of Ekho Moskvy, despite the station being bought by a holding loyal to Putin, it retains its status as an ‘oppositional’ media source.¹⁰¹ Yet, Venediktov admits that some economic pressure is still being applied through measures like downsizing the advertising department, a move that led to a plunge in advertising budgets, diminishing the financial autonomy of the outlet.¹⁰²

Private Ownership

In the Russian context it is also difficult to say which privately owned media structures are truly independent from state influence. The relationship between the owners of media companies and Putin’s inner circle is often uncertain. This is certainly the case for the media empire of Russian businessman Alisher Usmanov, for the online news platforms and radio stations owned by millionaires Vladimir Potanin and Alexander Mamut, for the shares of TV stations and print publications held by energy companies, and in other instances where the shadow nature of the Russian media market economy makes it impossible to differentiate between independent voices and those loyal to the state.¹⁰³ As pointed out by one Russian analyst, ‘Now big media in Russia can be in the hands only of strategic players who support the party line. It is not a business, it is a party task.’¹⁰⁴

98 VGTRK (2017) Vserossijskaja gosudarstvennaja televizionnaja i radioveščat’naja kompanija. [All-Russia State Television and Radio], ‘About: Structure of the Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company’.

99 Eremenko, *Weeding Out the Upstarts*, p. 8.

100 Lehtisaari, ‘Market and Political Factors’, p. 8; Timothy Heritage, ‘Independent Media Battle On in Putin’s Russia’ *Reuters*, 30 July 2015.

101 Heritage, ‘Independent Media Battle’.

102 Ibid.

103 Eremenko, *Weeding Out the Upstarts*, pp. 12–14.

104 Boleckaja, ‘“Gazprom-media” Kupil 7,5%’.

Indeed, the line between the media as a market and the media as a mouthpiece of the state is becoming increasingly blurred in modern Russia. This not only constrains economic and media freedoms domestically, but also leads to the deterioration of public trust in media institutions. Recent research conducted by the Levada Center suggests that many Russians still consider television the most reliable source of information. But only 50 per cent of those getting their news from television trust what they hear.¹⁰⁵ A quarter place their trust in sources available on social media, and 35 per cent turn to the press for reliable news.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, Russians tend to be skeptical about information disseminated by state-controlled channels; only 10 per cent. of respondents admit they entirely trust what they hear.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, it is evident that government's attempts to set a media agenda has led to a weakening of trust in information provided by state media. It has also led to public disillusionment in television as a medium, especially among younger Russians.

As a consequence of strong state control of mainstream media outlets, independent/oppositional platforms are not particularly prominent in the Russian media environment, and exist mostly online and as parts of satellite networks.¹⁰⁸ The growing accessibility of such platforms undoubtedly concerns state authorities, who seek to minimise the influence of independent media coverage in Russia. A scandal of several years ago involving the news website Lenta.ru is illustrative of this tendency. In March 2014, its owner replaced the entire editorial team, fearing that events unfolding in Ukraine were being covered in a way favourable to the new Ukrainian government.¹⁰⁹ Subsequently, the amount of content critical of the Russian government's actions substantially decreased.¹¹⁰ Former editor-in-chief Galina Timchenko and a number of the journalists fired from Lenta.ru, set up a new site, Meduza.io, and continued their work guided by the core principles of independent journalism. To make this possible, Timchenko and her team moved to Latvia, out of reach of legislative and economic pressures exerted by the Russian state.¹¹¹ The scandal did not produce any substantial increase in the platform's readership. Yet the ability

105 Volkov and Gončarov, *So stola sociologov: Empiričeskije issledovanija. Rossijskij medialandsaft. osnovnye tendencii ispol'zovanija SMI* [From the Sociologists' Table: Empirical Studies. Russian Media Landscape: Main Trends in Media Consumption] Levada Center, *Vestnik obščestvennogo mneija*, № 1/2 (124) January–June 2017, p. 123.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

108 The television channels RBK-TV, Dožd', radio stations Radio Liberty and BBC Russian, newspapers *Vedomosti* and *Novaya Gazeta* are considered the primary independent media outlets in Russia. See Petrov, Lipman, and Hale, 'Three Dilemmas', p. 7.

109 Ibid., p. 292.

110 BBC, 'Russia Lenta.ru Editor Timchenko Fired in Ukraine Row', 12 March 2014.

111 Ibid.

of such outlets to survive and preserve an independent voice illustrates that the Kremlin does not exercise total economic control over the domestic media landscape. Opportunities remain for those who wish to get their news from independent sources.¹¹²

Still, it is clear that the state retains control of most mainstream platforms, exerting a substantial influence over the messages and narratives they disseminate. Niche websites, newspapers, and radio stations remain relatively free, but they represent an insignificant threat to the government's authority and serve as convenient examples of a plurality of voices and ownership. This benefits the state, mitigating the widespread criticism of limitations on freedom of press and expression in Russia.

Foreign Ownership

Since the economic downturn of 2014, the authorities have been particularly cautious of foreign interference in Russian political and media spaces.¹¹³ The government's main concern has long been with 'colour revolutions'. They are widely perceived by the state as models of regime change used by Western actors to install puppet governments in countries of interest.¹¹⁴ To address this issue, in 2015 the State Duma passed a bill limiting foreign ownership of media companies to 20% of total shares.¹¹⁵ The bill echoed the infamous 'foreign agent law', which placed considerable restraints on the activities of non-governmental organisations funded from abroad that are involved in 'political activity'.¹¹⁶ Ultimately, this piece of legislation forced Germany's Axel Springer group to sell the Russian edition of *Forbes*, and Finland's Sanoma to sell 100% of its shares of the influential Russian daily *Vedomosti*, as well as the English-language platform *The Moscow Times*.¹¹⁷ As a Freedom House report states, '*The Moscow Times* subsequently switched from a daily to a weekly publication, and its chief editor resigned due to conflicts with the new owner. The new publisher of *Forbes* said that the magazine would carry fewer stories on politics and focus on business and economics'.¹¹⁸

112 Volkov and Gončarov, '*So stola sociologov*', p. 125.

113 Eremenko, *Weeding Out the Upstarts*, p. 9.

114 Svetlana Ivanovna Kuzina and Dmitrij Aleksandrovič Mjakinčenko, 'Informacionnoe Nasilie: Aspekty Nacional'noj Bezopasnosti' [Information Violence: Aspects of National Security], *Gosudarstvennoe i municipal'noe upravlenie. Učebnye zapiski SKAGS*, № 3 (2015): 205.

115 Lehtisaari, 'Market and Political Factors', p. 9.

116 Eremenko, *Weeding Out the Upstarts*, p. 9.

117 Freedom House, 'Russia', in *Freedom of the Press 2016*.

118 Ibid.

Such tendencies highlight the continued persistence of the Russian state in containing the information space within state borders by restricting economic opportunities for foreign companies wishing to invest in the Russian media industry. Apart from rare initiatives, such as that of Galina Timchenko, there is no great diversity of opinions in the mainstream media, because of economic pressure from the state. Hence, the government remains the most active player in Russia's media space. Its considerable resources allow it to programme operations and shape discourses in the domestic media environment.¹¹⁹

Still, given waning trust in dominant narratives from state-controlled outlets, as well as the growing prominence of the Internet as a medium of communication and news consumption, media sources and online platforms located beyond the reach of state ownership policies are gaining greater influence in Russia. The Levada Center's research shows that such platforms have been most popular among the young, educated, urban middle class.¹²⁰ Observing this development, the Kremlin has turned to legal instruments to establish greater control over online spaces, and to silence expressions of political dissent. The following section turns to the analysis of recent legislation governing communications in general and Runet in particular.

Legal Instruments as Tools of Control

Until December 1991, there was no regulation of media and information in Russia, as all information channels were controlled by the Soviet government. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a non-governmental realm of media came into being, and became the subject of the Russian Federation Law on the Mass Media,¹²¹ the first legal document outlining the basic rules and principles governing information activities in the country.¹²² Freedom of speech and inadmissibility of censorship became the most influential principles incorporated into the law, which remains the primary piece of legislation governing mass communications in Russia.¹²³ These principles were later reflected in the

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119 Valentina Venjaminovna Kixtan, 'Sovremennaja Rossija v zerkale mass-media' [Contemporary Russia in the Mirror of the Mass Media], *Contemporary Problems of Social and Human Sciences* № 1 (2015): 2.

120 Volkov and Gončarov, *So stola sociologov*, p. 123.

121 The law defines 'mass media' as 'printed, audio and audio-visual and other messages and materials intended for an unlimited range of persons'.

122 Andrej Vladimirovič Rossošansky, 'Evol'ucija političeskoj funkcional'nosti rossijskix SMP' [The Evolution of the Political Functionality of Russian Media], *Izvestija Saratovskogo universiteta, Serija Sociologija i Politologija*, N.S.12, № 1 (January 2012), p. 86.

123 Marina Il'inišna Alekseeva, Ljudmila Dem'janovna Bolotova, Elena Leonidovna Vartanova, et al., *Sredstva massonij informacii Rossii: Učebnoe posobie dlja studentov vuzov* [Russian Mass Media: A Manual for University Students] ed. by Iasen Nikolaevič Zasurskij, (Moscow: Aspect Press, 2006), pp. 62–63; Russian Federation, *The Russian Federation Law on Mass Media*, 27 December 1991, p. 2.

Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993, which guarantees freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom from censorship, and the right to privacy.¹²⁴ Provisions related to the independence of agents of communication are reflected in Article 29, which states that ‘everyone has the right to freely seek, receive, transmit, produce, and disseminate information by any lawful means. [...] Freedom of the mass media is guaranteed. Censorship is prohibited’.¹²⁵

It is evident that any consolidation of such norms in the country’s core legislation reflects not only the willingness of the new Russian government to develop constitutional principles in communications domestically, but also its motivation to portray Russia as a global player that shares international norms with the rest of the global community.¹²⁶ At the time of its introduction, the *Law on Mass Media* was one of the most liberal media laws in the world. As a group of Russian theorists points out, the principles intrinsic to the first pieces of media legislation were designed to correspond to international standards set forth in many international documents, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and the *Council of Europe’s Special Declaration on the Media and Human Rights* (1970), which ‘in many ways became the guidelines of the legal policy on the information sphere in Russia’.¹²⁷ Yet, these norms, for all their democratic nature, failed to become an effective legal watchdog over freedom of information, mainly because of the lack of detail concerning the mechanisms through which constitutional rights to information and transparency should be implemented.¹²⁸

The experience of the First Chechen War revealed the negative political effects that an independent media system can produce for state legitimacy, and underlined the government’s inability to control the news cycle. While these developments prompted the state to centralise control of the mainstream media outlets using economic instruments, legal regulation of the information sphere remained rather loose throughout 2000s.¹²⁹ But following a rapid acceleration in Internet penetration and the subsequent expansion of audiences of online

124 Russian Federation, *The Constitution of the Russian Federation* (Garant-Internet, 1993).

125 Ibid.

126 Vilkov et al., *Političeskaja funkcional'naja sovermennyx rossijskix SMP*, p. 48.

127 Ibid.

128 Igor’ Ivanovič Lukašuk, *Sredstva massovoj informacii, gosudarstvo, pravo* [Mass Media, State, Law] (Moscow: Stolnyj grad, 2007), p. 34.

129 The only exceptions may be the Federal Law ‘On Countering Extremist Activity’ (25 July 2002) that prohibits the abuse of ‘freedom of mass information’, the Federal Law ‘On Information, Information Technologies, and Information Protection’ (27 July 2006), and the Federal Law ‘On Providing Access to Information on the Activities of State Bodies and Local Self-government Bodies’ (9 February 2009).

news platforms, the necessity to assert greater control over the Internet domain became more acute for the Russian authorities.¹³⁰

Digitisation and Alternative Media

Beneath the monolithic discourses of state-run television there has been a considerable increase in the diversity of both media platforms available to the wider Russian public and the views that such outlets present. Along with the liberal newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* and the satellite TV channel *Dozhd*, the early 2010s saw a proliferation of such influential independent online platforms as lenta.ru (no longer independent) and snob.ru, as well as blogs written by political activists such as Alexey Navalny, which altered the dynamics of the Russian information space by providing alternative voices and news sources.¹³¹ The significance of such platforms became apparent to the government following a wave of popular protests ‘For Fair Elections’ in 2011–12, when audiences of *Dozhd* and lenta.ru rose substantially.¹³²

Fearing a domestic uprising (especially in the light of the events of 2014 in neighbouring Ukraine), the authorities resorted to active legal measures aimed at regulating the wider information space beyond the domain of the mainstream media. During Putin’s previous presidential term (2012–18), new legislation had been introduced to protect the public from extremism and terrorism. Yet, as numerous international observers pointed out, the laws have done more to undermine freedom of expression and the right to privacy in Russia than to protect the public from external and domestic threats.¹³³ This can be explained by the government’s apparent willingness to extend its powers of online surveillance and censorship domestically, and by the judiciary’s inclination to side with the executive authorities in the vast majority of cases, refusing to apply constitutional provisions protecting the basic rights of journalists and Internet users.¹³⁴

Driven by insecurity among political elites in the face of civil unrest in Russia, the new legislation provided the government with a ‘series of repressive, vaguely

130 Maria Kravčenko and Aleksandr Verxovskij, ‘[Neppravomernoe primenenie antiĕkstreĕmistskogo zakonodatel’sĕva v Rossii v 2015 godu](#)’ [Illegal Application of Anti-extremism Legislation in Russia in 2015], Sova Center, 2 March 2016.

131 Regina Smyth and Sarah Oates, ‘Mind the Gaps: Media Use and Mass Action in Russia’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, Issue 2 (2015): 289.

132 *Ibid.*, p. 290.

133 Freedom House, ‘[Russia](#)’, in *Freedom of the Press 2016* (New York, NY: Freedom House, 2016); Reporters Without Borders, ‘[World Press Freedom Index. Russia](#)’, 2017.

134 Freedom House, ‘[Russia](#)’, in *Freedom of the Net 2016*, p. 7.

worded measures that significantly expanded the array of regulatory tools available to stifle legitimate news reporting on politically embarrassing issues and limit the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on media matters'.¹³⁵ The most influential of these measures were an increase in powers of enforcement for several state communications agencies, the introduction of a controversial array of laws aimed at countering extremist activities, and a dramatic increase in detentions and prosecutions of online activists.

State Authorities and Online Censorship

Since early 2003, when Russia's Internet penetration across the country was below 10 per cent, the number of people with access to the worldwide web has significantly expanded to over 70 per cent in March 2017.¹³⁶ According to the Public Opinion Foundation, this figure represents about 82.4 million Russians who go online at least once a month.¹³⁷ The average monthly cost of Internet access is approximately 1 per cent of an average salary, which indicates the relative affordability of access to the worldwide web for the majority of Russia's population.¹³⁸ Another report *On the Runet Economy 2014–2015* conducted by the Higher School of Economics suggests that only 4 per cent of Russians cannot afford to access the Internet.¹³⁹ Like elsewhere in the world, the report suggests, rapid expansion in the number of Internet users coupled with increased speed and volume of communication resulted in fundamental changes in the very nature of communication practices, making them more personal and interactive.¹⁴⁰

These developments prompted the Russian government to significantly expand the powers of the main state body working in the field of mass media and communications—the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor).¹⁴¹ Established to register media content and issue licences for activities related to television broadcasting, in July 2012 Roskomnadzor was granted the power to block

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135 Freedom House, 'Russia', in *Freedom of the Press 2012*.

136 FOM (Fond Obščestvennoe Mnenie) Public Opinion Foundation, 'Internet v Rosii: dinamika pronikinovenija', [The Internet in Russia: Dynamics of Penetration], Spring 2017.

137 Ibid.

138 Freedom House, 'Russia', in *Freedom of the Net 2016*, p. 3.

139 Sergej Gennad'evič Davydov and Karen Aleksandrovič Kazar'jan (eds.), *Èkonomika Runeta. Èkonomika ryнков internet-servisov i kontenta v Rossii 2014–2015* [The Economics of Runet: The Economics of Internet Services and Content Markets in Russia 2014–2015], (Moscow: Associacija èlektronnyx kommunikacii and Nacionalnij issledovatel'skij universitet 'Vyššaja škola èkonomiki', 2016), p. 5.

140 Ibid.

141 Sergej Karpukhin, *Media Regulation in Russia: A Landscape Analysis of Laws and Trends*, (Reuters, DLA Piper Rus Limited, 2016), p. 13.

access to Internet sites that refuse to remove certain kinds of information and to demand that journalists disclose their sources when writing on particular issues.¹⁴² These measures apply primarily to information about suicide, drug propaganda, child pornography, materials that violate copyright, as well as content calling for ‘participation in extremist activities’ or ‘unsanctioned public protests’.¹⁴³ The wording of the amendment to the law that introduced these changes is strikingly vague, enabling Roskomnadzor to pressure and block politically undesirable providers, and thus ridding Russia’s information space of alternative points of view on the political, economic, social, and cultural processes taking place in the country.¹⁴⁴

The independent non-profit organisation Roskomsvoboda (‘Rus-com-freedom’) promotes ideas of freedom of information and constantly monitors blocked content. It observes that 7,954,722 websites have been blocked since the introduction of the law in 2012, 97 per cent of them illegally.¹⁴⁵ Along with Roskomnadzor, the powers of filtering and blocking content were also granted to the Ministry of Interior, the Prosecutor General’s Office, the Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights and Human Wellbeing (Rospotrebnadzor), and the Federal Drug Control Service.¹⁴⁶ Online content associated with Crimea and political activism continue to be areas of particular concern for such bodies.

For instance, a number of Ukrainian news websites, such as liga.net and correspondent.net, were blocked in Russia and Crimea for posting quotations from the head of the Crimean Tatar movement in Ukraine, who vocally opposes Russia’s annexation of the peninsula.¹⁴⁷ Also, in May 2016 Roskomnadzor unilaterally blocked a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty project ‘Crimea. Realities’, which reported on the state of affairs in Crimea, on the grounds of extremism and incitement of inter-ethnic hatred.¹⁴⁸ The decision was taken jointly with the Russian Federal Security Service of the Republic of Crimea to open a criminal case against ‘Crimea.Realities’ based on Part 2 of Article 280.1 of the Criminal Code (public calls aimed at violation of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, committed with the use of the media or the

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142 Ibid., p. 15.

143 Ibid.

144 Freedom House, ‘Russia’, in *Freedom of the Net 2016*, p. 5; Roskomsvoboda, *Zakonoproekt o novyx polnomočijax Roskomnadzora* [Legislation on the New Powers of Rospotrebnadzor], 16 January 2017.

145 Roskomsvoboda, *Raspredelenie blokirikov sajtov po vedomostvam* [The Distribution of Blocked Sites across Departments], 2017.

146 Freedom House, ‘Russia’, in *Freedom of the Net 2016*, p. 5.

147 SOVA, ‘Xronika filtracii Runeta № 02’ [Chronology of Runet Filtration № 02], Moscow, 29 February 2016.

148 TASS, ‘Sajt internet-izdanija “Krym Reali” zablokirovan v Rossii’ [The Website of the Internet Publication ‘Crimea. Realities’ is Blocked in Russia], 12 May 2016.

Internet). Openly silencing alternative platforms and opinions, these measures met with fierce criticism from users of Runet, who then created and shared detailed guidelines on how to bypass filtering and blocking restrictions imposed by the state.¹⁴⁹

Even more public resonance resulted from government attempts to censor online content on domestic political activism.¹⁵⁰ To date, the famous Russian political activist Alexey Navalny has been the most effective member of the opposition in gaining political capital through new media platforms and raising his profile through scandals associated with restrictions of basic freedoms of expression. In 2017, the politician and members of his Fight Against Corruption Foundation conducted an investigation into Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. The results were published in a fifty-minute-long video on YouTube. Since 2 March 2017 the video has been viewed over 24 million times. It has produced widespread outrage in Russia, inspiring popular anti-corruption protests across the country in March 2017 following the refusal of the Prosecutor General's Office to conduct any investigation into what the video claimed to be 'Medvedev's personal empire worth 70bn rubles'.¹⁵¹ The Moscow Court, in turn, recognised the shared information as false and intended to discredit the honour, dignity, and reputation of the top state official. The Court obliged Navalny to retract the facts presented in the video and to remove the website, film, and other videos covered by the investigation from the Internet.¹⁵² Yet, despite numerous requests from Roskomnadzor, to both Navalny and YouTube asking that access to the video be blocked, no action has followed.¹⁵³

Ultimately, this episode reveals the state's inability to completely silence independent voices contradicting the Kremlin's official narrative and exposing infractions of law by high profile officials. Notably, during the protests in Spring 2017, opposition groups led by Navalny used Facebook to coordinate their actions effectively, attracting more than 25,000 participants in Moscow, and many more in urban centres across Russia.¹⁵⁴ While the protests did not lead to the development of a lasting social movement, they showed that social

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149 Krymr.com, 'Kak obojti blokirovku Krym. Reali' [How to Bypass the Blocking of Crimea. Realities], 2017.

150 Steve Gutterman, 'Russia Blocks Internet Sites of Putin Critics', *Reuters*, 13 March 2014.

151 BBC, 'Genprokuratura otkazalas' proverjat' fil'm "On vam ne Dimon" ' [The Prosecutor General's Office Refused to Check the Film "He's not Dimon"]', 23 June 2017.

152 Ibid.

153 Ibid.

154 BBC, 'Miting v Moskve obernulsja rekordnym kolicestvom zaderzani' [The Rally in Moscow Turned into a Record Number of Detentions], 27 March 2017.

mobilisation in Russia (at least on such a modest scale) is not impossible.¹⁵⁵ Comprising mainly Russians under the age of thirty-five, the protests not only highlighted the growing significance of the Internet as a medium of exchange and communication in Russia, but also demonstrated its resistance to hierarchies imposed by the government.

Yarovaya Laws

The introduction of the Federal laws 374-FZ and 375-FZ on counterterrorism in July 2016 (widely known as the ‘Yarovaya Laws’ after their key author Irina Yarovaya) represent another decisive attempt by the Russian state to increase government control over Runet. The laws introduced an increase in the mandatory data retention period from twelve hours to six months for content (recordings of calls, messages, and Internet traffic of Russian citizens) and from one to three years for metadata (dates, times, and places where calls or messages occurred).¹⁵⁶ Providers and Internet platforms included in the ‘register of information dissemination bodies on the Internet’ were also called on to store all user traffic for at least six months and make all necessary data available to security and law enforcement agencies upon request.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, Internet and telecommunications companies are now mandated to decipher requested information as well as keep cryptographic backdoors in all messaging applications.¹⁵⁸

Such measures are deemed necessary by the Russian government in order to ‘defend the Russian population against the global terrorist threat’ and combat extremism at home.¹⁵⁹ However, telecommunications companies, civil society groups, and the wider Russian public strictly oppose the laws, calling them ‘expensive, unrealistic, and unconstitutional’.¹⁶⁰ Most observers tend to agree with the latter and point to the fact that successful implementation of regulations associated with storage and encryption of data as prescribed by the law is virtually impossible for a number of reasons.

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155 Andrej Alekseevič Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia's Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015).

156 Tanya Lokshina, ‘Draconian Law Rammed through Russian Parliament: Outrageous Provisions to Curb Speech, Privacy, Freedom of Conscience’, *Human Rights Watch*, 23 June 2016.

157 *Meduza*, ‘“Paket Jarovoj” priijat bol'she polugoda nazad. Kak on rabotaet?’ [The ‘Yarovaya Package’ was Adopted More than Six Months Ago: How is it Working?], 12 February 2017.

158 *Ibid.*

159 Roskomsvoboda, ‘Mnenie graždan, podpisavšix peticiju ob otmene “paketa Jarovoj”, vlastjam neinteresno (tekst rezoljucii i otzvyvy gosvedomstv)’ [The Opinion of Citizens who Signed the Petition to Cancel the “Yarovaya Package” is Not Interesting for the Authorities (Text of the Resolution and the Responses of State Agencies)], 19 January 2017.

160 *Meduza*, ‘“Paket Jarovoj” ubivaet internet-kompanii i pokušaetsja na častuju žizn'. I vot počemu’ [The ‘Yarovaya package’ Kills Internet Companies and Violates Privacy. This is Why], 24 June 2016.

First, according to some estimates, in order to store all data transmitted by Russian users, the world's biggest producers of data centres would have to focus exclusively on the Russian market for seven years in order to create enough infrastructure for storing and processing such huge amount of information.¹⁶¹

Second, according to Russia's Association of Electronic Communications, there is simply not enough electricity in the central part of the country to power data centres that have not even been built yet.¹⁶² Also, such an infrastructure, which would cost telecommunications companies more than 5 trillion roubles, is not currently being produced in Russia and would have to be imported from abroad.¹⁶³ The law does not allow for any state subsidies for developing domestic infrastructure, thus burdening telecommunications companies with colossal expenses that might eventually bankrupt them.

Third, considering the diversity of encryption methods available both in Russia and abroad, successful enforcement of this law would require new methods of encryption that would somehow work with all of the existing ones, as foreign companies will not support domestic technologies.¹⁶⁴ Even if development of a storage center for all encryption keys were possible, the entire system would be rendered extremely vulnerable to hacking, making it possible to decipher any Russian message.¹⁶⁵

And finally, the new laws violate the right of Russian citizens to the secrecy of correspondence guaranteed by the Constitution. This right can be violated only by a court decision; but Yarovaya's legislation requires law enforcement agencies to have access to all data without court authorisation. Currently most messengers use encryption—an important competitive advantage—as users are interested in safeguarding their correspondence. Such threats to the security and inviolability of the private lives of Russian citizens provoked many public organisations, such as the Russian Electronic Communications Association (RAEC) and the Regional Public Center for Internet Technologies (ROCIT), to speak out against the adoption of this legislation, inspiring a petition against the application of the law. The petition was signed by over 100,000 people, but was nevertheless ignored by the authorities.¹⁶⁶

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161 Roskomsvobosda, 'V Gosdume primimajut zakonoproekt o total'noj slezke. IT-otrasl' i obščestvo konsolirovanno vystipajut protiv' [The State Duma Adopts a Bill on Total Surveillance. The IT Industry and Society are Against It], 26 June 2016.

162 Meduza, '“Paket Jarovoj” ubivaet internet-kompanii'.

163 Ibid.

164 Ibid.

165 Ibid.

166 Roskomsvobosda, 'Mnenie graždan'.

It is evident that democratic principles initially introduced in the Russian Constitution are not being upheld in the current political environment. With the majority of independent communications and public activity taking place online, an attempt to control the Runet domain has become a subject of prime importance for Russian policy-makers, especially following the public protests in 2011 and 2017 and the annexation of Crimea. Government attempts to expand control over the online information space represent a considerable milestone on this path. But this also produced intense debates and disillusionment domestically, which provoked more protests and greater scrutiny on the part of international institutions regarding breaches of constitutional freedoms by the proposed legislation.

Ultimately, blacklisting websites promoting ‘unsanctioned public gatherings’ and ‘extremism’, and likewise the Yarovaya Laws, have proven to be of limited efficacy in regulating the virtual domain of the Russian information space. This is due to the fact that such laws cannot reach far enough (e.g. failure to pressure YouTube to delete a video compromising a high profile official) and the fact that they set unrealistic expectations, which are very difficult to achieve in practice. While the mainstream media is more susceptible to controls imposed by the government, so far attempts to regulate the Internet have been rather limited. Still, this remains a matter of prime significance to some Russian policy-makers and scholars, who consistently emphasise the dangers that open, networked information media on the Internet present to Russia, both domestically and internationally.

Conclusion

There are numerous approaches to conceptualising information space in Russian scholarship, from the increasingly networked planetary informational society of the noosphere to purely territorial understandings of zones of geopolitical informational influence. Within this wide range, however, arguments emphasising the prominence of ever-increasing global connectivity through the proliferation of horizontal, open-ended communication networks have been clearly overshadowed by territorial approaches in Russia’s policy discourse. This is mostly due to the Kremlin’s reliance on notions of sovereignty and non-intervention in the information sphere, rooted in the premise that Western countries and organisations, especially the US and NATO, use media and Internet networks as foreign policy tools aimed at provoking civil unrest in Russia.

This article has described the Kremlin's approach to controlling the domestic information domain, arguing that the government has not been able to establish complete control over Russia's information space. While it has undoubtedly secured the ability to shape discourses in the mainstream media, it has clearly enjoyed only limited success in the new, increasingly Internet-dominated media spaces, where state-controlled television and oppositional online platforms are separated by a mouse-click. Even though television remains the major news source for the majority of Russians, recent acts of political and social activism organised through online platforms and triggered by state policies of greater surveillance and censorship of Runet, clearly point to the ever-growing importance of the Internet as a medium of communication in Russia. Moreover, as the above analysis suggests, the delocalised and highly networked nature of this medium of communication makes it less vulnerable in the face of economic and legal pressures imposed by the government, as opposed to the hierarchically organised structures of the mainstream media.

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EXAMINING STRATEGIC INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN COORDINATION

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Abstract

Social media platforms are widely used for sharing information. Although social media use is generally benign, such platforms can also be used for a variety of malicious activities, including the dissemination of propaganda, hoaxes, and fake news to influence the public. The availability of inexpensive and ubiquitous mass communication tools has made such malicious activity much more convenient and effective. In this paper we study how blogs act as virtual spaces where malicious narratives are framed and then further disseminated through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. To discover how such disinformation campaigns work, it is necessary to examine the link between blogs and social media platforms and the role they play in media orchestration strategies, more specifically cross-media and mix-media strategies. We have carried out an in-depth examination of information networks, using social network analysis and cyber forensics, to identify prominent information actors and the leading coordinators of several disinformation campaigns. The research methodology we have developed reveals a massive disinformation campaign pertaining to the Baltic region, conducted primarily through blogs but strategically linking to a variety of other social media platforms, e.g. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and VKontakte.

Note: Although blogs fall under the broad definition of social media, for the purposes of this paper we distinguish between blogs and social media, using the term social media to refer to forums that have some sort of formal membership, but where any member can post about anything (within certain limits of legality and decency) to the audience of the account holder's choice; a blog is the product of an individual (at least ostensibly), writing about a set of topics limited by the blogger's interests.

Keywords—*social media, blogs, social network analysis, cyber forensics, disinformation, mix-media, cross-media.*

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Introduction

The power of blogs and social media as positive vehicles of transformation first became apparent around 2011, during the many events of the Arab Spring and subsequent Occupy demonstrations worldwide. However, this power has been recently harnessed by state and non-state actors, extremists, and terrorist groups to influence online discourse, steer mass thinking, and polarise communities, posing a dangerous force against democracy. This power, coupled with the proliferation of high-speed Internet-enabled mobile devices, has propelled us into an age where a lie can travel around the world several times to reach our screens before truth-seekers have had a chance to verify the claim.¹

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¹ Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, 'The Spread of True and False News Online', *Science* 359, № 6380 (2018): 1146–51.

Weblogs, or blogs, are first-person diary-entry-style postings presented in reverse chronological order. Because they cost nothing to set up, blogs have become one of the most popular platforms people use to voice their opinions. Blogs have become the preferred mode of carriage for all other media— everything digital (photos, videos, etc.) migrates to blogs. Consumers of information have now also become information producers and distributors. This practice has led to a meteoric rise in the popularity of blogs, and in their influence on political communication. Blogs are among the fastest-growing web-based forums.² At the start of 2003 there were fewer than 1 m blogs in existence; over the next three years their number doubled every six months. By 2011, there were 158 m blogs, with more than 1 m posts being produced every day. According to recent estimates, this number has grown to over 3 m new posts added daily to the blogosphere.³ According to WordPress, over 409 m people view close to 22 bn pages each month.⁴ Most assume that blogs empower ordinary citizens and expand the social and ideological diversity of the voices online. Blogs are thought to make political discourse less exclusive, making them fertile ground for ideal citizen journalism. These beliefs are mistaken.⁵

Blogs are free to use, barriers to publication are low, and the information environment of the blogosphere is casual and does not require scrupulous fact-checking. These factors put the quality of the information presented at great risk. Although there are several million blogs, only a tiny fraction of them maintain a large readership. Moreover, bloggers often do not represent the opinions of the broader electorate. Blogs have done little to amplify the political voice of average citizens; instead, certain partisan narratives are promoted. The low barrier to publication guarantees that anyone with something to say—be it true or false, fact or opinion, fair or biased—can post it to a blog for the world to see. Today, when it is more convenient for people to get their news from blogs and social media rather than the mainstream media, irresponsible citizen journalism poses a threat to democratic principles and institutions by misrepresenting facts and information. The Pew Research Center conducted a poll in the US regarding reputable sources of information and reported that over one-third (34%) of respondents trust news from social media sources,⁶ and over three-fourths (77%) trust information from friends and family, shared through a variety of means including blogs and social

2 Kenneth Jost and Melissa J. Hipolit, *Blog Explosion: Are Blogs a Passing Fad or a Lasting Revolution?*, *CQ Researcher* 16 (2006), Issue 22 (9 June). PAYWALL.

3 *Blogging statistics: blog posts written today*, is a real-time counter showing the global activity on wordpress bloggers. [last accessed 4 June 2018].

4 *Stats: A Look at Activity Across WordPress.com*, provides a visualisation of current posts, comments, and likes. [last accessed 4 June 2018]

5 Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

6 Michael Barthel and Amy Mitchell, 'Americans' Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines', *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project* (blog), 10 May 2017.

media channels. These statistics show the dangerous power of bloggers and social media users to conduct influence operations that manipulate public discourse.

Plenty of empirical evidence exists demonstrating the role blogs have played in the constant barrage of fake news and misinformation during various geopolitical events, regional as well as global, over the last several years. One of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon is the 2016 US Presidential election,⁷ when a number of misinformation-riddled stories were planted in clickbait⁸-driven post-truth⁹ media for financial and political incentives. Macedonian teens tapped into the digital gold rush by setting up blogs with content copied verbatim from alt-right¹⁰ news sites. During the Ukraine-Russia crisis, sites like LiveJournal, various blogging platforms, and VKontakte (a Russian social media platform), were used as propaganda machines justifying the Kremlin's policies and actions.¹¹ According to *Interpret Magazine*, the Kremlin recruited over 250 trolls,¹² each of whom was paid \$917 per month to work round the clock producing posts on social media and comments on mainstream media outlets. These trolls managed a stream of invective against pro-Ukrainian media and Western news stories containing unflattering information about Russia, using multiple 'sock puppet' accounts—online identities used for deception. These troll armies, or 'web brigades', piggyback on the popularity of social media to disseminate fake pictures and videos promoting their ideological goals. They have coordinated some very effective disinformation campaigns, to which even legitimate news organisations fall prey. To stem the tide of information subversion, or at least to raise awareness, several online crowdsourcing-based efforts, such as StopFake.org and euvdisinfo.eu, have been created to identify and debunk deliberately misleading imagery and stories about the war in Ukraine. However, such efforts are severely limited and the fact checkers are easily outnumbered by the vast troll armies.

7 Samantha Subramanian, 'The Macedonian Teens Who Mastered Fake News: Inside the Macedonian Fake News Complex' *Wired*, 15 February 2017.

8 'Clickbait'—Internet content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page (Oxford Dictionaries Online).

9 'Post-truth'—'Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Oxford Dictionaries Online). For a more in-depth discussion of 'post-truth' see Jente Althuis and Leonie Haiden (eds), *Fake News: A Roadmap* (Riga and London: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and King's Centre for Strategic Communications, 2018), p. 17.

10 'Alt-right'—'a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that 'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces using 'political correctness' and 'social justice' to undermine white people and 'their' civilization' (Southern Poverty Law Center).

11 M. Allen, 'Kremlin's "Social Media Takeover": Cold War Tactics Fuel Ukraine Crisis' *Democracy Digest* (blog), 10 March 2014; Celestine Bohlen, 'Cold War Media Tactics Fuel Ukraine Crisis', *New York Times*, 10 March 2014, sec. Europe.

12 'Troll'—'a person who starts quarrels or upsets people on the Internet to distract and sow discord by posting inflammatory and digressive, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community (such as a newsgroup, forum, chat room, or blog) with the intent of provoking readers into displaying emotional responses and normalizing tangential discussion, whether for the troll's amusement or a specific gain' (Wikipedia).

Discussions on blogs easily spill over into mainstream media, giving information originating from dubious sources the appearance of legitimacy. In August 2016, while a vigorous national debate was underway on whether Sweden should enter a military partnership with NATO, officials in Stockholm suddenly encountered an unsettling problem—a flood of distorted and false information appeared on social media, confusing public perceptions of the issue.¹³ The claims were alarming—if Sweden, not a member of NATO, signed the deal, the alliance would stockpile secret nuclear weapons on Swedish soil; NATO could attack Russia from Sweden without government approval; NATO soldiers, immune from prosecution, could rape Swedish women without fear of criminal charges. These stories were all false, but the disinformation was repeated by the traditional news media. As Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist travelled the country to promote the pact in speeches and town hall meetings, he was repeatedly grilled about the bogus stories.

This article begins by examining blogs riddled with mis- and disinformation to identify common characteristics that have been developed as heuristics to detect ‘fake-news’ blogs. ‘Disinformation’ is defined as ‘the manipulation of information that purposefully aims to mislead or deceive’, while ‘misinformation’ is defined as ‘inaccurate information that is the result of an honest mistake or of negligence’.¹⁴ It then goes on to explore the role blogs play in distributing mis- and disinformation. Major social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are not conducive for agenda setting or framing narrative due to character limitations and the nature of the platform. Blogs do not have any restriction on the number of characters. Bloggers use various modalities for an effective framing, such as images, videos, and audio files. Moreover, there is no risk of getting suspended if the narratives veer into hate speech. Bloggers have the liberty to set the agenda, however blogs lack the social network structure (no friend/follower relations) required to disseminate blog posts via links. Studies have shown that social media platforms are used strategically to coordinate cyber propaganda campaigns.¹⁵ Nine out of ten bloggers have Facebook accounts. Seventy-eight per cent of bloggers use Twitter to promote their content. This percentage is higher for professional and full-time bloggers, almost ninety per cent. In addition to promoting their own content, some bloggers also exploit computer

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13 Neil MacFarquhar, ‘A Powerful Russian Weapon: The Spread of False Stories’, *New York Times*, 28 August 2016, sec. Europe.

14 Althius and Haiden (eds), *Fake News: A Roadmap*.

15 Samer Al-khateeb, Muhammad Hussain, and Nitin Agarwal, ‘Leveraging Social Network Analysis & Cyber Forensics Approaches to Study Cyber Propaganda Campaigns’, in Tansel Özyer, Sambit Bakshi, and Reda Alhajj, (eds), *Social Network and Surveillance for Society* (Berlin: Springer, forthcoming in 2019).

programmes known as bots, social bots, or botnets, that can massively amplify the dissemination of content via Twitter; this phenomenon has been widely studied.¹⁶ YouTube, another of the fastest-growing social media platforms, is increasingly exploited for behavioural steering, with various production styles catering to specific demographics (such as teens and youth, or even more specific targets such as Somali-speaking men under the age of 35) subjecting the viewers to conspiracy theories, disinformation campaigns, and radicalising ideologies. Prolific linking of YouTube videos in tweets, blogs, or Telegram posts has led to unprecedented convenience in framing narratives, disseminating them widely, and driving online traffic to develop rich discourse.

In addition to content promotion, active media-integration strategies help to artificially boost search rankings. This technique, known as ‘link farming’, is a well-known search engine optimisation (SEO) strategy. Gaming search engines by prolific linking of blogs across the social-media ecosystem is now part of cyber-influence operations. This paper aims to peel away the layers of the complex media integration strategy to examine the role of cross-media and mix-media strategies (defined below) in conducting disinformation campaigns. By further examining these information flows, we have identified several blog and social media networks responsible for disseminating disinformation in the Baltic States. The paper presents an in-depth examination of such networks, using a social network analysis-based methodology referred to as ‘Focal Structure Analysis’,¹⁷ to identify the prominent information brokers and leading coordinators of the disinformation campaigns.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows: the Related Work section describes pertinent literature—we review how researchers study disinformation and what techniques they use, and survey the fields that engage in this sort of study, e.g. cyber forensics and social networks; the Data Collection section describes how data is fetched from different sources; the Data Statistics section provides more detail on the attributes of the datasets collected; the Research Methodology section outlines the research questions of the study, explains our approach to answer these questions, and provides a discussion of the findings; and, finally, we summarise the paper with Conclusions.

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16 Nitin Agarwal, Samer Al-khateeb, Rick Galeano, and Rebecca Goolsby, ‘Examining The Use Of Botnets And Their Evolution In Propaganda Dissemination’, *Defence Strategic Communications*, Volume 2 (2017): 87–112.

17 Fatih Şen, Rolf Wigand, Nitin Agarwal, Serpil Tokdemir, and Rafal Kasprzyk, ‘Focal Structures Analysis: Identifying Influential Sets of Individuals in a Social Network’, *Social Network Analysis and Mining* Volume 6, № 1 (8 April 2016): 17. PAYWALL.

Related Work and Terms

Numerous studies have been done on how misinformation and disinformation are spread, sometimes by irresponsible actors and sometimes by malicious ones. Researchers, including Agarwal et al., have studied blogs for a variety of purposes such as identifying the influence of certain bloggers, and how they engage with the audience.¹⁸ Alcott and Gentzkow have studied how blogs are used to disseminate disinformation by linking to platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit.¹⁹ Disinformation sharing is amplified through the use of bots. The use of bots has nefarious consequences when consumers of the information they share fail to verify the accuracy of the information and the reliability of the sources. An article published in the *MIT Technology Review* shows that accounts actively spreading false and misleading information are significantly more likely to be bots.²⁰ Ferrara's study on the use of bots to disseminate information found that they were very effective.²¹

Knowing what is factually correct is not a trivial task, given the barrage of biased, satirical, or conspiracy-theory-riddled stories on social media. The endless deluge of information, sometimes totally irrelevant or junk information, makes it more difficult to stem the flow of mis- and disinformation. Echo chambers quickly emerge, shielding users from divergent opinions, making the problem even worse.²² There are, however, cases where disinformation has been debunked by such well-known fact-checking websites as snopes.com, politifact.com, and factcheck.org. For instance, a post titled 'No More Child Support After 2017?' was identified as false by snopes.com,²³ and the 'PizzaGate' conspiracy theory was also eventually debunked.²⁴ However, such community-based fact checking efforts are largely manual, hence severely limited and also subject to personal biases. Automated systems are therefore warranted that can assist in debunking false claims. Few studies have been conducted recently in this domain. Kumar et al. devised methods of classification to determine whether or not a given article

18 Nitin Agarwal, Huan Liu, Lei Tang, and Philip S. Yu, 'Identifying the Influential Bloggers in a Community' in the Proceedings of the 2008 International Conference on Web Search and Data Mining, 207–218.

19 Hunt Alcott and Matthew Gentzkow, 'Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election', Working Paper № 23089 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2017).

20 Emerging Technology from the arXiv, 'First Evidence that Social Bots Play a Major Role in Spreading Fake News', *MIT Technology Review*, 7 August 2017. [accessed 4 June 2018].

21 Emilio Ferrara, 'Measuring Social Spam and the Effect of Bots on Information Diffusion in Social Media' ArXiv 2017.

22 Jonathan Bright, 'Explaining the Emergence of Echo Chambers on Social Media: The Role of Ideology and Extremism', Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, 14 March 2017.

23 Snopes.com, 'FACT CHECK: No More Child Support After 2017?', Kim LaCapria (fact-checker), 20 September 2017, updated 20 April 2018.

24 Snopes.com, 'FALSE: Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria Home to Child Abuse Ring Led by Hillary Clinton', Kim LaCapria (fact-checker), 21 November 2016, updated 4 December 2016.

on Wikipedia is a hoax.²⁵ Shu et al. developed a data mining model to detect so-called fake news in social media.²⁶

Since blogs do not have a social network structure, they use other social media to disseminate their content. In order to discover these often-invisible connections, we use cyber forensic analysis to dive deeper into the problem of disinformation. Cyber forensics is ‘the process of acquisition, authentication, analysis, and documentation of evidence extracted from and/or contained in a computer system, computer network, and digital media’.²⁷ Cyber forensics is a method of collecting metadata used to gain insight into the flow of digital information. Our objective is to understand the patterns associated with dissemination of information posted on blogs, how bloggers build engagement with their audiences, and how they communicate their agendas. We do this by identifying the media approaches used.

The term ‘mix-media information dissemination campaign’ refers to the use of multiple social media channels to disseminate a narrative. More precisely, an information campaign can be observed on multiple social media sites using similar text, images, audio, and video content. The content may not be identical on the various social media channels used, but pertains to one particular information campaign.

A ‘cross-media information dissemination campaign’ orchestrates the use of specific media channels. More precisely, the information is hosted on a website (e.g. a blog site or video on a YouTube channel) and is widely distributed through other social media channels that provide established social network structures, such as Twitter and Facebook.

Until recently, cyber forensic tools, or ‘the practice of identifying, preserving, extracting, analysing, and presenting legally sound evidence from digital media such as computer hard drives’,²⁸ have been primarily used by government agencies, but as the need for tracking such data has grown, many cyber forensic tools, such as Maltego, have become available to the public.²⁹ Cyber forensics studies can also

25 Srijan Kumar, Robert West, and Jure Leskovec ‘Disinformation on the Web: Impact, Characteristics, and Detection of Wikipedia Hoaxes’ in *Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on World Wide Web*, pp. 591–602, International World Wide Web Conferences Steering Committee, 2016.

26 Kai Shu, Amy Sliva, Suhang Wang, Jiliang Tang, and Huan Liu. ‘Fake News Detection on Social Media: A Data Mining Perspective’, *SIGKDD Explorations* 19, Issue 1 (June 2017): 22–36.

27 Digambar Povar and V. K. Bhadrán, ‘Forensic Data Carving’ in *International Conference on Digital Forensics and Cyber Crime, Second International IC3T Conference*, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 4–6 October 2010, Revised Selected Papers, ed. Ibrahim Baggili (Berlin: Springer, 2011): 137–48. PAYWALL.

28 Snopes, ‘FALSE: Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria’.

29 Paterva.com, [Company Page](#). [Accessed 4 June 2018]

take a variety of perspectives. Sabillion et al. have subjected multiple environments in digital ecosystems to digital forensic investigations from an information security and privacy standpoint,³⁰ while Harichandran et al. conducted a survey-based analysis from a computer security background.³¹ Our study is unique in that we have conducted our analyses using open source information from social media to identify the key actors disseminating mis- and disinformation.

Data Collection

Data collection is a critical task for analysing information flow in social media. As blogs are becoming virtual town halls³² that shape discourse, and have already become the preferred mode of carriage for all other digital media, we explore blogs in greater depth to understand the role they play in distributing mis- and disinformation.

Blog sites differ from one another in structure, so collecting data about them necessarily involves sophisticated, tailor-made techniques. ‘Crawling’ blog data requires high attention to detail and cannot be fully automated. However, other social media platforms usually have a data extraction limit, a rate limit, or both, so there is an advantage to extracting data from blogs.

These are some of the challenges we faced during the data crawling process:

- **No application programming interface (API) to collect data**

API in its simplest form is an interface that allows an application to talk to another application through simple commands. There is no blog data API that allows the user to make a request (i.e. crawl blog posts) and get a required response (i.e. blog posts data). There were blog indexing services such as BlogPulse, Blogdex, and Technorati that provided limited blog data APIs. But these efforts have been discontinued, making blog data collection a challenging task.

30 Regner Sabillon, Jordi Serra-Ruiz, Victor Cavaller, and Jeimy J. Cano, ‘Digital Forensic Analysis of Cyber-crimes: Best Practices and Methodologies’, *International Journal of Information Security and Privacy*, Volume 11, № 2 (2017): 25–37. PAYWALL

31 Vikram S. Harichandran, Frank Breiting, Ibrahim Baggili, and Andrew Marrington, ‘A Cyber Forensics Needs Analysis Survey: Revisiting the Domain’s Needs a Decade Later’, *Computers & Security* 57 (2016): 1–13.

32 ‘Town hall meetings, also referred to as town halls or town hall forums, are a way for local and national politicians to meet with their constituents, either to hear from them on topics of interest or to discuss specific upcoming legislation or regulation. During periods of active political debate, town halls can be a locus for protest and more active debate.’ (Wikipedia).

- **Changing blog structure**

Dealing with blogs is like shooting at a moving target. Blog site owners can change the blog site structure at any time, and a crawler trained for one structure does not work for another. So the effort of training the crawler must be repeated for the new structure. Additionally, each blog requires its own parser to crawl the data. As in linguistics, in programming to parse is to separate something into its component parts, so that these parts can be stored and manipulated. As the blog sites have different structures (syntax), different parsers are required for different blogs as a parser trained for one blog may not work at all for others.

- **Noise**

Regardless of how well a crawler is trained, 'noise' is always crawled. Social media plugins (Facebook share plugins, Twitter share plugins) and advertisements from the blog site could be crawled as part of noise. Even though the crawler is well trained, some JavaScript elements are often crawled as part of the blog data. This is considered noise as it does not constitute any useful information. Noise is later removed as part of the data cleaning process.

- **No standardisation**

While we collect blog data, we parse important attributes for analysis. One such attribute is date. While we work with date field extraction from blog posts, we notice that these differ in format from blog site to blog site, implying that there is no single standard followed here. This adds to the workload of converting discrepancies of this kind to a standard format for further study.

- **No automation**

The blog crawling process is not fully automated. Even the most intelligent and careful parsing may capture some noise. A human researcher must be in the loop to identify and eliminate noise.

- **Limitations of the Web Content Extractor (WCE)**

We use the WCE tool for blog data collection. With the help of this software <<http://www.newprosoft.com/>> we train the crawler to extract data from different blog sites efficiently. To train the crawler, we first provide the starting

or ‘seed URL’. Then, we train the crawler to navigate to all blog posts linked to the seed URL. While doing this, we sometimes encounter noise and observe that the WCE fails in crawling dynamic pages loaded with JavaScript.³³

We examined several blogs and identified a few common attributes among them such as title, date of posting, author/blogger, actual post, number of comments, and permalink. Later, we collected and indexed all blog content from the various sources to our Blogtrackers database. This tool can be accessed at <<http://blogtrackers.host.ualr.edu/>>. We surveyed over 300 blogs, including: a ‘fake news’ or disinformation dataset from Kaggle.com, disinformation blogs identified by Dr Melissa Zimdars, a professor at Merrimack College,³⁴ blogs containing disinformation regarding the Baltic States, and blogs containing disinformation regarding NATO activities and exercises. To crawl these different sources, we set up crawler(s) for each blog site to extract all required attributes. The main steps in crawling data from a blog site are: (1) exploring the blog site; (2) crawling the blog site; and (3) cleaning and storing the data in a database for retrieval and analysis. Figure 1 below represents the data crawling process for blogs.³⁵

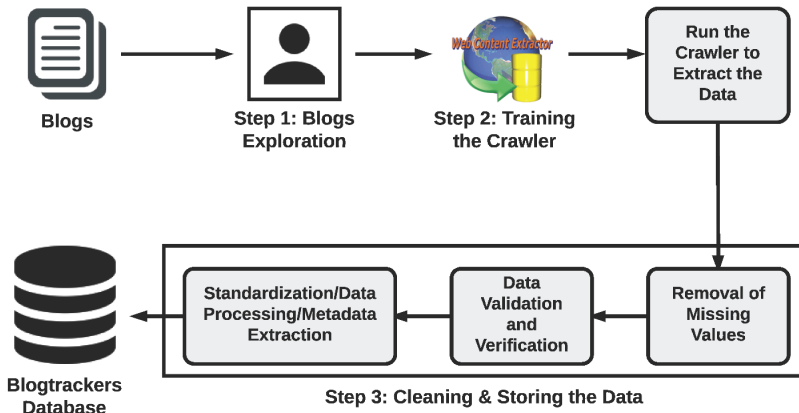


Figure 1. Data collection process for blogs

33 Muhammad Nihal Hussain, Adewale Obadimu, Kiran Kumar Bandeli, Nooman Mohammad, Samer Al-khateeb, and Nitin Agarwal, 'A Framework for Blog Data Collection: Challenges and Opportunities', The IARIA International Symposium on Designing, Validating, and Using Datasets (DATASETS 2017), June 2017.

34 Merrimack College, Dr Melissa Zimdars

35 Muhammad Nihal Hussain, Saaduddin Ghouri Mohammad, and Nitin Agarwal, 'Blog Data Analytics Using Blogtrackers', International Conference on Social Computing, Behavioral-Cultural Modeling & Prediction and Behavior Representation in Modeling and Simulation, Washington DC, July 2017.

Next we added ‘data augmentation’. This additional step facilitates the use of cyber forensics to collect metadata such as language, location, web traffic tracker codes, and other data. We used the cyber forensics tool Maltego to extract the metadata. During cyber propaganda campaigns, the extracted metadata made it possible to discover the information we used to track IP addresses and to identify the groups of users or entities that were working together to disseminate disinformation, as well as to discover hidden connections among the blogs.

Data Statistics

Primarily, the data collected is from four diverse sources. The descriptions and statistics associated with these four types of datasets are as follows:

A. A Disinformation dataset from Kaggle.com

This dataset was obtained from the Kaggle website using the link <<https://www.kaggle.com/mrisdal/fake-news>>. Data was collected for a period of 30 days from 2016.10.07 to 2016.11.07. It has 20 attributes, 2,236 bloggers, and 12,999 posts from 244 blogs. Some of the key attributes in this dataset are—domain name, site_url, author, post title, text, published date, language, comments, replies_count, shares, and likes.

B. Dr Zimdars’ list of Disinformation blogs

These blog sites are available at <<http://bit.ly/2ezvFbV>>. This dataset had 26 blogs, 971 bloggers, 116,667 posts, and 79 attributes at the time of this study. The list has now grown to over 1000 blogs thanks to an international community-wide effort. This dataset was collected from 2004.01.02 to 2017.05.04, and its key attributes are—blog site name, blogger, blog post title, blog post, posting date, location, and language. Tables 1 and 2 show the statistics for this dataset, describing the location and language distribution of the blogs.

Location	Blog Posts	Blogs
United States	79768	21
Not Available	20001	4
Great Britain	16898	1

Table 1. Location distribution for the 26 disinformation blogs

Language	Blog Posts	Blogs
English	115689	26
Not Available	926	5
Danish	9	2
Unknown	9	2
French	7	4
German	6	4
Guerrero	3	1
Italian	3	2
Finnish	2	2
Spanish	2	1
Afrikaans	1	1
Catalan	1	1
Dutch	1	1
Estonian	1	1
Hiligaynon	1	1
Latin	1	1
Maltese	1	1
Norwegian	1	1
Romanian	1	1
Russian	1	1
Swedish	1	1

Table 2. Language distribution for the 26 disinformation blogs

C. Blogs containing disinformation regarding the Baltic States

Subject matter experts identified this set of blogs suspected of disseminating disinformation, many of them originating from Latvia, Estonia, or Lithuania. We crawled 16,667 blog posts from 21 blogs with 728 bloggers. This dataset was collected from 2005.03.24 to 2017-02-09, and the key attributes are—blog site name, blogger, blog post title, blog post, posting date, location, and language. Tables 3 and 4 provide the statistics for this dataset, describing the location and language distribution of the blogs respectively.

Location	Blog Posts	Blogs
Lithuania	6595	2
United States	3156	3
Estonia	2592	7
Germany	2156	5
Latvia	1976	3
Netherlands	192	1

Table 3. Location distribution for the 21 Baltic States’ blogs

Language	Blog Posts	Blogs
Lithuanian	6590	2
Russian	4599	7
Latvian	3793	10
Estonian	809	6
English	738	8
Unknown	122	5
Not Available	15	1
Bulgarian	1	1

Table 4. Language distribution for the 21 blogs about the Baltic States

D. Blogs containing disinformation regarding NATO exercises and other activities

This dataset contains blogs containing disinformation that posted news during various exercises conducted by NATO, such as the Trident Juncture 2015, Brilliant Jump 2016, and Anakonda 2016. The dataset was collected using the Blogtrackers tool between 1993.02.28 and 2017.08.06. It has 70 blogs, 3641 bloggers, 118,908 posts, and 79 attributes. The key attributes are—blog site name, blogger, blog post title, blog post, posting date, location, and language. Tables 5 and 6 show the statistics for this dataset, describing the location and language distribution of the blogs.

Location	Blog Posts	Blogs
Germany	1788	4
France	228	2
Ireland	26	1
Netherlands	7572	3
Poland	16	1
Serbia	36	1
Russia	5419	4
Slovakia	285	1
Ukraine	391	1
United States	103146	51
Zimbabwe	1	1

Table 5. Location distribution for the 70 NATO exercise blogs

Language	Blog Posts	Blogs
English	101776	64
Polish	6107	10
German	2598	15
Unknown	1893	30
Croatian	1851	1
Spanish	1565	15
Romanian	641	5
Russian	623	11
Italian	590	9
Not Available	369	11
French	316	16
Greek	181	2
Catalan	115	5
Arabic	102	4
Ukrainian	46	3
Albanian	43	1

Czech	12	4
Danish	10	7
Afrikaans	9	2
Slovak	8	2
Turkish	8	3
Basque	6	1
Finnish	6	3
Korean	5	1
Portuguese	4	3
Dutch	3	2
Hungarian	3	2
Serbian	3	2
Swahili	3	2
Welsh	3	2
Central Mam	2	1
Faroese	2	1
Indonesian	2	2
Latvian	1	1
Maltese	1	1
Tagalog	1	1

Table 6. Language distribution for the 70 NATO exercise blogs

The attributes from the four datasets are summarised in Table 7.

Dataset	Number of Blogs	Bloggers	No of Posts	Attributes
Disinformation dataset from Kaggle.com	244	2236	12999	20
Disinformation blogs identified by Prof. Melissa Zimdars	26	971	116667	79
Blogs containing disinformation regarding Baltic States	21	728	16667	79
Blogs containing disinformation regarding NATO exercises and activities	70	3641	118908	79

Table 7. Details of the four datasets summarised

Research Methodology

This barrage of information on social media illustrates the challenges encountered in studying disinformation campaigns, challenges caused by the high volume and variety of the data. To classify such information as true or false poses big questions for researchers in the field. By the time a blog post hosting disinformation is detected and appropriate action is undertaken to stop it, the damage has already been done. Therefore, we study dissemination to understand the strategies and tactics used by those who operate such blogs. To this end, we formulated the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: What are the typical characteristics of mis- and disinformation-riddled blogs?
- Research Question 2: Can we track the origins of the content, such as memes, images, etc. appearing in these blogs?
- Research Question 3: What strategies (mix-media or cross-media) and media sites are commonly used for disseminating such content?
- Research Question 4: Is there a way to track how far a narrative antagonistic to NATO travels, and how effective the content has been in terms of comments, likes, and other markers, relative to other narratives?

The aforementioned research questions are answered during different phases in the proposed methodology, as shown in Figure 2 below. To answer RQ1, we collected data from different disinformation-riddled blogs, studied their characteristics, and proposed guidelines for identifying disinformation. To answer RQ2, we studied the provenance of the information on these blogs, for example, by tracking the sources using reverse image search, memes, web links, and hashtags. To answer RQ3, we studied the strategies commonly used to disseminate disinformation—the mix-media and cross-media approaches. Finally, to answer RQ4, we extended the work done on RQ1. The blog network was identified through the characteristics extracted from the blogs; we then used the Focal Structure Analysis (FSA) tool, an aspect of social network analysis, to identify the key disinformation actors or groups.

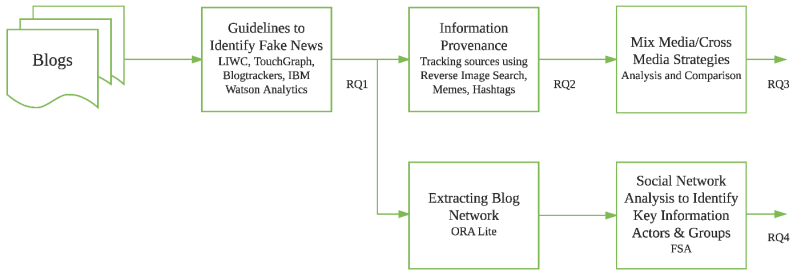


Figure 2. Proposed research methodology

RQ1: Typical Characteristics of Disinformation-riddled Blogs

We started the experiment by loading the datasets into IBM Watson Analytics to identify the data attributes, or the structure of the data, so as to detect key patterns that reveal the typical characteristics of disinformation-riddled blogs. To this end, we considered websites that frequently shared posts—their titles, likes, replies, shares, and comments. Then, we used tools such as TouchGraph SEO Browser,³⁶ LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count),³⁷ and Alchemy API³⁸ to dive deeply into the problem space. Later, we used Blogtrackers⁷ to analyse trends in keywords of interest, to identify unusual patterns in bloggers’ posting frequency and changes in topics of interest to the blogging community

36 TouchGraph, [SEO Keyword Graph Visualisation](http://www.touchgraph.com/seo). <http://www.touchgraph.com/seo> [Accessed 4 June 2018]

37 LIWC | Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count, [Landing Page](http://liwc.wpengine.com). <http://liwc.wpengine.com> [Accessed 4 June 2018]

38 <<https://www.ibm.com/watson/alchemy-api.html>>

in real time, to track trends in positive and negative sentiment, to estimate a blogger's influence in the blogosphere, and to understand the outlinks used to disseminate content through social media channels.

Based on our own observations and on those compiled by other experts, we provide a set of heuristics to identify blogs potentially riddled with disinformation:

1. Pay attention to the *contact us* section of a page to validate and verify site authors.

Misinformation-riddled blogs do not provide any real information about the website author. See: <<http://abcnews.com.co/>>

2. Do not just read the *headline*; instead examine the *body content* to discover more details of the story.

A headline, such as ‘Obama Signs Executive Order Declaring Investigation into Election Results; Revote Planned for Dec. 19th—ABC News’ is provocative, but the content of the story may reveal information useful to determining a post's veracity.

3. Pay close attention to URLs, sources, *images*, and to the editorial standards of the writing.

The URL <www.bloomberg.ma> is used to imitate the well-known site <www.bloomberg.com>.

4. Always crosscheck the story with *fact-checking websites*, such as snopes.com, factcheck.org, or politifact.com to verify the credibility of the story.

Is the blog post ‘The Amish In America Commit Their Vote To Donald Trump; Mathematically Guaranteeing Him A Presidential Victory—ABC News’ credible? Snopes says no.

5. Search for the post in *well-known search engines* such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo. If the same post or content is repeated on many sites, this indicates the use of the *mix-media* approach to narrative dissemination.

The disinformation blog post ‘Obama Signs Executive Order Declaring Investigation Into Election Results; Revote Planned For Dec. 19th—ABC News’ was shared on many sites across the web.

6. Check if the article has been *previously published* and if it is being reused to affect perceptions about an event or specific actions.

The blog post ‘Muslims BUSTED: They Stole Millions In Govt Benefits’ published in 2016 reused an image from 2013.

7. **Check to see if the post is *disturbing or controversial*; fake stories are often embedded in such posts.**

The blog post ‘EU NATO Commit Adultery, Prince Charles Saudi Trade & More’ presents disturbing information. Disinformation narratives are framed in just such posts.

8. **Check to see if the post has any likes, replies, or comments. This will indicate how interested the readers are in the given story, e.g. agree or disagree with it. The *sentiment* can be used to infer this.**

The blog post ‘NASA Confirms—Super Human Abilities Gained’ received numerous comments, many of them debunking this false story. Sentiment analysis on commentary provides a clear understanding of a post’s reception.

We conducted a survey to evaluate the efficacy of these eight criteria for predicting the veracity of a blog. We randomly selected 96 blog sites featuring mis- or disinformation and asked survey participants to rate the effectiveness of each criterion.

After collecting the survey data, we constructed a stacked bar where the Y-axis denotes the eight criteria, and the X-axis (representing values 0%–100%) indicates the confidence of the participants of the veracity of the 96 blog sites, classified as low, medium, or high. Figure 3 clearly shows that the best criterion is a blog site’s use of mix-media and/or cross-media strategies for disseminating content. The next best criterion is use of a fact-checking website.

Next, we present some empirical observations vis-à-vis disinformation heuristics on the disinformation dataset collected from Kaggle.com. Incidentally, most of the blog posts had no or very few comments; this might imply that these stories are disseminated, but not much discussed. We also discovered that, during the US elections, many posts were designed to direct the greatest number of readers to non-factual stories with the intention of biasing the electorate. For example, 12,468 of 12,999 (96%) of posts had zero ‘likes’ and 12,304 of 12,999 (94%) posts had zero ‘replies’. We also observed that the majority of the stories originated from a particular set of domains usually reported as containing false info.

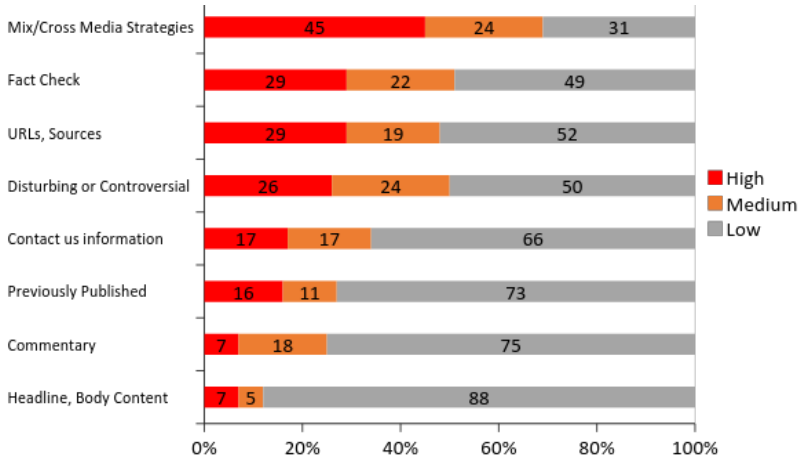


Figure 3. The effectiveness of each of the eight criteria in identifying disinformation-riddled blog

We found that in many cases that the ‘contact us’ page did not provide any real contact information, or it redirected readers to another website, usually a social media site, as shown in Figure 4 below: ABC NEWS at <<http://abcnews.com.co/>>. The <<http://cnn.com.de/>> website closely mimics the CNN News website <<http://www.cnn.com/>> using the CNN logo, its website structure, etc. However, the impostor site is riddled with false stories and conspiracy theories, but when articles are re-posted on Facebook, they bear the CNN.com logo and appear to be published by the authentic site. This deception strategy is highly effective and is further discussed in the next two sections. On a final note, the indicators used for answering RQ1 can be fine-tuned by using advanced language analytics. This remains a task for the future.

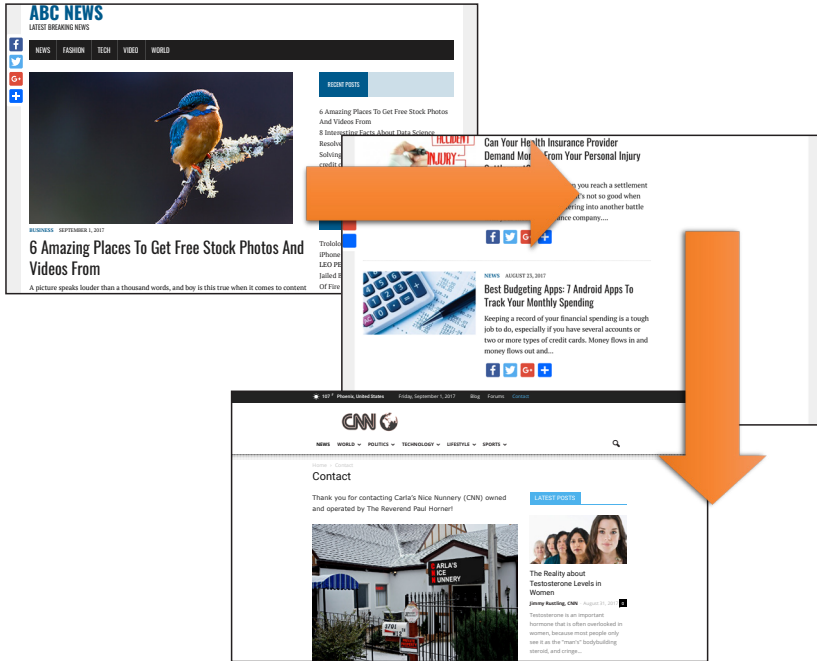


Figure 4. Contact link redirects to another website

RQ2: Tracking the Origins of Blog Content

In this section, we track the origins of memes, images, and other features appearing on selected blogs sites. We begin by searching for a given image URL using 'reverse image search' on Google Images to identify other sources using the same image. We found that many of the images used were not unique for each article, and often not relevant to the context of the article. The same image was reused with multiple different narratives, as shown in Figure 5. Images lend credibility to a narrative and are effective in fabricating perception. Using images or videos to frame narratives is highly effective, exploiting multiple modalities to influence thinking.

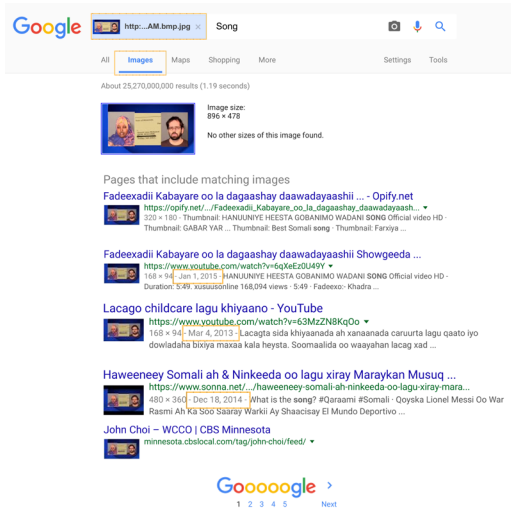


Figure 5. Reverse image search shows the same image used to illustrate multiple narratives

We observed a pattern frequently used to disseminate malicious content: purposefully generated content is posted to a blog; hashtags with embedded links serve to connect the post to high-traffic social media channels. This is known as shared or referenced using. Figures 6(a) and 6(b) below depict this pattern.



Figure 6(a). Post using hashtags with embedded hyperlinks to direct traffic to Twitter

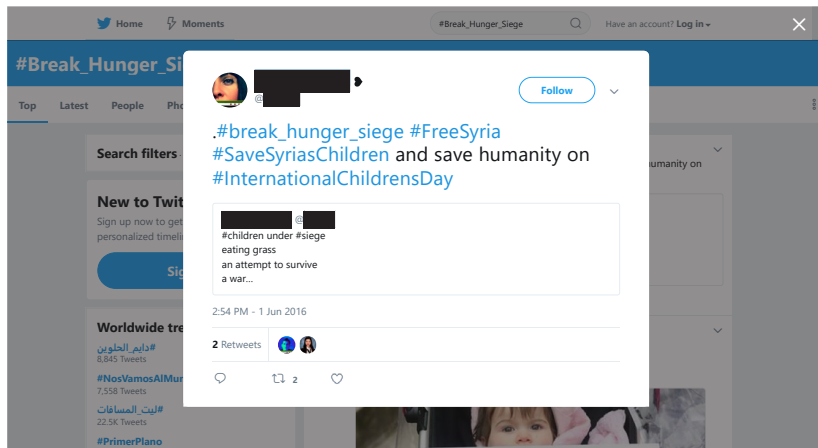


Figure 6(b). Twitter post using hyperlink-hashtags

RQ3: Mix-media vs Cross-media Approaches

To recap, when the designers of an information dissemination campaign post similar or identical texts, images, audio, and video content to multiple social media platforms we call this a mix-media campaign; when content is hosted on a single platform, such as a blog or a YouTube channel, but is distributed widely across multiple social media channels, we call this a cross-media campaign. The mix-media strategy is more work-intensive and tailor-made, while the cross-media relies more on strategic link placement. We hoped to discover which of these strategies is most commonly used to disseminate bogus content and if we can use our knowledge of these strategies to identify the other media sites in a dissemination chain?

We first investigated the use of the mix-media approach. The example in Figure 7 shows that the story ‘Towards a Renewed Imperialist Intervention in Libya? Anti-NATO Forces Retake Areas in Southern Libya’ was disseminated on multiple sites—facebook.com, oroom.org, twitter.com, globalresearch.ca, hotnews.ro, and workers.org.³⁹

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³⁹ This story was marked as a conspiracy theory by the application [bsdetector.tech](https://www.bsdetector.tech/)

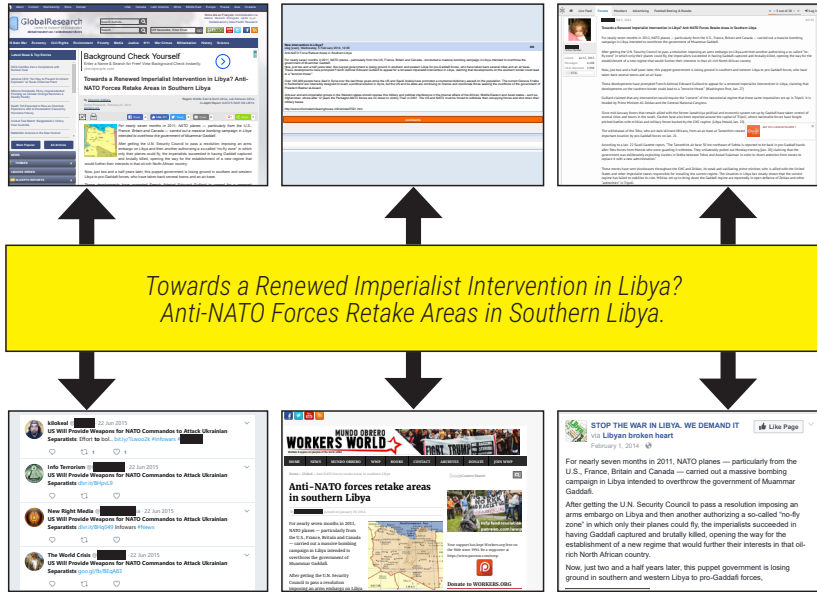


Figure 7. The mix-media strategy: disseminating disinformation on different websites.

Next, we examined the cross-media information dissemination approach. This strategy was observed to good effect in our dataset. Many sites that shared links to specific social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit. For instance, a blog site named 'globalresearch.ca' published a post entitled 'US Will Provide Weapons For NATO Commandos to Attack Ukrainian Separatists' with a link: <http://bit.ly/2ewVTg7>. This post was shared on a variety of social media channels—Twitter: <http://bit.ly/2xEQxnU>, Pinterest: <http://bit.ly/2x02sQ0>, and Facebook: <http://bit.ly/2wrIhZD>, as depicted in Figure 8. This clearly indicates the use of the cross-media approach.

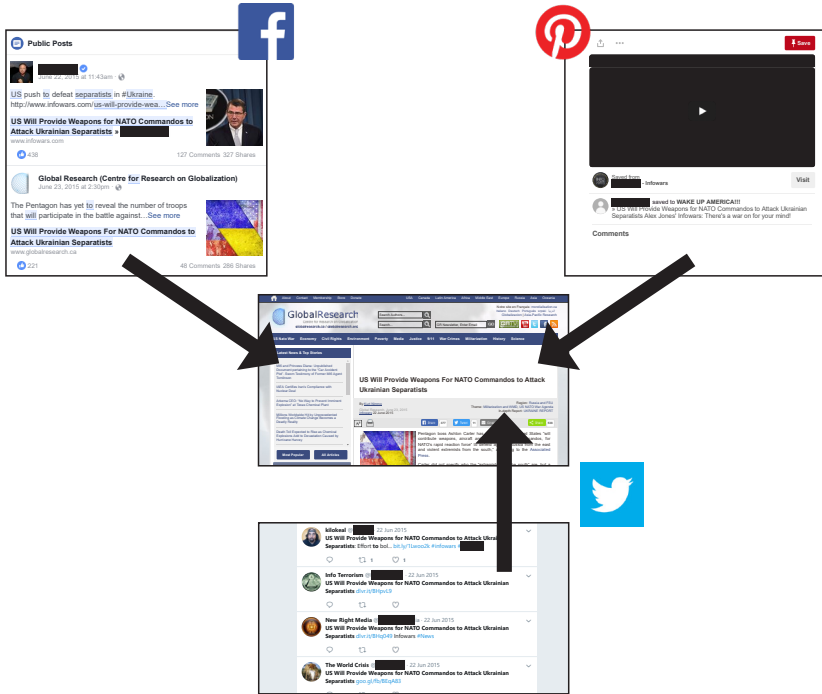


Figure 8. The cross-media strategy for disseminating disinformation on different social media channels

RQ4: Tracking How Far an Antagonistic Narrative Travels

We wanted to discover if we could track how far antagonistic narratives travel and how effective such narratives are, what kinds of reactions they received. We also analysed the blog networks to identify the blog clusters fundamental to disseminating these narratives. We considered reactions such as likes, comments, retweets, and shares to discover how widely a post had been circulated, and to uncover the media integration strategies used.

Readers may not realise that social plugins from Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit can be embedded in the 'like' feature of blogs. When a blog post is 'liked', this reaction shows up simultaneously on all linked platforms. For instance, on 18

September 2016 the blog site 21stcenturywire.com published the post ‘Syria: No “Dusty Boy” Outrage for 7 yr old Haider, Sniped by NATO Terrorists in Idlib Village of Foua’. This post received 65 comments and was shared on other social media. Its Twitter repost received 19 retweets, 5 likes, and 2 replies, while on Facebook it received 6 reactions, 3 comments, and 2 shares. This disinformation effort achieved modest success. 21stcenturywire.com published another post on 27 September 2016 entitled ‘EU NATO Commit Adultery, Prince Charles Saudi Trade & More’, which again was factually incorrect. As before, we tracked how this post travelled; however, it received no comments. The article was shared on Twitter, but it received only 1 retweet, 1 like, and 0 replies. The same post was also shared on Facebook, where it received 27 reactions, 1 comment, and 11 shares. But, all the shares came from 21stcenturywire.com. No other Facebook group posted this article. This one had no traction.

Next, we analysed the effect of blog networks on content dissemination. Unlike other social media platforms, blogs do not have a social network structure—there is no follow-follower relationship among blogs. However, information flow can be tracked based on who links to whom. We examined hyperlinks to extract information regarding the network of the blogs generating disinformation regarding the Baltic States using ORA-Lite (Organisation Risk Analyser)⁴⁰ to visualise the network, as depicted in Figure 9 below. The network contains 21 blogs (red nodes) and 2,321 hyperlinks (blue nodes). Further analysis of the blog network helped identify five blogs (out of the set of 21 blogs) that were the most resourceful. In other words, these five blogs had the highest number of hyperlinks, i.e. links to other websites. Furthermore, these five blog sites were the most exclusive in resources, i.e. they linked to websites that no other blogs did. Ten out of the 2,321 hyperlinks were the most shared and the most exclusive, i.e. these hyperlinks were shared profusely but only by a handful of blogs. Most of these hyperlinks have a domain suffix from the Baltic nations, i.e. ‘.ee’ for Estonia, ‘.lv’ for Latvia, and ‘.lt’ for Lithuania. The exclusivity of resources helps in identifying unique information sources and also hints at a coordinated information campaign. This is the subject of our investigation presented in the next section.

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40 <<http://www.casos.cs.cmu.edu/projects/ora/software.php>>

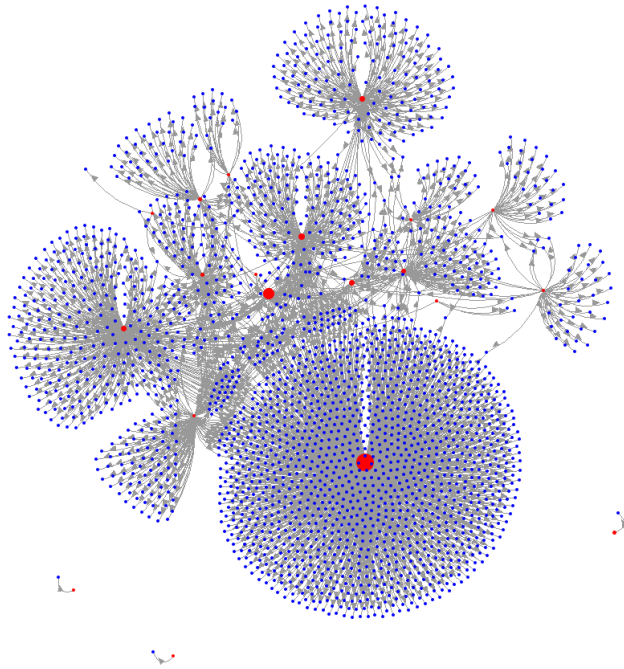


Figure 9. Network of blog sites and shared hyperlinks

The network contains 21 blogs (red nodes) and 2,321 hyperlinks (blue nodes). The size of a node is proportional to the number of shared hyperlinks (i.e. out-degree centrality). Edge thickness is proportional to the number of times a blog site shared a hyperlink.

Focal Structure Analysis

The exclusivity of resource sharing by a few blogs hints at a coordinated information campaign. The resources, in this case—hyperlinks, that are exclusively shared by a set of blogs. To get a clearer picture, we constructed a diagram of the blog network based on shared hyperlinks, depicted in Figure 10. The network is fully connected. Each blog connects to all other blogs, i.e. they form a clique when it comes to information sharing. This suggests that every blog in this set shares the same hyperlinks. This confirms our conjecture

that there is intensive campaign coordination among these blogs. Further investigation is required to discover if these blogs belong to or are controlled by the same individual or by a group.

Meta Network

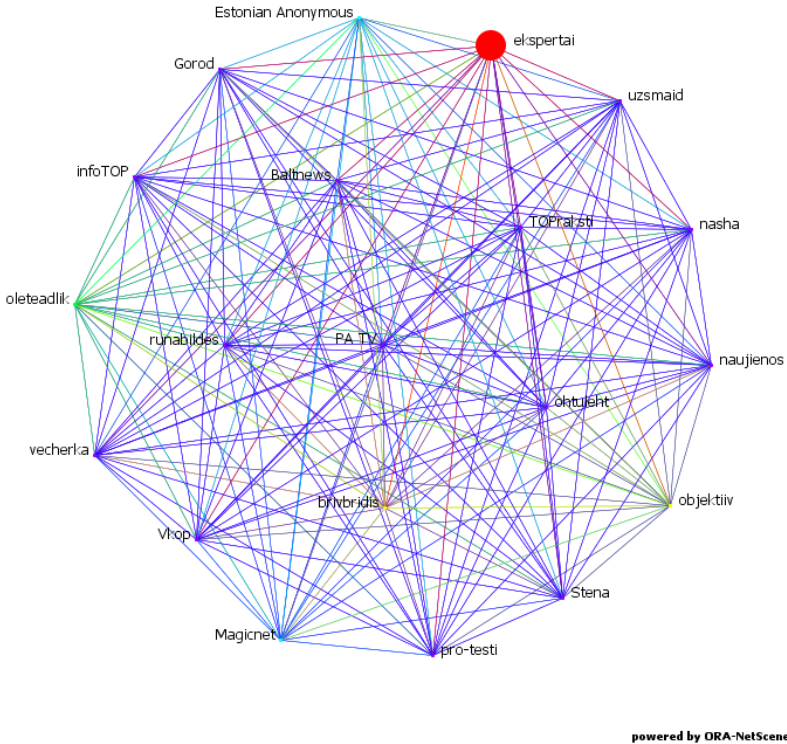


Figure 10. A network of blogs based on commonly shared hyperlinks

To answer the second part of the question—to see how effective the content has been, in terms of comments and likes relative to other narratives—we present an example where commentary forms a persuasive dimension. The research is grounded in exemplification theory and demonstrates how exemplified accounts

Figure 11. An exemplified account of comments shaping discourse to form a persuasive dimension

in user comments on a news story may influence audience perception.⁴¹ Exemplification theory refers to the idea that a single event, or story about that event, is taken to be representative of the set of similar events—it becomes an exemplar. Exemplars are neither consumed nor recalled equally, rather those that are engaging to us are often also taken to be representative, even if this is not the case. In other words, media that include engaging, meaningful, attractively illustrated exemplars are more convincing and memorable than well-argued and scrupulously documented news stories.

Guardianly.com posted the fictitious article 'NASA Confirms—Super Human Abilities Gained'. What could we learn from the 327 content-related comments? The majority of commentators debunked the false information contained in the article, forming a persuasive dimension. Figure 11 illustrates how the 'exemplified accounts' in users' comments can influence perception by developing a

41 Patric R. Spence, Kenneth Lachlan, Timothy Sellnow, Robert G. Rice, and Henry Seeger, 'That Is So Gross and I Have to Post About It: Exemplification Effects and User Comments on a News Story', *Southern Communication Journal*, Volume 82, No. 1 (2017): 27–37. PAYWALL

persuasive discourse.⁴² The content was linked to other websites or pages (Facebook fan pages) and shared 50 times on other channels, generating further discussion, as illustrated in Figure 11.

Conclusion

Several hundreds of thousands of blog posts, spread across 15 countries, and written in 42 languages, were analysed in this study, which was conducted from 28 February 1993 to 6 August 2017. We observed intriguing patterns of information diffusion used within the social media ecology to spread disinformation. While narratives are framed on blogs, they are disseminated through a variety of other social media channels. The methodology presented here contributes to the understanding of how such disinformation spreads. We documented typical characteristics of disinformation-riddled blogs, using a variety of information analysis tools, and presented guidelines to help identify disinformation on blogs. We demonstrated how to track the origins of the content on blogs with the help of memes, hashtags, links (URLs), and originally-published content. We found that both mix-media and cross-media strategies were commonly used in disseminating the content. We studied how disinformation spreads across different social media platforms using these approaches. We also studied how far an antagonistic narrative travels by analysing blog networks. By applying focal structures analysis, we succeeded in identifying a massively coordinated information campaign among the blogs. And by leveraging exemplification theory, we demonstrated that commentary on blogs can form a persuasive dimension to discourse. Through this study, we have sought to understand the social media ecology and how it supports disinformation dissemination, generating disinformation, weaponising narratives, and conducting propaganda campaigns, so that actions can be taken towards developing countermeasures to stem the tide of fakery.

Acknowledgments

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42 Dolf Zillmann, 'Exemplification Theory of Media Influence' *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* 2 (2002): 19–41. <http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/quillin/Gerbneretal%20growing%20up%20with%20television%202002.pdf>

US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (W31P4Q-17-C-0059), and the Jerry L. Maulden/Entergy Fund at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding organisations. The researchers gratefully acknowledge the support.

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WHEN PEOPLE DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW: BREXIT AND THE BRITISH COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

A Review Essay by John Williams

Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union.

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Explaining Cameron's Catastrophe.

Robert Worcester, Roger Mortimore, Paul Baines, and Mark Gill. IndieBooks, 2017.

Keywords—*Brexit, communications, European Union*

About the Author

John Williams is a former Director of Communication and Press Secretary at the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2000–06, during which time he was a spokesperson for the UK Presidency of the European Union, 2005.

The beginnings of Britain’s departure from the European Union go back much further than the 2016 referendum. There has been a fundamental failure of communication for a long time, and it continues. The problem is more profound than misinformation or disinformation. The voter at least has a chance to check or challenge mis- and dis-information,¹ but when no information is given, how is the voter going to find out the facts not given? Non-information is more difficult to deal with because we don’t know what we don’t know. If the complexities and the consequences are not debated or discussed, the country cannot take an informed view about strategic choices.

The impact on manufacturing supply chains if Britain leaves the European single market and customs union is an excellent example. The phrase ‘supply chains’ was not a focus of contention in the referendum, nor has it featured prominently in arguments about the British government’s strategy for departing the Union. The issue is too dull for media and politicians, difficult to convey compellingly in the familiar terms of debate. So it goes unmentioned, unless you have a subscription to the *Financial Times*, or seek out specialist websites, or read a book about it, which few voters, understandably, are tempted to do.

The *FT* has illustrated the supply chain problem by describing how the bumpers of some Bentley cars cross La Manche, known on the UK side as the English Channel, three times before the car’s final assembly in Crewe.² The fuel injector for diesel lorry engines made by Delphi in Stonehouse, Gloucester, uses steel

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1 ‘Disinformation’ is defined as ‘the manipulation of information that purposefully aims to mislead or deceive’, while ‘misinformation’ is defined as ‘inaccurate information that is the result of an honest mistake or of negligence’. The definitions taken from Jente Althuis and Leonie Haiden (eds), *Fake News: A Roadmap* (Riga and London: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and King’s Centre for Strategic Communications, 2018).

2 *Financial Times* <<https://www.ft.com/content/c397f174-9205-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78>>

imported from Europe, is sent to Germany for specialist heat treatment, comes back to Gloucestershire for assembly, and is then exported to Sweden, France, and Germany—four cross-border movements. Good business, very boring. The impact of disrupting these supply chains with customs checks and costly tariffs goes unheard and unread by the great majority of voters.

Only 44% of a British-made car is actually made in Britain, the rest crossing borders during the production process, according to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders,³ which estimates that 11 000 lorries a day enter the UK from the EU with car components. Do our politicians not know about this tedious business, or if they do, is it too much trouble to share the information with the ultimate decision-makers, the people? ‘Save our supply chains’ is not a catchy slogan.

Ian Dunt⁴ has no doubt what the problem is. He writes of the ministerial Brexiteers: ‘[...] the behaviour of these men during the referendum campaign and afterwards displayed their ignorance and set the tone of the European response. They have demonstrated a persistent inability to deal realistically with the challenges they face or set out a deliverable goal...’.

As we proceed towards our national destiny in ignorance—in its non-pejorative sense of simply not knowing—we have nothing to lose but our supply chains, as Marx might have said.

The profound point about the Brexit communication breakdown is this—the complexity of modern, multinational economies has outrun the capacity of our media and politics to explain or even to understand. To put it bluntly, we no longer understand how life works. This is as important as the cynical tendency of some in the media and politics to mislead. How are voters supposed to make informed choices about realities they are unaware of? Did the voters of the Nissan-producing city of Sunderland vote to leave the European Union in full knowledge of the risk to the town’s economy of leaving the single market? Did voters, swayed by fear of immigration, vote in full knowledge of facts that show the benefits of free movement within the EU?

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³ Costas Pitas and Kate Holton, ‘UK car industry says no Brexit deal would cause permanent damage’, ed. Louise Heavens, *Reuters Business News*, 20 June 2017; *Financial Times* <<https://www.ft.com/content/e00fbc9e-d438-11e7-a303-9060cb1e5f44>>

⁴ Ian Dunt, *Brexit: What the Hell Happens Now?* (Kingston upon Thames: Canbury Press, 2018), p. 109 [Kindle edition, Loc 1187].

An intriguing answer is given by the Remain campaign pollster, Andrew Cooper, in an email to one of the authors of a study of Brexit polling, Matthew Goodwin.⁵

We probed a lot in the focus groups and the ostensible logic was hard to crack.... [Reducing immigration] would obviously mean less pressure on public services, above all the NHS; no longer sending a fortune to the EU [...]. Most people simply refused to accept that the cost/burden to the NHS of immigrants from the EU using its services was a small proportion, overall, of what they contributed in taxes. We tried different ways of saying that [...], but *it felt too counter-intuitive to be true, when set alongside everything else people thought they knew.*

My italics: this is an important insight into the workings of public opinion in a political environment of mis- and non-information. If anti-EU newspapers regularly report on ‘welfare tourists’ without ever reporting that immigrants overall pay into the state more than they take out, then few will themselves seek out what they are not being told because they don’t know what they are not being told.

The Leave campaign director, Dominic Cummings, who came up with the ‘Take Back Control’ slogan, understood the importance of what people don’t know. ‘I am not aware of a single MP or political journalist who understands the Single Market....’, he has written.⁶

It was not in our power to change basics of how the media works. We therefore twisted them to our advantage to hack the system.... In an environment in which the central arguments concerning trade and the economy were incomprehensible to the ‘experts’ themselves and the history and dynamics of the EU, either unknown to or suppressed by broadcasters, people chose between two simple stories. Vote Leave’s was more psychologically compelling.

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5 Harold C. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 49 [Kindle edition, Loc 1715].

6 Dominic Cummings, ‘[On the referendum #21: Branching histories of the 2016 referendum and “the frogs before the storm”](#)’, *Dominic Cummings’s Blog*, Word Press, 9 January 2017; This important blog is quoted and analysed at greater length in my essay about Brexit in John Williams and Kevin Marsh, *Strategic Communication* (Wickford, Essex: Offspin Media, forthcoming in 2018), 130–39.

The ‘will of the people’ is not influenced by the latest paper from the Institute for Government,⁷ but people will read *The Daily Mail* or listen to the increasingly uninformative interviews of the BBC Radio’s *Today* programme, whose he-said-she-said format encourages the weary sense that everything is equally unreliable. The problem of the economically ‘left behind’ has been well-chronicled as a cause of Brexit, but there is also an issue of being ‘left behind’ by lack of information.

This is a democratic deficit at the heart of Britain’s media-political culture; rather, of England’s. The historian Robert Tombs⁸ has called the vote to leave the European Union an ‘English revolt’. Anti-EU newspapers created this climate over many years, and broadcasters follow their agenda, not just in what stories they report, but in what to ignore, in the culture of non-information. Supply chains are not good material for combative interviews—it’s easier to have one MP each from Leave and Remain slugging it out, spreading apathy across the land.

A second issue, equally ignored, is the effect of Brexit on the Irish border. It was hardly mentioned in the referendum by either campaign (an example of Remain’s weak communication strategy). This is a problem of non-information, not misinformation, leaving most voters unable to know what they don’t know. British readers can find what they don’t know about this issue, for example, in *The New York Review of Books*, where Fintan O’Toole of *The Irish Times* has written:

It is an impossible frontier. At best, attempts to reimpose it will create a lawless zone for the smuggling of goods and people. At

7 Joe Owen, Marcus Shephard, and Alex Stojanovic, *Implementing Brexit: Customs* (London: Institute for Government, 2017) do a much better job of explaining this costly reality than the British government. For example, page 4 says:

‘There are 180,000 traders who will need to make customs declarations for the first time after exit; many of whom will be small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). They will need to manage increased administration and incur the cost of doing so. **The introduction of customs declarations alone could end up costing traders in the region of £4 billion (bn) a year.** [sic] For these traders to be ready for exit, government must be clear about when and how they must adapt, and leave them enough time to do so. Until they are given some certainty on what is required from them on day one, the amount of this work that can take place is limited.

‘**There is a cliff edge at the other side of the English Channel too.** [sic] Even if the UK’s border is ready for Brexit, issues in Calais, Rotterdam or other European ports could cause significant disruption for British exporters and supply chains. The famous queues of lorries along the M20 in Kent in June 2015 were a result of problems on the French side, not in Dover. Government is dependent on the successful preparation of European partners. Engagement and collaboration are critical but so is certainty on what customs after Brexit will look like.’

8 Robert Tombs, ‘*The English Revolt: Brexit, Euroscepticism and the Future of the United Kingdom*’, *New Statesman*, 24 July 2016; Tombs, author of *The English and Their History* ([London]: Penguin, 2015), wrote in the *New Statesman* about ‘an upsurge over decades of a more assertive, perhaps resentful, sense of English identity.’

worst, border posts will be magnets for the violence of fringe militant groups who will delight in having such powerfully symbolic targets. The British position paper for the negotiations with the EU, published in August, merely evaded all of these problems by suggesting that in the wonderful free-trading Utopia that will emerge after Brexit there will be no need for a physical border at all.⁹

This is an outstanding example of the democracy deficit resulting from non-information. And this deficit has continued to characterise Britain's approach to negotiating exit terms.

Ian Dunt says: 'Britain's government has approached Brexit ineptly, misjudging its opponent, underestimating the challenges, and prioritising its short-term political interests over the long-term interests of the country.'¹⁰

Geoffrey Evans and Anand Menon note a study by the Hansard Society showing what it called a 'disturbing' new trend: 'Indifference to politics, it argued, was hardening into "something more significant", with interest, knowledge, satisfaction and engagement falling, at times sharply.'¹¹ The 'knowledge' part of that equation is the responsibility of politicians and the media, not of the public. In a democracy, elected leaders and opposition politicians have a duty to explain the policies they want people to vote for. When they do not, it is their fault, not the voters', that national choices are made in a vacuum of non-information. The political duty to explain is especially important when the issues are complex, and have major consequences. Instead, the leaders of British government and main Opposition have deluded themselves and misled the public about the European Union.

Attitudes to the European Union were not formed during the referendum campaign, but developed over a long time. Back in 1983, the first Eurobarometer poll found that only 33% believed Britain was benefiting from membership, 56% did not. Thereafter there were only 'a couple of polls where more thought Britain had benefited than not, but the proportion seeing a benefit

9 Fintan O'Toole, 'Brexit's Irish Question', *New York Review of Books*, 28 September, 2017.

10 Dunt.

11 Geoffrey Evans and Anand Menon, *Brexit and British Politics*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017) p. 43.

never reached 50%, and from 1999 onwards, was never over 40%’, according to Sir Robert Worcester, founder of MORI (Market & Opinion Research International Ltd.), and others in their study of polling on Europe. This was a long-established apathy against which the Remain campaign struggled in 2016. Worcester et al make the valid point that ‘the Remain campaign made little ground in establishing a positive case for EU membership of Europe. This has been a consistent weakness for almost the whole of the 30-plus years that the Eurobarometer has been monitoring British opinions on Europe’.¹²

Ulrich Speck, senior fellow at the Aspen Institute Germany,¹³ writing on his Facebook page, says: ‘One can argue that Brexit at least partly is a consequence of that failure of Europe’s intellectual class to develop a political discourse—ideas, categories, analysis—that is focused on what the EU is and does. Brits only discover now what the EU is and does, as they are confronted with the prospect of losing it.’¹⁴

One of the United Kingdom’s most distinguished EU diplomats, Sir Stephen Wall, has written about ‘the perpetual difficulties Britain has faced in extolling the EU’s benefits’.¹⁵ I experienced this difficulty when working with Wall among others, as the Foreign Secretary’s Press Secretary. Long before the referendum, the British government faced the challenge in the year 2000 of explaining and extolling the benefits of enlarging the Union to include countries that had been part of the Soviet empire. The benefits of Britain being one of the most influential decision-makers in this wider EU seemed so obvious to senior officials that they were puzzled by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook’s concern about how to communicate them. Our pressing concern was how to prevent the anti-EU media from convincing the public that the necessary changes to voting weights and veto powers would amount to a surrender of sovereignty.

My notes from that time describe the challenge, beginning with this passage reflecting on a paper which I submitted to the Foreign Secretary during preparations for the negotiations on EU enlargement:

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12 Robert Worcester, Roger Mortimore, Paul Baines, and Mark Gill, *Explaining Cameron’s Catastrophe* (London: IndieBooks, 2017), pp. 130–31.

13 [Aspen Institute Germany](#).

14 Ulrich Speck, [Facebook post](#), 18 January 2018.

15 Stephen Wall, *A Stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), quoted in William Keegan, David Marsh and Richard Roberts, *Six Days In September: Black Wednesday, Brexit and the Making of Europe* (London: OMFIF [Official Monetary and Financial institutions Forum] Press, 2017), p. 25.

[I]t has long seemed to me—I wrote this in the paper which Robin used as the basis for his [...] strategy submission to Blair—that the anti-European newspapers have set themselves the task of destroying this government’s pro-European policy by making it impossible to speak up sensibly and moderately for Europe. Their propaganda is a poison which will, if not drawn, kill this country’s commitment to Europe, within a very few years [...]. What Robin liked in the paper I had written for him was the trio of sceptic phrases which I picked out for counter-attack: superstate, surrender, sovereignty. These have been the devastatingly simple basis of their assault on the Major and Blair governments.¹⁶

The term ‘superstate’ was first used, as far as I know, by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in September 1988, in a speech to the College of Europe in Bruges. I was there as political correspondent of the *London Evening Standard*. ‘You will like this’, said her press secretary, Bernard Ingham, when he handed me the text on the way there, so that I could make the deadline for the front page. He and the Prime Minister knew the impact they wanted to make with phrases like:

We have not rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level, with a European superstate exercising a new dominance from Brussels.¹⁷

This was a ‘fantasy’, according to Hugo Young,¹⁸ one of her biographers, ‘a fantasy, however which [...] secured a life of its own that pervaded many corners of politics and diplomacy in the months ahead’.

Further ahead than a few months—it was arguably the most effective speech as strategic communication, by a British politician, in the last half century. It was the beginning of the argument that won the referendum nearly 30 years later. The Bruges speech set the framework in which the debate about Britain in Europe was argued from then on. By portraying it as a potential ‘superstate’, Margaret Thatcher simplified the complexities and ambiguities of modern Europe, and Britain’s role in it, to a narrative that served her followers well a generation later.

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16 John Williams, *Robin Cook: Principles and Power* (London: IndieBooks, 2015), p. 122

17 Margaret Thatcher, ‘Speech to the College of Europe “The Bruges Speech”’, The Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 22 September 1988.

18 Hugo Young, *One Of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 551

When our fellow Europeans wonder how Britain came to break with Europe, one of the answers must be that a mainstream political figure of such weight turned against the European Community.¹⁹ This gave the case against membership a respectability that it has not had in France, Germany, Italy, and so on, where the mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties of government have remained faithful to the EU consensus. Thatcher's legend remained an engine of anti-EU sentiment long after she left office in 1990.

Paul Welfens, a German academic who seems baffled by Brexit, gently understates the failure of communication about the EU's benefits to Britain: 'One may emphasise that knowledge about the EU seems to be rather modest in the UK.'²⁰ For Welfens, the referendum result was irrational. He notes Britain's long association with rationality:

The world owes British philosophy and scientific development a debt of gratitude for the modern approach of science which is based on observation, modeling and empirical studies.... Against this background of modern progress from 1700 to 2000, the run-up to the British referendum of 2016 looks particularly strange.²¹

He therefore cannot understand why the majority of voters were not persuaded by economic facts: 'The fact that a majority of British voters voted for Brexit, that is for the UK to leave the EU, despite expert warnings regarding its long-term reduction in income of 3–10%, demands closer attention—the rationality of western, or at the very least of British politics has been called into question by the referendum.'²²

Welfens is convinced that if the Treasury's forecast of a 3–10% loss of income had been more prominent in the campaign, especially in a government leaflet sent to all households, 'it can be assumed' this 'would have changed the result'.²³ But this is to misunderstand what moved the 52%: not the economy, but

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19 The European Community of Thatcher's day has been absorbed into the European Union.

20 Paul J.J. Welfens, *An Accidental Brexit: New EU and Transatlantic Economic Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 51.

21 *Ibid.*, p. xi.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 297.

immigration. The Ipsos Mori study includes a table which makes the point vividly, how divided the country was on what most mattered in the referendum.²⁴ For 54% of Leavers, immigration was ‘very important’ in deciding how to vote; for 18%, the economy. The reverse was true for Remain voters: 50% put ‘the impact on Britain’s economy’ first, while 12% cited ‘the number of immigrants coming into Britain’.

According to this analysis of the polling, we should ‘think of the referendum decision as one entirely deriving from a competition and interaction between different issues [...] these are not necessarily all policy issues decided entirely upon a rational and deliberative basis: we must remember to include issues which may be more emotionally or value based, such as perceptions of national identity, as well as those that may in theory be more solidly factual such as economic impact or immigration levels’.²⁵

Worcester et al go on: ‘What does seem clear is that most Leave voters rejected any likelihood that Brexit might be economically painful [...]. A comfortable majority of those intending to vote Leave said they thought the economy would be better[...]. This of course was directly contrary to the pronouncements of the government and many experts, who argued that Brexit would be economically disastrous, and most Remain voters accepted this message.’²⁶

So Paul Welfens has a point in seeing the outcome as not entirely rational. He describes the pro-Europe referendum campaign as a ‘Fatal Communication Disaster’²⁷ and blames the European Commission as well as Prime Minister David Cameron: ‘One can criticise the entire Brexit manoeuvre by Conservative PM Cameron, but it was also incumbent upon EU partner countries to demonstrate the benefits of EU membership and argue against Brexit[...]. The anti-EU focus of the British tabloid press hampered the European Commission’s attempts to make the EU institutions and politics understandable. From 2013 at least, however, the commission should indeed have invested more in UK information projects.’²⁸

This underestimates the problem of the so-called British tabloid press. *The Daily Telegraph* is a broadsheet, and influences—or reinforces—the beliefs

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²⁴ Worcester et al, Table 24, p. 117.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 116.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 121.

²⁷ Welfens, pp. 33–79.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

of a different segment of public opinion from *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*. There is a sadly amusing illustration of the gulf between Brussels and the *Daily Mail* in Christopher Patten's *First Confession*.²⁹ Lord Patten became a European Commissioner after leaving British politics. He describes how the head of the Commission, Romano Prodi, an Italian unfamiliar with London's media culture, decided to go and see the editor of the *Daily Mail*, Paul Dacre, to try to convince him of the virtues of Europe. Patten warned him he would be wasting his time and 'Romano returned, chastened, to Brussels, his belief in British commitment to responsible free speech and liberal values considerably dented'.³⁰

Patten was a Conservative pro-European who served in Thatcher's Cabinet and was among those who urged her to resign when challenged by Michael Heseltine, a pro-European ex-minister. The fall of Thatcher was not all about Europe, but her 'increasingly belligerent'³¹ attitude was a major factor, her hostility prompting the resignation of Sir Geoffrey Howe, triggering Heseltine's challenge.

Thatcher was succeeded by John Major, who 'rejected any idea that Europe was heading towards a "superstate"'.³² Major had persuaded Thatcher in her final weeks to take Britain into the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), a forerunner of the euro, which tied currencies to limited ranges of fluctuation. This brief and unhappy experience, when Britain lost £3.3bn³³ in a single day,³⁴ unsuccessfully trying to stop sterling's freefall, is another long-ago factor in the minds of older voters and of veteran Conservative MPs committed to leaving.

The story is told in *Six Days in September*, as stylishly as you would expect from a book co-written by William Keegan, whose column in *The Observer* has been a weekly pleasure for non-believers in Thatcherite orthodoxy from her heyday through to his continuing critique of the May government's handling of negotiations.

Wednesday 16 September [1992] was a day of transformation for Britain and Europe. Just 12 hours of frenetic foreign exchange trading tore apart Britain's economic strategy. John

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29 Christopher Patten, *First Confession, A Sort Of Memoir, European* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 219.

30 Ibid.

31 David Cannadine, *Margaret Thatcher: A Life and Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 103.

32 Keegan et al, p. 86.

33 Ibid., p. 4.

34 Ibid.

Major's Conservative government never fully recovered its authority. As Stephen Wall, one of Major's closest allies, said: "Black Wednesday altered the course of UK politics on Europe, and was fundamentally the end of the Major government."³⁵ Britain's new trajectory of EU semi-detachment culminated 24 years later in the referendum vote to Leave.³⁶

The anger generated by the ERM episode fused with resistance to the Maastricht Treaty, as Major was challenged by a parliamentary revolt led by Tory MPs who today remain prominent in the anti-EU movement, such as Iain Duncan-Smith and John Redwood. Thatcher herself believed Maastricht 'passes colossal powers from parliamentary governments to centralised bureaucracy'.³⁷ She left Britain's centre-right party of government, the Conservatives, permanently divided on Europe, an essential pre-condition for the 2016 referendum. Without a divided Conservative Party, Nigel Farage of the United Kingdom Independence Party could not have emerged as a political force strong enough to push David Cameron into holding the referendum.

Farage's significance in the Leave victory is astutely explained by Goodwin et al.³⁸ Though 'toxic' to many voters, his 'populist appeal was a plus for Leave in other respects [...] [with] his forthright emphasis on the dangers of mass immigration and accompanying argument that Brexit was the only way ordinary people could "take back control" [...]. Farage had recognised the potency of the immigration issue from the outset of the campaign and indeed years earlier.³⁹ In this sense Leave's dual-track organisation enabled its two rival armies to leverage the populist power of the immigration issue while simultaneously allowing miscellaneous middle-class eurosceptics to keep a safe distance from the politically incorrect UKIP chieftain'.

In other words, while Farage and Boris Johnson differed on the issue of immigration, each reached parts of the electorate the other couldn't. 'Leave's bifurcated campaign became an increasingly potent political weapon in the run-up to the balloting.'

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35 Major's government actually lasted nearly five more years, having just won a general election, but its authority and support were badly damaged by Black Wednesday.

36 Keegan et al, p. 86.

37 Ibid.

38 Goodwin et al, p. 32.

39 Matthew Goodwin and Robert Ford, *Revolt on the Right* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014) was a good guide to the voters UKIP was attracting, well before the referendum.

It is a commonplace in political communication that the messengers matter, as well as the messages. Andrew Cooper, the Remain campaign's chief pollster, says that 'it was clear from all our tracking research that Boris was having a big impact. This came through clearly in the focus groups in our (weekly, twice-weekly, then daily) polling, Boris invariably came top on the question of which politician has made the most persuasive impact (Cameron invariably came second)'. Johnson was 'especially important. Although the multiplicity of factors at work means that it is not possible to conclude "No Boris, No Brexit", it is clear that the widely unexpected presence of London's former Mayor at the heart of the Leave campaign was a major asset for the Leave side'.⁴⁰

To the extent that Cameron did not calculate for a politician of Johnson's appeal opposing him, it was an 'accidental Brexit', as Welfens terms it.

The German Chancellor Angela Merkel presciently feared such an accident well before Cameron made his strategic choice to hold a referendum. One of her biographers refers to 'the scenario that in Berlin was always described using an English expression: "accidental exit". Hopes of a referendum might be too high, there could be a backbench revolt, an unexpected result at the next general election [2015], and then a country that was unable to handle the consequences. At which point the situation would be beyond saving.'⁴¹

One accident waiting to happen turned out to be Boris Johnson. Another was a failure of communication between Cameron and Merkel: '[...] Merkel was keen that her British counterpart should get the right message: Cameron should not over-estimate his position, he should not count on her being too accommodating [...]. This short-term failure combined with a longer-term factor, in Merkel's view, according to one account: '[...] in Berlin there is always a note of sympathy in people's voices when they talk about Great Britain and its romantic view of a world that has long since changed.'

British nostalgia is one of the deep-seated reasons for Brexit, in my view: call it the Dunkirk factor, or as Hugo Young described it, 'the mythology of the sceptered isle, the demi-paradise'.⁴²

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40 Goodwin et al, p. 173.

41 Stefan Kornelius, *Angela Merkel: The Chancellor and Her World*, (Richmond [London]: Alma Books, 2014), [Chapter 12: The British Problem, Kindle edition, Loc 3319].

42 Keegan et al, p. 34.

Tony Judt wrote in his epic history of modern Europe, *Postwar*, of the effect of post-imperial nostalgia on both Britain and France: ‘It was not very surprising that history-as-nostalgia was so very pronounced in these two national settings in particular.’ Britain and France had ‘entered the 20th century as proud imperial powers [...]. The confidence and security of global empire had been replaced by uneasy memories and uncertain future prospects. What it meant to be French, or British, had once been very clear, but no longer. The alternative, to become enthusiastically “European”, was far easier in small countries like Belgium or Portugal, or in places—like Italy or Spain—where the recent national past was best left in shadow. But for nations reared within living memory on grandeur and glory, “Europe” would always be an uncomfortable transition; a compromise, not a choice.’⁴³

France has made a different choice to Britain, electing President Emmanuel Macron, with his enthusiasm for a more integrated EU. Compare David Cameron or Theresa May with Emmanuel Macron talking about Europe, and you see in the French President a man profoundly at ease with the Union, in contrast with the deep discomfort of the current British Prime Minister or the unconvincing rhetoric of Cameron: unconvincing on Europe because he was himself unconvinced.

Macron and May are the current reflections of different national cultures and identities and histories. It is no wonder that Britain is leaving when even advocates of EU membership speak with tongue-tied reluctance about the benefits. The contrast between French fluency and English fumbling is more than a matter of personal political style. Mrs May represents in her paralysed thinking the deadlocked English attitude to Europe, split almost equally for and against. This deadlock is the result of failure to think seriously about modern Britain’s role in the real world, preferring misunderstandings about how nations prosper now, and myths about free trade glory a hundred and more years ago

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43 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 769.

at the pinnacle of empire.⁴⁴ As Tony Judt wrote, there is ‘a genuine nostalgia for a fake past’. The insistence of leading Brexiteers that Britain must leave the customs union and return to its free trading heritage leaves out the inconvenient fact that it was not free but colonial trade that made Britain great.

When Britain lost an empire and searched for a role, we found it as one of the leading powers in the union of European nations, far more influential in EU decision-making than British leaders ever dared admit to, in a political-media culture that caricatured Europe as a series of zero-sum squabbles. Britain is now on the way to losing its enviable position as one of the strongest nations in the world’s biggest free trade area, whose democratic values need defending collectively more than ever, without quite realising what we are walking away from. Scotland seems to have understood what Europe means to its nations, and voted decisively for modernity against nostalgia, as did France when Macron defeated Marine Le Pen.

Macron sounds like a leader who has thought seriously about his country’s role in the actual world his generation lives in, for example when he speaks about needing a common European response to migration because the challenge cannot be met by ‘leaving the burden to the few, be they countries of first entry or final host countries, by building the terms for genuine, chosen, organized and concerted solidarity’. Or when he speaks about economic mobility in the digital age: ‘We are no longer living in times in which our economies can develop as if they were closed, as if talented people no longer moved around and as if entrepreneurs were tied to a post. We can regret this, but this is how it is. This digital revolution is being led by talented people and it is by attracting them that we will attract others.’⁴⁵

In his speech on Europe at the Sorbonne last September, the French President set these specific modern challenges in a strategic context that offers the

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44 Maia de la Baume, ‘UK has “huge misunderstanding” over post-Brexit customs: Senior MEP’, *Politico*, 12 February 2018, updated 14 February 2018. ‘Britain has a “huge misunderstanding” about how it will be able to trade with the EU after it leaves the bloc, a leading Brexit expert in the European Parliament said. Danuta Hübner, a member of Parliament’s Brexit Steering Group, said British leaders thought they could leave the EU’s customs union but enjoy an arrangement with Brussels that would produce similar benefits. But, Hübner said in an interview with POLITICO, British politicians did not seem to grasp what a customs union is or how it operates. “There is a huge misunderstanding”, said Hübner, who is an important voice in the Brexit debate as the European Parliament must approve the final withdrawal deal between the U.K. and the EU. “All the comments that we hear from politicians in the U.K. clearly show that there is no understanding between what it means to be in the customs union ...’

45 Emmanuel Macron, ‘Initiative pour l’Europe: Une Europe souveraine, unie, démocratique’, speech at the Sorbonne, full text English version, 26 September 2017.

opposite vision to the Brexit mentality: 'We can no longer choose to turn inwards within national borders; this would be a collective disaster. We must not allow ourselves to be intimidated by the illusion of retreat. Only by refusing this lie will we be able to meet the demands of our time, its urgency, its seriousness. [...] [W]e must instead consider how to make a strong Europe, in the world as it is today.'

He might have been speaking about British leadership when he said: 'It is so much easier never to explain where we want to go, where we want to lead our people, and to remain with hidden arguments, because we have simply lost sight of the objective.'

Macron gave a master class in strategic communication when he came to Britain for talks with Theresa May in January 2018. Interviewed on the BBC, his body and verbal language exuded confidence in the case for the EU.⁴⁶ He talked about 'a more protective Europe. [...] Europe is something which will protect you'. The Remain campaign might have made that its theme, talking about membership of the single market as the best protection for the jobs of workers in places that ended up voting to leave; might have highlighted the workplace and social rights protected by EU membership, for the very people who feel excluded from the modern economy; about EU protection of the environment that has cleaned up British beaches and rivers. But even if Remain had had the confidence to take this sort of case to the people, it would have struggled for a hearing because of the decades of reluctance to speak positively about the EU in the face of media hostility. It would have been, in that deadly phrase of Andrew Cooper's, counter-intuitive to what people think they know about Europe, to say that actually if you feel vulnerable in the free market, it is the EU that provides the economic strength and the political values that you are looking for.

46 'French President Emmanuel Macron on Brexit and Trump', *The Andrew Marr Show*, 21 January 2018; *The Huffington Post* commented that 'it was Macron's willingness to engage with Marr, ditch soundbites and speak with passion that led many political observers to reflect on why the UK has to make do with second best'. Graeme Demianyk, 'Emmanuel Macron's Andrew Marr Interview Has People Swooning', *Huffington Post*, 21 January 2018, updated 22 January 2018; Tweets from the political editor of *The Sun* and one of Sky TV's presenters gave the consensus view of the media. Tom Newton Dunn: 'Think what you like about Macron, but by God he answers a straight question. Our obfuscating politicians need to learn how to do that fast.' #Marr 9:45 AM - Jan 21, 2018; Kay Burley: 'Excellent body language from Macron on #marr. Plenty for our politicians to build on. Engaged with the interviewer. Answering the questions.' ✓@KayBurley, 9:33 AM - Jan 21, 2018

France is of course not immune to the kind of self-doubt that fuelled Brexit. ‘A book entitled *Le Suicide Français* became a runaway best seller in 2014 as it proclaimed that “France is dying, France is dead”, killed by a “vast subversive project” driven by globalization, immigration, feminism and the EU Bureaucracy.’⁴⁷ France had a straight choice in its Presidential election of 2017 between this bleak vision, as expressed by Marine Le Pen of the Front National, and a young man standing for national self-confidence. Nostalgia was defeated in France, but won in England (whose votes overwhelmed the rest of the UK in the 2016 referendum).

Nostalgia is an essential ingredient of English nationalism, that sense of destiny, separate from Europe, which has a strong pull on the national imagination. Margaret Thatcher’s pivotal Bruges speech was heavy with this nostalgia: ‘Over the centuries we have fought to prevent Europe from falling under the dominance of a single power. We have fought and we have died for her freedom [...]. Had it not been for that willingness to fight and to die, Europe would have been united long before now—but not in liberty, not in justice [...]. And it was from our island fortress that the liberation of Europe itself was mounted.’

This historical narrative—tinged with longing for past greatness—has lasting appeal well beyond those who see Margaret Thatcher as the most significant British leader since Winston Churchill. If it was not Boris Johnson who single-handedly won the referendum, I would argue that Margaret Thatcher had at least as much influence, posthumously, having set the terms of debate in her last years of power. The ‘superstate’ narrative was never successfully countered, even by Tony Blair during his decade of advocating and playing a constructive British role in Europe. It distilled all the anxieties about national impotence and decline, and it provided the fertile soil in which fears about immigration could grow. The superstate ‘fantasy’ provided not only something to blame, but better, something that could be revolted against.

As Fintan O’Toole says: ‘Since England doesn’t actually have an oppressor, it was necessary to invent one. Decades of demonisation by Rupert Murdoch’s newspapers and by the enormously influential *Daily Mail* made the European Union a natural fit for the job.’⁴⁸

47 Éric Zemmour, *Le Suicide français* (Paris : Albin Michel, 2014) quoted in Jonathan Fenby, *The History of Modern France: From the Revolution to the War on Terror* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2015, pp. 462–84) [Chapter 24: The Weight of History, Kindle edition, loc 7811].

48 O’Toole, ‘Brexit’s Irish Question’.

Ironically, Thatcher called at the end of the Bruges speech for the completion of the single market,⁴⁹ having herself negotiated the Single European Act of 1985 that created it. She herself said she had ‘surrendered no important British interest’ in doing so.⁵⁰

How different might English attitudes be to the European Union if the single market had been portrayed as a great legacy of Margaret Thatcher. All those companies trading across European supply chains have Margaret Thatcher to thank for their freedom to do so. To try that now would feel *‘too counter-intuitive to be true, when set alongside everything else people thought they knew,’* as Andrew Cooper described facts about immigration. This is perhaps the biggest lesson for strategic communication to come out of Brexit, that in our politics, the most powerful force is what people think they know, in the absence of information they never see nor hear.

Brexit is what happens when the seductive simplicities of nostalgia and nationalism triumph over the counter-intuitive realities of modern economies, in a vacuum of political non-information.

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49 The relevant passage from the Bruges speech is: ‘My third guiding principle is the need for Community policies which encourage enterprise. If Europe is to flourish and create the jobs of the future, enterprise is the key. The basic framework is there: the Treaty of Rome itself was intended as a Charter for Economic Liberty. But that is not how it has always been read, still less applied.

‘The lesson of the economic history of Europe in the 70s and 80s is that central planning and detailed control *do not* work and that personal endeavour and initiative *do*. That a State-controlled economy is a recipe for low growth and that free enterprise within a framework of law brings better results. The aim of a Europe open to enterprise is the moving force behind the creation of the Single European Market in 1992. By getting rid of barriers, by making it possible for companies to operate on a European scale, we can best compete with the United States, Japan and other new economic powers emerging in Asia and elsewhere.

And that means action to *free* markets, action to *widen* choice, action to *reduce* government intervention. Our aim should *not* be more and more detailed regulation from the centre: it should be to deregulate and to remove the constraints on trade [...]’. Thatcher, “The Bruges Speech”.

50 In her autobiography, Lady Thatcher wrote: ‘I was pleased with what had been achieved. We were on course for the Single Market by 1992. I had had to make relatively few compromises as regards wording: I had surrendered no important British interest [...]. I still believe it was right to sign the Single European Act because we wanted a Single European Market.’ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperPress, 2012), pp. 555–57.

DATA RIGHTS AND POPULATION CONTROL: HUMAN, CONSUMER, OR COMRADE?

A Review Essay by Charles Kriel

‘The Cambridge Analytica Files’.
The Guardian. 2018.

The EU General Data Protection Regulation and Recitals.
General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). 2018.

Black Mirror, Season 3, Episode 1, ‘Nosedive’.
21 October 2016. Netflix.

‘Inside China’s Vast New Experiment in Social Ranking’.
Hvistendahl et al. *Wired*. 14 December 2017.

Keywords—*data, privacy, human rights, consumer rights, DCMS Select Committee, fake news, Facebook, social credit, GDPR, Cambridge Analytica, Federal Trade Commission*

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¹ Charles Kriel, *CI – Countering Violent Extremism* [podcast] Corsham Institute.

On a rainy London Friday this year, the 23rd of March, seventeen UK officials entered a New Oxford Street building. Across the backs of many were FBI-style jackets emblazoned with a logo reading ‘ico.’—the UK Information Commissioner’s Office. The woman who led them carried a sheet of paper, presumably the warrant ICO Information Commissioner Elizabeth Denham had sought days before, allowing her to enter the offices of the campaign firm Cambridge Analytica.²

According to the *Guardian*’s ‘Cambridge Analytica Files’³ lead by investigative reporter Carole Cadwalladr, they weren’t the first group of ‘auditors’ to breach the building that week. Five days before, investigators from the cybersecurity firm Stroz Friedberg entered the Cambridge Analytica offices on behalf of Facebook, Inc., looking for information similar to that sought by Commissioner Denham.⁴

What was at stake was the data of at least 87 million Facebook users, most of them US citizens, and a trail of evidence implicating Cambridge Analytica. This material showed their CEO to be potentially in contempt of Parliament. Facebook too was in potential violation of a 2011 US Federal Trade Commission consent agreement that could see the company fined hundreds of millions of dollars.⁵ These discoveries led to an even deeper revelation—the world’s super-states were engaged in a struggle with information, all seeking to define the look of data governance. This revelation was to place the constituent foundational principles of the modern US, EU, and Chinese management policies—data management and also population management—in the spotlight.

On 19 March, Britain’s Channel 4 TV interviewed Damian Collins, the MP leading the UK’s House of Commons Select Committee investigation into fake news,⁶ on the propriety of Facebook, a corporation under suspicion, sending private investigators into Cambridge Analytica, a company under investigation, to trawl the evidence.⁷

2 Harriet Agerholm, ‘Investigators raid Cambridge Analytica offices after search warrant granted’, *Independent*, 23 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

3 *Guardian*, ‘The Cambridge Analytica Files’, a continuing series of articles from 17 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

4 Hannah Summers and Nicola Slawson, ‘Investigators complete seven-hour Cambridge Analytica HQ search’, *Guardian*, US edition, 24 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]; David Meyer, ‘Facebook Sent Auditors to Ensure Cambridge Analytica Wasn’t Hiding User Data. The U.K. Said “Get Out”’, *Fortune*, 20 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

5 Bloomberg, ‘Facebook May Have Breached a 2011 Consent Agreement, FTC Says’, *Fortune*, 29 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

6 The author is the Specialist Advisor to the House of Commons Select Committee on Fake News. Kriel, Charles, *Expert testimony on ‘Fake News’*, UK Parliament, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, meeting chaired by Damian Collins, 23 January 2018.

7 Channel 4 TV, ‘Damian Collins MP on Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: Mark Zuckerberg “should give evidence to MPs”’, presenter Jon Snow, 19 March 2018.

On the same day, Commissioner Denham kicked Facebook's auditors out. 'At the request of the U.K. Information Commissioner's Office, which has announced it is pursuing a warrant to conduct its own on-site investigation, the Stroz Friedberg auditors stood down', Facebook said.⁸

The arrogance of Facebook in sending in their own investigation team ahead of the authorities was noted in the press. 'Its culture melds a ruthless pursuit of profit with a Panglossian and narcissistic belief in its own virtue. Mr Zuckerberg controls the firm's voting rights. Clearly, he gets too little criticism', read the *Economist's* breathless assessment.⁹ But this wasn't the only surprise questioned by press and public.

Although the ICO first issued a demand for access to Cambridge Analytica's offices and data on 7 March, and a demand for a warrant on 19 March, the application wasn't granted until 23 March. In the four long days between, several shipping crates were removed from the building, followed by a suspended CEO Alexander Nix.¹⁰ Shadow digital minister Liam Byrne called the delay 'ludicrous'.¹¹

Within three weeks, Mark Zuckerberg would testify twice before Congressional committees. His company lost more than \$100 bn in market capitalisation (it would later recover somewhat).¹² And the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) would confirm an investigation into whether Facebook violated a 2011 consent decree regarding the privacy of not just 87 million users, but possibly of *every* Facebook user.

In addition to these FTC, Congressional, and Parliamentary investigations, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece,¹³ Australia,¹⁴ India, Kenya, and Nigeria¹⁵ were in pursuit as well.

8 Meyer, 'Facebook Sent Auditors'.

9 *Economist*, 'Facebook faces a reputational meltdown' (entitled 'Epic Fail' in the print edition), 22 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

10 Hilary Osborne and Dan Sabbagh, 'Cambridge Analytica: search of London HQ delayed by wait for warrant', *Guardian*, 22 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]; Paul Sandle and Costas Pitas, 'Cambridge Analytica London search warrant delayed by court', *Reuters*, 22 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

11 *BBC News*, 'Cambridge Analytica chief recalled by MPs', 22 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

12 Business Standard, 'Facebook loses \$100-bn m-cap in 10 days as US FTC announces privacy probe', 26 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

13 Már Másson Maack, 'Facebook reported in 7 countries for breaking European privacy law', *The Next Web*, 6 April 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

14 Rishi Iyengar, 'Australia launches investigation into Facebook over data scandal', *CNNMoney*, 5 April 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

15 Karen Attiah, 'It's not just America: Zuckerberg has to answer for Facebook's actions around the world', *Washington Post*, 10 April 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

What also began to emerge was the existence of a fundamental schism in the way data, and Facebook, are treated in the US and the EU, and further used to control populations in more autocratic countries such as the Philippines and Myanmar.¹⁶ Not to mention China, where, although Facebook has been banned since 2009,¹⁷ data surveillance is potentially one of the Chinese Communist Party's most promising tools for self-preservation.

At the Senate Committee hearing on 10 April, senators slung phrases like 'consumer rights', 'freedom and liberties', and 'Terms and Conditions' at the Facebook founder. Meanwhile, Zuckerberg shielded himself with promises of stateside implementation of much of the EU's sweeping General Data Protection Regulation, and that Artificial Intelligence would fix it.¹⁸ Despite that, the interrogation was generally congenial, with few sharp elbows. Senator Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) even offered compliments, 'Quite a story—dorm room to the global behemoth you are. Only in America, would you agree? You couldn't do this in China.'

Zuckerberg's reply: 'There are some strong Chinese Internet companies.'

In fact they're a little bit similar, in that [China and America] both come at data protection very much from a sectoral standpoint whereas in the EU we're really looking at a pan European Data Protection Regulation which is very much from a human rights standpoint.

Erin Anzelmo is a privacy advocate who spent ten years in Brussels working on Internet policy. She's being interviewed on the podcast *Ci – Countering Violent Extremism*,¹⁹ discussing the difference between data privacy approaches in the US and China.²⁰ 'In China and America it is very much piecemeal by industry, by sector, cut across many different forms of legislation as well as often from a *consumer rights angle*.'

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16 Ibid.

17 Sherisse Pham and Charles Riley, 'Banned! 11 things you won't find in China', *CNN Tech*, 17 March 2018. [Accessed 18 May 2018]

18 *C-SPAN*, 'Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg Senate Hearing on Data Protection', 10 April 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

19 Erin Anzelmo, interview by Charles Kriel, 'State surveillance, privacy and online radicalisation', Corsham Institute podcast *Ci - Countering Violent Extremism*, 3 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

20 The author is the host and producer of *Ci – Countering Violent Extremism*.

According to Anzelmo, the Chinese General Data Protection law is made up of two pieces of legislation: One is a legally binding document, drafted in 2012, that strengthens online information protection. The other is the Guideline for Personal Information Protection, classed somewhere below legislation, but still a part of China's data protection package. Although not legally binding, it guides industry and the private sector on subject access to, and handling and transfer of, sensitive personal data. 'These two comprise the majority of data protection law in China. And thirdly there's recently in 2017 adopted [sic] the China Cybersecurity Law which also touches on the handling of personal information.'

So isn't there some irony in these data protection laws having been passed in China, yet, as outlined in *Wired's* recent article 'You Are a Number' by Mara Hvistendahl, the Chinese government is working with Chinese companies to monitor and score citizens on their trustworthiness to the Chinese Communist Party?

'True. Some could call this window dressing', says Anzelmo. 'It is very different from what's happening in America with the vast amount of data harvesting, profiling and surveillance.'

America's approach to privacy began with the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1791 as part of the Bill of Rights.²¹ The Amendment was a response to the British Writ of Assistance, and largely protected the individual against unreasonable search and seizure by the State.²²

The US Privacy Act of 1974 'governs the collection, maintenance, use, and dissemination of information about individuals that is maintained in systems of records by federal agencies'.²³ While it seeks to protect the citizen from undue publication of personal data held in government systems of record, as well as giving individuals a means of accessing and amending these records—comprehensively listed by the Department of Justice²⁴—the Act does nothing to protect personal data held by non-government entities, and is limited to the federal government's processing of information.²⁵

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21 Anzelmo, 'State surveillance'.

22 Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute (LII), *Fourth Amendment: An Overview*, last edited June 2017. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

23 United States Department of Justice, Office of Privacy and Civil Liberties, *Privacy Act of 1974*, Updated 27 July 2015. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

24 US Department of Justice, Office of Privacy and Civil Liberties, *DOJ Systems of Records*, Updated 12 April 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

25 Anzelmo, 'State surveillance'.

The US began to address individual data privacy with regard to non-federal entities with acts like the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), the latter of which prohibits the collection of online data from anyone under the age of thirteen. In practice, this prohibits children from creating accounts on Facebook, or obtaining an Apple ID.²⁶

What is common amongst these Acts is they are trade-driven, and focused on rendering the data rights of consumers. 'The U.S. Agency primarily responsible for data protection is of course the Federal Trade Commission, the FTC. In the United States we see that privacy is very much about consumer protection. It's certainly not being regarded as a human right in comparison to what's happening in the European Union,' Anzelmo says, referring to the General Data Protection Regulation, implemented in 2018, harmonising data privacy laws across Europe.²⁷

If any organisation represents an existential threat to Zuckerberg's company, it is the FTC. There's no small irony in the world's monopoly social network—which shares a duopoly in global digital advertising with Google²⁸—putting the Federal Trade Commission on the front page of the world's newspapers. The FTC was established by Woodrow Wilson 104 years ago precisely to augment and enforce the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914 with the Federal Trade Commission Act. The FTC Act represented one of Wilson's major moves against America's trusts, unfair competition, and consumer exploitation.²⁹

[T]he Commission is empowered, among other things, to
(a) prevent unfair methods of competition and unfair or deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce; (b) seek monetary redress and other relief for conduct injurious to consumers; (c) prescribe trade regulation rules defining with specificity acts or practices that are unfair or deceptive, and establishing requirements designed to prevent such acts or practices; (d) gather and compile information and conduct investigations relating to the organization, business, practices,

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26 Wikibooks contributors, 'Information Security in Education/Security Regulations', *Wikibooks*, 19 March 2018.

27 *EU GDPR Information Portal*. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

28 Financial Times, <<https://www.ft.com/content/cf362186-d840-11e7-a039-c64b1e09b482>> PAYWALL.

29 Federal Trade Commission, *About the FTC*, n.d. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

and management of entities engaged in commerce; and (e) make reports and legislative recommendations to Congress and the public.³⁰

Zuckerberg sailed through his early Spring ‘grilling’ by senators on Capitol Hill, deflecting poorly informed questions from politicians who seemed never to have used his platform. At one point, Senator Brian Schatz, a Democrat from Hawaii, asked, ‘Let’s say I’m emailing about “Black Panther” within WhatsApp [...] do I get a “Black Panther” banner ad?’³¹

But because of the FTC and their consumer-protection approach, Facebook is a long way from home safe and back in the dugout. A regular feature of Zuckerberg’s testimony was mention of the FTC’s 2011 consent decree with the social network. At the time, Facebook was charged with eight counts of deceiving consumers about their privacy. Said Jon Leibowitz, then Chairman of the FTC, ‘Facebook is obligated to keep the promises about privacy that it makes to its hundreds of millions of users. Facebook’s innovation does not have to come at the expense of consumer privacy. The FTC action will ensure it will not.’³²

A consent decree is a settlement resolving a legal dispute between two parties. In this case, the FTC laid out eight charges against Facebook. Avoiding prosecution, the company agreed on a settlement to abide by certain rules going forward, without actually admitting guilt.

From a consumer protections perspective, the charges were damning:

- In December 2009, Facebook changed its website so certain information that users may have designated as private—such as their Friends List—was made public. They didn’t warn users that this change was coming, or get their approval in advance.
- Facebook represented that the third-party apps users installed would have access only to such user information that they needed to operate. In fact, the apps could access nearly all of users’ personal data—data the apps didn’t need.
- Facebook told users they could restrict sharing of data to limited

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30 Federal Trade Commission, *Federal Trade Commission Act*, n.d. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

31 Amelia Tait, ‘Five clueless questions United States senators asked Mark Zuckerberg’, *New Statesman*, 11 April 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

32 Federal Trade Commission, ‘Facebook Settles FTC Charges That It Deceived Consumers By Failing To Keep Privacy Promises’, 29 November 2011. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

audiences—for example with ‘Friends Only’. In fact, selecting ‘Friends Only’ did not prevent their information from being shared with third-party applications used by their friends.

- Facebook had a ‘Verified Apps’ programme & claimed it certified the security of participating apps. It didn’t.
- Facebook promised users that it would not share their personal information with advertisers. It did.
- Facebook claimed that when users deactivated or deleted their accounts, their photos and videos would be inaccessible. But Facebook allowed access to the content, even after users had deactivated or deleted their accounts.
- Facebook claimed that it complied with the US–EU Safe Harbor Framework that governs data transfer between the US and the European Union. It didn’t.³³

In the consent decree, Facebook agreed to implement a ‘comprehensive privacy program’, obtaining third-party audits of their own actions every two years for the following twenty years, ensuring ‘that the privacy of *consumers*’ information [was] protected’. They also agreed to protect consumers’ data from access by third parties.³⁴

In fact, the entire Cambridge Analytica / Facebook affair rests on the violation of this last requirement. David Vladeck, ex-Director of the Bureau of Consumer Protections at the commission, said on *Harvard Law Review*’s blog: ‘Facebook’s apparent violations [...] of the decree is [sic] troubling. The decree makes clear that robust opt-in consent is required before any sharing that exceeds the restrictions imposed by a user’s setting.’ Vladeck worked specifically on the FTC’s case against Facebook. He goes on to say they broke the consent decree ‘when Kogan deceived 270,000 users into thinking that their information would be used solely for research, and then managed to gain access to 50 million³⁵ of their friends, who had no clue (and probably still don’t) that their data was harvested as well.’³⁶

The punishment is severe. The penalty for violation of the consent decree is US \$40,000 per user per violation. At 87 million people, that is potentially trillions

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33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 This number has since been revised to 87 million by Facebook themselves; Issie Lapowski, ‘Facebook Exposed 87 Million Users to Cambridge Analytica’, *Wired*, 4 April 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

36 David C. Vladeck, ‘Facebook, Cambridge Analytica, and the Regulator’s Dilemma: Clueless or Venal?’, *Harvard Law Review*, Blog. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

of dollars—a fraction of which could bring Facebook down.

If the senators' performance in the hearing can be taken as any indication of US political will, the chances of this happening are slim.

Throughout his testimony, Zuckerberg alluded to the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).³⁷ 'We believe that everyone around the world deserves good privacy controls,' he said. 'We've had a lot of these controls in place for years. The GDPR requires us to do a few more things, and we're going to extend that to the world.'³⁸

A few more things indeed.

Recital 1 of the GDPR opens boldly, stating, 'The protection of natural persons in relation to the processing of personal data is a fundamental right.'³⁹

In other words, data protection is a *human* right, with profound implications.

For example, for 'natural persons'—that is, any citizen of any country, anywhere in the world—the processing of 'sensitive personal data' in Europe, if accompanied by risk, is illegal.⁴⁰

Risk occurs 'where the processing may give rise to discrimination, identity theft or fraud, financial loss, damage to the reputation, loss of confidentiality of personal data protected by professional secrecy, unauthorised reversal of pseudonymisation, or any other significant economic or social disadvantage; where data subjects might be deprived of their rights and freedoms or prevented from exercising control over their personal data; where personal data are processed which reveal racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religion or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, data concerning health or data concerning sex life or criminal convictions and offences or related security measures; where personal aspects are evaluated, in particular analysing or predicting aspects concerning performance at work, economic situation, health, personal preferences or interests, reliability or behaviour, location or movements, in order to create or use personal profiles;

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³⁷ Intersoft Consulting, *General Data Protection Regulation*, 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

³⁸ Bloomberg Government Transcripts, 'Transcript of Zuckerberg's appearance before House Committee,' *Washington Post*, 11 April 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

³⁹ Intersoft Consulting, 'Recital 1 - Data protection as a fundamental right', 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

⁴⁰ Matthias Dehmer and Frank Emmert-Streib, *Frontiers in Data Science*. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2018) p. 14.

where personal data of vulnerable natural persons, in particular of children, are processed; or where processing involves a large amount of personal data and affects a large number of data subjects.⁴¹ A broad church of digital information, by any estimation.

These definitions—of ‘risk’, ‘sensitive personal data’, ‘natural citizens’, etc.—are vital to the changes brought on by the GDPR. Facebook, for example, is almost wholly made up of ‘natural citizens’ and their ‘sensitive personal data’. At a minimum, and even where legal, processing natural citizens’ data in Europe has been highly regulated since 25 May of this year, when the GDPR updated the already-in-place Data Protection Directive 95/46/EC, harmonising data privacy law across Europe.⁴²

Just how much Facebook data is processed in Europe? Almost all of it.

In this instance, and particularly in light of Zuckerberg’s promise to deliver GDPR-like controls to US consumers, Facebook should be thought of as two entities: Facebook Menlo Park, and Facebook Ireland. 239 million Facebook users in the United States and Canada are served from Menlo Park, California, and thus escape the jurisdiction of any real data protection authority—only the consumer protection authority of the FTC.⁴³

Facebook Ireland processes the rest—1.9 billion users, or 89% of Facebook’s user base. And as their data is processed within the EU, as ‘natural citizens’, their data processing is subject to the GDPR.⁴⁴

But then, those users around the world were, until 25 May, also subject to the Data Protection Directive 95/46/EC, with similar rules. So what has changed? According to the *Washington Post*, the EU’s privacy standards have been upgraded, and are now the toughest in the world.⁴⁵

First, the GDPR extends the geopolitical territory it covers. If data from any EU citizen is processed, it no longer matters where that happens. The entity doing the processing will still be subject to EU law. ‘Non-EU businesses processing the data of EU citizens will also have to appoint a representative in the EU’,

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41 Intersoft Consulting, ‘Recital 75 - Risks to the rights and freedoms of natural persons’, 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

42 EU GDPR Portal, ‘EU GDPR Information Portal’, 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

43 Michael Veale, ‘Ignore Mark Zuckerberg’, *Slate*, 12 April 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

44 Ibid.

45 Rick Noack, ‘One key question for Zuckerberg: Will Americans become second-class Web citizens?’, *Washington Post*, 10 April 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

according to the GDPR portal EUGDPR.org.⁴⁶

The GDPR's increase in penalties is also significant. While before fines varied from country to country, and hovered in the hundreds of thousands, GDPR penalties have teeth—up to 4% of global turnover in the preceding year or €20 million, whichever is greater. Even the GDPR's tiered approach is enough to hit the bottom line of any company, as they can be fined 2% merely for not having their records in order.⁴⁷

Companies are now also forbidden from relying on documents filled with 'long illegible terms and conditions full of legalese' to protect themselves when obtaining consent from users.⁴⁸

There are substantial changes to rights of access, the right to be forgotten, data portability, design of systems for retention of the least data necessary ('privacy by design'), and the harmonisation of procedures around the appointment of Data Protection Officers.⁴⁹

Significantly for Facebook, there are also changes to the notification period when a data breach has occurred. Companies now have three days to inform a 'natural citizen' when their data has been compromised.⁵⁰

In the case of the 87 million records harvested by Dr Alexander Kogan for Cambridge Analytica and SCL, Facebook didn't get around to notifying victims for three years.⁵¹

Editor's note: On 11 July 2018, reports came in that Facebook is indeed to be fined the maximum £500,000 for failing to provide the protections required under data protection laws. In the first quarter of 2018, Facebook took in that amount in revenues every five and half minutes, but this cap was set in 1988 by the Data Protection Act. Under the new GDPR regime, the maximum fine would be '€20m (£17m) or 4% of global turnover—in Facebook's case, \$1.9bn (£1.4bn)'.⁵²

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46 EU GDPR Portal, 'Key Changes with the General Data Protection Regulation', 27 April 2016 [Accessed 10 May 2018]

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Aja Romano, 'The Facebook data breach wasn't a hack. It was a wake-up call', *Vox*, 20 March 2018. [Accessed 10 May 2018]

52 Alex Hern and David Pegg, 'The Cambridge Analytica Files: Facebook fined for data breaches in Cambridge Analytica scandal', *Guardian*, 11 July 2018. [Accessed 13 July 2018]

China's approach to online data protection arrived in the global consciousness like a 2017 October Surprise, outlined in an aghast *Wired UK* article. 'Big data meets Big Brother' read the headline.

What was being announced to a relatively unsuspecting West was China's Social Credit System. Despite the innocuous name—sounding something like a social welfare system as envisaged by Equifax—the Social Credit System as told by *Wired* lands more in the territory of *Black Mirror* meets *The Man in the High Castle*.

The first episode of Charlie Booker's television series *Black Mirror*⁵³ (named for the state of reflection of an unpowered digital screen) is called 'Nosedive'. In a Max Richter-scored pastel future, dressed in clothes seemingly designed by a nostalgic *haute couture* Easter Bunny, citizens spend every waking moment glued to a smartphone, viewing their world through smart contact lenses. Attached to that view is a social media score in constant flux, regulated by the opinions of 'friends' in the black mirror.

In 'Nosedive', Lacie (played by Bryce Dallas Howard) is a sugary, cheerful 4.2 keen to buy a new home in a development for 4.5s and up. Hoping to raise her score, she attacks every human interaction with relentless positivity. Lacie even seeks out her childhood best friend Naomi—an impressive 4.8—in hopes that proximity and approval will up her score. Naomi acts thrilled, inviting Lacie to be her bridesmaid.

A comedy of errors leads Lacie to the wedding: she accidentally spills coffee on a stranger, lowering her score to 4.183; she misses her flight and only 4.2s or higher are allowed on the next one; an expletive-laden outburst at the airport drops her to a 3.1, forcing her into a hooptie rental that runs out of gas. Hitchhiking to a missed rehearsal dinner, bedraggled and desperate, her rating hits 2.6.

Aware of the new score, Naomi bans Lacie who nonetheless crashes the wedding, humiliates herself with a pathetic speech, is removed and remanded, and lands on a solid 0.0. Freed of her inhibitions and relentless observation, she seems to find love over an exchange of ridiculous insults with a handsome fellow-incarceree, both now freed to say whatever they like to the Other. My particular favourite was Lacie's 'What sort of cartoon character did your Mom

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⁵³ *Black Mirror*, season 3, episode 1, 'Nosedive', aired 21 October 2016, on Netflix. [Accessed 11 May 2018]

have to fuck to brew you up?⁵⁴

Whenever I've mentioned China's Social Credit Score,⁵⁵ I've been met with, 'Oh, just like *Black Mirror*.'

Social Credit Score is not just like *Black Mirror*. To the civil society-trained mind, it is a dystopian near-future reality, prepped for China-wide launch by 2020, with real possibilities of expanding beyond the country's borders.

The concept was first mooted on 14 June 2014 by the State Council of China in a document titled 'Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System', calling for 'the establishment of a nationwide tracking system to rate the reputations of individuals, businesses, and even government officials', according to Hvistendahl in 'You Are a Number'.⁵⁶

The aim of the Social Credit Score, slated for nationwide implementation by 2020, is that each citizen's data should be tracked across all possible digital services and then consolidated into a file that will follow them throughout their lives, both online and offline. This aggregation of files is searchable and identifiable—by both fingerprints and biometric data.

The system is based on a scaled series of rewards and demerits. Everyone starts at 600, with a maximum possible score of 900. The number fluctuates according to trackable behaviours—'what you buy at the shops and online; where you are at any given time; who your friends are and how you interact with them; how many hours you spend watching content or playing video games; and what bills and taxes you pay'.⁵⁷

While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has implemented piecemeal legislation giving citizens' rights and placing limits on companies collecting personal data—the General Data Protection Law, the Guideline for Personal Information Protection, and the Cyber Security Law—it is simultaneously working with the Asian continent's equivalents of Facebook, Google, and Amazon to cement power and insure their dominance for decades to come.⁵⁸

54 Natalie Zutter, 'Trying Too Hard: Black Mirror, "Nosedive"', *Tor*, 24 October 2016. [Accessed 11 May 2018]

55 This journal's editor is the one exception.

56 Mara Hvistendahl, 'Inside China's Vast new Experiment in Social Ranking', *Wired*, 14 December 2017. [Accessed 11 May 2018]

57 Rachel Botsman, 'Big data meets Big Brother as China moves to rate its citizens', *Wired*, 21 October 2017, updated 21 November 2017. [Accessed 11 May 2018]

58 Anzelmo, 'State surveillance'.

In regional experiments across the country, Alibaba, China Rapid Finance, and Sesame Credit, to name just three, use platforms like AliPay, WeChat, Didi Chuxing, and even Baihe—China’s largest dating app, to collect information and pass it on to a ranking algorithm. Charged with calculating the score, Alibaba subjects citizens to a ‘complex algorithm’, taking five factors into account when determining their score: credit history (do you pay your bills), fulfilment capacity (could you pay your bills), personal characteristics (phone numbers, etc., for personal identification), behaviour and preference, and interpersonal relationships. While the first three categories would surprise no European scanning their Experian statement, the last two rely on social media relationships, adding an alarming surveillance factor.

‘Someone who plays video games for ten hours a day, for example, would be considered an idle person. Someone who frequently buys diapers would be considered as probably a parent, who on balance is more likely to have a sense of responsibility’, Li Yingyun, Technology Director of Sesame Credit, told *Wired*. ‘[T]he system not only investigates behaviour—it shapes it. It ‘nudges’ citizens away from purchases and behaviours the government does not like’, according to the magazine.

As users’ scores rise and fall, they find their ability to negotiate society either enhanced or inhibited. With the standard starting score of 600, a citizen can take out a Just Spend loan of £500 to use with Alibaba. At 650, rental cars no longer require deposits, hotel check-ins become faster, and VIP airport lounges open their doors. Ant Financial offers nearly £6,000 loans with scores of 666. And a score of 750 opens the fast-track to a pan-European Schengen visa. These are not just life enhancements, but also opportunities to display individual status. According to *Wired*, more than 100,000 people have boasted about their high scores on China’s Twitter equivalent, Weibo. This is important to not only the individual, but to their families for generations to come, because a higher score results in greater prominence for a potential partner’s profile on dating app Baihe.⁵⁹

But this is also the Chinese Communist Party harnessing data to automate its processes for the consolidation and maintenance of power. Along with rewards come punishments. Like ‘a big data gamified version of the Communist Party’s surveillance methods’, Social Credit doles out demerits for the smallest violation, taking *nudge* to a new level.⁶⁰

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59 Botsman, ‘Big data meets Big Brother’.
60 Ibid.

The infractions can range from cheating in school, through associating with low-score ‘losers’, to expressing opinions online that are out of step with the CCP. *Wired* inventories a few of the punishing restrictions: on internet speeds; access to restaurants and nightclubs; travel and services; access to housing and public transportation; employment opportunities; loans; social security benefits; schools; and more. ‘As the government document states, the social credit system will ‘allow the trustworthy to roam everywhere under heaven while making it hard for the discredited to take a single step’, says *Wired* writer Rachel Botsman, quoting a State Council General Office policy entitled ‘Warning and Punishment Mechanisms for Persons Subject to Enforcement for Trust-Breaking’.⁶¹

China is at a nearly perfect junction for the creation of a total surveillance and control system. Rapidly advancing technology, online tracking, and CCP ambitions have collided, creating a population-control environment with implications beyond the super-state.

‘It’s always been something that the party saw as a way of improving its control both over the party and over society itself’, says Dr Samantha Hoffman of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Anzelmo agrees. ‘China’s approach to data is driven by the Chinese Communist party, its ideology and its desire to stay in power.’⁶²

Behind the saturated screens of six hundred million smartphones, China’s approach to data privacy for population management reflects like a dark mirror, and with the potential to spill beyond Asian borders. The heads of six major intelligence agencies in the US recently warned citizens to avoid products and services from Chinese tech giants Huawei and ZTE. FBI Director Chris Wray warned ‘about the risks of allowing any company or entity that is beholden to foreign governments that don’t share our values to gain positions of power inside our telecommunications networks’.⁶³

As hyperbolic as that may sound, the threat of a Chinese-manufactured global surveillance system driven by data is real. In the face of such a daunting prospect, one of the few safe zones may well be the EU, ring-fenced and protected through trade regulation, the General Data Protection Regulation, and the principle of data as a human right, with profound implications for both individual and national privacy and security.

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61 Ibid.

62 Anzelmo, ‘State surveillance’.

63 James Vincent, ‘Don’t use Huawei phones, say heads of FBI, CIA, and NSA’, *Verge*, 14 February 2018. [Accessed 11 May 2018]

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