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Shot by Both Sides: The War in Ukraine, Italy, and NATO'S Strategic Communications Challenges

Stemming The Narrative Flow: The Legal And Psychological Grounding for The European Union's Ban on Russian State-Sponsored Media

Measuring The Effectiveness of Celebrity Activism: Celebrity Advocate v Celebrity Endorser

Guiding Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) Through Organic Social Media for Effective Strategic Communications: a Literature Review

Disinformation and Scholarly Communications

Persuasion Not Propaganda: Overcoming Controversies Of Domestic Influence in NATO Military Strategic Communications

Democracy, Power, and Our Failing Imaginations

The Ugly Mirror *Avots*

Russia v The World: Was That Inevitable?

Home before Dark: China's Approach to The Russian War in Ukraine

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Foreword

The map of the world is changing before our eyes. But most of us are not looking. The film director Stanley Kubrick once talked of 'walking with eyes wide shut', choosing not to see what we don't wish to see.

2022 was a revealing year, albeit in ways not obvious at first glance. Dramatic events encouraged us to look at maps through fresh eyes. And 2023 will no doubt go further, reminding us that maps sit at the forefront of how strategic communicators shape people's understanding of their world. Into this cartographic imaginary, they attempt to introduce 'positive change'.

For a long time maps remained fixed on paper and imprinted on our imaginations. Once set, there seemed little reason to change the way we read borders delineating one sovereign country from the next. We saw fixture and stasis, not mobility and change. Where were the humans whose busy lives straddled these divides; where were the changes in landscape that nature's winds and rains were remoulding? A multitude of small moments and events merged into process across time and place ignored by cartographers. After all, Greenwich Mean Time as a measure of longitudinal timekeeping did not emanate from the movement of the planets but from the projection of state power.

Maps were, and always have been, markers of intent—the colourful display of peacock power. Empire and conquest would be absorbed into bureaucratic ways of officialising a divided world, sometimes bilaterally and unequally neighbour to neighbour, sometimes multilaterally through powerbroker consensus. Witness the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the bedrock of how we seek to pin down stability amid global anarchy. Or Yalta in 1945, a cynical triage of post-war populations to benefit great powers. A new order, such as that born in Bretton Woods, was meant to create a new stability among states. But it would always be to someone's

detriment. Despite the protestations of just war theorists that war has no winners, nevertheless some states emerge from tragedy materially better endowed than others. Each, nevertheless, carries its own memory of suffering to which maps remain amnesiac.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Covid pandemic since 2019, and China's sabre-rattling towards Taiwan and regional neighbours throughout 2022 offer us good cause to reflect on borders.

Russia's irredentist ambitions in Ukraine, writ large with Grad missile barrages, suicide drones, and indiscriminate targeting of civilians, have returned Europe to a command-and-control geopolitics evocative of former days. Moscow has set out to achieve a redrawing of a map that had been, until the short century of the Soviet Union, unstable. Hence the systematic flooding of Russian, Ukrainian, and international discourse spaces with delegitimising tropes—Ukrainians were Russians, there was no Ukrainian nation or history, and Ukrainians were homosexuals, Nazis, and criminals, Moscow claimed. After annexing Crimea in 2014, and infiltrating eastern Ukraine through proxy actions soon after, 2022 marked the attempt to absorb the entire territory into the map of an imagined greater Russia.

Strategic communicators, however, must deal with nested maps which represent space and place where the material features of statehood are present, and at the same time, indicate discourses which appear in an altogether different way. Discourses are fluid, organic, and impermanent. Ideas which they capture may rise and fall, and rise again with the ages. A discourse map is more like a meteorologist's—local weather patterns, concentrations of pressure, high and low, and arrows of airstreams variously cross the bordered outlines of countries that lie a long way beneath them. Meteorologists identify weather systems which depend on the movement of their constituent parts. So too do discursive maps feature interconnected conversations that can be monitored in space or geographically, and in time or historically.

Conversations traverse state borders and penetrate populations to different degrees, particularly with today's widespread dissemination of consumer technologies. They are best visualised as parallel, contiguous, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes distinct. Often they resonate with the residue of conversations from the past, since these are rarely lost but become revitalised by current events, acquiring a new significance in people's lives. Most important, conversations rarely endure through call-and-response, thrust-and-parry exchanges; they do not resemble the offensives and counter-offensives of kinetic conflicts. Publics and counterpublics offer a more productive insight into the map of discourses—not audience demographics—since these groups define themselves according to how and when they engage with a particular mediated conversation.[1]

Throughout the Ukraine war, these Western discourses have included:

> On the one side, the existential struggle between advancing autocracy against democracy seen to be in retreat across the globe; a post-Westphalian discussion around the breach of international law and the borders of one sovereign state by another; consequently, too, the right to protect (R2P) and transgressing sovereign borders to achieve human security; a neo-colonial independence struggle; and even more existentially, the assertion of a people's organic subjectivity in the face of brutal war; the view that the Ukraine war represents a Russian colonial attempt to hold back the inevitable demise of its own empire; a sacrifice on the part of Western economies amid a global energy and food crisis giving rise to a new recession; and calls for war crimes and retribution against the highest in the Kremlin; the threat of nuclear strikes and the return of

1 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

> MAD (mutually assured destruction) for so long considered a relic of Cold War discourse.

These, as captured in a recent report, lead the author to observe: 'Put simply, these are discourses promoted by Western communicators but are aimed variously at Russian audiences as well as those in the West and the Global South.' The Russian repertoire includes:

> On the other side discourses range across the promotion of a neo-imperial *Russkii mir*; the questioning of Ukraine's national identity and fundamental right to exist; associated accusations of criminality and Nazism gripping the country; an accusation of historic NATO *expansion* rather than *enlargement*; a perception in the global South that this is Europe's war, and not theirs.[2]

Nor should we forget the repeated evocation of the Great Patriotic War by Moscow's leadership and the sacrifice of millions of Soviet lives during World War II.

That a virus such as Covid-19 shows no respect for human constructs for keeping some people in and others out of sovereign containers we call states has become a truism all too familiar to people across the world over the last three years. Instead the virus recognises only vectors of dissemination and vulnerabilities for infection. The map it creates is different. Through conduits of transmission, it resembles networks of nodes and links—a picture of dots and lines energised by motion and interrupted by occasional friction—roads and rivers scrawled across the page of living and breathing humanity. China's zero-Covid policy to contain viral spread by constraining free movement of its own citizens is only now proving to have collapsed under popular pressure. A sovereign map goes head to head with a viral map: there can be only one winner.

2 For a more detailed discussion of the discursive ecosystem, see Neville Bolt, NATO, Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023, in press.

Where a virus once revealed the fragility of human security, governments have attempted to reassert control over state security through human agency.

Brutal war in Ukraine targeting civilian populations reminded Europeans that the Balkan atrocities of the 1990s, so close to home, were no simple aberration. Meanwhile in the Indo-Pacific region, strategic ambiguity in Chinese Communist Party foreign and security policy continues to keep the world guessing—the Belt and Road Initiative, on the one hand (persuasion), and kinetic confrontations in the East and South China Seas, on the other (coercion), beg the question: China, good guy or bad?

All three threats—Russia, China, Covid—share a common outcome. Consumer economies around the world are hastily reappraising their erstwhile embrace of global supply chains that span continents, crossing borders. Confidence in post-1980s globalisation has been shaken. Supply chains draw arcs of movement of goods and people across the globe—arcs that criss-cross a backdrop of entire oceans and continents. Deep-water harbours and shipping lanes, airport terminals and flight paths, commodity storage and logistics centres paint a different kind of map. For them, state sovereignty with its alternative lines on the map matter in so far as transnational corporations and protective taxation regimes can benefit from economic models of manufacture in low-cost labour markets and production assembly closer to consumer centres.[3]

Yet Apple's triangulated production of its iPhone speaks volumes—designed in the US, with a case manufactured in China, but brain installed in Taiwan—demonstrates how microchips can so easily turn into bargaining chips when a geopolitical context becomes a contest. Apple's map of the world, originally drawn to a corporate logic, suddenly highlights three key protagonists in a geopolitical drama. Apple's own dilemma becomes not simply a question of failure to supply hungry markets but a confusion between how to conduct public relations, product

3 For further discussion of maps and networks see, Nicholas Michelsen and Neville Bolt, *Unmapping the 21st Century: Between Networks and the State* (Bristol University Press, 2022).

and corporate marketing, and strategic communications—each distinct but so often confused with the next in the business of projecting influence.

At the same time, vulnerabilities exposed by both natural and human interventions have undermined the very notion of liberal freedoms extended through trade and cultural exchanges. But in our times, great power contest has become the new order of the day. Consequently, short supplies of consumer goods through factories closed by pandemic, or global shipping lanes constricted by hegemonic ambitions, threaten the world's interconnected economy as never before.

As George Kennan's containment became the enduring metaphor of the Cold War, inviting our imaginations to draw mental maps around confronting ideologies, reduced to good and evil, so too a new map is already being drawn around engagement in what Europe and North America once labelled the Far East, more recently Asia-Pacific. Since that celebrated train ride in 2016 when Shinzo Abe, then prime minister of Japan, and Narendra Modi, prime minister of India, announced the mapping of the Indo-Pacific as a new mental construct, a diplomatic map has ushered in a new phase of geopolitics with a fresh organising framework. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific captures myriad uncertainties in perhaps the world's most sensitive region, economically and militarily. This is not simply an initiative that derives impetus from Washington's pivot to Asia, but more organically and authentically a strategic communications concept that emerges dynamically from the complexities of the region itself. It comprises forty countries, including Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea (ROK), Taiwan, Vietnam—and the United States, together with North Korea (DPRK) and China (PRC). Each reads the Indo-Pacific map differently through its own national interest. Whether China and North Korea should be included in this framework depends on what effect each participant presumes engaging with these troublesome countries can achieve. Which in turn depends on how each predicts those countries' ambitions and future actions.

The Indo-Pacific invites cartographers to reimagine the world but once again at the expense of the tensions that permeate it. Namely, despite certain ambiguous interpretations by its diverse actors separated by ideology, economic might, and historical antipathies, these actors remain united in a shared concern for the rise of an economically dominant China with a penchant for advertising its military prowess. The nineteenth century witnessed Britain face Russia in the Great Game. Does this evoke a similar confrontation for strategic communicators in the twenty-first century, but this time between the US and China? Except now a plethora of medium-sized states militarily has to be counted into multi-dimensional calculations.

Where the Middle East is a clumsy construct disowned by many academic area specialists, the Indo-Pacific, first mentioned in the 1850s, attempts to connect more coherently Asia and Africa across two oceans, the Pacific, via the East and South China Seas, and the Indian Ocean. Home to two of the world's most populous countries (India, democratic; China, authoritarian), and two of the world's leading economies (China and Japan), the region generates 60 per cent of the world's GDP, and much of that trade passes through the Strait of Malacca and waters off China's coastline, where it presumes to exert its claim to sovereignty.[4] All the while, the US and other free states fear a potential stranglehold on free movement, ultimately destabilising the global economy. This map is one of threats and vulnerabilities.

Why do maps matter? Mental maps, like printed maps, create normality—a given, a common-sense view of the world through which all else should be processed and understood. As the philosopher Timothy Garton Ash notes: 'The deepest power is that of determining what people consider normal. If you can persuade others that your way of doing things is normal, you have won.'[5] Strategic communications can transform the abnormal into the normal. Around us our maps are changing. They conceptualise and filter the way we read the world. But they vary in

4 *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, The White House, Washington, DC, February 2022.

5 Timothy Garton Ash, 'Beware of the Creeping Normalisation of the Hard Right', *Financial Times*, 14 November 2022, p. 25.

their character and appearance—why should a financial balance sheet, normally thought of as a snapshot in accounting time, not also be a way of finding a route between one place and the next, or reveal the relative power of one location to the next? More on this topic and a discussion of maps in strategic communications in future volumes.

The Autumn issue of *Defence Strategic Communications* journal remains as eclectic as ever—better to explore the multidisciplinary nature of this fast-emerging academic field, informed by policy and practice.

Donara Barojan brings a more serious lens to the study of celebrity influencers on politics, weighing celebrity advocacy against celebrity endorsement. This perspective, she claims, is long overdue; nor should influencers be viewed as the frivolous preserve of the popular press or noisy social media. Governments have long realised that to connect their campaigns to target audiences involves finding the most persuasive bridge to address particular grievances. How significant are race, gender, and the politics of today's leading influencers in their ability to draw large audiences? This research suggests we are still at an early stage in this important line of inquiry. In their article, marketing experts Aybars Tuncdogan and Aidan Hughes survey the literature on organic social media marketing as the overarching driver in word-of-mouth communications, arguing that while strategic communications scholars and think tanks devote extensive research time to social media, they fail to include the large body of literature in the world of marketing. The authors seek to correct this by examining the output of commercial organisations and products. However, they point out, 'there is little or no marketing research that distinguishes between strategic political communications versus tactical political communications, although this is an important difference worth future research effort'.

When Ursula von der Leyen led the ban on Russian media outlets RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik inside the EU following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine—'spread[ing] their lies to justify Putin's war and to sow division in our Union'—it divided opinion sharply inside the Union.

What was at stake was freedom of information, a view advocated strongly by the International Press Institute. Not only did the ban interfere with free speech, but it was considered ineffectual in the face of systematic disinformation and misinformation. And anyway, such decisions should be the preserve of individual states not supra-states, it argued. Aiden Hoyle and Peter B.M.J. Pijpers combine psychological and legal methods of inquiry to guide us through this thorny issue. Researcher Will White continues the disinformation theme, but questions why so few attempts have been made in the academic world to break down disinformation conceptually and from the point of view of the author's intent. He offers three ways of moving our understanding forward which can be gleaned by reviewing the scholarly literature on disinformation: 'parodic, which critiques the scholarly process through mimicry and humour; opportunist, which seeks to promote the author's scholarly image; and malicious, which distorts the reader's perception of a controversial issue like vaccination or climate change'. A backdrop of literature around Covid-19 and right-wing extremism make this article even more poignant.

Two further articles focus on NATO strategic communications but from different perspectives. Aurelio Insisa charts the change in public mood in Italian politics following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It was initially seen as Moscow's act of aggression. But, despite the atrocities of a brutal war, public discourse among a sizeable minority across mass media and social media is seen to have shifted towards being critical of NATO's role in having caused the conflict. This has consequences for NATO, suggests the author. Pacifist and 'geopolitical' critiques, and left- and right-wing political attacks, are now hindering the Alliance's ability to pursue effective strategic communications in a member state, Italy. How should NATO speak to its own members? Meanwhile, Elizabeth Fry tackles the complex field of propaganda, much argued over and diverse in its interpretations, proposing that NATO's simplistic dichotomy between influence and information is misleading, if not counterproductive. 'There is no such thing as value-free information,' she argues. 'There is, or should be, an intent behind all military communications: we are always trying to persuade audiences to see the world as we do.' For

Fry, a historic sensitivity around propaganda is to blame for a wider misunderstanding, for which US and NATO terminologies and poor theorising should bear their share of responsibility.

Defence Strategic Communications has for many years encouraged the review essay as a literary form. And its contributors are among the most downloaded by readers of the journal. Here, Paul Bell reflects in a deeply moving essay on a long career spent in this field, but only after considering some ideas by two leading academics, Francis Fukuyama and Helen Thompson. The future and indeed the present of liberal democracy offer him much food for thought amid the disorder of the new century, which he surveys from the vantage point of his work in Tbilisi, Georgia. Anda Boluža looks back to a moment of awakening in the Latvian independence movement during the last days of Soviet Latvia in the 1980s. Her profile of the magazine *Avots*—a brief cultural, artistic, and political outpouring—offers a glimpse into a seemingly paradoxical event when the lid was finally released from the pressure cooker of decades-long censorship and repression. Such moments need to be recalled lest we forget forever.

James Farwell, a familiar essayist in these pages, ponders on recently published commentaries on Russia and its historic relations with Germany. The latter features strongly here because of a relationship spanning centuries and the guilt and atrocity of millions of war dead, and because of an ambiguous and perhaps defining moment in recent history involving Mikhail Gorbachev, James Baker, and the political agility of Helmut Kohl. How should we read the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and its aftermath through these lenses? Farwell offers some robust observations. And finally, China specialist Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova draws on the Apple TV+ *Home before Dark* series to create her metaphor through which to gauge China's hesitant responses to Russia and the Ukraine war. She explores the contradictions of Chinese foreign policy, more a guessing game than political science inquiry on the part of scholars and policy experts. One particular lens she singles out is Responsibility to Protect (R2P), through which she explores multiple coexisting contradictions

in Beijing, which add up 'to support that falls just short of casting itself squarely in the Russian worldview'.

We wish all our readers, authors, and peer reviewers a successful 2023 and look forward to welcoming you back to further issues of the journal in the coming months.

Dr Neville Bolt,
Editor-in-Chief

Contents

Shot by Both Sides:
The War in Ukraine, Italy, and NATO's
Strategic Communications Challenges
Aurelio Insisa 17

Stemming The Narrative Flow:
The Legal and Psychological Grounding for
The European Union's Ban on Russian State-Sponsored Media
Aiden Hoyle and Peter B.M.J. Pijpers..... 51

Measuring the Effectiveness
of Celebrity Activism:
Celebrity Advocate v Celebrity Endorser
Donara Barojan..... 81

Guiding Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) Through Organic Social
Media For Effective Strategic Communications:
a Literature Review
Aybars Tuncdogan and Aidan Hughes.....115

Disinformation and Scholarly Communications
Will White.....151

Persuasion Not Propaganda:
Overcoming Controversies of Domestic Influence in
NATO Military Strategic Communications
Elizabeth Fry..... 177

Democracy, Power, and Our Failing Imaginations
A Review Essay by Paul Bell.....215

The Ugly Mirror *Avots*
A Review Essay by Anda Boluža..... 231

Russia v The World:
Was That Inevitable?
A Review Essay by James P. Farwell 255

Home before Dark:
China's Approach to the Russian War in Ukraine
A Review Essay by Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova..... 271

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Shot by Both Sides: The War in Ukraine, Italy, and NATO's Strategic Communications Challenges

Aurelio Insisa

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, war in Ukraine, Italy, NATO, disinformation, misinformation*

About the Author
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Abstract

The war in Ukraine has sparked an intense public debate in Italy over NATO's objectives and activities. A significant minority of the Italian public considers the alliance at least partially responsible for the conflict. Early analyses of the public debate over the conflict focused on the influence projected by the Russian state and state-adjacent actors in Italian media and politics. This study shifts the focus towards the interests and agency of Italian actors critical of NATO. It frames criticism of the alliance in mass media and social media as the result of deeply rooted resentment against an organisation perceived—both on the left and on the right of the political spectrum—as a sinew of a network of 'foreign' institutions considered responsible for Italy's socio-economic decline. From these premises it examines how pacifist and 'geopolitical' critiques of NATO have affected the alliance's capability to perform strategic communications

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in the country. These findings, in turn, suggest the need for renewed attention to how NATO strategic communications could engage domestic audiences of member states.

Introduction

NATO has provided political support and practical assistance to Ukraine through the Comprehensive Assistance Package since the earliest stage of the conflict sparked by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.[1] In the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the alliance has helped coordinate Kyiv's request for assistance and supported allies in the delivery of humanitarian, non-lethal, and financial aid, while ammunition and military equipment have been provided by individual allies.[2] Beyond supporting Ukraine, NATO has articulated a multidimensional response to Russian actions. It strengthened the defence posture on its eastern flank in the immediate aftermath of the February invasion.[3] It has devised a fundamental shift of its defence and deterrence posture; it has countered Russian disinformation over the alliance's role in the conflict; and it has managed the Kremlin's threatening rhetoric over the use of weapons of mass destruction in order to avoid escalation.[4] NATO's response exemplifies the alliance's strategic communications (SC) approach—one that is 'based on values and interests' and that holistically 'encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'.[5] A critical objective of NATO SC since the new phase of the conflict has been to deter Moscow from expanding its threats to member states of the alliance. This effort requires, beyond the effective targeting of Russian elite audiences, a continuing

1 NATO, 'Relations with Ukraine', 8 July 2022.

2 Raluca Csernatoni, 'Is NATO Doing Anything for Ukraine?', *Carnegie Europe—Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe*, 1 September 2022.

3 NATO, 'NATO's Eastern Flank: Stronger Defence and Deterrence', July 2022; NATO, 'NATO's Eastern Flank: Air Domain', April 2022.

4 NATO, 'NATO's Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', 1 September 2022.

5 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO StratCom CoE, 2019), p. 46.

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engagement with the domestic audiences of the individual members over the alliance's activities since Moscow's full-scale invasion. NATO SC is most effective when its domestic audiences understand the values informing and shaping the alliance's approach to deterrence, and when they gain full awareness of the wide range of tools, including military ones, it uses to reach this objective.

Evidence from polls suggests that a significant minority of the Italian public has not responded positively to these efforts. The Italian technocratic government led by Mario Draghi from February 2021 to September 2022 unequivocally sided with Ukraine from the early stages of the Russian invasion in February 2022. Under the Draghi government, Rome provided political and (limited) military support to Kyiv while firmly condemning Moscow's invasion. Yet, the EU Eurobarometer poll published in May 2022 shows a more nuanced picture. The poll found that 21 per cent of Italians do not consider Russian authorities 'responsible first and foremost' for the conflict, and 34 per cent disapprove of 'financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine'.[6] Crucially, 57 per cent of the Italian public are dissatisfied with NATO's reaction to the conflict.[7] This position was confirmed by a separate YouGov poll conducted in May covering 17 European states, which showed that 19 per cent of Italians place equal blame for the conflict on Russia and NATO, while another 14 per cent place the blame either entirely on NATO or 'more [on] NATO than [on] Russia'.[8]

Early analyses of the Italian information environment did not focus on the scepticism of such a significant minority of the Italian public over the Euro-Atlantic response to Moscow's aggression. Instead, these

6 EU Directorate-General for Communication, 'Flash Eurobarometer 506: EU's Response to the War in Ukraine', May 2022, pp. 14, 27.

7 Ibid., p. 19.

8 YouGov, 'Support for Ukraine Is Strong in Europe, but Nations Are Not As United As It Looks', 5 May 2022.

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analyses generally focused on Russian 'propaganda',[9] and specifically on its pervasiveness within Italian mass media and social media.[10] This approach has coalesced into a linear three-stage narrative. According to this narrative, in the first stage, before the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia successfully infiltrated the country's politics, society, and economy. In the second stage, both Italian and Russian actors operating within a corrupted Italian information environment disseminated pro-Russian narratives. As a result, in the supposed third stage, a sizable portion of Italian public opinion, disoriented by the magnitude of the crisis, embraced Moscow's justifications for the conflict and condemned the US and NATO. This linear narrative is not without merits. It builds upon a growing body of literature, comprising both academic research and journalistic investigations,[11] as well as judicial inquiries,[12] that since the mid 2010s have provided evidence about the impressive extent of the Kremlin's influence operations in the country. It also casts a light on the presence, at least in the early months of the current phase of the conflict, of both Russian officials (such as Foreign Minister

9 Italian national mass media consistently use the term 'propaganda' with a strong negative connotation implying malign intent and the dissemination of wilfully false content. For an SC-perspective on the meaning of propaganda, see: Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), pp. 44–46; James P. Farwell, *Power and Persuasion: The Art of Strategic Communications* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), pp. 23–35.

10 Giovanna Faggionato, 'In Italia non si riesce a fermare la propaganda del Cremlino' [The Kremlin's Propaganda in Italy Cannot Be Stopped], *Domani*, 16 March 2022; Hannah Roberts, 'Infowars: Putin's Propaganda Permeates Italian Media', *Politico*, 20 May 2022; Gian Luca Atzori, 'Troll de guerre', *Il Tascabile*, 16 March 2022; Simone Fontana, 'Dentro i gruppi Facebook italiani che amano Putin e fanno disinformazione sulla guerra' [Inside the Italian Facebook Groups Who Love Putin and Disseminate Disinformation about the War], *Facta News*, 14 April 2022.

11 Luigi Sergio Germani and Jacopo Iacoboni, 'Italy: Is the Russian Turn Reversible?', in *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 2.0: Russian Influence in Greece, Italy, and Spain*, Alina Polyakova (ed.), (Atlantic Council, 2017), pp. 11–19; Heather A. Conley, Donatienne Ruy, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers* (CSIS, 2019), pp. 57–68; Massimiliano Di Pasquale and Luigi Sergio Germani, *L'influenza russa sulla cultura, il mondo accademico e sui think tank italiani* [Russia's Influence over Italy's Culture, Academe and Think Tanks] (Istituto Gino Germani di Scienza Sociali e Studi Strategici, 2021); Gianluca Paolucci and Jacopo Iacoboni, *Oligarchi: Come gli amici di Putin stanno comprando l'Italia* [Oligarchs: How Putin's' Friends Are Buying Italy] (Bari: Laterza, 2021); Vittorio Malagutti and Carlo Tecce, 'Manager di Stato, imprenditori, diplomatici hanno spianato la strada a Putin in Italia: Ecco i loro nomi' [State Managers, Businesspersons, and Diplomats Paved Italy's Way to Putin: Here Are Their Names], *L'Espresso*, 4 March 2022.

12 Monica Serra, 'Caso Moscopoli, va avanti il tira e molla sulla rogatoria: L'inchiesta rischia l'archiviazione' [Moscowgate, the Tug-of-War on the Letter Rogatory Continues: The Judicial Inquiry Risks a Dismissal], *La Stampa*, 1 March 2022; 'Spionaggio, la Cassazione conferma: "Walter Biot ha ceduto informazione segrete ai russi"' [Espionage, the Supreme Court Confirms: 'Walter Biot Provided Secret Information to the Russians'], *La Stampa*, 8 April 2022.

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Sergey Lavrov and the ministry's spokesperson Maria Zakharova) and of controversial figures in the Russian nationalist media landscape (such as Vladimir Solov'yëv, Nadana Fridrikhson, and Aleksandr Dugin) in the raucous infotainment shows popular on Italian TV channels.[13] Yet, such a linear narrative has also relevant limitations. Firstly, it frames the motivations of Italian actors criticising NATO mainly in transactional terms, reducing them to 'Russian agents'. Secondly, it conflates expressions of support for the Kremlin's operations in the Italian media with the Italian public's scepticism towards NATO. Thirdly, it feeds the perception that severing the channels of Russian influence through sanctions and counter-intelligence operations will be sufficient to eventually win back public opinion.

Concentrating on the Kremlin's projection of influence and on the pervasiveness of Russian 'propaganda' alone fails to provide the necessary diagnostic tools to understand the challenges that NATO SC faces in Italy. This study aims to address these issues across four sections. The first surveys the root causes of the Italian public's hostile views of NATO as the result of a convergence between a wider backlash against the sinews of globalisation, on one side, and domestic historical grievances, on the other. The second section examines how, prior to the February invasion, multiple dynamics of Russo-Italian interplay challenged the credibility of NATO SC in Italian constituencies across the political spectrum. The third section investigates the articulation of criticism targeting NATO in the Italian media. It covers the public debate over the conflict, from the beginning of the crisis in February 2022 to the end of the so-called 'second phase', coinciding with the exhaustion of the Russian offensive in the Donbas and the beginning of the Ukrainian counter-offensives between August and September 2022. Within these sections, this study sketches a concise 'history of the present' covering the evolution of the Italian public's perceptions of NATO and Russia, one rooted in

13 Jonathan Lis, 'Bennett Says Putin Apologized over FM Lavrov's Nazi Comments', *Haaretz*, 2 May 2022; 'Solovyov, Fridrikhson, Dugin, Zakharova: Chi sono i volti della "propaganda russa" nei talk show italiani su cui indaga il Copasir' [Solovyov, Fridrikhson, Dugin, Zakharova: These Are the Faces of 'Russian Propaganda' on Italian Talk Shows Who Are Being Investigated by Copasir], *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 9 May 2022.

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the context of Italy's economic decline and political dysfunctionality.[14] It does so by applying historiography's focus on 'contextualization, causality, attention to change over time, focus on large social groups, myth-busting and awareness of issues in language and representation'.[15] The conclusion sums up findings and outlines their implications for the alliance.

Italy's Long Winter of Discontent

The annual report on the 'social situation' of Italy released by the authoritative centre for sociological studies CENSIS at the end of 2021 provides a snapshot of the socio-economic discontent, and consequent lack of trust in national and supranational institutions, that enveloped Italian society on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The report depicted a society 'escaping into irrationalism' in the aftermath of the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, a society where 11 per cent of Italians consider vaccines against the new coronavirus 'not effective', 6 per cent are convinced that the earth is flat, 20 per cent are convinced that 5G is a 'tool to control people', and an astonishing 40 per cent believe in conspiracy theories of 'ethnic replacement'. The explanation provided by CENSIS for these results is worth quoting here:

> The irrationalism manifested in our society is not simply a pandemic-related distortion. It has deep socio-economic roots, and it follows a trajectory moving from resentment to psychic sovereignism [*sovranismo psichico*]. It is now evolving, turning into a great refusal of the rational discourse […] of those tools that we previously used to build our progress and welfare: science, medicine, drugs, technological innovations. This shift is occurring because we have entered a cycle of diminishing returns in social investments that has sparked a vicious circle: low economic growth, diminishing tax revenues, consequent triggering of a public debt spiral, widespread social discontent and the rejection of the rational paradigm.[16]

One data point sums up the magnitude of the country's economic decline and its impact on Italian society: the country is the only EU member state where salaries have decreased since 1990, recording a 2.9 per cent contraction.[17] While the deep-rooted causes of Italy's economic decline are to be found in the country's inability to adapt to the new global economy that emerged in the 1970s, the effects of this systemic failure fully appeared only in the 1990s, when more imposing international constraints and conditions for competitiveness in global markets began to stifle local small and medium enterprises that had been the main drivers of Italy's post-WWII economic growth.[18] This predicament, in turn, left the country severely exposed to the exogenous shocks that preceded the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the 2000s and the 2010s: Italy's entry into the Eurozone in 2000, the impact of China's access to the WTO since 2001, the global financial crisis of 2008, and the Eurozone crisis of 2011.

Changing demographic patterns in the country in the last twenty years have further fuelled an acute sense of unease among the Italian population, contributing to a wider backlash against globalisation. The country has faced the return of historically high rates of migration in the twenty-first century, especially among its younger citizens, due to depressed salaries and a mismatch between preferences in academic education and the needs of the domestic job market.[19] Yet Italy has also simultaneously

14 Michelguglielmo Torri, 'La storia del presente: Una nota metodologica' [The History of the Present: A Note on Methodology], *Nuova Rivista Storica* [New History Review] 97 Nº 2 (2013): 607–32.

15 Juan Cole, 'Blogging Current Affairs History', *Journal of Contemporary History* 46 Nº 3 (2011): 658.

16 CENSIS, 'La società irrazionale' [The Irrational Society], 3 December 2021.

17 Openpolis, 'Quanto guadagnano in media i cittadini europei' [How Much European Citizens Earn on Average], 13 October 2021.

18 Emanuele Felice, *Ascesa e declino: Storia economica d'Italia* [Rise and Decline: The Economic History of Italy] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018), pp. 315–16, 358.

19 See Fabio Berti and Marco Alberio, 'Italiani che lasciano l'Italia: Le nuove emigrazioni tra continuità e cambiamenti' [Italians Who Leave Italy: The New Emigrations between Continuity and Change], in *Italiani che lasciano l'Italia: Le nuove emigrazioni al tempo della crisi* [Italians Who Leave Italy: The New Emigrations in a Time of Crisis], Marco Alberio and Fabio Berti (eds), (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2020), pp. 7–29.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

transformed into a multi-ethnic society, as the number of foreigners resident increased fourfold between 2002 and 2020, reaching 8.8 per cent of the population.[20] The socio-cultural disorientation caused by these trends, in turn, has morphed within many segments of Italian society into widespread interest in conspiracy theories of ethnic replacement which offer self-absolutory and easy-to-grasp tools to rationalise the country's twofold demographic challenge. Within this context, Italy's own forefront position in absorbing rising migratory fluxes from Northern Africa has had a compounding effect on these demographic anxieties. The country's geographic location and the inadequacies of the EU Dublin Regulation for asylum seekers, in particular, have left the Italian society and state to bear the brunt of new migratory waves arriving from Northern Africa.

Three decades of socio-economic decline rooted in the systemic inability to adapt the country's economy to the challenges of twenty-first century globalisation, coupled with rapid demographic changes, have thus created a breeding ground for widespread resentment against national political institutions, but also against allied countries, the EU, and international institutions. These political actors are perceived as sinews of a globalisation process that has left Italy not only weaker and poorer, but also devoid of its 'national character'. NATO has been widely considered as one of the sinews of such a 'system' to be contested. An example of this common frame of interpretation was provided two days after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine by the MP and former minister of health Giulia Grillo of the populist M5S, the party most voted for in the 2018 general elections. Grillo stated:

> A part of the [Five Star] Movement, being anti-system, was against everything that was part of the […] pre-constituted order, of what was there before [us]. And it was necessary to at least question it. It was something in the soul of the Five Star Movement. Atlanticism—the role of Italy seen as secondary, subaltern to the US—was questioned too. It was a position that we abandoned when we started to rule, because this is how foreign policy works, you need to stay continuously within the tracks, you can't just switch tracks from one government to another.[21]

Grillo's reductionist definition of Italy's alignment with the NATO alliance and the US—a position known as 'Atlanticism' (*atlantismo*)—as a condition of subalternity vis-à-vis Washington should not be dismissed. Her statement does not simply reflect the 'anti-system' backlash exploited by populist parties in the 2018 parliamentary elections. It embodies instead a widely shared, popular understanding of Italy's Cold War and post-Cold War history. On the left, such views emphasise Italy's NATO membership as the decisive factor that prevented the major opposition party, the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI), from gaining power through democratic means—a predicament that turned Italy into a 'blocked democracy' until the end of the Cold War. More importantly, Italy's membership in NATO is perceived across the entire political spectrum as evidence of a wider process of elite capture by Euro-Atlantic interests and institutions that constrains the country from pursuing a national-interest-oriented foreign policy—a narrative embraced and amplified by the populist parties that emerged on the centre of the Italian political stage in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis. These popular understandings are based on historical and political realities: first, Italy's status as a defeated party with limited foreign policy agency after the end of World War II; second, the country's laborious process of European integration after the Maastricht Treaty, characterised by a gradual loss of national sovereignty to the EU supranational institutions. Yet, the limitations of these perspectives remain glaring. They fail to capture the complexity and the ebb and flow of the bilateral relations between Rome and Washington during the Cold War and since its

20 Francesco C. Billari and Cecilia Tomassini, *Rapporto sulla popolazione: L'Italia e le sfide delle demografia* [Report on the Population: Italy and the Challenges of Demography] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021), p. 120.

21 Lorenzo De Cicco, 'Russia, Giulia Grillo: "Nel M5S mettevamo in discussione la Nato: Governare ci ha fatto cambiare idea"' [Russia, Giulia Grillo: 'In the Five Star Movement We Questioned NATO: Ruling Changed Our Minds'], *La Repubblica*, 26 February 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

end,[22] thus depicting Rome as a subaltern actor with no agency. They also gloss over, if not distort, the critical role that EU supranational institutions have played in sustaining the Italian economy, while relieving Italian parties and civil society from their responsibilities in failing to 'promote regulatory and redistribution policies that, while beneficial to their electoral constituencies, are compatible with allocative efficiency'.[23]

The pervasiveness of these anti-American and anti-NATO perspectives is one of the lasting legacies of the massive cultural influence that the PCI maintained over Italy throughout much of the Cold War era.[24] As the historian Silvio Pons notes, since the early years of post-war reconstruction, the PCI resorted both to an ideological form of anti-Americanism, which functioned as a tool of mass mobilisation and as a gluing factor for post-fascist communist identity, and to a pro-Soviet version of pacifism as a means to project its 'social influence' well beyond the perimeter of the Italian left.[25] Against this backdrop, one must consider also the emergence of historiographical, journalistic, and judiciary investigations that proved the involvement of state and state-adjacent actors close to or within Gladio (the Italian section of NATO's covert Stay Behind

22 See Ennio Di Nolfo, 'La politica estera italiana tra indipendenza e integrazione' [Italian Foreign Policy between Independence and Integration], in *L'Italia repubblicana nella crisi degli anni Settanta: Tra Guerra Fredda e distensione* [Republican Italy in the Crisis of the Seventies: Between Cold War and Détente] (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2003), pp. 17–28; Leopoldo Nuti, *Gli Stati Uniti e l'apertura a sinistra: Importanza e limiti della presenza americana in Italia* [The United States and the Opening to the Left: Importance and Limits of the American Presence in Italy] (Bari: Laterza, 1999); Massimo De Leonardis, 'La politica estera italiana, la Nato e l'Onu negli anni del neo-atlantismo' [Italy's Foreign Policy, NATO and the UN in the Years of Neo-Atlantism], in *L'Italia e le organizzazioni internazionali: Diplomazia multilaterale nel Novecento* [Italy and International Organisations: Multilateral Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century], Luciano Tosi (ed.), (Padua: Cedam, 1999), pp. 201–34; Emidio Diodato and Federico Niglia, *Italy in International Relations: The Foreign Policy Conundrum* (Palgrave, 2017).

23 Andrea Lorenzo Capussela, *The Political Economy of Italy's Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 175.

24 Since the immediate post-WWII era, a virulent strain of anti-Americanism built upon a supposed contraposition between a 'materialistic' American culture and a 'spiritual' European identity was present also within the Italian far right. This particular strand of anti-Americanism, however, never played a relevant role in the evolution of the Italian mass society of the second half of the twentieth century, given the fringe status of far-right culture and movements during the Cold War. See Gregorio Sorgonà, *La scoperta della destra: Il Movimento sociale italiano e gli Stati Uniti* [The Discovery of the Right: The Italian Social Movement and the United States] (Rome: Viella, 2019); Meindert Fennema and Christopher Pollmann, 'Ideology of Anti-Immigrant Parties in the Europe Parliament', *Acta Politica* 33 Nº 2 (1998): 111–38.

25 Silvio Pons, *I comunisti italiani e gli altri: Visioni e legami internazionali nel mondo del Novecento* [The Italian Communists and the Others: Visions and International Ties in the World of the Twentieth Century] (Milan: Einaudi, 2021), p. 144.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

networks) in the country's dark history of domestic terrorism between the 1960s and the 1980s.[26] The belated revelations of these events to the Italian public contributed to sustaining a popular culture inclined to read Italy's contemporary history and current events in international politics through conspiratorial, anti-American, and anti-NATO lenses. Specific incidents related to the extensive US military presence in Italy and firmly impressed in the national consciousness—such as the 1985 Sigonella Crisis and the 1998 Cavalese cable crash, as well as the NIMBY and pacifist protests against the installation of ground stations for the US military communications satellites Mobile User Objective System in central Sicily in the early 2010s—have kept the flames of anti-Americanism and anti-NATO sentiment alive. As a result, a sizable portion of the Italian public perceives the transatlantic alliance purely as the military dispositive of an American political and economic hegemony that, in turn, sustains a globalisation process in which Italy emerged as a net loser.

Three Dynamics of Russo-Italian Interplay

Against the backdrop of socio-economic anxieties that have emerged in the last three decades, the unfolding and flourishing of Russo-Italian relations at multiple levels—bilateral, political, economic, and cultural—have played a critical role in exacerbating negative perceptions of NATO as one of the sinews of a perceived 'system' of institutions responsible for the Italian decline. Three dynamics will be examined here to better understand this development. First, Italian–Russian relations at the state level; second, the use of Russian state narratives by Italian political actors to gain electoral advantage; and third, the attitudes of the Italian epistemic communities focused on foreign affairs and security policy towards Russia.

26 Davide Conti, *L'Italia di Piazza Fontana: Alle origini della crisi repubblicana* (Milan: Einaudi, 2020) [The Italy of the Piazza Fontana Massacre: At the Origins of the Crisis of the Republic]; Mirco Dondi, *L'eco del boato: La strategia della tensione 1965–1974* [The Blast's Echo: The Strategy of Tension, 1965–1974] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

In their longue durée analysis of the bilateral relationship between Italy and the Soviet Union/Russian Federation, Natalizia and Morini note that Rome tends to cooperate with Moscow when it perceives a stable international order, but is generally inclined 'to align with a major ally […] and to assume a competitive posture' when facing 'a global crisis'.[27] Focusing exclusively on foreign policy alignment, however, provides only a partial picture of the bilateral relation. Fair-weather policies towards Russia created pattern dependency, as shown by the evolution of Italian energy policy in the twenty-first century. Even though Rome aligned with the Euro-Atlantic consensus over the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, foreign policy environments did not fundamentally alter the bipartisan consensus over Russia's status as a low-level threat to national security, which emerged in the mid 2000s.[28] As a result, Italian executives prior to the Draghi government failed to diversify access to energy sources, leading the country to depend on the import of Russian gas.[29] Data recorded at the end of 2021 show how, just two months before the beginning of the invasion, 39.4 per cent of Italy's gas imports (amounting to 28.3 billion cubic metres) came from Russia.[30] Italy's challenges in remapping its energy imports, historically high energy prices as the conflict entered the summer of 2022, and the prospect of an energy embargo from Russia provided powerful arguments for those advocating an opportunistic departure from Euro-Atlantic unity over sanctions against Moscow. This predicament contributed to damaging the perception of NATO, or, more precisely, of Italy's international alignment, among those segments of the public less engaged

27 Gabriele Natalizia and Mara Morini, 'Sleeping with the Enemy: The Not-So-Constant Italian Stance towards Russia', *Italian Political Science* 15 Nº 1 (2020): 54.

28 Francesco Olmastroni, 'The Alleged Consensus: Italian Elites and Public on Foreign Policy', *Italian Political Science Review* 47 Nº 2 (2017): 147–82.

29 Elisabetta Brighi, *Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and International Relations: The Case of Italy* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 140. While the liberalisation of the EU energy market created an incentive to foster dependence on the lowest bidder, the decision to underestimate the national security implications of this choice was purely driven by domestic politics. Furthermore, mitigation actions against a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine were devisable prior to the conflict. See Ettore Bompard, Andrea Carpignano, Marco Erriquez, Daniele Grosso, M. Pession, and Francesco Profumo, 'National Energy Security Assessment in a Geopolitical Perspective', *Energy* 130 (2017): 149–51.

30 ENEA, Analisi trimestrale del sistema energetico italiano: Anno 2021 [Quarterly Report on the Italian Energy System: Year 2021] Nº 1 (2022), p. 40.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

with domestic and international politics and most affected by a sharp rise in utility bills.

The second dynamic of Russo-Italian interplay concerns the resonance of Russian narratives within large segments of the Italian electorate through the mediation of local political parties. Examining this dynamic requires a brief detour into the evolution of Russian foreign policy. Vladimir Putin notoriously vented his grievances against Europe's post-Cold War security order and NATO enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe in a speech delivered at the 2007 Munich Security Conference.[31] Following Putin's Munich speech, Russia's contestation of the Western-led security order was primarily directed against post-Soviet states either belonging to or oriented towards Euro-Atlantic institutions. This shift resulted in cyberattacks against Estonia in 2007, the war against Georgia in 2008, and the illegal annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbas in 2014. The Kremlin's new assertiveness in foreign policy was coupled with what Conley and Ruy describe as a form of 'strategic conservatism' that is 'defined in opposition to Western ideals of pluralism and liberalism, and in defense of Russian actions and the Putin regime'.[32] While it is 'domestically rooted within Russia', the Kremlin's strategic conservatism has been also 'customized internationally', turning into a 'marketable philosophy' designed to provide 'ideational parity with the West'.[33]

In the wake of the havoc left by the Eurozone crisis on Italy's domestic economy and society, Russian strategic conservatism found fertile ground among the country's right-wing political environments. Following the demise of the liberal-conservative personalist project of Silvio Berlusconi in the early 2010s,[34] the two major parties on the right, the League

31 Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 56–57. For a sympathetic view of Russia's 'neo-revisionist' turn around 2007, see Richard Sakwa, *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (St Ives: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 19–37.

32 Heather A. Conley and Donatienne Ruy, *The Kremlin Playbook 3: Keeping the Faith* (CSIS, 2022), pp. 5–6.

33 Ibid., pp. 5–6.

34 Elisabetta Brighi, '"One Man Alone"? A Longue Durée Approach to Italy's Foreign Policy under Berlusconi', *Government and Opposition* 41 Nº 2 (2006): 278–97; Emidio Diodato and Federico Niglia, *Berlusconi 'The Diplomat': Populism and Foreign Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 58–59.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

and Brothers of Italy (FdI, Fratelli d'Italia), embraced both Russian (strategic) conservatism and the mystique of the political persona of Putin himself as ideational tools in their political struggle against the EU supranational integration, the centre-left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD), and 'globalist elites'. In particular the League, led by Matteo Salvini, was at the forefront of this process, going beyond the mere rhetorical support shown by FdI.[35] Beyond Salvini's own stunts, such as sporting a T-shirt with Putin's face at the European Parliament in 2015,[36] his party signed a cooperation agreement with the United Russia (Yedinaya Rossiya) party in March 2017,[37] and lobbied for the recognition of the so-called 'People's Republics' in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the lifting of the EU sanctions imposed over the illegal annexation of Crimea.[38] Especially throughout the second half of the 2010s, the Italian right's love affair with the Putin regime played a critical role in the construction of an illiberal, populist, and right-wing worldview receptive of Russian narratives over NATO, thus expanding scepticism over the value of Italy's alignment with the alliance to new constituencies.

In fact, Russian narratives have continued to resonate also within Italy's diminished left-wing constituencies—highlighting the 'strategic' character of Russian conservatism. Fringes of the Italian far left have consistently shown sympathy for the Putin regime and its confrontational foreign policy against Euro-Atlantic institutions—either due to a naive form of Soviet nostalgia or, more often, because they see in Moscow

35 Alberto Magnani, 'Alla ricerca dell'uomo forte: Perché la politica italiana è innamorata di Putin' [Looking for the Strongman: Why Italian Politics Is in Love with Putin], *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 19 March 2018. See also: Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Abingdon and Oxford: Routledge, 2017).

36 'Salvini in Parlamento europeo con la maglietta di Putin: "Una risposta agli eurocretini"' [Salvini at the European Parliament with a Putin T-Shirt: 'An Answer to Euro-Imbeciles'], *Corriere della Sera*, 8 March 2017.

37 Emanuele Lauria, 'Il giallo dell'accordo tra la Lega di Salvini e il partito di Putin' [The Mystery of the Agreement between Salvini's League and Putin's Party], *La Repubblica*, 28 February 2022. In contrast with Salvini, who has maintained an ambiguous position over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, FdI's leader Giorgia Meloni has steered her party towards an unequivocal condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and a firm commitment to NATO since the earliest stages of the conflict.

38 Gianfrancesco Turano, 'Ambasciatori improbabili, affaristi e fascisti: La galassia dei sostenitori italiani di Putin' [Dubious Ambassadors, Wheeler-Dealers, and Fascists: The Galaxy of the Italian Supporters of Putin], *L'Espresso*, 23 July 2019.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

an improbable ally in their own 'anti-imperialist' and anti-capitalist struggles.[39] Moscow's justifications for the intervention in Ukraine in 2014, centred on the 'defence' of Russian-speakers from Western- and NATO-supported Ukrainian 'neo-Nazis', have not been easily dismissed by Italians on the left who have been socialised in the politicised cult of the partisan resistance (la Resistenza) against Nazi-Fascism during World War II.[40] Similarly, Moscow framed its military support for the Assad regime in Syria as a response against jihadist groups that emerged from a failed Western attempt at regime change.[41] This framing has appealed to the many people who participated in the peace protests against the US invasion of Iraq in early 2003—perhaps the last moment when the Italian left was capable of tapping into popular sentiment of local masses and mobilising them,[42] but it also resonates with criticism of NATO's intervention against the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011.

Both conservative and 'anti-imperialist' Russian narratives found a receptive audience among the eclectic electorate of the most-voted-for party in the 2018 general elections, the M5S. This predicament reflects the party's ideological inconsistency, mixing positions in line with Western European libertarian left movements together with right-wing populist themes.[43] As previously mentioned in this study, scepticism towards NATO has been ingrained in the party's DNA since its early days. The alliance has repeatedly been the subject of harsh criticism by the party's

39 Taras Bilous, 'A Letter to the Western Left from Kyiv', *Open Democracy*, 25 February 2022; Stefano Cappellini, 'La sinistra anti-NATO: Più Pilato che Marx' [The Anti-NATO Left: More Like Pilate than Marx], *La Repubblica*, 17 March 2022; Dimitri Deiolanes, 'Ora la guerra di Putin divide anche la diaspora comunista nel mondo' [Now Putin's War Divides the Global Communist Diaspora Too], *Il Manifesto*, 27 May 2022.

40 See Filippo Focardi, *La guerra della memoria: La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi* [The Memory War: The Resistance in the Italian Political Debate from 1945 to Today] (Bari: Laterza, 2005).

41 Roy Allison, 'Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis', *International Affairs* 89 Nº 4 (2013): 795–823; Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria* (RAND, 2019).

42 See Simona Colarizi and Marco Gervasoni, *La tela di Penelope: Storia della Seconda Repubblica* [Penelope's Web: The History of the Second Republic] (Bari: Laterza, 2012), p. 158.

43 Pasquale Colloca and Piergiorgio Corbetta, 'Beyond Protest: Issues and Ideological Inconsistencies in the Voters of the Movimento 5 Stelle', in *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement: Organisation, Communication and Ideology*, Filippo Tronconi (ed.), (Abingdon and New York: Routledge: 2016), pp. 195–212.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

founder, former leader, and current 'guarantor', Beppe Grillo.[44] Like the League, the M5S translated a receptiveness to Russian narratives into direct engagement with Moscow, especially after 2017.[45] The event that best exemplifies the amicable relationship between Moscow and Rome under the two M5S-led executives of Giuseppe Conte (the first with the League and the second with the centre-left PD as respective junior partners) is the controversial 'health diplomacy' operation conducted by the Russian army on Italian soil during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, which was also the subject of an investigation by the parliamentary committee for intelligence.[46] The operation, code-named 'From Russia with Love', played an important role in bolstering favourable perceptions of the country among the Italian public at a moment of *perceived* international isolation when Italy became the first Western country to face the pandemic.[47] Indeed, a poll published by the Pew Research Center at the end of 2020 showed record-high rates of support for Russia in the country—a trend contrary to those of all the other major Western and East Asian countries surveyed.[48] M5S supporters too were thus provided with pro-Russian narratives that diminished the value of NATO for national interest and private welfare.

The third dynamic relevant to understanding critical attitudes against NATO in Italy relates to the country's epistemic communities concerned with national security and international politics. Starting in the early post-Cold War era, professional networks active in Italian academia, think

44 Grillo has generally attacked NATO by posting opinion pieces by M5S members and public figures close to the party on his personal blog, for years the most followed blog in Italy. See 'M5s, il deputato Di Stefano sul blog di Grillo: "Nato mette a rischio l'Europa, ridiscutere la presenza dell'Italia"' [Five Star Movement, MP Di Stefano on Grillo's Blog: 'NATO Endangers Europe, It Is Necessary to Discuss Again Italy's Membership'], *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 12 January 2017; 'M5S, sul blog di Grillo attacco al vertice Nato e al G7 in difesa di Cina e Russia. Di Maio: "Posizione personale"' [Five Star Movement, Attack against the NATO Summit and the G7 to Defend China and Russia on Grillo's Blog. Di Maio: 'Personal Position'], *La Repubblica*, 15 June 2021.

45 Jacopo Iacoboni, *L'esperimento: Inchiesta sul Movimento 5 Stelle* (Bari: Laterza, 2018) [The Experiment: An Investigation into the Five Star Movement], pp. 156–65.

46 Luca Roberto, 'Per il Copasir l'indagine sulla missione russa in Italia non può considerarsi conclusa' [Copasir Does Not Consider the Investigation over the Russian Mission to Italy to Be Over], *Il Foglio*, 1 April 2022.

47 Dario Cristiani, 'Russian Motives behind Helping Italy's Coronavirus Response: A Multifaceted Approach', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17 Nº 47 (2020).

48 Christine Huang, 'Views of Russia and Putin Remain Negative across 14 Nations', *Pew Research Center*, 16 December 2020.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

tanks, and media have been responsible for articulating the vested interests of a range of local political and geo-economic actors that supported Italy's engagement with the Putin regime. These same professional networks have simultaneously contributed to the popularisation and legitimation of pro-Russian arguments via their role in higher education and their divulgatory work in local media. The history and articulation of these networks have been painstakingly reconstructed by Di Pasquale and Germani in a recently published report.[49] Here, it is worth noting that the two analysts distinguish between two milieus within Italian pro-Russian epistemic communities. The first is that of the so-called 'neo-Eurasianists' (*neo-eurasianisti*), which has its origins in a group of far-right intellectuals and activists who in the early 1990s embraced Russian Eurasianism as an ideology of resistance against liberal democracy and globalisation.[50] After decades at the fringes of Italian politics, culture, and academia, Italian neo-Eurasianists eventually entered the mainstream as the conflict in the Donbas began. They have forged ties with Salvini's League, established a presence on national media, and made inroads on social media.[51] The second, more important milieu identified by Di Pasquale and Germani is the so-called *Russlandversteher* (German for 'Russia-sympathisers'). This term labels a diverse group of 'advocates of a more moderate pro-Russian orientation' who came to 'dominate the media and the Italian academic discourse on Russian and post-Soviet affairs, as well as over other critical foreign policy issues', while at the same time struggling to accept the sovereignty and agency

49 Di Pasquale and Germani, *L'influenza russa*.

50 On Russian Eurasianism, see Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington, DC, and Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

51 Italian Neo-Eurasianists are usually identified in the national public debate as 'red-browns' (*rossobruni*), an umbrella label that in recent years has come to identify any kind of intellectual and/or political convergence between the far left and the far right. Originally used in relation to Strasserists and German National Bolshevists in the interwar period, the 'red-brown' label was eventually adopted to describe the Belgian political theorist Jean-François Thiriart, the Italian Marxist philosopher Costanzo Preve, and Italian fringe far-right groups involved in political terrorism in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the so-called 'Nazi-Maoists' (*nazimaoisti*) and Terza Posizione, as well as contemporary Lilliputian parties on the far left such as the Partito Comunista of former Italian MP Marco Rizzo. See Andrea Daniele Signorelli, 'Rossobruni' [Red-Browns], *Il Tascabile*, 4 July 2017; Matteo Pucciarelli, 'Rossobruni, sovranisti e "non allineati": Le improbabili convergenze tra estrema destra e sinistra in vista delle Politiche 2023' [Red-Browns, Sovereignists and 'Non-Aligned': The Unlikely Convergences between Far Right and Left in the Build-Up to the 2023 Elections], *La Repubblica*, 3 June 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

of the other post-Soviet states.[52] In contrast with the neo-Eurasianists, *Russlandversteher* generally do not directly criticise NATO and the EU, or question Italy's participation in these institutions. Rather, they have systematically adopted Russian strategic narratives on European security and have contributed to their dissemination on mainstream media.[53]

Within this second milieu, it is worth singling out the magazine *Limes* (Latin for 'limits', 'borders'), founded in 1993 by former PCI member and journalist Lucio Caracciolo. Since the 1990s, *Limes* has been shaping the Italian public debate on foreign policy, spearheading what Brighi and Petito define as a 'renaissance of geopolitics' in post-Cold War Italy.[54] As the two scholars note, the magazine has championed and popularised a strand of geopolitical *Realpolitik* (defined by Brighi and Petito as '*Real*geo*politik*') that provides, 'at a very low intellectual cost', a 'loose but politically relevant link between theory and practice' for Italian diplomats and policy-makers.[55] The magazine has done so while maintaining an editorial line vague enough to 'fit different political agendas at different times and for different purposes', turning into a forum where 'left-wing post-communist contributors [stand] side by side with figures from right-wing, conservative and military backgrounds'.[56] For these reasons, *Limes* has become a popular and credible source among audiences on both sides of the Italian political spectrum. To audiences on the left, the magazine's *Real*geo*politik* outlook provides a validation of traditional leftist critiques of the foreign policy of liberal democracies and in particular of the US, centred on imperialism, the extraction of natural resources, and the control of infrastructures and strategic geographical features. To audiences on the right, the same analyses provide instead a merciless diagnosis of Italy's position in international politics, as well as a map for pursuing the country's own, neglected 'national interest'. The outreach and the influence of the magazine should not be underestimated. The first issue published after the beginning of the Russian invasion of

52 Di Pasquale and Germani, *L'influenza russa*, p. 11.

53 Ibid., pp. 19–31.

54 Elisabetta Brighi and Fabio Petito, 'The Renaissance of Geopolitics in Post-1989 Italy', *Geopolitics* 16 Nº 4 (2011): 819–45.

55 Ibid., p. 840.

56 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

Ukraine, for instance, sold 150,000 hard copies (astounding numbers for the Italian editorial market).[57] To these numbers one must add online subscriptions and a presumably higher number of soft copies illegally downloaded on the internet—a common issue given the popularity of digital piracy in Italy.

Down the years *Limes* has adopted a *Russlandversteher* line—though one cloaked by the logic of the magazine's own strand of *Real*geo*politik*. It has popularised Kremlin narratives that delegitimise the statehood of post-Soviet countries, thus indirectly justifying a Russian sphere of influence in other post-Soviet states and sponsoring the emergence of a 'Euro-Russian' security condominium. Caracciolo and the magazine's regular contributors have played an active, though cautious, role in this effort.[58] Yet, the dissemination of such Russian narratives has been primarily achieved through editorial choices, mainly by regularly publishing articles by pro-establishment Russian authors—even including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.[59] In doing so, the magazine has remained wilfully oblivious not only to the Kremlin's playbook for foreign influence, but also to Italy's own fragile societal resilience against influence operations by foreign actors. *Limes*'s consistent tendency to portray transatlantic relations as a zero-sum conflict for the survival of a US 'empire in Europe', in which Italy is relegated to a bleak condition of subalternity,[60] has further bolstered *Russlandversteher* opinions and sceptical attitudes towards NATO in the country.

57 Associazione Italiana Editori, Il mercato del libro nei primi quattro mesi del 2022 [The Book Market in the First Four Months of 2022], 22 May 2022, p. 33.

58 Lucio Caracciolo, 'Le sciabole dello zar' [The Tsar's Sabres], *Limes*, 22 May 2008; 'Eurussia il nostro futuro?' [Eurussia, Our Future?], *Limes*, 28 April 2009; Pietro Figuera, 'L'Italia può e deve aiutare la Russia a rientrare in Europa' [Italy Can and Must Help Russian Re-Enter Europe], *Limes*, 5 March 2019.

59 Sergey Lavrov, 'Il mondo visto dalla Russia' [The World Seen from Russia], *Limes*, 2 February 2016. See also the many monographic issues focusing on Russia and the post-Soviet space: 'L'Ucraina tra noi e Putin' [Ukraine between Us and Putin], *Limes*, 16 April 2014; 'La Russia in guerra' [Russia at War], *Limes*, 18 December 2014; 'Il mondo di Putin' [Putin's World], *Limes*, 4 February 2016; 'Russia-America, la pace impossibile' [Russia-America: The Impossible Peace], *Limes*, 6 October 2016.

60 See 'L'Europa tedesca, incubo americano' [The American Nightmare of a German Europe], *Limes*, 8 June 2017; Dario Fabbri, 'Così gli Stati Uniti attaccheranno la Germania' [This Is How the United States Will Attack Germany], *Limes*, 8 June 2017; 'L'Europa non è europea' [Europe Is Not European], *Limes*, 15 May 2019; Dario Fabbri, 'Europa, perla dell'impero americano' [Europe, the Pearl of the American Empire], *Limes*, 15 May 2019; Fabio Mini, 'Siamo servi di Serie B e non serviamo a niente' [We Are Second-Class Servants and We Are Good for Nothing], *Limes*, 6 June 2018.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

The Production and Reproduction of Criticism Targeting NATO in the Italian Media

Italy's national TV news broadcasting and newspapers broadly and unequivocally condemned Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in their coverage of the earliest stages of the Kremlin's 'special military operation'. Yet, the same national media still found ways to disseminate narratives criticising NATO's supposed 'responsibility' for the beginning of the largest land war in Europe since World War II. They have done so mostly through commentaries and interviews in printed media and through talk-show debates during prime time. This development was the result of a widely shared editorial approach aiming at raising engagement with domestic audiences by staging a contraposition between a 'pro-Ukraine' camp and a 'pacifist' camp. To enable this contraposition, the national media pitted professional figures possessing actual expertise on international politics against a diverse range of intellectuals and public figures who possessed virtually no professional expertise on Russia, Ukraine, or European security. This contraposition was designed to allow local audiences to identify the former with the national 'establishment', mainly because of their professional affiliation, and the latter as quixotic figures ready to 'speak truth to power'. A majority of these quixotic figures had a personal history of leftist militancy and activism, as in the case of the renowned classicist Luciano Canfora, the philosopher Donatella Di Cesare, and the famous journalist Michele Santoro.[61] Others, however, presented their critiques of NATO to the general public through the prism of academic objectivity, as in the case of sociologist Alessandro Orsini, who briefly rose from obscurity to media celebrity status in the first weeks of the conflict.

The content of critiques targeting NATO at this stage echoed those same Russian grievances that have taken centre stage in the Kremlin's political communication since Putin's 2007 Munich speech. They echoed perceptions of a Western 'betrayal' of 'pledges'—none of them

61 Concetto Vecchio, 'Da Rovelli a Canfora, i teorici del "né-né": "L'Europa si pentirà"' [From Rovelli to Canfora, the 'Neither-Nor' Theorists: 'Europe Will Regret It'], *La Repubblica*, 13 March 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

possessing *de jure* value—made to the Soviet leadership during the critical 1989–91 period between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the USSR. These critiques, however, mostly focused on (1) how NATO enlargement to include the former Warsaw Pact member states and the Baltic republics established an inherent threat to Russian security; and (2) how the alliance's continuing existence constitutes an obstacle to the emergence of a more effective security architecture in Europe. While such issues have been the subject of extensive academic debate,[62] criticism of NATO enlargement in the Italian national media expectedly lacked any nuance or contextualisation, and conveniently avoided mentioning both Russian domestic political and cultural drivers, on one side, and Central and Eastern European countries' agency, on the other.

On 27 February, the fourth day of the invasion, the then chief correspondent in Moscow for the Italian national public broadcasting company RAI, Marc Innaro, stated during a prime-time in-depth show:

> Maybe Europeans suffer from a colossal lack of historical memory, [from a lack of] understanding of the deeper dynamics that Russia has suffered […] in the last thirty years. One can just look at the geographical map to realise that after the dissolution of the USSR, [the side] who expanded was not Russia, but NATO.[63]

62 On the issue of Western pledges to the USSR over NATO enlargement, see Mark Kramer, 'The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia', *Washington Quarterly* 32 Nº 2 (2009): 39–61; Marc Trachtenberg, 'The United States and the NATO Non-Extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?', *International Security* 45 Nº 3 (2021): 162–203. On the impact of NATO's enlargement on US–Russia relations, see Charles E. Ziegler, 'A Crisis of Diverging Perspectives: U.S.-Russia Relations and the Security Dilemma', *Texas National Security Review* 4 Nº 1 (2020): 11–33. For a synopsis of Mearsheimer's popular argument against NATO enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe written in the aftermath of the invasion, see John J. Mearsheimer, 'John Mearsheimer on Why the West Is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis', *The Economist*, 19 March 2022; for a rebuttal, see Adam Roberts, 'Sir Adam Roberts Rebuffs the View that the West Is Principally Responsible for the Crisis in Ukraine', *The Economist*, 26 March 2022.

63 Valerio Valentini, 'Il PD denuncia la propaganda pro Mosca in RAI' [The PD Denounces the Pro-Moscow Propaganda in RAI], *Il Foglio*, 27 February 2022. Similar pro-Russian reports, in this case from the 'Donetsk People's Republic' puppet state, had been broadcast by RAI in the period leading up to the invasion. See: 'Il Donbass spiegato al TG1' [The Donbas Explained to the TG1], *Il Foglio*, 15 January 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

Similarly, in an interview with national newspaper *La Stampa*, former prime minister Massimo D'Alema (the first and only former-communist prime minister of Italy) argued that 'the theme of Russian security had never been dealt with seriously' prior to the invasion of Ukraine. D'Alema continued by outlining only two possible options: either the inclusion of Russia in a 'NATO that would change its nature' or a wholly new European security architecture.[64] Another former leader of the Italian centre left, Pierluigi Bersani, criticised the proactive role of the EU, arguing that it should not act in a manner similar to NATO when dealing with Russian security aspirations in Europe.[65] By emphasising NATO's supposed 'alien' character vis-à-vis the EU project, this line of criticism published early in the evolution of the conflict established an interpretative frame that fundamentally distorted perceptions of the alliance's values and role and provided arguments for Russian apologists.

Criticism of NATO in the Italian national media, however, did not concentrate solely on its post-Cold War enlargement and proximity to Russian borders. It also focused on its engagement with Ukraine in the period between the events of 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022. Some of the harshest criticism targeted at the alliance, in particular, concerned the aim and impact of the military exercises that NATO held together with Ukrainian armed forces in 2021. As Kubai explains, the shift in the number, scale, geography, types of scenario, and identity of third parties invited to join NATO's military exercises is the result of a deterrence strategy fashioned in response to Moscow's own military activities since 2014, as in the cases of Russia's Zapad military exercises held together with Belarus in 2017 and in 2021.[66] Nonetheless, NATO's attempts at deterrence via military exercises were easily distorted and presented to the general public as evidence of the alliance's provocative

64 Fabio Martini, 'D'Alema: "Questa aggressione è un crimine ma sulla Russia errori dell'Occidente"' [D'Alema: 'This Aggression Is a Crime but the West Made Mistakes on Russia'], *La Stampa*, 26 February 2022.

65 Concetto Vechio, 'Ucraina, Bersani: "Non mi piace la Ue solo con l'elmetto. Si spinga sul negoziato"' [Ukraine, Bersani: 'I Don't Like This EU Equipped Only with a Combat Helmet. Let There Be a Push for Negotiations'], *La Repubblica*, 3 March 2022.

66 Danylo Kubai, 'Military Exercises as a Part of NATO Deterrence Strategy', *Comparative Strategy* 41 Nº 6 (2022): 155–61.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

stance vis-à-vis Moscow. The sociologist Alessandro Orsini, for instance, stated on national TV channel La7 on 10 March 2022:

> I would like to say that my argument cannot be understood if certain information is kept unavailable in Italy. NATO conducted three massive military exercises with war scenarios in Ukraine. It conducted one in June 2021, called Sea Breeze […] NATO conducted another massive military exercise in July 2021, called Three Swords, then it conducted another massive military operation in September 2021 called Rapid Trident. When it conducted the one in September 2021, Putin came close to shooting NATO ships and said: 'You must stop, because you are bringing this situation to a point of collapse.'[67]

The snippet containing this statement and uploaded on the YouTube channel of La7 reached 1.2 million views in July 2022. Particularly interesting is the conspiratorial tone of the statement, which highlights a fundamental problem for NATO SC. Relying on the ignorance of an Italian public generally uninterested in international politics and oblivious to the scope and modalities of NATO exercises, Orsini presented the alliance's three exercises conducted with Ukraine as secretive manoeuvres carefully designed to provoke Russia and push Putin to war. A few days later the renowned theoretical physicist and science communicator Carlo Rovelli rehashed Orsini's argument on the pages of Italy's newspaper of record, the *Corriere della Sera*, in an opinion piece of his own. Rovelli wrote:

> The prospect of NATO nuclear missiles in Ukraine terrorized the elite in power in Russia. Do you think it is weird? Did NATO conduct military exercises in the Black Sea facing Russian

67 'Ucraina, il Prof. Orsini avverte: "Sta per scoppiare un'altra guerra in Georgia"' [Ukraine, Prof. Orsini Gives a Warning: 'Another War Is Erupting in Georgia'], *La 7*, 10 March 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

> bases last year to promote détente? This does not justify anything at all, but it helps us understand. In order to avoid Soviet missiles in Cuba, the United States was ready to wage nuclear war.[68]

These critiques, which, for large swathes of the Italian public, possessed a common-sense character, squarely ignored the fact that Ukrainian aspirations to join the alliance had been repeatedly met with firm opposition by NATO member states since the Bucharest summit of 2008.[69] More importantly, these critiques of NATO failed to mention how Ukraine's own prospects to join the alliance had become non-viable after the events in 2014 and the Russian annexation of Crimea, given that states with territorial disputes are not allowed to join the alliance.[70] Ironically, just a few months later, Italian apologists for Russia were eventually contradicted by Putin's own depiction of the invasion as a revanchist endeavour aimed at retaking control of lands that historically belonged to the tsarist empire.[71]

As the Russian 2022 invasion entered its 'second phase' in April after the failure to capture Kyiv, criticism of NATO changed accordingly, now being framed within the wider narrative of a US-led 'proxy war' against Russia that hurt Italy's national interests and security. NATO was now indicted as an obstacle to the resolution of a conflict that could supposedly have been close to reaching its end—if only Western weapons had stopped arriving in Ukraine. For instance, Fabio Mini, a retired general of the Italian Army and former commander of the KFOR mission in Kosovo, who is one of *Limes*'s most renowned authors, argued in the national newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* that the conflict was 'an open war waged by the US against Russia with supplementary tools such as the rest of NATO and the European Union'.[72] Beyond the talking

68 Carlo Rovelli, 'Ecco perché penso che mandare armi all'Ucraina sia un errore' [This Is Why I Believe It Is a Mistake to Send Weapons to Ukraine], *Corriere della Sera*, 15 March 2022.

69 Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, pp. 57–58.

70 NATO, 'Study on NATO Enlargement', 5 November 2008.

71 Andrew Roth, 'Putin Compares Himself to Peter the Great in Quest To Take Back Russian Lands', *The Guardian*, 10 June 2022.

72 Fabio Mini, 'Nyt, Biden e gli 007: Il gioco delle parti "fa bene" alla guerra' [The NYT, Biden and the 007s: A Role Play 'Benefiting' the War], *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 7 May 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

points of the chorus of anti-NATO voices in the national media, there is one event that clearly shows the structural challenges that the alliance continues to face in the Italian information environment. On 6 May, Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated at a Chatham House event that 'to stop the war between Russia and Ukraine … the minimum step should be the restoration of the situation as it was before the full-scale invasion'.[73] A newswire by ANSA, Italy's main news agency upon which most national newspapers and media companies rely, ambiguously reported Zelenskyy's statement by explaining that the Ukrainian president was ready to start peace talks 'without the retrocession of Crimea'.[74] On 7 May, the day after Zelenskyy's interview, NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg gave the following view on the evolution of the conflict in an interview with *Die Welt*:

> Ukraine must win this war because it defends its territory. NATO members will never accept the illegal annexation of Crimea. We have also been opposing Russia's control over parts of the Donbas region in Eastern Ukraine. The allies support Ukraine's sovereignty and its territorial integrity in relation to the recognized borders. We will support Ukraine as long as Putin will continue the war. Ultimately, however, it is up to the government and the sovereign people of Ukraine how to design peace. We cannot decide this ourselves.[75]

Most Italian media, however, interpreted Stoltenberg's statement in light of the ambiguously worded ANSA newswire, presenting it as evidence

73 Chatham House, 'War on Ukraine: Volodymyr Zelenskyy', 6 May 2022.

74 'Zelensky apre a pace con i russi senza restituzione Crimea' [Zelensky Opens the Door to Peace Talks with the Russians without the Retrocession of Crimea], *ANSA*, 6 May 2022.

75 Christoph B. Schiltz, 'Deutschland hat eine Führungsrolle' [Germany Has a Leading Role], *Die Welt*, 7 May 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

that NATO itself was coercing Kyiv to continue fighting.[76] *Il Fatto Quotidiano* published for instance a grotesque front page with a photo montage of Biden and Stoltenberg gagging the Ukrainian president, titled 'NATO against Zelensky: "Crimea Is Ours"'.[77] While this front page reflected the broadly anti-establishment editorial line of a newspaper that is the unofficial house organ of the M5S, it is telling that even other national newspapers that have consistently expressed support for Kyiv and endorsed Euro-Atlantic measures taken in the aftermath of the invasion, such as *La Stampa*, disseminated the same interpretation of the event. The diverse range of sources involved is evidence that the malaise of the Italian media cannot be simply explained by Russian 'influence' over the country's media system.[78] Rather, it is a symptom of scarce professionalism within the workforce, little familiarity with foreign languages and foreign media, and a consequent reliance on a narrow range of sources. The new framing presenting NATO as 'an obstacle to peace' was evident also in the response that the *maîtres* à *penser* of the Italian 'peace camp' gave to Finland's and Sweden's requests to join the alliance, a coordinated move that was immediately framed as a NATO provocation aimed at further raising tensions with Moscow.[79]

While public figures in the pacifist left and *Real*geo*politik* analysts led criticism of NATO in the Italian mass media, no public figure from the radicalised environments of the Italian populist right emerged in the national debate. To provide an accessible term of comparison, there

76 'Il delirio mediatico tutto italiano su Zelensky, il Segretario Generale della NATO e la Crimea' [The All-Italian Media Delirium on Zelensky, the NATO Secretary General and Crimea], *Valigia Blu*, 9 May 2022. See also Luciano Capone, 'Zelensky vuole cedere la Crimea e la Nato glielo impedisce: Ma solo in Italia' [Zelensky Wants to Cede Crimea and NATO Forbids Him to Do It: But Only in Italy], *Il Foglio*, 10 May 2022.

77 Il Fatto Quotidiano (@FattoQuot0idiano), 'PRIMA PAGINA Nato contro Zelensky: "La Crimea è nostra"' [FRONT PAGE NATO against Zelensky: 'Crimea Is Ours'], *Twitter*, 8 May 2022.

78 Francesca Sforza, 'La NATO corregge Zelensky: "La Crimea è incedibile"' [NATO Corrects Zelensky: 'Crimea Cannot Be Ceded'], *La Stampa*, 8 May 2022.

79 'Metropolis/71 – Ucraina, Caracciolo: "Perché Finlandia e Svezia nella Nato sono un problema"' [Ukraine, Caracciolo: 'Why Finland and Sweden in NATO Are a Problem'], *La Repubblica*, 13 April 2022; 'Finlandia e Svezia nella NATO, Di Cesare: "La chiamo annessione"' [Finland and Sweden in NATO, Di Cesare: 'I Call It Annexation'], La7, *YouTube*, 23 May 2022; Davide Falcioni, '"La Finlandia nella NATO è una provocazione alla Russia", dice il generale Bertolini' ['Finland in NATO Is a Provocation against Moscow', Says General Bertolini], *Fanpage.it*, 12 May 2022. Despite the possibly deceptive moniker, *Fanpage.it* is one of the most popular no-paywall internet media platforms in Italy, with 8.5 million followers on Facebook and 2.8 million subscribers on YouTube.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

was no Italian Tucker Carlson.[80] Unable to gain traction in the national mass media, because of the awkward repositioning over relations with Russia of the two main political parties on the right—Giorgia Meloni's FdI and Salvini's League—in the aftermath of the invasion these environments have articulated instead their own anti-NATO narratives over the war, mostly on social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram.[81] Far from the (relatively) sophisticated arguments proposed by the 'peace camp' and by Italian geopolitical analysts, their criticism of the alliance generally relied on Russian disinformation, such as the supposed presence of covert NATO troops, bases, and even 'bio-laboratories' throughout Ukraine.[82] More importantly, these environments have framed opposition to NATO as part of a wider, long-term 'popular struggle' against 'corrupt' international and Italian democratic institutions—a 'struggle' that had already intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic.[83] Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume the emergence of two separate, fully distinct discourses in the Italian information environment. In the absence of quantitative studies on the phenomenon, a cursory assessment of social media and ephemeral websites suggests that, mainly through snippetisation of content produced on mass media, narratives critical of NATO from the pacifist left and from geopolitical analysts do reach populist right-wing environments, which, in turn, have occasionally used them to provide their opinions with a veneer of legitimacy in the struggle against the perceived *pensée unique* within Italy and the EU.

80 Daniel W. Drezner, 'Tucker Carlson's Bizarre Theory of the War in Ukraine', *Washington Post*, 3 May 2022.

81 Giuliano Foschini, 'Quel filo che lega partiti e opinionisti al network della propaganda russa' [That Thread Connecting Parties and Commentators to the Russian Propaganda Network], *La Repubblica*, 21 May 2022; Monica Guerzoni and Fiorenza Sarzanini, 'La rete di Putin in Italia: Chi sono influencer e opinionisti che fanno propaganda per Mosca' [Putin's Network in Italy: These Are the Influencers and Commentators Who Disseminate Propaganda for Moscow], *Corriere della Sera*, 5 June 2022.

82 Simone Fontana, 'Dentro i gruppi Facebook italiani'; 'Non ci sono prove che l'acciaieria Azovstal di Mariupol nasconda un "bio laboratorio" e una base Nato' [There Is No Evidence That Mariupol's Azovstal Steel Plant Hides a 'Biolaboratory' and a NATO Base], *Facta News*, 14 April 2022.

83 Atzori, 'Troll de guerre'.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

Conclusion

As in other European liberal democracies, the war in Ukraine has been a catalytic event that forced a reckoning over international politics and regional security among wide segments of Italy's politically inactive population, in a manner similar to how the COVID-19 pandemic put public health policies and state surveillance at the centre of the public debate. From this perspective, the war in Ukraine can also be understood as a critical juncture that opened a window of opportunity to shape perceptions of NATO's role in European and Italian security. This window closed as the conflict lengthened in the summer of 2022. The public debate shifted to the impact of rising inflation in European countries, the effectiveness of the economic sanctions imposed on Russia, the weaponisation of energy supply to Europe by the Kremlin, the fall of the Draghi government in July, and the electoral campaign for the general elections held in September, won by the right-wing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni's FdI. In this scenario, it is reasonable to assume that the narratives and frames that took hold at the beginning of the conflict will continue to affect popular understandings of Italy's position and NATO's role in the new regional security order that will eventually emerge from its termination.

Beyond the direct impact of the Kremlin's influence operations, the previous sections of this study have identified a set of drivers that shaped public opinion against NATO and challenged the alliance's successful implementation of SC in the country, which are summed up as follows:

- a unidimensional popular understanding of the country's post-WWII history hostile to NATO
- a deeply rooted strand of pacifism historically constructed in direct opposition to the US and consequently to NATO itself
- a string of executives who fostered Italy's energy dependence on Russia

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

- widespread popular resentment against Euro-Atlantic institutions scapegoated for a thirty-year socio-economic decline exploited by populist parties
- the opportunistic embrace of the Kremlin's narratives by major right-wing and populist parties that have dominated domestic politics since the 2010s
- the staying power of epistemic communities who have seen engagement with Moscow as a bulwark against Euro-Atlantic institutions and the US
- a conformist media market that fosters engagement through polarisation and facilitates misinformation.

Unfortunately for NATO, the sources of SC challenges identified here are the consequences of structural issues that have their origins in Italy's contemporary history and socio-economic decline. Consequently, NATO's options to mitigate what ultimately amounts to a scapegoating of the alliance in future scenarios similar to the current war in Ukraine—namely in the case of security crises affecting the European regional order but not perceived as existential by the Italian public—are severely limited. After all, the alliance cannot directly shape the information environment of a member state. One of the few avenues available to NATO in this context is to improve SC localisation. This shift would require crafting timely SC capable of addressing criticism and distortions emerging from the country's highly contested information environment. In particular, the case study discussed in this article suggests greater effort in communicating the history of the alliance, the rationale and mechanisms of its enlargement, and the scope and motivation of its military exercises. Yet, given the structural origins of these challenges, a more refined approach to SC localisation could provide tangible benefits to NATO only if national and EU institutions are capable of both addressing long-standing issues of socio-economic cohesion and committing to improve public literacy on international politics and security affairs, and are willing to do so.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.1

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Stemming the Narrative Flow: the Legal and Psychological Grounding for The European Union's Ban on Russian State-Sponsored Media

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Keywords—*Ukraine-Russian War, narratives, freedom of expression, European Union, proportionality, strategic communications, strategic communication*

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Abstract

On 2 March 2022, in response to framed and anti-Western narratives surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Council of the European Union legally banned two Russian state-sponsored media outlets, RT and Sputnik, within EU borders. The decision of the Council divided opinion. While the ban indeed limits the reach of these Russian 'organs of influence', it also infringes on fundamental human rights within the

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EU. It is therefore pertinent to scrutinise if the benefit of prohibiting the Kremlin's antagonistic narration is worth the sacrifice of impeding fundamental principles of democracy. How proportional and how necessary is the ban? The current article assesses these questions from a psychological and legal perspective. It argues that while the decision to ban RT and Sputnik is legally sound, the justification for the decision would benefit from a more elaborate explanation of balancing the different (colliding) fundamental rights, not least since the disruptive effect of the RT and Sputnik narration is unsettled. Moreover, instead of a blanket ban, a less stringent and more nuanced approach could be more appropriate, affording the ability to appropriately sanction RT and Sputnik while remaining proportional and mitigating a possible backfire effect.

Introduction

> Efforts to control the visual and narrative dimensions of war delimit public discourse by establishing and disposing the sensuous parameters of reality itself.[1]

On 24 February 2022 the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine, marking a major escalation in Russia's hostile activity that began in 2014. Next to the military operation, an information operation was built that sought to justify the incursion as a 'special military operation' that aimed to denazify the country and protect the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, which Russia had recognised as independent days prior. In response to these developments, the Council of the European Union announced that it would be legally banning two Russian state-sponsored media outlets: RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik, within EU borders.[2] In a statement President of the European Union Ursula von

1 Judith P. Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso Books, 2010), p. xi.

2 Effective as of 2 March 2022, the date of publication. See: Council of the European Union, 'Legislation concerning Restrictive Measures in View of Russia's Actions Destabilising the Situation in Ukraine—Council Regulation 2022/350 & Council Decision 2022/351', OJ L 65, 2 March 2022.

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der Leyen said that the ban was to prevent the outlets from 'spread[ing] their lies to justify Putin's war and to sow division in our Union'.[3]

This decision divided opinion. As a justification, the Council referred to the control the Kremlin has over Russian media outlets, and how 'disinformation, information manipulation and distortion of facts' are used as strategic tools to destabilise targeted European states. More specifically, RT and Sputnik were said to be explicitly used to justify Russia's war in Ukraine.

Yet the decision to ban the outlets was criticised as a violation of freedom of information. The International Press Institute released a statement saying such a ban should only be implemented at the state level, that such bans are ineffective in countering propaganda, and that such measures may stoke Russia to reciprocate by banning Western media in Russia.[4] Such sentiments were echoed by the European Federation of Journalists, which labelled the ban 'a mistake'.[5] The decision was later defended by the Council, which said 'they are not independent media, they are assets, they are weapons, in the Kremlin's manipulation ecosystem'.[6]

Clearly the ban broaches a tension whereby, on the one hand, there is a desire to stem the flow of antagonistic narration that is projected into Western societies by hostile political actors, such as Russia or China. Yet, on the other, maintaining the values that Western democracy is built upon—of freedom of information and expression—is paramount to preserving the legitimacy of European political institutions. Being seen to infringe on these values could not only create a hypocritical image in the eyes of European citizens but could also be exploited as it echoes a long-standing anti-EU narrative by Russia.

3 'Statement by President von der Leyen on Further Measures to Respond to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', *European Commission,* 27 February 2022.

4 IPI, 'IPI: Statement on Banning of RT and Sputnik', *International Press Institute,* 4 March 2022.

5 EFJ, 'Fighting Disinformation with Censorship Is a Mistake', *European Federation of Journalists,* 1 March 2022.

6 European Union External Action, 'Disinformation: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP Debate', 8 March 2022.

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In this article we question whether the ban on state-sponsored media is a proportionate and necessary measure, worth the sacrifice of impeding pivotal principles of democracy. In this way, we strive to go beyond the political rhetoric and navigate the grounds upon which the ban is made, something that has not yet been scrutinised. Psychologically, we ask if the hostile narration projected by RT and Sputnik causes the type of destabilising psychological effects that would warrant the ban as necessary. From a legal perspective, we scrutinise the justification for such far-reaching sanctions and assess whether the costs of the legal ban outweigh the impact of the Russian narration. We conduct our research based on a multidisciplinary approach, taking into consideration psychological and legal perspectives, and review pertinent literature from both disciplines to provide a consolidated answer to this question.

We begin by embedding the discourse in a political context, then turn to discuss the role of RT and Sputnik as assets of the Russian state. After this we parse findings from recent research examining both the audience(s) accessing and effects triggered by Russian antagonistic strategic narratives. We then move to the legal framework on which the blocking of media outlets is possible and assess which exceptional circumstances would justify a legal ban. Lastly, we discuss the consequences of the ban, connecting with broader debates on how open societies can deal with disinformation, and conclude by reflecting, according to our analysis, on the Council's choice to opt for 'blocking' Russian antagonistic narration.[7]

Political Warfare

The EU ban is best assessed within a wider discourse of Russia–Western relations. Both sides make use of narratives to portray the opponent in a framed and often negative manner. Whereas the West sees Russia as

7 We do not intend to justify the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, nor to downplay the Russian 'war against reality' or the long-time development to suppress independent media and criticism. See also David Kaye, 'Online Propaganda, Censorship and Human Rights in Russia's War against Reality', *American Society of International Law* 116 (2022): 140–44; Mariëlle Wijermars, 'Russia's Law "On News Aggregators": Control the News Feed, Control the News?', *Journalism* 22 № 12 (2021): 2938–54.

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an irrational and immoral actor, generating an offensive threat, and causing chaos, Russia accuses the West of having double standards and as an immoral actor distorting the truth.[8]

The use of propaganda or disinformation is not new. The Cold War era saw many Russian and American (US) interferences in each other's sphere of influence, mainly within the remit of espionage or covert actions. The employment of 'all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives'[9] is a form of political warfare in which one state uses 'political means to compel an opponent to do one's will'.[10] Russian political warfare or 'active measures' seek to find strategic advantages by deception, forgeries,[11] provocation, and subversion,[12] but also by the spreading of disinformation.[13]

Foreign interferences and information operations appear to have gained increased momentum with the emergence of cyberspace, including the internet and social media. While narratives can be used strategically to sway targeted audiences, the assumed effectiveness of narratives depends on the possibility to coordinate, align, and synchronise state actors,[14] including (state-controlled) media.[15] Contrary to Russia, most liberal democracies have limited or no control over media outlets.[16] Cohen and Bar'el argue that there is a 'basic asymmetry in rules of engagement

8 Mario Baumann, '"Propaganda Fights" and "Disinformation Campaigns": The Discourse on Information Warfare in Russia-West Relations', *Contemporary Politics* 26 № 3 (2020): 293–97.

9 Linda Robinson, Todd C. Helmus, Raphael S Cohen, Alireza Nader, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, and Katya Migacheva, 'Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses', *RAND Corporation*, 2018, citing George Kennan, pp. 1 and 321–22.

10 Paul A. Smith, *On Political War* (National Defense University, 1989), p. 3.

11 Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, 'Russia's Strategy for Influence through Public Diplomacy and Active Measures: The Swedish Case', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40 № 6 (2017): 773–816 (790–97).

12 Andrew Radin, Alyssa Demus, and Krystyna Marcinek, 'Understanding Russian Subversion: Patterns, Threats, and Responses', *RAND Corporation*, February 2020, pp. 2–3.

13 US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 'Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election—2: Russia's Use of Social Media', 2019, pp. 12–13; EU vs Disinfo, *Election Meddling and Pro-Kremlin Disinformation: What You Need to Know*, 2019, p. 4.

14 Henning Lahmann, '"Information Operations and the Question of Illegitimate Interference under International Law', *Israel Law Review* 53 № 2 (2020): 189–224 (195).

15 Such as RT or Sputnik in the Russian remit. See: Maria Hellman and Charlotte Wagnsson, 'How Can European States Respond to Russian Information Warfare? An Analytical Framework', *European Security* 26 № 2 (2017): 153–70 (155–57).

16 Media Ajir and Bethany Vailliant, 'Russian Information Warfare: Implications for Deterrence Theory', *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12 № 3 (2018): 70–89 (77–79).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

when conducting influence operations' between non-Western entities and liberal democracies, with Russian endeavours to affect voters during the 2016 British EU Referendum and 2016 US presidential election a case in point.[17]

What Are the Roles and Narrative Agendas of RT and Sputnik?

RT and Sputnik are media outlets, funded by the Kremlin, that are ostensibly tasked with conveying the Russian perspective on global news and events. Both outlets can be considered what Carter and Carter term 'outward-facing propaganda apparatuses'[18]—news platforms operated by foreign adversaries tasked to influence the public in target countries. Many suggest that the outlets act as vectors for the Kremlin to pursue its *Russkiy Mir foreign policy objectives through public diplomacy.*[19]

As assets of the Kremlin, the outlets can be seen as purveyors of *strategic narratives.* These are 'a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors'.[20] Styling themselves as alternative, 'underdog' platforms that seek to balance homogeneous and Russophobic mainstream Western media coverage,[21] both the outlets' core narrative agendas have been characterised as 'antagonistic', 'anti-West', and geared towards engendering cynicism in

17 Daniel Cohen and Ofir Bar'el, *The Use of Cyberwarfare in Influence Operations* (Yuval Ne'eman Workshop for Science, Technology and Security, Tel-Aviv University, 2017), p. 10; US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 'Minority Report on Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security', 2017, pp. 17–23.

18 Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter, 'Questioning More: RT, Outward-Facing Propaganda, and the Post-West World Order', *Security Studies* 30 № 1 (2021): 49–78.

19 Mona Elswah and Philip N. Howard, '"Anything That Causes Chaos": The Organizational Behavior of Russia Today (RT)', *Journal of Communication* 70 № 5 (2020): 623–45.

20 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Routledge, 2014), p. 6.

21 Ilya Yablokov, 'Russian Disinformation Finds Fertile Ground in the West', *Nature Human Behaviour* 6 № 6 (2022): 766–67.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

domestic audiences, destabilising Western states, and eroding the liberal international order.[22]

Research documenting the most common antagonistic strategic narratives pushed by RT and Sputnik generally converges on the idea that their narration cultivates an image of political dysfunction within Western societies. Narratives of government failure and incompetence, increasing social conflict, and pervasive violence and crime appear most frequently.[23] Supranational political institutions such as the EU or NATO are also often negatively portrayed by the outlets, depicted as hypocritical, internally disorganised, and often uncaring for or exploitative of member states in their eastern regions.[24] Indeed, for countries more proximate to Russia in geographical and historical ties, Soviet history and nostalgia are also often weaponised.[25] They are also far more likely to receive provocative narratives such as touting the rise of Nazism or Russophobia in their respective countries. These narratives are typically projected in states with higher proportions of Russian-speaking populations.[26]

Wagnsson and Barzanje propose that the antagonistic strategic narratives can generally be divided into three main types: destruction narratives, which focus on creating the image of a state as weak, chaotic, and subordinate; suppression narratives, which craft an image of a state as strange and morally bereft; and direction narratives, which reward geopolitical behaviour by the state that is desirable for the Kremlin.[27]

22 Elswah and Howard, 'Anything That Causes Chaos'.

23 Gordon Ramsay and Sam Robertshaw, 'Weaponising News: RT, Sputnik and Targeted Disinformation', *Kings College London,* 31 July 2019.

24 Corina Rebegea, '"Question More—But Not Too Much": Mapping Russia's Malign Master Narratives in Central and Eastern Europe', *Challenges in Strategic Communication and Fighting Propaganda in Eastern Europe* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2019), pp. 75–83.

25 Vladimir Sazonov, Sergii Pakhomenko, and Igor Kopytin, 'Between History and Propaganda: Estonia and Latvia in Russian Historical Narratives', *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare* (Springer, Cham, 2021), pp. 397–423.

26 Rebegea, 'Question More'.

27 Charlotte Wagnsson and Costan Barzanje, 'A Framework for Analysing Antagonistic Narrative Strategies: A Russian Tale of Swedish Decline', *Media, War & Conflict* 14 № 2 (2021): 239–57.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

These strategies have been observed in the narration of several states.[28] These general narrative currents are reflective of and instrumental in what are commonly understood as the Kremlin's objectives to be seen on the world stage as a great power and a defender of traditional Christian values.[29] Thus, these trends reinforce the outlets' positions as geopolitical tools for the Kremlin.

What Is the Psychological Basis for the EU's Decision to Ban RT and Sputnik?

Clearly, RT's and Sputnik's agendas towards European states are antagonistic and seek to paint a negative portrait of the region. It is, therefore, understandable that there is concern regarding the possible consumption—through directly accessing the outlets or exposure through more local or social media—of their narratives by European audiences. Generally, there is a consensus that consuming these narratives should give rise to destabilising psychological effects in audiences, such as fomenting feelings of frustration or fear or eroding trust within society.[30] However, it is important to reflect critically on the evidence that supports this decision.

Who is engaging with RT and Sputnik, and how do they respond psychologically to the outlets' narration? These are pertinent questions to ask in light of the EU ban. It is vital to consider what it would mean for the tenability of the ban should evidence suggest a lack of potential harm in consuming their narration.

28 Aiden Hoyle, Helma van den Berg, Bertjan Doosje, and Martijn Kitzen, 'Portrait of Liberal Chaos: RT's Antagonistic Strategic Narration about the Netherlands', *Media, War & Conflict*, OnlineFirst (2021); Edward Deverell, Charlotte Wagnsson, and Eva-Karin Olsson, 'Destruct, Direct and Suppress: Sputnik Narratives on the Nordic Countries', *Journal of International Communication* 27 № 1 (2021): 15–37.

29 Hoyle et al., 'Portrait of Liberal Chaos', p. 5.

30 Aiden Hoyle, Helma van den Berg, Bertjan Doosje, and Martijn Kitzen, 'Grey Matters: Advancing a Psychological Effects-Based Approach to Countering Malign Information Influence', *New Perspectives* 29 № 2 (2021): 144–64.

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Who are RT's and Sputnik's audiences and why do they access the outlets?

It is important to consider, firstly, that current research suggests that the size of RT's and Sputnik's direct audience—those people who have RT and Sputnik within their day-to-day media diet—is thought to be small. Although it is difficult to capture accurately the size, studies have begun to shed some light on the issue. According to Crilley et al., RT's audience is 'extremely small in Western European countries and […] not growing except in the Middle East, and in Syria and Iraq particularly'.[31] In a large-scale study on a nationally representative survey of Swedes, Wagnsson showed that 7 per cent of respondents had engaged with RT or Sputnik, and 2 per cent accessed the sites on a somewhat regular basis.[32] This echoes similar findings showing that the outlets' direct social media engagement is also relatively limited and appears to be inflated artificially by bot accounts.[33]

Notably, research characterising these audiences has shown that they typically skew younger and male, with men aged 18–29 being by and large the most common demographic within the 'engaged' group. Those who consumed RT and Sputnik regularly were also comparatively less trusting of news media, politicians, and public institutions than respondents who did not regularly consume RT or Sputnik.[34] This emerging profile of RT and Sputnik consumers parallels the profile distilled in the existing literature characterising consumers of broader alternative, right-wing media.[35]

Yet, research that scrutinised RT and Sputnik audiences has shown that pigeonholing the audiences more closely would miss a great deal of

31 Rhys Crilley, Marie Gillespie, Bertie Vidgen, and Alistair Willis, 'Understanding RT's Audiences: Exposure Not Endorsement for Twitter Followers of Russian State-Sponsored Media', *International Journal of Press/Politics* 27 № 1 (2022): 220–42.

32 Charlotte Wagnsson, 'The Paperboys of Russian Messaging: RT/Sputnik Audiences as Vehicles for Malign Information Influence'. *Information, Communication & Society,* OnlineFirst (22 February 2022).

33 Crilley et al., 'Understanding RT's Audiences'.

34 Wagnsson, 'Paperboys of Russian Messaging'.

35 Heidi Schulze, 'Who Uses Right-Wing Alternative Online Media? An Exploration of Audience Characteristics', *Politics and Governance* 8 № 3 (2020): 6–18.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

nuance in them. Notably, Wagnsson showed that RT or Sputnik readers were diverse in gender and age, and they existed at every point of the political spectrum.[36] Moreover, the reasons *why* they engaged with the outlets have also been shown to be very diverse. Emerging in-depth research into the Swedish consumers of RT or Sputnik showed that while a segment of this audience actively endorsed ideology in line with the outlets' narrative trends, the majority were not necessarily ideologically aligned with the outlets. In fact, many regular consumers endorsed beliefs that directly contradict the main tenets of RT's and Sputnik's overarching narrative trends.[37]

Further, different types of engagement with RT and Sputnik have been established. While a segment of the population was indeed driven by an active dissatisfaction with mainstream media reporting and viewed RT or Sputnik as a reliable source of news, other less-concerning profiles were also identified. This ranged from consumers who engaged with the outlets as they simply enjoyed occasionally checking non-mainstream media content to those who felt propelled to keep track of the media landscape as a whole due to a general malaise with media reporting.[38]

Although research into audiences of RT and Sputnik is growing, these emerging findings suggest that both the size and the intentions of the audiences accessing RT and Sputnik should not be overestimated. While much discourse has focused on RT's and Sputnik's 'huge western audience that wants to believe that human rights are a sham and democracy a fix',[39] emerging research suggests that the outlets' readership is perhaps neither as sizeable—certainly in comparison to other media outlets—nor as ideologically monolithic as initially feared.

36 Wagnsson, 'Paperboys of Russian Messaging'.

37 Charlotte Wagnsson, Torsten Blad, and Aiden Hoyle, '"Keeping an Eye on the Other Side": RT, Sputnik, and Their Peculiar Appeal in Democratic Societies', *International Journal of Press/Politics (in press).*

38 Ibid.

39 Matthew Turner, 'To All the Self-Identifying Liberals Cheering about Russia Today's Bank Accounts Being Frozen, Did You Ever Consider Your Own Bias?', *The Independent*, 18 October 2016.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

How do audiences respond psychologically to Russian state-sponsored media narration?

These results provide perhaps a reassuring perspective that may help alleviate concerns that large audiences of hostile and untrusting sceptics are being goaded by Russian state-sponsored media. Yet, it is also critical to understand that despite not all of RT's and Sputnik's audiences' consumption being driven by frustration and hostility, they may still be liable to experiencing undesirable psychological effects. Indeed, while there is again relatively little research that directly investigates how audiences consume, interpret, and react to RT and Sputnik narratives, the few studies that have investigated this suggest that the EU's concerns about the potential security threat posed by the outlets may not be entirely unfounded.

To begin with, studies have shown that consuming RT or Sputnik can impact the political attitudes of consumers—even when they are aware of the outlets' intentions. This is concerning given the above literature shows that audiences can access these outlets simply out of curiosity about alternative viewpoints or to expand their media diets. Aleksandr Fisher examined the influence of exposure to RT narratives on the attitudes of American audiences regarding foreign states, and observed that participants who consumed antagonistic narration by RT about Ukraine were significantly lower in their evaluations of Ukraine when compared to people who saw a control text. This effect was found even if participants were informed of RT's background as a propaganda instrument of the Kremlin and its 'anti-Western' narrative agenda.[40]

Such findings were reaffirmed by later studies. Carter and Carter observed that exposure to RT narratives led to large shifts in the foreign policy attitudes of American audiences towards a direction more favourable to the Kremlin. For example, they saw a significant increase in support for US withdrawal from its leadership position in global politics, an idea

40 Aleksandr Fisher, 'Demonizing the Enemy: The Influence of Russian State-Sponsored Media on American Audiences', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36 № 4 (2020): 281–96.

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that is often endorsed in Russian state-sponsored media narration.[41] Again, this effect was robust even when it was disclosed to participants that RT is a media outlet directly sponsored by the Kremlin. Petersen and Allamong extend these findings, showing again that exposure to RT can elicit attitudinal shifts in participants, and that exposure to RT narratives on several political issues actually yielded stronger attitudinal effects than the content of more established mainstream news sources.[42]

Moving away from more attitudinal effects to focusing on the potential for destabilising emotional or trust responses, Hoyle et al. have shown that exposure to RT or Sputnik antagonistic narration can trigger negative emotional responses.[43] Particularly pertinent given its use of European audiences, the survey experiment revealed that Dutch, Swedish, and Latvian audiences exposed to various common antagonistic narratives projected by RT or Sputnik were significantly higher on a plethora of negative emotions, such as anger, disgust, and shame, when compared to control respondents who received purely factual information. Alarmingly, these significant differences were shown even after short-term exposure to these narratives.[44]

However, there are also reasons to maintain scepticism regarding the potentially destabilising effects of Russian state-sponsored media, and the necessity of the ban. Firstly, the evidence is not plentiful. As mentioned before, research into the effects of consuming Russian state-sponsored media is sparse and, while it is growing, it probably remains too small to base convincing conclusions on.

Secondly, the evidence is not unanimous. While they did observe shifts in foreign policy attitudes in their American audience, Carter and Carter also saw little impact of RT narratives on attitudes towards

41 Carter and Carter, 'Questioning More'.

42 Erik Peterson and Maxwell B. Allamong, 'The Influence of Unknown Media on Public Opinion: Evidence from Local and Foreign News Sources', *American Political Science Review* 116 Nº 2 (2022): 719–33.

43 Aiden Hoyle, Charlotte Wagnsson, Helma van den Berg, Bertjan Doosje, and Martijn Kitzen, 'Cognitive and Emotional Effects of Russian State-Sponsored Media Narratives in International Audiences', *Journal of Media Psychology* (in press).

44 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

the president or trust in the stability of the national economy or in the national government. Moreover, Hoyle et al. found few effects of RT and Sputnik narration on trust factors—with a particular lack of effects on trust experienced between different social groups in society. Such results show that exposure to Russian state-sponsored media narration is not *always* effective, particularly for trust—a construct of core relevance when speculating on the potential damage elicited by consuming Russian influence.

Lastly, the evidence is currently also not wholly convincing. Many of these studies have been carried out in small experimental designs, which lack the ecological validity necessary to extrapolate the findings to real-life settings. Within this burgeoning area of research, studies should be done that capture more realistically how people may interact with Russian state-sponsored media narration within their media diet, to draw more accurate conclusions about the necessity of the ban.

What Is the Legal Basis for the EU's Decision to Ban RT and Sputnik?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a gross violation of international law,[45] and Russia's systematic information manipulation and disinformation used in its assault on Ukraine are also a significant and direct threat to the Union's public order and security,[46] causing the EU to ban RT and Sputnik on all media outlets.[47]

The restrictive measure to ban RT and Sputnik is not undisputed. Though the outreach of RT and Sputnik narration could potentially have

45 Council of the European Union, 'Legislation concerning Restrictive Measures'.

46 'Ukraine: Sanctions on Kremlin-Backed Outlets Russia Today and Sputnik EU Ban', *European Commission*, March 2022.

47 Article 2f Council Regulation 2022/350 states that 'It shall be prohibited for operators to broadcast or to enable, facilitate or otherwise contribute to broadcast, any content by [RT and Sputnik] including through transmission or distribution by any means such as cable, satellite, IP-TV, internet service providers, internet video-sharing platforms or applications, whether new or pre-installed'. See Council of the European Union, 'Legislation concerning Restrictive Measures'.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

a destabilising effect, it has been argued that the ban is a disproportionate violation of the fundamental human rights of citizens within the EU.

To assess whether the banning of RT and Sputnik outweighs the impact on EU citizens it is crucial to describe the legal framework and the circumstances that could justify the blockage of media outlets by the EU. The impact of RT and Sputnik activities and the subsequent restrictive measure by the EU against Russia will be assessed first via an international law paradigm and second via a human rights law paradigm, thereby including the impact of the restrictive measure on the citizens of the EU.

International law

Can RT and Sputnik narration—as exponents of the Russian informational instrument of power[48]—be considered a breach of international law, and, if so, what measures can be taken in response? International law governs the relations (coexistence and cooperation) between states. Since the narratives do not reach the threshold of threat or use of force, the main standards that can be violated in respect of sovereignty and non-intervention.[49]

Is international law violated?

States are sovereign and equal in legal terms.[50] As a corollary, states are free to make choices in their 'political, economic, social and cultural

48 The EU opines that RT and Sputnik are state-sponsored outlets 'which are under the permanent direct or indirect control of the leadership of the Russian Federation'. Preamble bullet 8, Council Regulation 2022/350, Council of the European Union. See also Björnstjern Baade, 'Fake News and International Law', *European Journal of International Law* 29 Nº 4 (2018): 1357–76 (1361).

49 Russia could also be accused of violating due diligence. However, since the EU has attributed the RT and Sputnik activities to Russia, due diligence is a subsidiary rule to the primary breach of sovereignty by the state (Russia) itself. See also: Corfu Channel Case (merits), Judgment of 9 April 1949, *ICJ Reports* (1949), p. 22.

50 Article 2(1), UN, Charter of the United Nations (1945).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

system, and the formulation of foreign policy'.[51] Though this reserved domain is the area that international law leaves to states,[52] it can be limited by customary international law or treaties, one of which is international human rights law (IHRL), including freedom of expression.

To violate the prohibition of intervention, Russian narratives need to infringe the reserved domain of the states of the EU in a coercive manner.[53] First, on the reserved domain: activities that are under the aegis of protecting and furthering human rights are outside the state's reserved domain. Russian expressions of freedom of speech and journalism, including by RT and Sputnik, and even propaganda will therefore not per se violate the reserved domain of European states. However, if the sharing of disinformation or propaganda is intended to interfere with, for example. elections, which are at the core of the reserved domain,[54] it would be an infringement. Second, the infringement must be coercive. Coercion is a specific form of influence and must not be equated with persuasion, criticism, or propaganda. Coercion involves acts 'designed to deprive another State of its freedom of choice, that is, to force that State to act in an involuntary manner or involuntarily refrain from acting in a particular way'.[55] The RT and Sputnik narratives are deliberate acts by Russia, with an intent to change the policies of the EU toward the war in Ukraine. In that sense, the narratives intend to undermine the control of the EU states and hence can be regarded as coercive,[56] even if they fail.[57]

51 Case Concerning Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua, *ICJ Reports* (1986), Para. 205, p. 108.

52 PCIJ, Nationality Decrees in Tunis and Morocco, Advisory Opinion, Series B, *PCIJ Reports* (1923), p. 24.

53 Peter B.M.J. Pijpers, 'Towards a Legal Framework for Influence Operations in Cyberspace', *ACIL* Nº 6 (2022).

54 Igor Popovic, 'The EU Ban of RT and Sputnik: Concerns regarding Freedom of Expression', *European Journal of International Law* (March 2022).

55 Michael N. Schmitt, *Tallinn Manual 2.0 on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Operations*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 317—19.

56 Peter B.M.J. Pijpers, Influence Operations in Cyberspace: On the Applicability of Public International Law during *Influence Operations in a Situation Below the Threshold of the Use of Force* (Amsterdam, 2021), chapter 6.

57 Schmitt, *Tallinn Manual 2.0,* rule 66 (29), p. 322; Steven Wheatley, 'Regulating the Frontiers of Hybrid-Warfare: The International Law on Foreign State Cyber Operations Targeting Democracy', in *New Technologies: New Challenges for Democracy and International Law*, Cambridge University, 2019, pp. 1–27 (p. 18).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

To assess whether Russia has violated the sovereignty of EU member states, sovereignty can be divided into territorial integrity and political independence.[58] Remotely executed activities making use of cyberspace, such as RT and Sputnik narratives, can violate territorial integrity only if they cause damage—physical or functional.[59] Since the narratives merely use cyberspace as a vector, they do not cause damage in a direct manner. Consequently, the notion of territorial integrity is a poor fit to regulate information activities via cyberspace.[60] Political independence, on the other hand, is not related to persons or material but to inherently governmental functions. These are universal state activities, associated with law enforcement, taxation, public order, and national defence.[61] Political independence is violated once another state takes over state functions (usurpation) or interferes with them. Narratives or framed information can therefore violate political independence if these interfere with state functions such as maintaining public order, crisis management, or law enforcement.

While Russian narratives are coercive acts, they do not necessarily infringe the reserved domain of EU states; hence it cannot be stated conclusively that Russian narratives violate the prohibition of intervention. Nor do they violate territorial integrity. The coercive narratives do, however, interfere with the inherently governmental functions of the states of the EU, and hence violate the sovereignty of the states of the EU.

58 PCA, Island of Palmas Case (The Netherlands v United States), II Reports of International Arbitral Awards 829–71 (1928). Arbiter Huber stated (p. 838) that 'Sovereignty in the relations between States signifies independence. Independence in regard to a portion of the globe is the right to exercise therein, to the exclusion of any other State, the functions of a State.'

59 Schmitt, *Tallinn Manual 2.0.* Damage in this sense is related to an infringement to persons, material, or the virtual layers (software, data) of the ICT infrastructure.

60 Peter B.M.J. Pijpers and Bart G.L.C. Van Den Bosch, *The 'Virtual Eichmann': On Sovereignty in Cyberspace, ACIL Research Paper 2020-65* (2020).

61 Harriet Moynihan, 'The Application of International Law to State Cyberattacks: Sovereignty and Non-Intervention', *Chatham House*, 2019, p. 23.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

How to respond

The EU's decision to ban RT and Sputnik is not a unilateral act. The EU is responding to an earlier Russian act. The EU has expressed this both in legislation[62] and in public speeches.[63]

International law—in relations between states—recognises three retaliatory acts: retorsions, reprisals (countermeasures), or the use of force. The last can be neglected since the narratives disseminated via RT and Sputnik fall well below the threshold of the use of force;[64] hence using force as an EU measure would be unlawful and disproportionate.

Reprisals are 'coercive measures directed by one government against another State in retaliation for alleged unlawful acts committed by the latter'.[65] It is a measure that normally would be unlawful but justified if taken as a countermeasure against an earlier unlawful act. These countermeasures are coercive but exclude the (threat or) use of force. Though the matter is controversial, countermeasures can only be taken by the injured state and not collectively (as in the case of self-defence deriving from Article 51 of the UN Charter).[66]

A retorsion is a 'legal, but deliberately unfriendly act by one government against another State in retaliation for an equally unfriendly, but lawful act',[67] and includes the severance of diplomatic relations.[68]

The EU ban, in response to a violation of the sovereignty of EU member states, can be assessed as a non-coercive retorsion. Though the EU restrictive measure has a deliberate intent, it will not affect Russian policy

62 Council of the European Union, 'Legislation concerning Restrictive Measures'.

63 'Ukraine: Sanctions'.

64 Though Russia's invasion of Ukraine started an international armed conflict, subject to international humanitarian law, the member states of the EU are not part of or a belligerent party in that conflict.

65 Christopher C. Joyner, 'Coercion', *Max Planck Encyclopedia of International Law*, 2006.

66 François Delerue, *Cyber Operations and International Law,* Cambridge Studies in International and Comparative Law (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 232.

67 Joyner, 'Coercion', bullet 3.

68 Terry D. Gill, 'Non-Intervention in the Cyber Context', in *Peacetime Regime for State Activities in Cyberspace,* Katharina Ziolkowski (ed.), (Tallinn: NATO CCD COE, 2013), pp. 217–38 (p. 230).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

or control of RT and Sputnik since the EU limits its actions to the EU and its jurisdiction. The retorsion—unfriendly but lawful[69]—can (contrary to countermeasures) be taken collectively, is not disproportionate, and intends to counter unlawful coercive narratives that interfere with the sovereignty of EU member states.

Human rights law

The sanctioning of RT and Sputnik can also be assessed from a human rights law dimension.[70] In that sense, freedom of expression or receiving these expressions is a fundamental human right recognised in numerous treaties, including Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR),[71] Article 10 of the 1950 Council of Europe's European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), Article 19 of the 1966 UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and Article 11 of the 2000 EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR). To quote this last Article on freedom of expression and information:

> (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.
>
> (2) The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected.

Protecting and furthering fundamental human rights, such as freedom of expression, can be at odds with other rights or legal obligations; human rights will have to be balanced against national security or the

69 Joyner, 'Coercion'.

70 Of note, Russia, Ukraine, and the EU states are or were all parties to the UDHR, ICCPR, and ECHR, until Russia's expulsion from the ECHR in 2022. Council of Europe, Resolution on the Cessation of the Membership of the Russian Federation to the Council of Europe, CM/Res(2022)3.

71 UN General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) *Resolution 217 A*.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

maintenance of public order. In the worst case, fundamental human rights will have to be restricted.

Fundamental human rights carry special responsibilities and duties,[72] and any restriction must be justified[73] and needs to comply with a cumulative test regarding the legality of the restriction, its legitimacy, and its proportionality.[74]

The EU legal basis (legality) for restricting human rights

Restricting fundamental human rights is only possible by law, meaning that the restriction is codified in (national) legislation.[75] Article 19(3) of the ICCPR demands that restrictions 'are provided by law and are necessary: (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.' In addition, Article 20 provides special grounds for limiting fundamental rights based on the propaganda for war and any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence. Of note, these specific grounds require (additional) codification in national legislation.[76]

Sanctions or restrictive measures have a sound legal basis. These are EU instruments taken by unanimous decisions of the European Council,

72 Article 19(3), UN, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), UN Treaty Series (1966); Article 10(2) of the Council of Europe, European Convention on Human Rights, European Court of Human Rights (1950).

73 Human Rights Committee, 'General Comment No. 34: Article 19: Freedoms of Opinion and Expression', *CCPR* (September 2011), bullet 52.

74 Articles 19 and 20, UN, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); Human Rights Committee, 'General Comment No. 34'; Kaye, 'Online Propaganda'.

75 See Articles 19(3) and 20 of the ICCPR or Article 52(1) of the EU Charter. The latter reads, 'Any limitation on the exercise of the rights and freedoms recognised by this Charter must be provided for by law and respect the essence of those rights and freedoms.' Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union [2000] OJ C364/01. See also Human Rights Committee, 'General Comment No. 11: Prohibition of Propaganda for War and Inciting National, Racial or Religious Hatred (Art. 20)', *CCPR* (1983).

76 Human Rights Committee, 'General Comment No. 11'.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

under Common Foreign and Security Policy rules, Article 29 of the TEU and Article 215 of the TFEU.[77] The sanctions against RT and Sputnik refer to 'a significant and direct threat to the Union's public order and security' relaying them to Article 10(2) of the ECHR and Article 19(3) of the ICCPR.

The legitimacy of the EU for restricting human rights

The legitimacy of the EU ban relates to weighing the content against infringements on other rights. After all, while the airing of false news is unwelcome, it is not *ipso facto* a legitimate aim to restrict fundamental human rights in the EU.[78]

The EU ban could be directed against Russian expressions and intentions to propagate war.[79] Propagating for war, as expressed in Article 20 of the ICCPR, is, however, not an airtight match with the EU's urge to ban the framed, misleading, and manipulative narratives of RT and Sputnik.[80] After all, propaganda for war relates to an explicit[81] call for war, irrespective of whether the content is true or false. It is questionable if reference to propaganda for war was the intent of the restrictive measure since (a) it is not explicitly mentioned in the sanction, except for the implied section in recital 7 'to justify and support its aggression against

77 Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union [2012] OJ C326; Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, [2012] OJ C326, Title IV, Restrictive Measures.

78 Björnstjern Baade, 'A Lawful Measure against Propaganda for War', *Verfassungsblog*, 2022.

79 Popovic, 'EU Ban'. See also ICCPR Article 20, UN, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966). The Article reads: '1. Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law. 2. Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.'

80 As present in recitals 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 of the EU Decision and Regulation Council of the European Union, 'Legislation concerning Restrictive Measures'.

81 Human Rights Committee, 'General Comment No. 11'.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

Ukraine',[82] and (b) propaganda for war is not explicitly prohibited by law in EU legislation.

Maintaining public order could be another option to legitimise the EU's restrictive measure. Public order is mentioned in Article 10(2) of the ECHR and Article 19(3) of the ICCPR and is (thereby) a more generic ground for restricting fundamental rights. As mentioned above, the RT and Sputnik narratives are coercive in nature and have a clear and deliberate intent to interfere with the political activities of the EU member states, hence undermining the ability to maintain public order.

While the EU has a legal base to issue restrictive measures, the legitimacy is far less obvious. Though some reasons can be deduced, the EU does not articulate how the all-out ban of RT and Sputnik justifies the restriction of fundamental principles of EU citizens.

General Discussion

In the preceding sections we evaluated both the psychological and legal foundations of the EU's decision to ban RT and Sputnik within the European media space. Psychologically, the evidence is inconclusive. Research has shown that the audiences directly accessing RT and Sputnik are small and perhaps driven more by curiosity than malintent. However, there is also a growing relevant body of research that suggests that allowing European audiences to freely consume Russian state-sponsored media narration could constitute a security threat through the elicitation of destabilising psychological effects in these audiences. At present, however, this research agenda is simply too underdeveloped to draw concrete conclusions, but the current trend in research does suggest that caution should be advised.

82 Council of the European Union, 'Legislation concerning Restrictive Measures', bullet 7 reads: 'In order to justify and support its aggression against Ukraine, the Russian Federation has engaged in continuous and concerted propaganda actions targeted at civil society in the Union and neighbouring countries, gravely distorting and manipulating facts.'

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

Legally speaking, we concluded that while sharing disinformation or propaganda is not unlawful per se, the RT and Sputnik narratives can be considered coercive. Since the reserved domain was not infringed, this might not amount to a prohibited Russian intervention of EU member states on the part of Russia, as it does violate their sovereignty. A retorsion by an EU member state is therefore a lawful response under international law. However, the EU restrictive measure does not solely address the legal personalities of RT and Sputnik;[83] it also affects EU citizens as the audience of RT and Sputnik by limiting their fundamental human rights. While the sanction stands the test of legality and could be legitimate in response to the need to maintain public order, the measure is poorly justified.

Together, these mirroring perspectives seem to suggest that the decision to ban RT and Sputnik can be supported—grounded in (growing) psychological evidence and sound legal reasoning. Questions remain, however, if the decision is proportional and if the consequences outweigh invoking the sanction.

The EU ban is proportional in the sense that it is of a temporal nature, and that many social media and internet platforms were already in the process of blocking access to RT and Sputnik in the EU,[84] based on corporate policies.[85]

However, the ban does not make a distinction between broadcasting, for example, a sports event and broadcasting a news update containing political narratives or misleading content. All news feeds are prohibited, yet not all media topics relate to an infringement of national security, public order, or the protection of health or morals, let alone incite hatred or propagate war. Similarly, while the ban blocks the outlets for all

83 RT France has filed a lawsuit against the Council of the European Union arguing the EU violates numerous fundamental rights of the EU Charter including freedom of expression (Article 11), freedom to conduct a business (Article 16), right to a fair trial and presumption of innocence (Articles 47 and 48). 'Russia Today Challenges EU Broadcasting Ban before General Court', *EU Law Live* (March 2022): 9585.

84 Chee Siang Ang, 'EU Bans RT, Sputnik over Ukraine Disinformation', *Reuters*, 2022.

85 Sinéad McSweeney, 'Our Ongoing Approach to the War in Ukraine', *Twitter Blog*, 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

EU member states, the impact of the RT and Sputnik broadcasts and narratives differs according to member state. Consequently, researchers are not able to tap into RT and Sputnik data to uncover and substantiate the true nature of the framed and manipulative narratives.

Moreover, the ban introduces the potential for retaliation. In their criticism of the ban, the International Press Institute warned that such actions could lead Russia to ban Western media.[86] Days later, this became a reality when Russia restricted access to, among others, the BBC, Deutsche Welle, and Radio Free Europe.[87] This has been viewed as a grave development for the Russian population, as access to accurate reporting is seen as one of the methods to reduce the grip of the Kremlin's propaganda domestically.[88]

A final key consideration here should be the potential of triggering *reactance*—the psychological concept describing a 'motivational state directed toward the re-establishment of the free behaviours which have been eliminated or threatened with elimination'.[89] Essentially, it captures how the experience of frustration arising when one experiences a threat or perceived loss to previously free behaviours can lead to the prohibited behaviour appearing increasingly attractive—a so-called 'forbidden fruit' effect—and to an increase in counteractive behaviour. Several studies have robustly evidenced reactance effects,[90] and importantly for this discussion, a large strand of this research has looked at reactance effects triggered by media censorship.

Research has shown that censoring media publishing unwanted information galvanises information-seeking behaviour through an

86 IPI, 'IPI: Statement on Banning of RT and Sputnik'.

87 Reuters, 'Russia Blocks Access to BBC and Voice of America Websites', 4 March 2022.

88 James Ellingworth, 'Russia Cracks Down on Dissenting Media, Blocks Facebook', *AP News*, 5 March 2022.

89 Jack W. Brehm, *A Theory of Psychological Reactance* (New York: Academic Press, 1966); Andy H. Ng, Mohammad S. Kermani, and Richard N. Lalonde, 'Cultural Differences in Psychological Reactance: Responding to Social Media Censorship', *Current Psychology* 40 Nº 6 (2021): 2804–13.

90 Benjamin D. Rosenberg and Jason T. Siegel, 'A 50-Year Review of Psychological Reactance Theory: Do Not Read This Article', *Motivation Science* 4 Nº 4 (2018): 281–300.

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increased motivation to resist censorship.[91] This increased resistance has been associated with a higher demand for media freedom—an important result considering the aforementioned research on Sweden showing that a large segment of RT and Sputnik consumers accessed the outlets purely out of scepticism of the media landscape in general.[92] Other studies have shown that the perception of a threat to or loss of freedom can increase anger and hostility towards the source of the threat/loss.[93] The perceived credibility of the source has also been shown to reduce if it attempts to prohibit freedoms.[94]

Here, then, an uncomfortable paradox may emerge: while the ban was enacted to avert potential damage, its actual implementation may nevertheless elicit both an increased desire to seek and potentially endorse RT's or Sputnik's narratives, and an increased hostility towards the European Union. In this instance, then, the EU would seem hypocritical—particularly so, given it has made public statements criticising other states, for instance, Belarus, for prohibiting the internet and therefore curtailing freedom of speech domestically.[95] This apparently hypocritical image of the EU is something that, as discussed before, the Kremlin has been eager to cultivate in the past. Here we should also reconsider earlier research highlighting that consumers were already comparatively likely to be less trusting of political institutions such as the European Union.[96]

This raises the question: is such a far-reaching and blanket ban worth these (potential) consequences? Or would a more nuanced approach be more advantageous? As mentioned, the extent to which different states

91 See Golnoosh Behrouzian et al., 'Resisting Censorship: How Citizens Navigate Closed Media Environments', *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 23.

92 Wagnsson et al., 'Keeping an Eye'.

93 For example, Christina Steindl, Eva Jonas, Sandra Sittenthaler, Eva Traut-Mattausch, and Jeff Greenberg, 'Understanding Psychological Reactance: New Developments and Findings', *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* 223 Nº 4 (2015): 205–14.

94 Paul J. Silvia, 'Reactance and the Dynamics of Disagreement: Multiple Paths from Threatened Freedom to Resistance to Persuasion', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 36 Nº 5 (2006): 673–85.

95 Rob Snyovitz, 'EU Calls Belarusian Internet Decree "A Step in Wrong Direction"', *Radio Free Europe*, 4 February 2010.

96 Wagnsson, 'Paperboys of Russian Messaging'.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

are targeted, and indeed the types of narratives that they are exposed to, varies. Ramsay and Robertshaw have shown that certain countries feature more heavily in RT and Sputnik coverage, and Galeotti discusses how the Kremlin has different strategic intentions for states depending on a constellation of factors, including the extent to which they have cultural or historical affinities with Russia.[97] In certain countries, perhaps those that we discussed earlier as more proximate to Russia and that bear the brunt of more hostile or deceptive narration, such a ban might be appropriate. Yet in others introducing a ban may be inconsequential, or worse, only drawing more attention to the outlets' narration and creating problem of reactance.

Alternatively, a more piecemeal approach could have been considered, whereby states under more direct threat, such as those described in Section 2, could adopt a different approach to other states. Hellman and Wagnsson, for example, analysed several response policies that European states can apply to Russian information warfare,[98] ranging in the degree to which they engage with Russian media narration, and to which they target the domestic or foreign audience (how inwardly/outwardly projecting they are). They discuss blocking as one option that is high in engagement and relatively inwardly projecting. However, they also discuss other options—such as naturalising, the strategy of producing a narrative that speaks to the same topic but does not directly contrast an adversary's narrative, and ignoring, simply not engaging with adversarial narratives—as alternative response types that offer states the opportunity to respond to Russian narration without actively engaging with them. Future research might consider investigating counternarratives from the civilian perspective. The ban presents a conundrum for EU policymakers as they must balance stemming Russian antagonistic narration with the potential damage to their image in the eyes of European citizens. In this way, the opinions of ordinary Europeans are very important, and there is merit in investigating European attitudes towards the ban, but also other methods of countering Russian information influence.

97 Ramsay and Robertshaw, 'Weaponising news'; Mark Galeotti, 'Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 September 2017.

98 Hellman and Wagnsson, 'How Can European States Respond'.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.2

Of course, in a situation where the EU is responding to Russia's invasion, it is logical that any immediate response should display fortitude and power. Indeed, our described alternatives lack the immediacy with which the EU may have felt compelled to respond, given the velocity at which Russia's invasion of Ukraine began. They also, by centring on a less engaging approach, lack the demonstrative, 'statement-like' impact that enacting an unprecedented and far-reaching ban had. They do, however, offer alternative ways of response that are more compatible with the EU's democratic values and circumvent any possible undesirable reactions as a result. They may be considered viable options in states that are considered more robust against, or smaller targets for, Russian influence.

Conclusion

In sum, this article has analysed the psychological evidence and legal foundations upon which the controversial decision by the EU to ban Russian state-sponsored media was taken. Parsing this, we have determined that the ban is supported by sound legal arguments and a body of psychological evidence that is inconclusive yet concerning enough to motivate action. We scrutinised the ban's tenability by examining its proportionality and discussing its potential to trigger a disturbing set of backfire effects, including consequences both for audiences in the Union, but also for the Russian domestic population. Lastly, we discussed whether a less stringent and more nuanced approach, which would allow each state to form its own response, might be more beneficial in the long term. Here, states, where implementing the ban may make strategic sense, would be free to do so, yet other states, where the ban may, in fact, do more harm than good, could pursue alternative methods.

A final closing remark reflects more broadly on the function of the ban. Despite the psychological evidence and sound legality of the EU ban, a worrying thought is that the costs of the measure, related to both its infringement of the fundamental rights of EU citizens and possible Russian repercussions, might be higher than the impact that RT and

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Sputnik narratives might have. That said, in the tumultuous geopolitical period immediately after Russia's invasion, the EU needed to demonstrate visible actions that indicated the seriousness with which this invasion was being taken. Therefore, the EU ban's function as a political signal to Russia—one of action, solidarity, and resolve—should not be discounted.

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Measuring The Effectiveness of Celebrity Activism: Celebrity Advocate v Celebrity Endorser

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Keywords—*celebrity politics, celebrity activism, celebrity advocacy, celebrity endorsement, strategic communications, strategic communication*

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Abstract

The influence of celebrities in politics has long been underestimated in political science and political communications disciplines. This research explores the effectiveness of two types of celebrity activism—celebrity advocacy and celebrity endorsements—to determine which type produces broader and more focused media coverage. Through case study analysis, this essay finds that although celebrity advocates and celebrity endorsers generate similarly broad media coverage, celebrity advocates generate media coverage that is more focused on their cause. In addition, by taking into consideration celebrities' gender, race, and the political leaning of the cause advocated or endorsed by the celebrity, the research finds that all three variables also affect the breadth and the focus of the

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media coverage, but more quantitative research is required to confirm a causal relationship. This research has important implications for governmental and non-governmental actors engaging with celebrity endorsers and celebrity advocates—while both are equally capable of generating broad media coverage, celebrity advocates are better suited to retaining the focus of the media coverage on the cause, and not themselves.

Introduction

In the US, not unlike in other countries, politics and celebrity culture have long been entwined, but never more than they are right now. Academics researching celebrity politics date the rise of celebrity involvement in politics to around 100 years ago when, in 1918, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was instructed to start maintaining close surveillance of suspected Hollywood radicals.[1] The US government could already see the impact celebrities could have on the country's political discourse and was immediately suspicious.

Over the last decade Anglo-Saxon celebrities' relationship with politics changed considerably. Before Barack Obama's 2012 campaign, celebrities were reluctant to get political, but in 2012 as a result of his star power, coupled with his liberal ideas and most importantly the rise of social media—which made communication that much easier for celebrities and regular citizens alike—celebrities' political activism exploded.[2] From a strategic communications perspective, technology has also allowed celebrities to craft and control their public image and messaging more effectively. With the ability to manage their own social media accounts and communicate directly with their audience, celebrities can shape the narrative around their activism and position themselves as leaders and advocates for specific causes. By the time of the watershed US presidential election of 2016, celebrities were regularly sharing their

1 Steven J. Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 3–4.

2 Patrick Gavin, 'Celebs Get Political in 2012', *Politico*, 5 November 2012.

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political opinions and taking on political causes not only in the Global South, but also domestically.

In the post-President Donald Trump era, US celebrities are more than ever before vocal about politics; some even feel pressured to support or denounce certain politicians or political causes. In 2016 the pop singer Taylor Swift was criticised for not endorsing the presidential candidate Hilary Clinton, with some far-right activists going as far as suggesting her silence might mean she was one of them.[3] By 2018 the pressure compounded, and Taylor Swift came out in support of the Democratic Party candidates in Tennessee. This led to a surge of 65,000 voter registrations in the 24 hours following the announcement,[4] as well as criticism from the Republican Party for exerting undue influence on democratic processes.[5] Taylor Swift's case embodies the state of celebrity politics in the US today—it is highly polarised, and highly impactful.

Despite the growing phenomenon of celebrity activism, celebrities' role remains an underexplored topic—some even question if it matters,[6] i.e., if it influences policy. Although this article was unable to identify a single case where celebrity activism single-handedly resulted in domestic policy change—it would still argue that there are other measurable and valuable ways in which celebrities' activism influences politics. For example, Kim Kardashian secured clemency for Alice Marie Johnson[7] and started a national conversation on prison reform, Oprah's endorsement of Barrack Obama secured Obama nearly 1 million extra votes in the 2008 election,[8] and advocacy and fundraising efforts by Eva Longoria

3 Jeff Jacoby, 'After Years of Pressure Celebrities Get Political', *Boston Globe*, 12 October 2018.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 John Street, 'Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter?', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14 № 3 (2012): 346–56.

7 'Trump Pardons Alice Johnson, Whose Cause Was Backed by Kim Kardashian', *Reuters*, 28 August 2020.

8 Andrew Pease and Paul R. Brewer, 'The Oprah Factor: The Effects of a Celebrity Endorsement in a Presidential Primary Campaign', *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13 № 4 (2008): 386–400.

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and America Ferrera led to an increase in Latino politicians running for office in the US.[9]

Another reason why celebrities' influence on politics has not been explored in as much detail yet is the issue of framing it within the wider context of political science and political communication.[10] Political scientists are highly critical and suspicious of celebrities' role in politics to the point of dismissing it altogether,[11] while political communication researchers accept it as a part of decentralised political communication. Both see it as part of a broader personalisation of politics trend[12] as well as a collapse of trust in the political classes[13] in the context of late modernity.[14]

The personalisation of politics trend refers to politicians using their personal brand and image as a political asset and incorporating elements of their personality—values and personal experiences—into their media profile. Antkowiak and Schefs link this trend to the rise of mass media, which forces politicians to partake in media performance, where their personality is sought after as much as, if not more than, their policy stance or political track record.[15] The personalisation of politics trend creates favourable conditions for celebrities to have an ever-growing role in politics because they are better able to partake in media performance than career politicians. As Street put it, 'either politicians learn the skills of the medium or those already skilled in it (the celebrity) come to dominate it'.[16]

9 Bethonie Butler, 'If You Don't Know Why Eva Longoria Is a Political Power Broker, You Haven't Been Paying Attention', *Washington Post*, 20 October 2020.

10 Street, 'Do Celebrity Politics'.

11 Ibid.

12 Mark Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), p. 9.

13 Ibid., p. 139.

14 Street, 'Do Celebrity Politics'.

15 Paweł Antkowiak and Łukasz Schefs, 'The Personalisation of Politics at the Local Level in Poland and Selected Central and Eastern European States: A Contribution to the Research', *Politics in Central Europe* 11 № 2 (2015): 95–108.

16 John Street, 'Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6 № 4 (2004): 435–52.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

The personalisation of politics trend stems from the collapse of trust in the political classes.[17] According to Pew Research, Americans' trust in government has been on a downwards trend since the 1960s. Back in 1958, when the National Election Study started asking respondents about trust in government, 73 per cent of Americans trusted their government. In 2021 that figure stood at just 24 per cent. Political scientists such as Marsh attribute this decline in trust to the period of late modernity, where hierarchies have been replaced with networks and the state has been hollowed out[18]—the power has shifted upwards to international organisations, downwards to non-governmental organisations, and sideways to transnational corporations and other non-state actors, including celebrities. Not all hierarchies have been replaced, however; the remaining ones have been rebuilt along more horizontal lines, which has given rise to the emergence of new forms of power and influence. This has led to the thinning of the traditional political community and contributed to the dissolution of communitarian agreements,[19] leading to a decline in trust in government.

The trust vacuum created by the declining trust in politicians has been quickly filled with growing trust in the private sector. According to the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, business is the most trusted institution in the US.[20] That year business also became the only institution that is perceived as both competent and ethical.[21] Although the Edelman Trust Barometer does not include celebrities, existing research indicates that people consider celebrities to be more trustworthy than politicians.[22] Researchers suggest that the reason celebrities appear more trustworthy than politicians is that they seem familiar due to their constant media presence.[23]

17 Antkowiak and Schefs, 'Personalisation of Politics'.

18 David Marsh, 'Late Modernity and the Changing Nature of Politics: Two Cheers for Henrik Bang', *Critical Policy Studies* 5 № 1 (2011): 73–89.

19 Robert D. Putnam, 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital', *Journal of Democracy* 6 № 1 (1995): 65–78.

20 Edelman, Edelman Trust Barometer 2021.

21 Ibid.

22 Craig Frizzell, 'Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The Effects of Celebrity Endorsements', *Social Science Journal* 48 № 2 (2011): 314–23.

23 Jessica Grose, 'When Did We Start Taking Famous People Seriously?', *New York Times*, 20 April 2020.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

The central question this article will aim to answer is, in a society where celebrity politics have become commonplace, which of the two most common types of celebrity activism is more effective—celebrity endorser or celebrity advocate? Celebrity advocates are in control of their agency—they can proactively choose the causes they want to advocate for, and they can define their own messaging and their advocacy style. Celebrity endorsers, on the other hand, are often used by others—politicians, political parties, NGOs—to promote or endorse their cause.

This article hypothesises that the type of celebrity activism affects both the breadth and the focus of the media coverage—the two proxies for effectiveness. Although the article's focus will be on comparing celebrity endorsers with celebrity advocates, it will take into consideration celebrities' identity—gender, race, and the political leaning of their cause in its selection of case studies and analysis. By answering this research question, it will contribute to closing the research gap assessing the effectiveness of the two most common types of celebrity activism.

To answer the central question, I shall rely on a case study analysis of eight celebrities taking on celebrity endorser or celebrity advocate roles. Namely:

- Kim Kardashian advocating for clemency for Alice Mary Johnson
- Colin Kaepernick advocating for the abolition of the police
- Diamond and Silk advocating for a bill to defund sanctuary cities
- Kelsey Grammer advocating for Marsy's law
- Olivia Rodrigo endorsing President Biden's youth vaccination plan
- Lil Wayne endorsing President Trump's 'Platinum Plan' for Black Americans
- Jeff Goldblum endorsing a bill that would reduce the use of single-use plastics in California

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

- Kirstie Alley endorsing President Trump in the Presidential elections in 2020.

I shall limit its scope to US national politics only and not investigate the celebrities' role in international advocacy and fundraising efforts, which is a lot better researched. Geographically, the scope of this research will be limited to the United States due to the widespread phenomenon of celebrity activism in the country.

Literature Review

The explosion of academic literature on the topic of celebrity politics coincided with the rise of the 24-hour news cycle and the democratisation of the media. Wheeler dates the roots of scholarship on the subject to the mid twentieth century when an American sociologist, Leo Lowenthal, argued that 'idols of production', politicians, had been replaced with 'idols of consumption', celebrities.[24] Duncombe argues that celebrities in democratic societies are acceptable because they are simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary.[25] On the one hand, 'they are just like us', in that a lot of them have humble beginnings, but at the same time they are extraordinary—the reason they have become famous is their exemplary talent.[26] This essay would like to offer an alternative theory—celebrity politics are acceptable because for the most part they have been focused outward, predominantly on the Global South. Celebrities have long lobbied, fundraised, and advocated for humanitarian causes outside the domestic political discourse.[27]

Since the 2010s, however, some celebrities' focus had shifted inward. This essay attributes this inward shift to the growing polarisation as

24 Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics*, p. 9.
25 Ibid.
26 Lisa Ann Richey and Alexandra Budabin, 'Celebrities in International Affairs', *Oxford Handbooks Online*, July 2016.
27 bid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

well as a shifting political discourse that no longer glosses over societal fissures, such as racism, sexism, or income inequality.

Due to the polarisation of societies, including the US, that shift was not welcomed by the opposing sides of the causes that celebrities have taken on. Colin Kaepernick lost his NFL career for taking a stance against police brutality and racial inequality in the US. Others lost their fans, brand deals, and social media followers for their political activities.[28] By comparing the effectiveness of the different types of celebrity activism in the context of US domestic politics, this article will inject some evidence-based insights into a highly polarised debate.

As Marsh et al. have observed, the bulk of academic research on celebrity politics to date has focused on either classifying the different types of celebrity involvement in politics or assessing the effects of celebrity politics on democracy.[29] Most of the research into the effects is highly theoretical and critical of celebrities' role. Celebrities' role in politics has long been criticised by left-leaning authors, such as Chris Rojek, who see celebrities as agents of the neoliberal system, perpetuating its values and the reward culture in which one can be distinguished through financial or social status.[30]

Others' criticism has been more practical and centred on celebrities' lack of political substance and their emotive rather than rational responses.[31] In the US specifically, the public discourse around celebrities' involvement in politics has been criticised for unfairly favouring left-wing politics and causes.[32] This trend might transcend the Western world because

28 Adam Jude, 'How Colin Kaepernick Inspired Activism, Awareness and Seattle Athletes to Speak out against Racial Injustice', *Seattle Times*, 27 August 2020.

29 David Marsh, Paul 't Hart, and Karen Tindall, 'Celebrity Politics: The Politics of the Late Modernity?', *Political Studies Review* 8 Nº 3 (2010): 322–40.

30 Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2001), p. 198.

31 Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics*, p. 141.

32 Nahuel Ribke, 'Entertainment Industries and "Liberal" Celebrities: The Failure to Convert Attention into Political Power', *A Genre Approach to Celebrity Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 117–33.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

celebrity politics research from South Korea presents empirical evidence of politically influential celebrities' being more left-leaning.[33]

Ross's analysis, however, challenges this claim. In his book *Hollywood Left and Right he* demonstrates that although left-leaning celebrities may have been able to secure more media coverage that made the issue more visible, it is right-leaning celebrities that were more likely to seek, win, and exercise electoral power.[34] This adds another dimension to the research. The case study analysis will therefore look to compare the media coverage associated with right- and left-leaning causes taken up by celebrities.

Apart from criticism, some micro studies have been published by academics assessing the effectiveness of individual celebrities, but no work has been done comparing the different types of celebrity activism and its effects. Since most of the existing research on celebrity politics has focused on forming typologies, numerous classifications have been established with varying scopes. Marsh et al. name two types of classification in celebrity politics—one that focuses on the origins of the celebrities and another that focuses on celebrities' political action.[35] West and Orman laid the groundwork for the former by distinguishing between celebrity politicians who are (i) political celebrities; (ii) legacies who owe their popularity to their political families; (iii) celebrities turned politicians; and (iv) overnight celebrities who gain this position through an event, often as a victim or a witness.[36] Street only distinguishes between a celebrity politician (a celebrity that becomes a political figure, such as Donald Trump) and a political celebrity—a celebrity who uses their status to influence politics, such as Bono.[37] Mukherjee builds on Street's work and adds another type of celebrity politician—a celebrity endorser who promotes certain causes or policies.[38]

33 Sungjin Park et al., 'The Network of Celebrity Politics', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 659 Nº 1 (2015): 246–58.

34 Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right*, p. 4.

35 Marsh et al., 'Celebrity Politics'.

36 D. West and J. Orman, *Celebrity Politics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 19–23.

37 Street, 'Celebrity Politicians'.

38 Marsh et al., 'Celebrity Politics'.

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On the other side of the spectrum, Hart and Tindall shift their attention to celebrities' political action. They offer a typology of four distinct political celebrities: (i) celebrity advocate; (ii) celebrity endorser; (iii) celebrity politician; and (iv) politician turned celebrity.[39] They distinguish between a celebrity advocate and a celebrity endorser by defining an advocate as a celebrity who proactively lobbies for a cause, as opposed to endorsers, who pay lip service to a cause, organisation, or an individual, but do not necessarily engage in long-term advocacy for a specific policy change.[40]

This article challenges the existing typology for missing an important dimension—the agency of the celebrity. By analysing celebrity politics through a political communication lens that sees celebrities as information conduits,[41] celebrities' agency is omitted from the typology. Instead, researchers focus on their actions or the origin of their fame, while their ability to make creative or communicative choices is not considered. This misses the biggest difference between celebrity advocates and celebrity endorsers—celebrity advocates are proactive and can therefore make more independent choices when it comes to their activism, while celebrity endorsers, who usually become endorsers at someone's request, are more constrained, and their agency is more limited.

For the purposes this article, the research will compare the two most common types of celebrity activism—celebrity advocacy and celebrity endorsement. I adopt Hart and Tindall's foundational definition of the two, but will further distinguish the two according to their agency. Celebrity advocates are in control of their agency—they can proactively choose the causes they want to advocate for, and they can define their own messaging and their advocacy style. Celebrity endorsers, on the other hand, are often (not always) used by others—politicians, political parties, NGOs—to promote or endorse their cause. As a result, they are more constrained when it comes to messaging, and other activities associated with their endorsement. I shall investigate to what extent (if at all) that affects their reach and the focus of media coverage.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics*, p. 29.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

Despite the prevalence of celebrity endorsers in politics, in the field of political communication and political science, celebrity endorsers have only been researched in the context of endorsing NGOs and certain candidates in elections. Wymer and Drollinger found that celebrities' personal qualities can affect the effectiveness of their charity endorsement, and celebrity qualities such as expertise and admirability are significant predictors of audience donation intentions.[42] Von Sikorski et al. found that negative press associated with the celebrity endorser can negatively affect the endorsed political candidate.[43]

Survey data from 2019 confirms the findings of Sikorski et al., and further argues that celebrities' endorsements not only do not have a bearing on the vast majority's voting behaviour, but even put some off voting for certain candidates if they had been endorsed by a celebrity. The survey found that 65 per cent of Americans said that celebrities' endorsement had no bearing on their decision, 11 per cent said that they were more likely to vote for someone who was endorsed by a celebrity, and 24 per cent said that a celebrity endorsement would make them less likely to vote for the endorsed candidate.[44]

The key tenet of the existing scholarship on celebrity advocates is the conclusion numerous academics have reached that when celebrities get involved in politics, they bring more attention to themselves than they do to the cause or issue they are endorsing or advocating for.[45] This is illustrated by Jensen, who analysed Kim Kardashian's criminal justice reform efforts.

Jensen concludes that the media coverage of Kim Kardashian's efforts had two major implications. First, it shifted the focus to celebrity and

42 Walter Wymer and Tanya Drollinger, 'Charity Appeals Using Celebrity Endorsers: Celebrity Attributes Most Predictive of Audience Donation Intentions', *Voluntas* 26 (2015): 2694–717.

43 Christian von Sikorski, Johannes Knoll, and Jörg Matthes, 'A New Look at Celebrity Endorsements in Politics: Investigating the Impact of Scandalous Celebrity Endorsers and Politicians' Best Responses', *Media Psychology* 21 № 3 (2018): 403–36.

44 Gene Del Vecchio, 'Dear Celebrities, Research Shows That Your Political Opinions Hurt Your Cause More than Help It', *Forbes*, 25 June 2020.

45 Courtney Jensen, 'Celebrity Everyday Maker: Public Policy and the Discourse of Celebrity Surrounding Kim Kardashian', *Public Integrity* 23 № 3 (2021): 269–80.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

away from the substance; second, the coverage emphasised individual engagement rather than collective political action.[46] While this essay agrees with the second assertion, Jensen's first assertion misses the point entirely. The media outlets that cover celebrity activism stories and do not provide sufficient coverage to the cause are not the type of outlets that would normally cover political issues.

The criminal justice issue Kim Kardashian took on never had the 'focus' that could be shifted elsewhere—the type of media that covered the issue once Kim Kardashian took it on had never covered it before. In her analysis, Jensen cites articles in *Vogue* and a celebrity activism news magazine called *Mary Sue*, among others. Neither publication has a track record in covering the issue of criminal justice reform outside the celebrity context. Before publishing Kim Kardashian's profile, *Vogue* only ever touched upon the issue of criminal justice reform when the outlet was profiling other celebrities who had made statements on the issue. The same is true for *Mary Sue* (themarysue.com): only nineteen articles on its website contained the words 'criminal justice reform',[47] and all nineteen were associated with celebrities' statements or actions on the subject. In essence, although celebrities taking on policy causes draw more attention to themselves than to the policy, the attention the policy receives with the celebrity backing is often sufficient for policy change to occur or public awareness levels to skyrocket.[48]

Beyond individual celebrity case studies, Thrall et al. conducted some aggregate research looking at 165 celebrities involved in environmental advocacy campaigns. They found that the media coverage of celebrity activism on the subject was not preceded by increased coverage of environmental issues overall.[49] They argue that this indicates that the role of celebrities in politics has been overestimated. This article would disagree with this interpretation of their findings. The long-term media

46 Ibid.

47 Search for 'criminal justice reform', *The Mary Sue* [accessed 25 August 2021].

48 Mark Harvey, *Celebrity Influence: Politics, Persuasion, and Issue-Based Advocacy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017), pp. 14–18.

49 Marsh et al., 'Celebrity Politics'.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

coverage of a topic is not an appropriate measure for success in celebrity politics. Most celebrities' activism aims to either affect policy change or increase awareness that could then lead to increased public pressure, and because of it—policy change. It is, therefore, more fitting to look at either policy change or the media coverage of the issue that resulted in the celebrities' involvement. Here, the latter will be used because policy change cannot be attributed to a single actor in a networked policy environment.

Another important finding of celebrity and politics literature is that although the quality of attention celebrities' causes gets might be debatable, its quantity far exceeds the media coverage of any politician. In his book *Celebrity Influence: Politics, Persuasion, and Issue-Based Advocacy*, Mark Harvey compares the coverage of celebrities' pet projects with the coverage of politicians' key public policy positions. His research found that celebrities were more effective at earning their causes media attention than either the sitting US president or members of Congress from 1999 to 2012.[50] This, however, should be qualified, because Thrall et al. found that the coverage of celebrities' political activism is linked to the level of their fame, i.e., A-list celebrities get more media coverage of their political engagement than do less popular celebrities.[51]

Hart and Tindall's research suggests that it is not just the level of fame that affects media coverage, but other qualities of celebrities' stardom, such as meritocracy of their fame, the prestige of their field, the endurance of their fame, and the breadth and width of their fame, are all positively correlated to the perceived significance of their political activities.[52] This article will contribute to this area of research by determining if the type of celebrity activism, be it endorsement or advocacy, also affects the type of coverage celebrities receive.

There is a gap in the literature looking at the difference in media coverage (if any) associated with celebrities' gender and race. There is some research

50 Harvey, *Celebrity Influence*, pp. 14–18.

51 Marsh et al., 'Celebrity Politics'.

52 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

on how the political activism of Black celebrities in the US has been covered by the media, including the seminal work of Sarah J. Jackson, who found that Black celebrities' activism is more often sensationalised, but framed in a way that detracts from their cause.[53] There is even less literature on how celebrities' gender affects the media coverage of their activism. Van Zoonen, for example, argues the term 'celebrity' is gendered because public visibility strongly favours men over women,[54] but her findings are not backed up by empirical data.

Theoretical Framework

As was established in the previous section, there is no existing theoretical framework to measure the effectiveness of celebrity activism,[55] and celebrity advocates and celebrity endorsers have not been compared before. Different researchers have attempted to assess celebrity activism by analysing the policy effects[56] or conducting discourse analysis of individual case studies.[57] Neither, however, yielded the desired results. The nature of discourse analysis does not produce a replicable framework for multiple case studies, while policy analysis does not align with the nature of celebrity activism. Celebrity activism is a highly performative act of political participation designed for mass media consumption. The goal of celebrity activism is rarely direct policy change; more often it is awareness-raising that could then lead to policy change.[58] Also, policy-making in late modernity is a highly networked endeavour[59]—no policy change can be attributed to a single individual; therefore, policy effects analysis is an imperfect way of assessing the effectiveness of celebrity activists.

53 Sarah J. Jackson, *Black Celebrity, Racial Politics, and the Press Framing Dissent* (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2014).

54 Liesbet van Zoonen, 'The Personal, the Political and the Popular', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9 № 3 (2006): 287–301.

55 Asteris Huliaras and Nikolaos Tzifakis, 'Celebrity Activism in International Relations: In Search of a Framework for Analysis', *Global Society* 24 № 2 (2010): 255–74.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Street, 'Do Celebrity Politics'.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

To overcome it, this article will instead create an original criterion for effective celebrity activism based on what academics have established to be qualities of *ineffective* celebrity activism and take into account the media-centric nature of celebrity activism. Jensen in her analysis of the discourse around Kim Kardashian's prison reform efforts found that her campaigning was ineffective because it shifted the focus from the cause for which she was advocating to herself. This is a broadly accepted criterion for ineffective celebrity activism used also by Wheeler[60] and West.[61] Effective celebrity activism, would, therefore, place the focus of media coverage back on the cause. Another criterion for ineffective celebrity activism is set out by Jackson[62] and Ross.[63] In separate studies, they both used the lack of visibility—the limited reach of celebrities' activism—to conclude that certain celebrities' activism was less effective than others'. The second criterion will therefore be the visibility of activism.

Both criteria—the focus on the cause and the visibility of the effort—relate to the media coverage of celebrity activism. The most appropriate unit of analysis is, therefore, individual media articles. The media is the most appropriate lens through which one can analyse the phenomenon of celebrities and celebrity politics because celebrities themselves only exist in media storytelling—if they were not talked about, they would not be celebrities, i.e., they would no longer be well known. That is not to say celebrities cannot control or have no agency over their coverage in the media—including the framing of themselves and their political activism—but that control is not total.

Social media engagement is another valuable facet of the media that could add a layer of depth to investigation, as most political activism takes place on social media platforms. However, celebrities' participation in multiple social networks makes it considerably harder to compare metrics from different social media platforms. Other metrics, such as

60 Mark Wheeler, 'Celebrity Diplomacy', in *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy,* Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp (eds), (London, UK : SAGE Publications, 2016), pp. 530–39.

61 Darrell M. West, 'Angelina, Mia, and Bono: Celebrities and International Development', *Brookings* [accessed 25 August 2021].

62 Jackson, *Black Celebrity*, pp. 10–12.

63 Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right*, pp. 19–21.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

engagement with political actions (e.g. signing petitions, political debate, fundraising), are also too different to provide a uniform metric across all case studies.

Methodology

Eight case studies of celebrities' activism will be analysed—four celebrity endorsers and four celebrity advocates. Purposeful sampling will be used to identify the eight case studies[64] that match a pre-existing criterion, namely that four case studies must be about celebrity endorsers and four about celebrity advocates. To account for any gender- and race-related biases that could affect the media coverage,[65] the case studies will include two white male celebrities, two white female celebrities, two non-white male celebrities, and two non-white female celebrities—one of each for the two types of celebrity activism. A distinction will be made between celebrities advocating for left-leaning and right-leaning causes to account for political differences that might affect the media coverage. To take this into consideration, four case studies will focus on celebrities taking on left-leaning causes and the other four on right-leaning issues. All eight case studies will be geographically limited to the US.

For each case study, ten top-ranking media articles in a neutral Google search (non-personalised, non-location-based) will be analysed. A neutral Google search was chosen to replicate the experience of an average reader and analyse the same articles that most readers would have been recommended if they searched for information about each case study. The Google search results are limited to a three-month period for each case study to yield comparable datasets.

The two criteria that will be used to assess the media coverage will be the focus and the visibility of the top ten media articles per case

64 Lawrence A. Palinkas et al., 'Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research', *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42 Nº 5 (2015): 533–44.

65 Jackson, *Black Celebrity*, pp. 14–16.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

study. The focus will be measured by determining what percentage of the article focused on the cause taken on by the celebrity. This will be measured by counting the words in sentences focusing on the cause and the words in sentences focusing on other topics. The research will also account for what those other topics are. To contextualise each article, it will also determine the overarching narrative of each media article in regard to the celebrity activists, i.e., how they are portrayed, or if they are discredited or presented as credible. This will help determine if their personal qualities or behaviour outside their identity attributes might affect the coverage of their activism.

The visibility of the top ten media articles will be measured by proxy of the average monthly audience of the outlets where the articles are published. The audience figures are found on similarweb, an online digital analytics platform that shows average monthly audience data for media outlets with at least 50,000 monthly visitors.

The celebrity advocacy case studies are shown in Table 1.

	Female	Male
White	ADVOCATE, left-leaning: Kim Kardashian	ADVOCATE, right-leaning: Kelsey Grammer
White	ENDORSER, right-leaning: Kirstie Alley	ENDORSER, left-leaning: Jeff Goldblum
Non-white	ADVOCATE, right-leaning: Diamond and Silk	ENDORSER, right-leaning: Lil Wayne
Non-white	ENDORSER, left-leaning: Olivia Rodrigo	ADVOCATE, left-leaning: Colin Kaepernick

Table 1. A list of the case studies and criteria by gender, race, political leaning of the cause, and the type of activism

My analysis examines the breadth and the focus of the coverage across the eight case studies to compare the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers and advocates. In addition to comparing the effectiveness of celebrity

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endorsers and celebrity advocates, it will also seek to determine if race, gender, and the political leaning of the cause the celebrity endorsed or advocated for affects the visibility and the focus of the media coverage.

Case Studies

Kim Kardashian

The case study of media personality Kim Kardashian revolves around Kardashian's efforts to win clemency for Alice Marie Johnson, a first-time offender who was sentenced to life in prison for a drug offence in 1996.[66] Kim Kardashian used her personal lawyer and a team of legal experts to win her clemency. At the end of May 2018, Kim Kardashian West met with President Trump to personally advocate for Johnson's pardon. Following the meeting, President Trump granted clemency to Johnson. The keywords used to identify relevant articles were 'kim kardashian alice marie johnson' and the search limits were 15 March to 15 May 2018.

Overall, Kim Kardashian West's campaign to win Alice Marie Johnson clemency was highly successful—the coverage was broad (the top ten outlets had a combined audience of 1.1 billion readers) and focused on the facts of Johnson's case. The top ten Google Search articles on the case study all covered Johnson's case thoroughly, providing background to her arrest, listing mitigating circumstances, and highlighting her achievements in prison.

Around 84 per cent of the total coverage the case received in the ten articles analysed was dedicated to Johnson and her efforts to gain clemency, not Kim Kardashian or her celebrity. Some articles were so dedicated to covering Johnson's story that they failed to mention Kim Kardashian, although her name was featured in the headline and imagery. This would suggest that while Kim Kardashian brought a spotlight to the

66 'Everything You Need to Know about the Black Woman Kim Kardashian Is Trying to Get Released from Prison', *NewsOne*, 30 May 2018.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

story, the media outlets that covered it focused their coverage on Johnson's case rather than Kim Kardashian's celebrity. The articles framed Kim Kardashian as an effective advocate for Johnson who was negotiating as an equal with White House officials for Johnson's clemency. The articles analysed did not attempt to undermine Kardashian's reputation by questioning her qualifications or the origin of her fame.

Colin Kaepernick

Former NFL player Colin Kaepernick has long advocated against police brutality and institutional racism. In autumn 2020 Kaepernick published an essay[67] advocating for the abolition of the police. It was a response to a pandemic of police violence against Black communities and Breonna Taylor's and George Floyd's murders by police officers.

Because it was published in October 2020, the timeline for data collection was 1 September to 1 December 2020. The keywords used were 'kaepernick police abolition'.

Despite the high visibility of Kaepernick's efforts—the combined audience of the top ten articles had a reach of 1 billion—only 48.5 per cent of the total coverage the case study received in the ten articles analysed was dedicated to Kaepernick's cause and arguments discussed in his essay.

Overall, Kaepernick's advocacy received highly polarised framing. In liberal, left-leaning media, Kaepernick was hailed as a thought leader in the anti-police brutality and Black Lives Matter movement. Meanwhile, the conservative, right-wing media framed him as a proponent of Marxist ideology who was injecting the public discourse with poisonous anti-police narratives and putting the lives of police officers at risk. Negative descriptions of Kaepernick in conservative media included offensive language and some racist tropes: 'one of the few unemployed people in

67 Colin Kaepernick, 'The Demand for Abolition', *LEVEL*, 6 October 2020.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

Trump's America';[68] 'messiah of the militants';[69] 'inarticulate failure […] who has never delivered an eloquent speech'.[70]

Diamond and Silk

Sisters Lynnette Hardaway and Rochelle Richardson, better known for their stage names Diamond and Silk, are political social media influencers who regularly produce YouTube content mocking the Democrats and promoting the GOP.[71] In June 2019 Congressman Steve King announced a bill informally known as the 'Diamond and Silk Act 2019' because the pair advocated for the bill, and conversations with them inspired the congressman to draft it.[72] The bill aimed to take federal funding away from 'sanctuary cities'—cities that limit their cooperation with the national authorities on matters of immigration enforcement—and redirect that funding towards veterans and the homeless. The Google Search limits for this case study were 1 May to 1 August 2019, and the keywords used were 'diamond and silk steve king'.

The sources of the top ten articles had a total reach of nearly 1 billion readers, but on average only around 22 per cent of the coverage was focused on the bill. The rest of the coverage cantered around Rep. King's history of racist behaviour and statements, his previous collaboration with Diamond and Silk, and the bill's lacklustre chances in the Democrat-controlled Congress. The articles also covered the press conference which was the main source of the media material, including the imagery. Instead of focusing on the bill, the coverage of the press conference centred on the behaviour of the participants—Rep. King and Diamond

68 C. Brito, 'Colin Kaepernick Calls for Abolishing Police and Prisons in New Essay', *CBS News*, 8 October 2020.

69 A. Raskin, 'Kaepernick Calls for Abolishment of "White Supremacist" Police', Daily Mail, 24 September 2020.

70 Ibid.

71 Zak Cheney-Rice, 'Steve King, Diamond, and Silk Deflect Racism Charges by Unveiling Racist Legislation', *Intelligencer*, 13 June 2019.

72 Griffin Connolly, 'Rep. King's "Diamond and Silk Act" Gets Ripped by Conservative Pundits', *Roll Call*, 13 December 2019.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

and Silk—and statements unrelated to the bill. Some of the descriptors used to describe the two creators had racist overtones: for example, 'two sinister chocolate-skinned sisters of doom'.[73] The narratives portrayed the two Black creators as shields used by Rep. King against allegations of racism. The focus was, therefore, not on Diamond and Silk, but on Rep. King.

Kelsey Grammer

In 2018 *Frasier* star Kelsey Grammer began advocating for the so-called Marsy's law—a victims' rights amendment that would give them the right to take part in public proceedings and reasonable protection from the accused, and to refuse discovery requests made by the accused.[74] To advocate for the law in various US states considering it, Grammer starred in an advertisement urging voters to support it.

Although the law was criticised by civil liberties organisations, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Grammer is an ardent supporter of victims' rights legislation, including Marsy's law. His support comes from personal experience—his father was gunned down at the age of thirty-eight and his sister was raped and murdered when she was eighteen.[75] For the purposes of this article, Grammer's advocacy for the law was limited to September to December 2018 when he advocated in advance of crime amendment referendums in North Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Florida, Oklahoma, and Nevada, and the Google Search keywords were 'kelsey grammer marsy's law'.

The top ten outlets covering the story only had a reach of around 190 million readers, which is about one-fifth of the size of the other case studies. Despite the limited reach, on average 94 per cent of the coverage was firmly focused on Marsy's law. The coverage outside the issue was

73 Wonderbitch, 'Steve King Built a Wall', *Wonkette*, 13 June 2019.

74 Katie Meyer, 'Marsy's Law Explained', *WITF*, 5 November 2019.

75 Emily Birnbaum, 'Kelsey Grammer Invokes Family Tragedies in Crime Victims Amendments Ad', *The Hill*, 22 October 2018.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

focused on Grammer's personal story, specifically his father's and his sister's murders, and that he only found out that his father's killer was released on bail through a tabloid because there was no legal provision stipulating that the victims should be notified of such developments. The narratives focused on Grammer's credibility as a celebrity advocating for Marsy's law because of his own experience.

Olivia Rodrigo

Singer Olivia Rodrigo used her newly found fame to become a spokesperson for the White House's COVID-19 vaccination plan for youths.[76] In July 2021 she visited the White House and met with President Joe Biden and Dr Anthony Fauci, and endorsed the vaccine for youth unequivocally.[77] The keywords used to identify relevant articles were 'olivia rodrigo vaccine'. The search limits were 15 May to 15 August 2021. This period was selected to cover Rodrigo's visit to the White House and the endorsement of the vaccines for young people.

Olivia Rodrigo's campaign was more visible than Kim Kardashian's—the total combined audience of the top ten articles was 1.6 billion—but the focus of the story was more blurred: only 56 per cent of the articles focused on youth vaccination and its benefits. Of the ten articles, four focused their attention on the practice of governments using celebrities to promote policies, rather than Olivia Rodrigo's endorsement of the vaccines. Other outlets shifted their focus to the origin of Rodrigo's celebrity or to the backlash from Republican lawmakers protesting against teen vaccination.[78]

76 Kate Nakamura, 'Olivia Rodrigo Wants You to Get Vaccinated', *Global Citizen*, 15 July 2021.

77 Ibid.

78 F. Sonmez and P. Firozi, 'Singer Olivia Rodrigo Emphasizes "the Importance of Youth Vaccination"', *Washington Post*, 14 July 2021.

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Lil Wayne

US rapper Lil Wayne endorsed President Trump's 'Platinum Plan' for Black Americans days before the 2020 presidential election. The $ 500 billion plan was a part of Donald Trump's re-election campaign aimed at Black voters; it pledged to grant access to capital, to create 3 million new jobs, and to address racial disparities in education and healthcare.[79] The plan was criticised by US policy analysts for lacking details and repeating many of the mistakes made by previous administrations' attempts to help African American communities.[80] Wayne announced his endorsement in a tweet on 29 October 2020. The Google Search limits, therefore, were 15 September to 15 December 2020. The keywords used were 'lil wayne platinum plan'.

Wayne's endorsement did not receive a lot of media attention from major media outlets. The total reach of the top ten outlets covering the story was 511 million readers, about half the size of the other case studies. Around half of the media outlets could be described as conservative or fringe, indicating that the story attracted less mainstream media attention.

Only 38.5 per cent of the coverage from the top ten media outlets covered either the endorsement or the Platinum Plan. A lot of the coverage of Lil Wayne's endorsement focused on another rapper—Ice Cube's collaboration with the Trump administration to incorporate Ice Cube's vision for Black America into the Platinum Plan.

In at least half of the articles in the top ten list, the focus was on Ice Cube's work with the Trump administration, not Wayne's endorsement of the Platinum Plan. Articles that did put the focus on Lil Wayne were all rather short[81]—quoting Wayne's tweet in which he announced his support for the Platinum Plan and adding no more than three or four sentences to contextualise it. Some outlets contextualised Wayne's endorsement with his previous controversial statements on racism.

79 Kriston Capps, 'What's in Trump's "Platinum Plan" for Black America?', *Bloomberg.com*, 29 September 2020.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid. See 'Lil Wayne Meets With Donald Trump, Supports His Platinum Plan', *VladTV*, 29 October 2020.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

Newsweek, for example, cited his arrest and an eight-month sentence at Rikers Island prison;[82] neither the arrest nor the sentence was related to Wayne's endorsement.

Jeff Goldblum

In January 2020 actor Jeff Goldblum endorsed two bills in California's Senate and Assembly that would require companies to reduce single-use packaging by 2024 and ensure that products imported or made in California were recyclable or biodegradable.[83] As part of his endorsement of the bill, Goldblum met with lawmakers at the California Capitol.[84] The keywords used to discover the stories were 'jeff goldblum single-use plastics' and the search period limits were 1 December 2019 to 1 March 2020.

Overall, the top ten sources had a total reach of 131 million readers, which is significantly less than the other case studies. Like Grammer's case study, the coverage of Goldblum's endorsement was highly focused on the two bills. On average, 94 per cent of all coverage was about the two bills. The remaining 6 per cent placed attention on the source of Goldblum's fame, and his personal habits when it comes to single-use plastics. Unlike with the other case studies, a lot of the media outlets in the top ten articles analysed used the same AP news story, indicating a low interest in the endorsement. This led to at least five identical articles in the list of ten. The overarching narrative was that Goldblum lent his celebrity status to advocate for a progressive law.

82 Jeffery Martin, 'Lil Wayne Has "Great" Meeting with Donald Trump, Says His Platinum Plan Will Give Community "Real Ownership"', *Newsweek*, 30 October 2020.

83 'Celebrities Back California Bill to Cut Single-Use Plastics', *KPBS Public Media*, 23 January 2020.

84 Cuneyt Dil, 'Celebrities Back California Bill to Cut Single-Use Plastics', *AP*, 23 January 2020.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

Kirstie Alley

Actress Kirstie Alley announced her second endorsement for Trump in October 2020, less than a month before the presidential election. In her endorsement, posted on Twitter, she said, 'I'm voting for @realDonaldTrump because he's NOT a politician. I voted for him 4 years ago for this reason and shall vote for him again for this reason.'[85] The search terms for this case study were 'kirstie alley trump endorsement' and the search limits were 1 September to 1 December 2020.

The top ten sources had a total reach of 808 million readers. Despite the broad reach, the coverage of Alley's endorsement focused almost exclusively on the backlash that it had caused—not President Trump's agenda or the presidential campaign. Only 7.5 per cent of the coverage focused on the endorsement—most of that was made up of verbatim quotes of Alley's tweet endorsing the president. The remainder of all articles placed the focus on the backlash the endorsement received from other celebrities, especially Alley's former co-stars and the general public. Out of the ten articles analysed, six referred to Alley's affiliation with the Church of Scientology, which is not directly relevant to the endorsement, but probably to undermine her credibility. The overarching narrative was that Alley's endorsement caused a social media backlash against the celebrity.

Results

The results of the case study analysis (Table 2) uncovered several trends that could be used as hypotheses for future research, because a sample of eight case studies is too limited to draw conclusive results. The research was further limited by exclusively looking at one type of media coverage—digital media—and excluded traditional media (print, TV, radio), as well as social media.

85 Kirstie Alley (@kirstiealley), 'I'm voting for @realDonaldTrump because he's NOT a politician', *Twitter*, 17 October 2020.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

Celebrity	Endorser/ advocate	Advocate/ endorser race, the political leaning of the cause	Total reach	Focus of the coverage
Kim Kardashian West	Advocate	White, left-leaning cause	1.1 billion	84% focused
Olivia Rodrigo	Endorser	Non-white, left-leaning cause	1.6 billion	56% focused
Colin Kaepernick	Advocate	Non-white, left-leaning cause	1 billion	48.5% focused
Jeff Goldblum	Endorser	White, left-leaning cause	131 million	94% focused
Diamond and Silk	Advocate	Non-white, right-leaning cause	929 million	22% focused
Kelsey Grammer	Advocate	White, right-leaning cause	189 million	94% focused
Lil Wayne	Endorser	Non-white, right-leaning cause	511 million	38.5% focused
Kirstie Alley	Endorser	White, right-leaning cause	808 million	7.5% focused

Table 2. A summary of the results by case study, total reach, and the focus of the coverage

When race, gender, and the political leanings of the cause are accounted for (Table 3), there appears to be no significant difference between celebrity advocates and celebrity endorsers when it comes to their reach, but celebrity advocates do appear to generate more focused coverage than celebrity endorsers (62 per cent of advocates' coverage focused on the issue, compared with 49 per cent of celebrity endorsers). This confirms one part of the initial hypothesis that the type of celebrity engagement—advocacy or endorsement—does affect the focus of the media coverage.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

	Reach	Focus of the coverage
Advocates v endorsers	3.18 billion – 3.05 billion	62% – 49%
White v non-white	2.2 billion – 4.04 billion	69% – 41%
Female v male	4.43 billion – 1.83 billion	42% – 69%
Left-leaning v right- leaning	3.83 billion – 2.43 billion	71% – 41%

Table 3. A summary of results by identity features, total reach, and the focus of the coverage

Surprisingly, the most important factor that affects the reach of celebrity endorsement or advocacy is not the type of engagement, but the celebrities' gender. Female celebrity endorsers and advocates can achieve more than twice the amount of reach of their male counterparts (4.43 billion compared with 1.83 billion), but the focus of that coverage is likely to be less on the cause than on themselves (42 per cent of coverage focused on issues advocated for or endorsed by female celebrities, compared with 69 per cent of their male counterparts).

Race and the political leaning of the cause undertaken also affect the media coverage. Non-white celebrities generate broader media coverage (4 billion compared with 2.2 billion), but the coverage focuses less on the cause, and instead on the celebrity (41 per cent of coverage focused on issues advocated for or endorsed by non-white celebrities, compared with 69 per cent of their white counterparts).

The political leaning of the cause also affected both the reach and the focus of the coverage. Left-leaning causes had a greater reach (3.8 billion compared with 2.4 billion) and more of the coverage was focused on the cause (71 per cent of coverage focused on left-leaning issues, compared with 41 per cent of right-leaning issues).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

	Race		Gender		Cause	
	White	Non-white	Female	Male	Left-leaning	Right-leaning
Celebrity advocate						
Reach	1.28 billion	1.92 billion	2 billion	1.1 billion	2.1 billion	1.12 billion
Coverage	89%	35%	53%	71%	66%	58%
Celebrity endorser						
Reach	0.93 billion	2.11 billion	2.4 billion	0.64 billion	1.73 billion	1.31 billion
Coverage	51%	47%	32%	66%	75%	23%

Table 4. A table summarising the results by the type of celebrity activism, race, gender, and political leaning of the chosen cause. Greater values under each variable—race, gender, and cause—are highlighted in green.

When analysing aggregates by race, gender, and the political leaning of the cause, a clear pattern emerges (Table 4). Across both celebrity advocates and celebrity endorsers:

- white celebrities generate more focused coverage, but non-white celebrities reach greater audiences
- female celebrities reach greater audiences, but male celebrities generate more focused coverage
- celebrities associating themselves with left-leaning causes receive both broader and more focused coverage
- white celebrity advocates attracted the most focused media coverage (89 per cent of the coverage was focused on their cause).

The narratives of the media coverage favoured white male celebrities—they were less likely to be attacked by the media on the opposite side of the political aisle, i.e., if they were advocating/endorsing a left-leaning issue the opposite side of the political aisle would be conservative media and vice versa. White female celebrities and non-white male and female

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celebrities were more likely to generate negative coverage and have their credibility questioned. That was especially the case if they were engaging with a right-leaning cause. Lil Wayne, Diamond and Silk, and Kirstie Alley were all subject to ad hominem attacks—Lil Wayne for serving time in prison, Diamond and Silk for their behaviour during the press conference, and Kirstie Alley for being a part of the Church of Scientology. These narratives blurred the focus of the coverage. As a result, only 23 per cent of the coverage on right-leaning causes endorsed by the selected celebrities was focused on the cause.

Discussion

The results of the case study analysis align with some of the results of the existing empirical research and raise the need for additional research exploring the relationships between the effectiveness of celebrity activism and celebrities' identity.

The findings of the research partially confirm the original hypothesis. While the type of celebrity activism does not affect its visibility, it does affect the focus of its coverage. Celebrity advocates are more likely to get coverage that is more focused on the cause than on themselves, while celebrity endorsers are more likely to get coverage that is less focused on the cause and more focused on the celebrity. One explanation could be that celebrity advocates are more likely to engage in long-term activism of a single cause, and are, therefore, better able to communicate their message. Celebrity endorsers, on the other hand, are more opportunistic; their engagement is more limited and as a result produces less focused media coverage. This discovery contributes to the existing research on celebrity politics which did not previously consider the distinction between celebrity advocates and celebrity endorsers to be a significant factor affecting the effectiveness of celebrity activism.

The case study analysis findings related to gender and the effectiveness of celebrity activism contribute to the meagre scholarship on the subject.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

The findings show that female celebrity activists generate broader media coverage than do male celebrity activists, but that coverage is less focused on the cause and more focused on the celebrity. This aligns with the existing scholarship that considers 'celebrity' to be a gendered term because, as argued by van Zoonen, 'public visibility is not evenly distributed among women and men'.[86] Although the findings of this research would appear to contradict that, it is more likely that both are true—women celebrities are less visible overall, but when they venture into politics, they attract more visibility because this falls outside what is perceived as 'feminine' and is, therefore, more newsworthy. This finding warrants a more thorough investigation to establish a causal relationship.

The findings from the content research on the impact of race also contribute to the existing literature on the subject. By observing that non-white celebrities generate broader media coverage, but that coverage is less focused on their cause compared with white celebrities, the results align with Sarah J. Jackson's findings that mainstream media sensationalises Black celebrity activism, hence the broader coverage, but at the same time, frames it in a way that pulls the attention away from the issue. Hence, the limited focus on the cause.[87]

The research also aligns with Steven J. Ross's findings that the left-leaning celebrities are more vocal and more visible.[88] The analysis adds to Ross's findings by quantifying the 'visible' part through reach and adding a new dimension of the focus of the coverage which Ross did not originally consider.

This article's findings have some impact on individual politicians, political parties, and NGOs considering celebrity partnerships—either as endorsers or advocates. It demonstrates that partnerships with celebrity advocates can be more effective in generating focused media coverage than partnerships with celebrity endorsers. It also indicates that left-leaning causes can benefit more from celebrity activism.

86 Van Zoonen, 'The Personal, the Political and the Popular'.
87 Jackson, *Black Celebrity*, pp. 28–29.
88 Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right*, pp. 3–4.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.3

Due to the limited number of case studies considered, the results can only be used to identify trends that should then be confirmed with additional empirical research. Additional empirical research is also needed to explore the intersectionality between race, gender, and celebrities' political leanings. Qualitative research is also needed to establish more nuanced answers to why the type of celebrities' activism and celebrities' identities affect the perception and success of their activism. Future research could consider factors related to the issues—the relevance of the issue; how polarising the issue is; how authentic the celebrity association is; how creative the application of the endorsement is; the length of time they continue to be connected with the issue; what the ask is; specifically, how tangible the action is; how the public perceive the celebrity.

Conclusion

This article identified a research gap in the field of celebrity politics—namely the lack of a framework for measuring the effectiveness of celebrity activism, and the lack of comparison of the effectiveness of different types of celebrity activism. To address this gap, this article put together its own framework for measuring the effectiveness of celebrity activism based on the existing scholarship of what *ineffective* activism looks like. The framework centred on the visibility and the focus of the media coverage that the celebrity activism—celebrity advocacy and celebrity endorsements—generated. To account for any gender, racial, or political disparities in the coverage, it controlled for gender, race, and the political leaning of the cause in the selection of the case studies. The initial hypothesis was that the type of celebrity activism affects the visibility and the focus of the media coverage.

Through the analysis of eight case studies, it was found that the type of celebrity activism affects the focus of the media coverage, but not its breadth. Although celebrity advocates and celebrity endorsers generate similarly broad media campaigns, the coverage of celebrity advocates was more focused on their cause than that of celebrity endorsers. This

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partially proves the initial hypothesis that the type of celebrity activism affects the focus of the media coverage dedicated to celebrities' activism.

This article also confirmed that other factors affect the breadth and focus of the media coverage, namely gender, race, and the political affiliation of the celebrity's chosen cause. It was discovered that while women generated broader media coverage than men, men's media coverage was more focused on the cause. The same trend was observed with race—non- white celebrities generated broader coverage, but that coverage was less focused on their cause. Celebrities who took up a left-leaning cause were more likely to receive broader and more focused media coverage than the celebrities that took up right-leaning causes.

The research was limited by a small sample of case studies; therefore, to confirm the patterns identified in this research, more case studies should be reviewed. The research findings point to other areas of research that should be explored in more detail, first establishing causal relationships between the variables of celebrity activism and celebrity identity considered here. Additional research is also needed to investigate why aspects of celebrity identity—their gender and race—affect the media coverage generated by their activism. Future research should consider adding social media metrics to investigations as it is the primary medium for celebrity activism.

The results of the quantitative content analysis have important implications for politicians, political parties, NGOs, and other organisations considering celebrity partnerships, as well as the celebrities themselves. The trends identified in the research would suggest that Democrat politicians and left-leaning causes would benefit more from celebrity endorsements than their Republican counterparts or right-leaning causes. They would also suggest that celebrities should consider advocacy over endorsements to generate better quality coverage for their cause. The correlation between celebrities' gender and race should encourage more critical production and consumption of the mainstream media.

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Guiding Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) Through Organic Social Media for Effective Strategic Communications: a Literature Review

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Keywords—*digital communications, social media, word-of-mouth (WOM), literature review, strategic communications, strategic communication*

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Abstract

The advantages of social media, including rapid information dissemination and easy access at little or no cost to the user, have placed them at the heart of communications. As a result, regardless of who they are (e.g., governmental organisation, NGO, terrorist group), all strategic communicators today have to utilise social media. More

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specifically, it is necessary for strategic communicators to have a good understanding of how to guide word-of-mouth communications. While there is an emerging dialogue in the strategic communications journals about social media, it is still at a nascent stage. However, this area has received substantial attention from marketing scholars over the years. In this literature review paper, we aim to contribute to the development of this growing stream of research by summarising findings of the marketing literature on social media and word-of-mouth communications that are useful for strategic communications purposes. Overall, this paper has implications for the theory and practice of strategic communications.

Introduction

Almost every large-scale political movement of the last two decades has involved the use of social media in a multifaceted manner. In many political events, social media were at the heart of mass message delivery and participant recruitment processes (Arab Spring, Gezi protests, Occupy movement).[1] However, beyond that, high-level strategic processes including the planning of message content and brand positioning of the message source (the faction trying to recruit participants, the political party trying to attain votes) were developed and continuously refined via data scraped automatically from social media platforms (the case of Cambridge Analytica). More importantly, the use of social media as a tool for strategic communications is so prevalent that almost every competing party in a political equation simultaneously employs social media.

In 2013, during Turkey's Gezi protests, groups opposing the Erdogan government leveraged social media to generate the word-of-mouth (WOM) necessary to recruit ordinary Turkish citizens.[2] In particular,

1 Pascal Lupien, 'Indigenous Movements, Collective Action, and Social Media: New Opportunities or New Threats?', *Social Media + Society'*, 6 Nº 2 (2020): 1–11.

2 Olu Jenzen, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Umut Korkut, and Aidan McGarry, 'The Symbol of Social Media in Contemporary Protest: Twitter and the Gezi Park Movement', *Convergence* 27 Nº 2 (2021): 414–37.

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WOM refers to 'informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service'[3] and social media are defined as 'online platforms that allow users to generate content, exchange information, and communicate with one another'.[4] Without the WOM communication facilitated by social media, turning what was initially a local sit-in protest in a district of Istanbul into a fully fledged opposition movement in ninety cities would have been difficult, if not impossible. Three years later, during the Turkish coup d'état attempt on 15 July 2016, social media were again leveraged to recruit ordinary Turkish citizens, but this time against an opposing military faction, by the Erdogan government.[5] These are examples of both government and opposition groups employing social media marketing for strategic communications. There are also numerous cases of NGOs, for-profit companies, and even terrorist organisations benefiting from the power of social media in order to attract groups of individuals,[6] or instil certain thoughts and emotions (ISIS beheading videos).[7] Social media platforms have even been used intra-organisationally (internal wiki sites) to strategically communicate with colleagues and change the discourse inside an organisation: to lessen resistance to strategic change, shape organisational identity, and establish strategic consensus/commitment to goals throughout the organisation.[8]

The prevalence of social media marketing is not without explanation; since its inception, social media use has grown unabated. It is now estimated

3 L. Jean Harrison-Walker, 'The Measurement of Word-of-Mouth Communication and an Investigation of Service Quality and Customer Commitment as Potential Antecedents', *Journal of Service Research* 4 Nº 1 (2001): 60–75.

4 Jessica Y. Breland, Lisa M. Quintiliani, Kristin L. Schneider, Christine N. May, and Sherry Pagoto, 'Social Media as a Tool to Increase the Impact of Public Health Research', *American Journal of Public Health* 107 Nº 12 (2017): 1890–91.

5 Semra Demirdiş, 'The Role of Facebook and Twitter in Social Movements: A Study on the July 15 Coup Attempt in Turkey', *Türkiye İletişim Araştırmaları Dergisi* 32 (2019): 32–49.

6 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Seamus Hughes, 'Social Media Recruitment of Americans: A Case Study from the Islamic State', in *Routledge Handbook of US Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations* (Routledge, 2021), pp. 413–22.

7 Ally McCrow-Young and Mette Mortensen, 'Countering Spectacles of Fear: Anonymous' Meme "War" against ISIS', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2021): 13675494211005060.

8 L.R. Men, J. O'Neil, and M. Ewing, 'Examining the Effects of Internal Social Media Usage on Employee Engagement', *Public Relations Review 46 Nº* 2 (2020): 101880.

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that close to 4.5 billion people worldwide use social media, a figure that has more than doubled since 2015.[9] Facebook/Meta—which also owns Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger—reported that 2.8 billion users accessed at least one of its platforms each month.[10] TikTok, in a brief span of six years between 2016 and 2022, amassed well over a billion users.[11] On Snapchat, the number of 'snaps' created has surpassed 6 billion.[12] In the same way that all major institutions were argued to have incorporated 'mass media logic'[13] into their strategic considerations by the 1970s, Van Dijck and Poell argue that 'social media logic' is now 'gradually invading all areas of public life'. And politics is no exception.[14]

Many individuals regularly share not only their memories,[15] travel experiences,[16] and news[17], but also political information,[18] and even misinformation[19] and 'fake news'.[20] As well as opening avenues for public debate between online users, the proliferation of social media is credited

9 Brian Dean, 'Social Network Usage & Growth Statistics: How Many People Use Social Media in 2021?', *Backlinko*, 1 September 2021.

10 Facebook, 'Facebook Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2020 Results', *Facebook*, 27 January 2021.

11 Marzieh Eghtesadi and Adrian Florea, 'Facebook, Instagram, Reddit and TikTok: A Proposal for Health Authorities to Integrate Popular Social Media Platforms in Contingency Planning amid a Global Pandemic Outbreak', *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 111 Nº 3 (2020): 389–91.

12 Ashna Habib, Tooba Ali, Zainab Nazir, and Arisha Mahfooz, 'Snapchat Filters Changing Young Women's Attitudes', *Annals of Medicine and Surgery* 82 (2022).

13 David L. Altheide and Robert P. Snow, *Media Logic (*SAGE Publications, 1979).

14 José Van Dijck and Thomas Poell, 'Understanding Social Media Logic', *Media and Communication* 1 Nº 1 (2013): 2–14 (2).

15 Charles B. Stone, Li Guan, Gabriella LaBarbera, Melissa Ceren, Brandon Garcia, Kelly Huie, Carissa Stump, and Qi Wang, 'Why Do People Share Memories Online? An Examination of the Motives and Characteristics of Social Media Users', *Memory* (2022): 1–15.

16 Tiago Oliveira, Benedita Araujo, and Carlos Tam, 'Why Do People Share Their Travel Experiences on Social Media?', *Tourism Management* 78 (2020): 104041.

17 Chei Sian Lee, Long Ma, and Dion Hoe-Lian Goh, 'Why Do People Share News in Social Media?', in *International Conference on Active Media Technology* (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2011), pp. 129– 40.

18 Dam Hee Kim, S. Mo Jones-Jang, and Kate Kenski, 'Why Do People Share Political Information on Social Media?', *Digital Journalism* 9 Nº 8 (2021): 1123–40.

19 Xinran Chen, Sei-Ching Joanna Sin, Yin-Leng Theng, and Chei Sian Lee, 'Why Do Social Media Users Share Misinformation?', in *Proceedings of the 15th ACM/IEEE-CS Joint Conference on Digital Libraries* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2015), pp. 111–14.

20 Shalini Talwar, Amandeep Dhir, Puneet Kaur, Nida Zafar, and Melfi Alrasheedy, 'Why Do People Share Fake News? Associations between the Dark Side of Social Media Use and Fake News Sharing Behavior', *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 51 (2019): 72–82.

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with a recent increase in political participation.[21] At the same time, they have become a vital platform for politicians seeking to mould public opinion and set agendas.[22] And now no election campaign is complete without substantial political chatter across social media. In today's political landscape—which has moved further into digital spaces since Covid—strategic communicators need a firm understanding of how to drive WOM communications using digital media.

In this literature review, we will contribute to the emerging dialogue in strategic communications literature on political events and social media[23] by providing an interdisciplinary perspective. More specifically, by reviewing marketing literature on social media and WOM communications, we aim to provide insights for strategic communications scholars and practitioners. In scope, this paper focuses on organic social media marketing as a key driver of WOM communication. But some of the information provided will be relevant for the purposes of paid advertising on social media as well. Consequently, this paper offers two key contributions to the theory and practice of strategic communications.

First, while the importance of persuasion is emphasised in this growing stream of literature,[24] the marketing perspective is missing. The lack of this perspective limits conceptual development in the literature, as the variance that can be explained by psychological theories is different from those of economic and organisational theories.[25] It should be noted that while the focus of most studies in the marketing literature is on selling commercial products and services, most of these ideas are based on the social psychology literature, and are applicable to inducing behavioural

21 Shiksha Kushwah, Deep Shree, and Mahim Sagar, 'Evolution of a Framework of Co-Creation in Political Marketing: Select Cases', *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing* 14 Nº 4 (2017): 427–45.

22 Daniel Kreiss, *Prototype Politics: Technology-Intensive Campaigning and the Data of Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

23 Nitin Agarwal and Kiran Kumar Bandeli, 'Examining Strategic Integration of Social Media Platforms in Disinformation Campaign Coordination', *Defence Strategic Communications* 4 Nº 1 (2018): 173.

24 M. Holmstrom, 'The Narrative and Social Media', *Defence Strategic Communications 1* Nº 1 (2015): 118–32.

25 Aybars Tuncdogan, Frans Van Den Bosch, and Henk Volberda, 'Regulatory Focus as a Psychological Micro-Foundation of Leaders' Exploration and Exploitation Activities', *Leadership Quarterly* 26 Nº 5 (2015): 838–50.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

change in any other areas of life, such as health-related choices,[26] lifestyle preferences,[27] and voter perceptions,[28] Furthermore, it is also important to note that most strategic communications aim to convey a strategic idea to a group of individuals and a desirable future outcome as a result of adherence to this strategic idea (the argument for increased autonomy and prosperity as a result of Brexit). In this respect, strategic communications share similarities with selling a service. In sum, we argue that introducing insights from marketing literature will prove of use in increasing the explanatory capacity of strategic communications literature.

Second, the majority of current strategy literatures (strategic management, strategic renewal, institutional theory, public management, governance) are experiencing a micro-foundations movement.[29] In other words, instead of investigating phenomena only at the unit of analysis in which they are predominantly interested (country or organisation level), scholars are also examining underlying factors of smaller units of analysis (department, team, or individual level). While the goal remains to understand strategic outcomes at higher levels of analysis, by analysing smaller units, it is possible to gain a finer-grained understanding of how certain strategic outcomes can be reached. Parallel to this, we review the marketing literature on social media at lower levels of analysis to provide insights to strategic communicators regarding how they can more effectively reach their high-level strategic goals.

To recap, considering that a core goal of strategic communications literature is to convey information to and change attitudes of large groups of people, we believe that insights developed in marketing literature could be useful for scholars and practitioners in the strategic communications field. In particular—while exceptions exist—marketing is a discipline

26 Cornelia Pechmann, 'Does Antismoking Advertising Combat Underage Smoking? A Review of Past Practices and Research', *Social Marketing* (2018): 189–216.

27 Aylin Kumcu and Andrea E. Woolverton, 'Feeding Fido: Changing Consumer Food Preferences Bring Pets to the Table', *Journal of Food Products Marketing* 21 № 2 (2015): 213–30; Teoman Duman, Yusuf Erkaya, and Omer Topaloglu, 'Vacation Interests and Vacation Type Preferences in Austrian Domestic Tourism', *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* 37 № 2 (2020): 217–45.

28 M.R. Holman and J.C. Lay, 'They See Dead People (Voting): Correcting Misperceptions about Voter Fraud in the 2016 US Presidential Election', *Journal of Political Marketing* 18 № 1–2 (2019): 31–68.

29 Aybars Tuncdogan, Adam Lindgreen, Henk Volberda, and Frans van den Bosch (eds), *Strategic Renewal: Core Concepts, Antecedents, and Micro Foundations* (Routledge, 2019).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

that typically examines micro-level effects regarding influence (level of the individual consumer or a group of consumers), whereas strategic communications literature is interested mainly in macro-level (country-level) outcomes. This makes marketing a relevant discipline for strategic communications scholars for the purpose of theory-building. That is, insights from marketing literature can be useful for building hypotheses in the strategic communications domain. Strategic communications practitioners can also benefit from these insights and consider how these findings apply to their area. Overall, this paper constitutes an early step towards increasing interdisciplinary research between the strategic communications and marketing specialties.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In the following section, we briefly discuss communication norms on social media. After this, we discuss research on WOM with a focus on social media related effects. Then, we review research on opinion leaders. Finally, in the discussion, we review contributions and implications of this paper and point towards areas of future research.

Communication Norms on Social Media

When using social media, strategic communicators must understand the social norms of the channel they are using. Social situations are moderated by norms that are, broadly speaking, a set of rules governing the behaviours and attitudes of the members of a social group;[30] they evolve through interactions between the group's members and are generally enforced through the application of sanctions to violators.[31] If a politician fails to adhere to the established social norms of a social media platform, they can expect to see a backlash from their followers.[32]

30 Robert B. Cialdini and Melanie R. Trost, 'Social Influence: Social Norms, Conformity, and Compliance' in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Daniel Todd Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske and Gardner Lindzey (eds), (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 151–92.

31 Maria Knight Lapinski and Rajiv N. Rimal, 'An Explication of Social Norms', *Communication Theory* 15 № 2 (2005): 127–47.

32 Daniel Kreiss, Regina G. Lawrence, and Shannon C. McGregor, 'In Their Own Words: Political Practitioner Accounts of Candidates, Audiences, Affordances, Genres, and Timing in Strategic Social Media Use', *Political Communication* 35 № 1 (2018): 8–31.

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A recent case of this was US Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, who faced a substantial backlash after she was observed to 'like' several violent posts targeting candidates from a rival party ('a bullet to the head would be quicker').[33] Here, the key reason for the backlash is not the strategic communicator's personal characteristics or political affiliations, but a direct transgression of communication norms (non-violence). In other words, if the same uncalculated communications were made by politicians of other affiliations or if the remarks were made about other groups of people, a social media backlash would still be very likely.

Social media have created new social situations for which new norms have developed and continue to evolve. However, in addition to traditional social considerations, these norms are directly affected by the technological properties of the platforms on which they exist,[34] such as the communication tools available to users.[35] Many platforms encourage users to amplify the posts of others by making this as easy as possible. 'Sharing' on Facebook or 'retweeting' on Twitter each requires just a single click from users, making information dissemination quick and easy.[36] Similarly, platforms also allow users to find information on certain subjects quickly, often through hashtags or user-maintained groups dedicated to a particular topic.[37] These tools have useful applications for those looking to spread information strategically. Many people refrain from discussing politics due to its complexity and the potential of provoking disagreement,[38] but social media allow users to reshare political posts directly without necessitating that they understand them first, and also

33 Allan Smith, 'GOP Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene Faces a Backlash over Incendiary Social Media Posts', *NBC News*, 28 January 2021.

34 Anna J.M. Wagner, 'Do not Click "Like" When Somebody Has Died: The Role of Norms for Mourning Practices in Social Media', *Social Media + Society* 4 (2018).

35 Van Dijck and Poell, 'Understanding Social Media Logic'.

36 Samah M. Alzanin and Aqil M. Azmi, 'Detecting Rumors in Social Media: A Survey', *Procedia Computer Science* 142 (2018): 294–300.

37 Gunn Enli and Chris-Adrian Simonsen, '"Social Media Logic" Meets Professional Norms: Twitter Hashtags Usage by Journalists and Politicians', *Information, Communication & Society* 21 № 8 (2018): 1081–96.

38 Michael Chan, 'Reluctance to Talk about Politics in Face-to-Face and Facebook Settings: Examining the Impact of Fear of Isolation, Willingness to Self-Censor, and Peer Network Characteristics', *Mass Communication and Society* 21 № 1 (2018): 1–23.

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to find like-minded others that are likely to respond positively to these same posts.

Social media give strategic communicators the chance to bypass traditional media 'gatekeepers' and speak directly to voters.[39] Parties in different countries (right-wing party in the US, left-wing party in Turkey, opposition in Venezuela) tried to make a case for voting fraud; social media were commonly used to directly communicate with the voters.[40] However, while this would appear to democratise political communications by encouraging a dialogue between political elites and citizens, these platforms are deeply hierarchical ecosystems where the few users with many followers wield far more influence than the majority with fewer followers.[41] A significant reason for this is the algorithmic feed curation that dictates what most social media users see.[42] Despite originating as chronological platforms, Facebook and Twitter feeds are now populated algorithmically by default, with the stated intention to 'show everyone the right content at the right time'.[43] Consequently, any strategic communicator seeking to proliferate a message effectively on social media must understand what the 'right' content is, and when is the 'right' time to post it.

Van Dijck and Poell observe how social media have developed the one-way communicative traffic of traditional media into a two-way conversation between users and programmers.[44] While algorithms shape the content that appears on a platform, they simultaneously learn from

39 Yilang Peng, 'What Makes Politicians' Instagram Posts Popular? Analyzing Social Media Strategies of Candidates and Office Holders with Computer Vision', *International Journal of Press/Politics* 26 № 1 (2021): 143–66.

40 Dino P. Christenson, Sarah E. Kreps, and Douglas L. Kriner, 'Contemporary Presidency: Going Public in an Era of Social Media: Tweets, Corrections, and Public Opinion', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 51 № 1 (2021): 151–65.

41 Changhyun Lee, Haewoon Kwak, Hosung Park, and Sue Moon, 'Finding Influentials Based on the Temporal Order of Information Adoption in Twitter', paper presented at WWW 2010, 26–30 April 2010, Raleigh, NC, USA, pp. 1137–38.

42 Nicholas Diakopoulos, *Automating the News: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Media* (Harvard University Press, 2019).

43 Erich Owens and David Vickrey, 'Showing More Timely Stories from Friends and Pages', *Facebook*, 18 September 2014.

44 Van Dijck and Poell, 'Understanding Social Media Logic'.

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users' inputs and reactions, meaning that users also play a significant role in the evolution of online communicative norms. This pivot away from chronological feed curation is part of a wider aim of social media platforms to strive for relevance rather than freshness,[45] and means that widely followed users who are considered more 'relevant' by platform algorithms are more likely to see their posts appear on their followers' feeds.[46] Platform algorithms incentivise users to post certain types of content, in the knowledge that their post will be seen by more people if they adhere to certain norms. Even among politicians with significant online followings, campaign strategists report inconsistencies in how many people each post reaches, and a key process during a modern political election campaign is the 'test and learn' approach to social media posting.[47]

As well as giving thought to the mechanics behind social media, politicians also need to consider why people use different platforms, so that their posts are relevant to each platform's userbase and do not appear out of place or disingenuous.[48] Social media platform choice is driven by a variety of motivations.[49] More than half of US adults report using social media as a news source 'often' or 'sometimes', but this pattern is not uniform across all platforms; 59 per cent of Twitter users get news from the platform regularly, but this figure drops to 28 per cent for Instagram and 19 per cent for Snapchat.[50] Consequently, users who intend to use social media for news are more likely to choose Twitter than Snapchat, and it is therefore reasonable to expect that those seeking to strategically communicate newsworthy information may achieve a higher response rate if they do so on Twitter rather than Snapchat.

45 Taina Bucher, 'The Right-Time Web: Theorizing the Kairologic of Algorithmic Media', *New Media & Society* 22 № 9 (2020): 1699–1714.

46 Van Dijck and Poell, 'Understanding Social Media Logic'.

47 Kreiss et al., 'In Their Own Words'.

48 Michael Bossetta, 'The Digital Architectures of Social Media: Comparing Political Campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 US Election', *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 95 № 2 (2018): 471–96.

49 See Shiu-Li Huang and Chih-Yu Chang, 'Understanding How People Select Social Networking Services: Media Trait, Social Influences and Situational Factors', *Information & Management* 57 № 6 (2020), for a summary.

50 Elisa Shearer and Amy Mitchell, 'News Use across Social Media Platforms in 2020', *Pew Research Center,* 12 January 2021.

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User motivations and the expectations they have from each platform will also affect *how* they use social media. On Instagram—a primarily visual medium—users are more likely to post about visually appealing topics such as art, food, and travel, whereas Twitter, a microblogging platform, sees more posts about news, sport, and business.[51] Similarly, the format of a post will influence the type of responses it will generate—text-based posts tend to generate comments, whereas videos are more likely to be shared[52]—and consequently strategic communicators should base the format of their post on the type of responses they seek. However, a trend that appears to hold firm for politicians across various platforms is the engaging nature of highly personalised posts:[53] studies across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter all show that politicians elicit positive responses from users when posting personalised content.[54] Nevertheless, many studies also observe that the majority of political posts on social media continue to offer depictions of 'politics-as-usual'.[55] Politicians and other strategic communicators that can buck this trend should expect to see favourable engagement with their organic social media activity, no matter what platform they are using.

Word-of-Mouth Communications

For any strategic communicator seeking to influence, the most persuasive communications may not necessarily be those they elicit themselves, but rather those that their intended audience hear from their own

51 Lydia Manikonda, Venkata Vamsikrishna Meduri, and Subbarao Kambhampati, 'Tweeting the Mind and Instagramming the Heart: Exploring Differentiated Content Sharing on Social Media', in paper presented at the Tenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, 2016.

52 Karolina Koc-Michalska, Darren G. Lilleker, Tomasz Michalski, Rachel Gibson, and Jan M Zajac, 'Facebook Affordances and Citizen Engagement during Elections: European Political Parties and Their Benefit from Online Strategies?', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 18 № 2 (2021): 180–93; Marton Bene, 'Go Viral on the Facebook! Interactions between Candidates and Followers on Facebook during the Hungarian General Election Campaign of 2014', *Information, Communication & Society* 20 № 4 (2017): 513–29.

53 In this context, by 'personalised' posts we mean those that show the politician as a private individual rather than as posts that have been specifically tailored to the audience. See e.g. Peng, 'What Makes Politicians' Instagram Posts Popular?'

54 Bene, 'Go Viral on the Facebook!'; Peng, 'What Makes Politicians' Instagram Posts Popular?'; Shannon C. McGregor, 'Personalization, Social Media, and Voting: Effects of Candidate Self-Personalization on Vote Intention', *New Media & Society* 20 № 3 (2018): 1139–60.

55 Peng, 'What Makes Politicians' Instagram Posts Popular?'; Enli and Simonsen, 'Social Media Logic'.

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social networks. We are referring here to the effectiveness of WOM communications, which have been studied by marketing academics since the 1960s and have been described as the 'dominant force in the marketplace'[56] and as one of the most persuasive tools available to marketers.[57] WOM communications are generally considered to be more influential than commercially sponsored messaging,[58] and researchers have demonstrated their positive effects on numerous outcomes beneficial for marketers, including brand perception,[59] customer loyalty and long-term value,[60] and product purchase intention.[61] These are benefits that translate to the political environment. Social networks are influential in the spread of political information,[62] so strategic communicators should attempt to capitalise on their credibility by disseminating information through these channels.

One definition of WOM is 'communication between consumers about a product, service, or a company in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence',[63] and it is this perceived independence that explains its striking persuasiveness. Research shows that the credibility of a message is limited considerably when its commercial intentions are made clear;[64] individuals are naturally resistant to persuasion attempts made by someone with ulterior motives—such as creating a

56 W. Glynn Mangold, Fred Miller, and Gary R. Brockway, 'Word-of-Mouth Communication in the Service Marketplace', *Journal of Services Marketing* 13 Nº 1 (1999): 73–89 (79).

57 Ed Keller and Brad Fay, 'Word-of-Mouth Advocacy: A New Key to Advertising Effectiveness', *Journal of Advertising Research* 52 Nº 4 (2012): 459–64.

58 Pramod Iyer, Atefeh Yazdanparast, and David Strutton, 'Examining the Effectiveness of WOM/eWOM Communications across Age-Based Cohorts: Implications for Political Marketers', *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 34 Nº 7 (2017): 646–63.

59 Devkant Kala and D.S. Chaubey, 'The Effect of eWOM Communication on Brand Image and Purchase Intention towards Lifestyle Products in India', *International Journal of Services, Economics and Management* 9 Nº 2 (2018): 143–57.

60 Moh Erfan Arif, 'The Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), Brand Image, and Price on Re-Purchase Intention of Airline Customers', *Jurnal Aplikasi Manajemen* 17 Nº 2 (2019): 345–56.

61 Jungkun Park, Hyowon Hyun, and Toulany Thavisay, 'A Study of Antecedents and Outcomes of Social Media WOM towards Luxury Brand Purchase Intention', *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 58 (2021): 102272.

62 R. Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, *Citizens, Politics and Social Communication: Information and Influence in an Election Campaign* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

63 Stephen W. Litvin, Ronald E. Goldsmith, and Bing Pan, 'Electronic Word-of-Mouth in Hospitality and Tourism Management', *Tourism Management* 29 Nº 3 (2008): 458–68 (459).

64 Johannes Müller and Fabian Christandl, 'Content Is King—But Who Is the King of Kings? The Effect of Content Marketing, Sponsored Content & User-Generated Content on Brand Responses', *Computers in Human Behavior* 96 (2019): 46–55.

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profit for themselves—as they view the persuader as less trustworthy.[65] For instance, politicians are among the least trusted professionals,[66] meaning this problem is particularly relevant in the context of political communications. Although few citizens adjust their perceptions of parties according to statements from the parties themselves,[67] recipients are far more likely to trust the information they receive via WOM as these communications come from a relatively independent source, making it an important part of a political communicative strategy.

Although the majority of WOM was historically transmitted through oral, one-to-one conversations between a single 'sender' and a single 'receiver',[68] the advent of the internet has caused the growth of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Rather than being communicated orally, most eWOM is written and posted on publicly available web pages, which allows for asynchronous information-spreading and the rapid diffusion of said information from one sender to many receivers.[69] eWOM is now a near-ubiquitous feature of online shopping: 89 per cent of online shoppers consult reviews before making a purchase,[70] and businesses are encouraged to demonstrate their willingness to engage with customers by responding to negative reviews.[71] Despite its many positives, a potential drawback of eWOM in comparison to traditional WOM is that because it regularly occurs between a sender and receiver who have no personal relationship, this can harm its credibility in the eyes of a receiver, who is unlikely to trust the word of a stranger to the same extent that they

65 Kelley J. Main, Darren W. Dahl, and Peter R. Darke, 'Deliberative and Automatic Bases of Suspicion: Empirical Evidence of the Sinister Attribution Error', *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 17 Nº 1 (2007): 59–69.

66 Ben Gelblum, 'Trust in Politicians Has Fallen to an All Time Low in the UK', *London Economic*, 27 November 2019.

67 James Adams, Lawrence Ezrow, and Zeynep Somer-Topcu, 'Is Anybody Listening? Evidence That Voters Do Not Respond to European Parties' Policy Statements during Elections', *American Journal of Political Science* 55 Nº 2 (2011): 370–82.

68 Shu-Chuan Chu and Yoojung Kim, 'Determinants of Consumer Engagement in Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) in Social Networking Sites', *International journal of Advertising* 30 Nº 1 (2011): 47–75.

69 Christy M.K. Cheung and Dimple R. Thadani, 'The Impact of Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communication: A Literature Analysis and Integrative Model', *Decision Support Systems* 54 Nº 1 (2012): 461–70.

70 Ying Lin, '10 Online Review Statistics You Need to Know In 2021', *Oberlo*, 4 July 2021.

71 M.S. Balaji, Kok Wei Khong, and Alain Yee Loong Chong, 'Determinants of Negative Word-of-Mouth Communication Using Social Networking Sites', *Information & Management* 53 Nº 4 (2016): 528–40.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

would trust the word of an acquaintance.[72] Feedback on review sites or company websites may also be anonymous, which may raise further questions as to the legitimacy of the feedback.[73]

As social media platforms have lowered communication barriers between individuals, they have encouraged the further proliferation of eWOM, and its prevalence on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter has led to claims that social media word-of-mouth (sWOM) should be considered separately to eWOM.[74] sWOM is often claimed to be more inherently trustworthy, partly because most conversations and interactions on social media take place between individuals who are part of a friendship network,[75] but also because most social media platforms are largely de-anonymised.[76] This has many potentially useful applications for strategic communicators. Evidence suggests that Facebook users who see that their friends have voted in an election are more likely to do so themselves,[77] and other research has shown how political groups that capitalise on sWOM can increase the reach of their online communications,[78] while also improving online community engagement and positively influencing the political preferences of—especially younger—voters.[79]

72 Adrian Palmer and Qunying Huo, 'A Study of Trust over Time within a Social Network Mediated Environment', *Journal of Marketing Management* 29 Nº 15 (2013): 1816–33.

73 Anthony M. Evans, Olga Stavrova, and Hannes Rosenbusch, 'Expressions of Doubt and Trust in Online User Reviews', *Computers in Human Behavior* 114 (2021): 106556.

74 Chu and Kim, 'Determinants of Consumer Engagement'.

75 Jaakko Pihlaja, Hannu Saarijärvi, Mark T. Spence, and Mika Yrjölä, 'From Electronic WOM to Social eWOM: Bridging the Trust Deficit', *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 25 Nº 4 (2017): 340–56.

76 Shu-Chuan Chu and Sejung Marina Choi, 'Electronic Word-of-Mouth in Social Networking Sites: A Cross-Cultural Study of the United States and China', *Journal of Global Marketing* 24 Nº 3 (2011): 263–81.

77 Robert M. Bond, Christopher J. Fariss, Jason J. Jones, Adam D. I. Kramer, Cameron Marlow, Jaime E. Settle, and James H. Fowler, 'A 61-Million-Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization', *Nature* 489 Nº 7415 (2012): 295–98.

78 Jeff Hemsley, 'Studying the Viral Growth of a Connective Action Network Using Information Event Signatures', *First Monday* 21 Nº 8 (2016).

79 Saikat Banerjee, 'On the Relationship between Online Brand Community and Brand Preference in Political Market', *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing* 18 Nº 1 (2021): 27–55.

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The written and recorded nature of eWOM and sWOM makes them far easier to measure than traditional WOM,[80] enabling companies to learn about their customers through the online reviews that are posted, and to adapt their product in accordance with this feedback.[81] As political parties have begun to place more importance on the views of the electorate—and increasingly allowed these views to dictate the formulation of policy—the political need for feedback has grown in importance,[82] and this feedback is readily available online. Strategic communicators can trial different messaging strategies and decide next steps based on the reaction from the internet users that were exposed to them.[83] Although collating and analysing feedback from some online platforms may be difficult and time-consuming, social media platforms offer a wide assortment of tools and metrics that allow users to assess the performance of their various posts. The data pulled from the platforms offers political operatives insight on what policies elicit positive responses, what type of content is most engaging, and what demographics are most supportive.[84]

There is a wide body of literature that addresses various moderators of WOM persuasiveness. These can be broadly divided into three subcategories: sender characteristics, receiver characteristics, and situational characteristics such as the content of the communication, or the environment in which it is communicated. We will discuss the impact of sender characteristics on WOM persuasiveness later in the section on opinion leadership. With this in mind, this section will focus primarily on the latter two features.

80 Jumin Lee, Do-Hyung Park, and Ingoo Han, 'The Effect of Negative Online Consumer Reviews on Product Attitude: An Information Processing View', *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications* 7 Nº 3 (2008): 341–52.

81 Antoni Serra Cantallops and Fabiana Salvi, 'New Consumer Behavior: A Review of Research on eWOM and Hotels', *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 36 (2014): 41–51.

82 André Turcotte and Jennifer Lees-Marshment, 'Political Market Research' in *Political Marketing: Principles and Applications*, Jennifer Lees-Marshment, Brian Conley, Edward Elder, Robin Pettitt, Vincent Raynauld and André Turcotte (eds), (Routledge: 2019).

83 Kreiss et al., 'In Their Own Words'.

84 Turcotte and Lees-Marshment, 'Political Market Research'.

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Receiver Characteristics: Attitudes and Consensus

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pre-existing attitudes of a receiver towards a subject have been found to moderate their reaction to WOM communications on that topic. This is often due to genuine expertise in the matter at hand,[85] but uninformed preconceived opinions can be just as influential. Erkan and Evans find a consumer's initial purchase intention is positively correlated to their attitude towards and adoption of eWOM recommendations.[86] And Moravec et al. observe that social media users exhibit significant levels of confirmation bias when attempting to discern between truthful and untruthful information.[87] This effect is stronger still when WOM communications are in line with the consensus on a topic. People are less likely to scrutinise persuasion attempts when they know little about the subject matter, or if the topic does not strike them as being of high importance.[88] In these cases, individuals can employ mental heuristics—such as adhering to social proof—to accelerate the decision-making process.

The strength of social proof as a persuasive influence is well-documented.[89] Focusing on politics, Boukouras et al. draw attention to the fact that biased polls can sway the electorate in favour of the leading candidate,[90] and some countries do not allow any polling publication close to election day.[91] Some political groups attempt to take advantage of this phenomenon on social media by creating inauthentic grassroots accounts—a process

85 Gillian Moran and Laurent Muzellec, 'eWOM Credibility on Social Networking Sites: A Framework', *Journal of Marketing Communications* 23 Nº 2 (2017): 149–61.

86 Ismail Erkan and Chris Evans, 'The Influence of eWOM in Social Media on Consumers' Purchase Intentions: An Extended Approach to Information Adoption', *Computers in Human Behavior* 61 (2016): 47–55.

87 Patricia Moravec, Randall Minas, and Alan R. Dennis, *Fake News on Social Media: People Believe What They Want to Believe When It Makes No Sense at All*, *Kelley School of Business Research Paper* Nº 18–87 (2018).

88 Wendy Wood, 'Attitude Change: Persuasion and Social Influence', *Annual Review of Psychology* 51 Nº 1 (2000): 539–70.

89 See Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (New York: Collins, 2007) for several examples.

90 Aristotelis Boukouras, Will Jennings, Lunzheng Li, and Zacharias Maniadis, *Can Biased Polls Distort Electoral Results? Evidence from the Lab*. Discussion Papers in Economics. School of Business, University of Leicester, 2020.

91 Sushil Bikhchandani, David Hirshleifer, and Ivo Welch, 'Learning from the Behavior of Others: Conformity, Fads, and Informational Cascades', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 12 Nº 3 (1998): 151–70.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

known as 'astroturfing'.[92] Widespread pressure following concerns over astroturfing during the 2016 US presidential election[93] caused Facebook to address the issue directly, and state its intentions to take action against what it calls 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour',[94] although concerns persist following reported instances in the period since then in countries such as India, Honduras, and Azerbaijan.[95]

The rise of social bots—particularly on Twitter—is also relevant here. Whereas astroturfing on Facebook is frequently achieved by a single or connected set of human users establishing groups or pages that appear to be distinct but are in fact not, Twitter's communicative structure commonly involves interaction with strangers, meaning it lends itself much more readily to influence by automated systems that can push out thousands of messages in a very short space of time.[96] Large groups of bots can be employed to strategically push a political message—perhaps in the hope of affecting an election, as with the UK's EU referendum in 2016,[97] or to influence public opinion following a negative event like the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.[98] This again can create the illusion of widespread support, which in turn makes that message more convincing and appealing to legitimate social media users.[99] Both social bots and the inauthentic groups that have become prevalent on Facebook attempt to create fictitious instances of social proof, and in so doing attempt to take advantage of the persuasive power of sWOM communications for political gain.

92 Marko Kovic, Adrian Rauchfleisch, Marc Sele, and Christian Caspar, 'Digital Astroturfing in Politics: Definition, Typology, and Countermeasures', *Studies in Communication Sciences* 18 Nº 1 (2018): 69–85.

93 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

94 Nathaniel Gleicher, 'Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Explained', *Facebook*, 6 December 2018.

95 Craig Silverman, Ryan Mac, and Pranav Dixit, '"I Have Blood on My Hands": A Whistleblower Says Facebook Ignored Global Political Manipulation', *Buzzfeed News*, 14 September 2020.

96 Emilio Ferrara, Onur Varol, Clayton Davis, Filippo Menczer, and Alessandro Flammini, 'The Rise of Social Bots', *Communications of the ACM* 59 Nº 7 (2016): 96–104.

97 Chris Baraniuk, 'Beware the Brexit Bots: The Twitter Spam Out to Swing Your Vote', *New Scientist*, 21 June 2016.

98 Mariella Moon, 'Twitter Suspends Bots Spreading Pro-Saudi Tweets about Missing Journalist', *Engadget*, 19 October 2018.

99 Stefan Stieglitz, Florian Brachten, Björn Ross, and Anna-Katharina Jung, 'Do Social Bots Dream of Electric Sheep? A Categorisation of Social Media Bot Accounts', *arXiv:1710.04044v1* (October 2017).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

Receiver Attitudes: Tie Strength to Sender

Granovetter draws a distinction between the 'strong' and 'weak' ties that socially connect individuals, and multiple studies investigate tie strength between a sender and receiver as a moderating factor of WOM effectiveness.[100] Although strong-tie WOM has been shown to most effectively drive product growth,[101] weak ties are also crucial for the spread of WOM communications, as they enable the passing of communication between largely unconnected groups of people,[102] making these links central to the effectiveness of eWOM communications. However, while eWOM may often pass between users with no social tie of any sort, a significant strength of sWOM communications is that they largely take place between individuals with some sort of tie, thus enhancing sWOM credibility in comparison to some eWOM, as discussed above. In particular, by making it much easier to interact with those outside one's immediate social circle, social media significantly boost the prevalence of weak-tie eWOM.[103]

In weak-tie (or no-tie) situations, perceived homophily on the part of the receiver has also been shown to moderate WOM influence, with higher degrees of similarity between the receiver and sender increasing the persuasiveness of the communication.[104] This often applies regardless of sender expertise; studies suggest that people are more likely to seek information from those with whom they share political beliefs, even if the person from whom the advice is sought knows little about the

100 Mark S. Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 78 Nº 6 (1973): 1360–80.

101 Hai-hua Hu, Le Wang, Lining Jiang, and Wei Yang, 'Strong Ties versus Weak Ties in Word-of-Mouth Marketing', *BRQ Business Research Quarterly* 22 Nº 4 (2019): 245–56.

102 Lars Groeger and Francis Buttle, 'Word-of-Mouth Marketing: Towards an Improved Understanding of Multi-Generational Campaign Reach', *European Journal of Marketing* 48 Nº 7–8 (2014): 1186–1208.

103 Moran and Muzellec, 'eWOM Credibility'.

104 Mary C. Gilly, John L. Graham, Mary Finley Wolfinbarger, and Laura J. Yale, 'A Dyadic Study of Interpersonal Information Search', *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 26 Nº 2 (1998): 83–100.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

subject.[105] Homophily has long been known to play a role in shaping social networks and in influencing a voter's preferred candidate during an election,[106] but social media platforms give their users more choice than ever over the content they see and the other people they interact with online. Individuals can participate in self-chosen communities filled with like-minded others and spread information that is likely to be believed by fellow participants.

The ability of social media users to carefully manage those with whom they exchange information has led to claims that online communications are increasingly taking place within various self-contained echo chambers.[107] Evidence of echo chamber development on Facebook,[108] Twitter,[109] and TikTok,[110] as well as others such as Instagram and Weibo,[111] has raised concerns that social media are contributing to the political polarisation of society[112] and to the spread of misinformation, as individuals who see content posted by those they consider themselves similar to are more likely to spread it without confirming its veracity.[113] The prevalence of these concerns in the last few years speaks to the persuasive power of sWOM within social media communities and suggests that, rather than

105 Joseph Marks, Eloise Copland, Eleanor Loh, Cass R. Sunstein, and Tali Sharot, 'Epistemic Spillovers: Learning Others' Political Views Reduces the Ability to Assess and Use Their Expertise in Nonpolitical Domains', *Cognition* 188 (2019): 74–84.

106 Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M. Cook, 'Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks', *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 Nº 1 (2001): 415–44; Benjamin R. Warner and Mary C. Banwart, 'A Multifactor Approach to Candidate Image', *Communication Studies* 67 Nº 3 (2016): 259–79.

107 David Robert Grimes, 'Echo Chambers Are Dangerous—We Must Try to Break Free of Our Online Bubbles', *The Guardian,* 4 December 2017.

108 Ana Lucía Schmidt, Fabiana Zollo, Antonio Scala, Cornelia Betsch, and Walter Quattrociocchi, 'Polarization of the Vaccination Debate on Facebook', *Vaccine* 36 Nº 25 (2018): 3606–12.

109 Kiran Garimella, Gianmarco De Francisci Morales, Aristides Gionis, and Michael Mathioudakis, 'Political Discourse on Social Media', in *Proceedings of the 2018 World Wide Web Conference on World Wide Web—WWW '18* (ACM Press, 2018).

110 Medina Serrano, Juan Carlos, Orestis Papakyriakopoulos, and Simon Hegelich, 'Dancing to the Partisan Beat: A First Analysis of Political Communication on TikTok', *WebSci '20: 12th ACM Conference on Web Science* (New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery, 2020), pp. 257–66.

111 ZiPeng Chen, 'Research on the Rapid Growth of the Chamber Effect on Social Media', in *2021 International Conference on Social Development and Media Communication (SDMC 2021)* (Atlantis Press, 2022), pp. 153–56.

112 Gilat Levy and Ronny Razin, 'Social Media and Political Polarisation', *LSE Public Policy Review* 1 Nº 1 (2020): 1–7.

113 Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, 'Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs', *American Journal of Political Science* 50 Nº 3 (2006): 755–69.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

trying to convert new followers, strategic communicators should instead use social media to motivate and energise those that already agree with them, while encouraging this audience to share and repost that content themselves.

Situational Characteristics: Message

Regardless of the sender or receiver, features of the communication itself can moderate WOM effectiveness. Research suggests that WOM is more persuasive when the argument used to express it is of a higher quality,[114] with specific attention given in some cases to the vividness and the clarity of the expression.[115] Plenty of attention has also been given to the valence of a WOM communication—i.e., whether the recommendation is positive or negative—with mixed conclusions as to what reviews are more persuasive.[116]

This ambiguity extends to the political arena,[117] but there is ample evidence that negativity spreads more widely and quickly than positivity on social media. Chung and Zeng provide general evidence for this phenomenon on Twitter,[118] whereas Hemsley and Stromer-Galley et al.

114 Erkan and Evans, 'Influence of eWOM'.

115 Moran and Muzellec, 'eWOM Credibility'; Jillian C. Sweeney, Geoffrey N. Soutar, and Tim Mazzarol, 'Factors Influencing Word of Mouth Effectiveness: Receiver Perspectives', *European Journal of Marketing* 42 Nº 3/4 (2008): 344–64.

116 Geng Cui, Hon-kwong Lui, and Xiaoning Guo, 'Online Reviews as a Driver of New Product Sales', *ICMECG '10: Proceedings of the 2010 International Conference on Management of e-Commerce and e-Government* (IEEE Computer Society, 2010), pp. 20–25, find negative reviews are more persuasive, whereas the reverse is found by Iryna Pentina, Ainsworth Anthony Bailey, and Lixuan Zhang, 'Exploring Effects of Source Similarity, Message Valence, and Receiver Regulatory Focus on Yelp Review Persuasiveness and Purchase Intentions', *Journal of Marketing Communications* 24 Nº 2 (2018): 125–45.

117 For an example that contests the effectiveness of negative political advertising, see Victor A. Hernández-Huerta, 'Negative Advertisements and Voter Turnout: The Evidence from Mexico', *Colombia Internacional* Nº 92 (2017): 135–56, and for an argument that it is effective, see Tao Ma, David Atkin, Leslie B. Snyder, and Arthur Van Lear, 'Negative Advertising Effects on Presidential Support Ratings during the 2012 Election: A Hierarchical Linear Modeling and Serial Dependency Study', *Mass Communication and Society* 22 Nº 2 (2019): 196–221.

118 Wingyan Chung and Daniel Zeng, 'Dissecting Emotion and User Influence in Social Media Communities: An Interaction Modeling Approach', *Information & Management* 57 Nº 1 (2020): 103108.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

find the same applies to political communications on the platform.[119] This then would suggest that the most effective political WOM messages on social media are negative posts that attack opposing groups (see also Lewsey's discussion on this topic[120]). For example, a video posted by a YouTuber called Rezo entitled 'The Destruction of the CDU', attacking Angela Merkel's policies, went viral. As of the election day (which went badly for the CDU), it was watched more than 11 million times.[121]

However, although the literature suggests that negatively valenced content posted is likely to spread further and more quickly on social media, this is a tactic that should be approached with caution; social media users may dislike or be uninterested in negative content on platforms like Instagram where the majority of content is positively valenced.[122] Research based on the 2019 Canadian elections examining posts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter suggests that a post attacking a rival politician (among Trudeau, Singh, and Scheer) is likely to positively influence user engagement in Twitter, but not on Facebook or Instagram. Furthermore, there is evidence that incivility begets further incivility on these channels[123] and that political negativity can cause citizens to become disengaged.[124] The Pew Research Center reports that in a survey of US citizens following the 2020 presidential election, the majority (55 per cent) of social media users said that they were 'worn out' by political posts and discussions.[125]

119 Jeff Hemsley, 'Followers Retweet! The Influence of Middle-Level Gatekeepers on the Spread of Political Information on Twitter', *Policy & Internet* 11 Nº 3 (2019): 280–304; Jennifer Stromer-Galley, Feifei Zhang, Jeff Hemsley, and Sikana Tanupabrungsun, 'Tweeting the Attack: Predicting Gubernatorial Candidate Attack Messaging and Its Spread', *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 3511–32.

120 Fred Lewsey, 'Slamming Political Rivals May Be the Most Effective Way to Go Viral: Revealing Social Media's "Perverse Incentives"', *University of Cambridge*, 22 June 2021.

121 Joachim Allgaier, 'Rezo and German Climate Change Policy: The Influence of Networked Expertise on YouTube and Beyond', *Media and Communication* 8 Nº 2 (2020): 376–86.

122 Sophie F. Waterloo, Susanne E. Baumgartner, Jochen Peter, and Patti M. Valkenburg, 'Norms of Online Expressions of Emotion: Comparing Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp', *New Media & Society* 20 Nº 5 (2018): 1813–31.

123 Patrícia Rossini, Heloisa Sturm-Wikerson, and Thomas J. Johnson, 'A Wall of Incivility? Public Discourse and Immigration in the 2016 US Primaries', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 18 Nº 3 (2021): 243–57.

124 Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

125 Monika Anderson and Brooke Auxier, '55% of U.S. Social Media Users Say They Are "Worn Out" by Political Posts and Discussions', *Pew Research Center*, 19 August 2020.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

Situational Characteristics: Subject

As well as the way in which a message is communicated, the nature of the subject can also affect the value and persuasiveness of WOM; consumers consider WOM more important for products that cannot be trialled or researched beforehand. It is particularly important for service organisations—especially when consumers consider the services in question to be complex or high risk.[126] This relates to the earlier discussion of the prior knowledge of WOM receivers, as it provides more evidence that WOM is more effective and important when the receiver knows less about the subject in question.[127]

In political marketing literature, the marketing of politics is frequently likened to service marketing[128] due to its inherent complexity and heterogeneity.[129] Although the comparison is not perfect,[130] the literature suggests that, as consumers use WOM to inform themselves about complex decisions, politicians should attempt to capitalise on this to disseminate information. However, research on the impact of WOM for service organisations is not quite so clear. Valos et al. suggest that WOM is less likely to spread on social media as complex products are less interesting,[131] while Sano finds no significant evidence for social media marketing generating positive WOM for a complex service.[132] This may be due to the limited attention span of social media users. Facebook recommends using easily digestible content to appeal to

126 Valarie A. Zeithaml, Ananthanarayanan Parasuraman, and Leonard L. Berry, 'Problems and Strategies in Services Marketing', *Journal of Marketing* 49 Nº 2 (1985): 33–46.

127 Moran and Muzellec, 'eWOM Credibility'.

128 Robert P. Ormrod and Heather Savigny, 'Political Market Orientation: A Framework for Understanding Relationship Structures in Political Parties', *Party Politics* 18 Nº 4 (2012): 487–502.

129 Christian Grönroos, 'Marketing Services: The Case of a Missing Product', *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* 13 Nº 4/5 (1998): 322–38.

130 Jenny Lloyd, 'Square Peg, Round Hole? Can Marketing-Based Concepts Such as the "Product" and the "Marketing Mix" Have a Useful Role in the Political Arena?', *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing* 14 Nº 1–2 (2005): 27–46.

131 Michael John Valos, Fatemeh Haji Habibi, Riza Casidy, Carl Barrie Driesener, and Vanya Louise Maplestone, 'Exploring the Integration of Social Media within Integrated Marketing Communication Frameworks: Perspectives of Services Marketers', *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 34 Nº 1 (2016): 19–40.

132 Kaede Sano, 'An Empirical Study of the Effect of Social Media Marketing Activities upon Customer Satisfaction, Positive Word-of-Mouth and Commitment in Indemnity Insurance Service', paper presented a the *International Marketing Trends Conference*, 2015.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

users, given the average online user's short attention span,[133] and the amount of time that topics spend 'trending' on Twitter has decreased during the last decade.[134] With this in mind, in order to maximise the effectiveness of their social media posts it would seem prudent for strategic communicators to keep to simpler topics that can be easily consumed and spread by their followers.

Opinion Leadership and Word-of-Mouth in Social Media Settings

One construct that has been receiving particular attention from WOM researchers is opinion leadership. Opinion leadership is defined as 'the process by which individuals share information and influence others' attitudes and behaviors'[135] or 'the process by which one person (the opinion leader) informally influences the actions or attitudes of others, who may be opinion seekers or merely opinion recipients',[136] whereas opinion leaders are individuals 'that exert a disproportionate influence on those around them'.[137] In other words, by definition, the concepts of opinion leadership and opinion leader are intertwined with the idea of WOM communication. Basically, opinion leaders are individuals (either actively or passively, when their opinion is requested) who distribute a substantial amount of WOM and whose WOM has more influence on other individuals. Research on opinion leadership can be divided into two areas. One part of the literature focuses on the outcomes of opinion leadership, such as the different effects it has on others, while an even larger part focuses on the antecedents of opinion leadership.

133 Facebook, 'Capturing Attention in Feed: The Science behind Effective Video Creative', *Facebook IQ*, 20 April 2016.

134 Philipp Lorenz-Spreen, Bjarke Mørch Mønsted, Philipp Hövel, and Sune Lehmann, 'Accelerating Dynamics of Collective Attention', *Nature Communications* 10 Nº 1 (2019): 1–9.

135 Eunice Kim, Yongjun Sung, and Hamsu Kang, 'Brand Followers' Retweeting Behavior on Twitter: How Brand Relationships Influence Brand Electronic Word-of-Mouth', *Computers in Human Behavior* 37 (2014): 18–25.

136 Leon G. Schiffman, Håvard Hansen, and Leslie Lazar Kanuk, *Consumer Behaviour: A European Outlook* (*Prentice Hall/Financial Times,* 2008).

137 Hans Risselada, Peter C. Verhoef, and Tammo H.A. Bijmolt, 'Indicators of Opinion Leadership in Customer Networks: Self-Reports and Degree Centrality', *Marketing Letters* 27 Nº 3 (2016): 449–60.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

The variables examined by the stream of literature focusing on the outcomes of opinion leadership include WOM tendency (referral), shifts in attitudes, and behavioural change. According to a large two-wave survey conducted with a sample reflecting the US population, on social media opinion leadership is a clear determinant of political persuasion.[138] Moreover, according to a study conducted on Instagram, opinion leadership is positively associated with a consumer's intention to follow the influencer's advice, and with the likelihood of their interacting with and recommending the opinion leader.[139] Likewise, opinion leadership is positively associated with satisfaction. In fact, engaging not only in opinion leadership behaviours (i.e., opinion giving and opinion passing) but also opinion seeking behaviours on social media increases individuals' satisfaction with the brand.[140]

The stream of literature focusing on antecedents of opinion leadership is very diverse, as numerous classes of factors can influence one's emergence as an opinion leader. Some of these studies take the perspective of traits and individual differences and examine chronic tendencies. Studies suggest that the popular Big Five model of personality (extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and agreeableness) can successfully predict the emergence of opinion leadership on social media.[141] One important aspect of examining chronic tendencies is that stable psychological characteristics can be used to predict behaviours in the long term and can also be used to locate opinion leaders. For instance, using text and/or pictures from an individual's social media posts or the pictures that an individual 'liked' on social media, machine-learning

138 Brian E. Weeks, Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu, and Homero Gil de Zúñiga, 'Online Influence? Social Media Use, Opinion Leadership, and Political Persuasion', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 29 Nº 2 (2017): 214–39.

139 Luis V. Casaló, Carlos Flavián, and Sergio Ibáñez-Sánchez, 'Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and Consequences of Opinion Leadership', *Journal of Business Research* 117 (2020): 510–19.

140 Akos Nagy, Ildikó Kemény, Krisztián Szűcs, Judit Simon, and Viktor Kiss, 'Are Opinion Leaders More Satisfied? Results of a SEM Model about the Relationship between Opinion Leadership and Online Customer Satisfaction', *Society and Economy* 39 Nº 1 (2017): 141–60.

141 So Young Song, Erin Cho, and Youn-Kyung Kim, 'Personality Factors and Flow Affecting Opinion Leadership in Social Media', *Personality and Individual Differences* 114 (2017): 16–23.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

algorithms can predict that user's Big Five personality traits[142] and determine a user's likelihood of emerging as an opinion leader.

Some other studies examine 'proximal' variables. Unlike traits, the levels of these psychological variables change more regularly—so they generally cannot be used to make long-term predictions such as who will emerge as opinion leaders—but due to their conceptual closeness to the outcome variables, they typically have better explanatory power (coefficient of determination).[143] An Instagram user's originality is an important predictor of whether that person emerges as an opinion leader.[144] However, originality is not a stable trait (i.e., an individual will not always be original or unoriginal in all areas of life—it fluctuates) but is rather an outcome of other stable traits such as openness to experience.[145] In other words, while such proximal variables are better able to predict opinion leadership in the short term, they are not suitable for purposes of long-term forecasting.

Discussion

In this paper we reviewed the literature on social media and WOM communications. In particular, we discussed the role of communication norms in social media and then reviewed the factors affecting the amount and impact of WOM communications. The review also explored the role of opinion leadership as a driver of WOM communications. As a result, the paper contributes to and provides implications of the theory and practice of strategic communications.

142 Alixe Lay and Bruce Ferwerda, 'Predicting Users' Personality Based on Their "Liked" Images on Instagram', in *The 23rd International on Intelligent User Interfaces, March 7–11, 2018* (CEUR-WS, 2018).

143 Aybars Tuncdogan and Aybeniz Akdeniz Ar, 'Distal and Proximal Predictors of Food Personality: An Exploratory Study on Food Neophilia', *Personality and Individual Differences* 129 (2018): 171–74.

144 Casaló et al., 'Influencers on Instagram'.

145 Wiebke Käckenmester, Antonia Bott, and Jan Wacker, 'Openness to Experience Predicts Dopamine Effects on Divergent Thinking', *Personality Neuroscience* 2 (2019).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

As previously described, a variety of strategy literatures are experiencing micro-foundations and behavioural strategy movements.[146] Put differently, the psychological micro-foundations of behaviour at lower levels of analysis (individuals, groups) have been examined to gain a deeper understanding of the outcomes at higher levels of analysis (e.g., countries, organisations). By drawing upon the streams of literature on social media[147] and WOM,[148] this paper introduces the behavioural micro-foundations perspective to strategic communications literature. In particular, the current review draws upon relevant digital research to provide explanations of why certain manners of communicating on social media generate WOM and produce large-scale impact while others fail. In doing so, this study contributes to the ongoing debate within strategic communications literature about how the strategic use of social media campaigns[149] can be further improved.

This paper also adds to the discussion in the streams of literature on strategic communications, political science, and strategic management on the extent to which strategy is a deliberate or emergent phenomenon.[150] That is, there are various types of strategies depending on where they lie on the deliberate–emergent continuum. Strategy may be fully planned (deliberate extreme of the continuum) or it can be fully imposed by the environment (emergent extreme of the continuum). However, it can also lie somewhere between the two extremes, such as when there are specific constraints influencing the process of formulating a deliberate strategy, when the strategic choice is the result of a consensus by the key stakeholders, or when the strategy is based upon a certain ideology.[151]

146 Tuncdogan et al., *Strategic Renewal.*

147 Wondwesen Tafesse and Anders Wien, 'Implementing Social Media Marketing Strategically: An Empirical Assessment', *Journal of Marketing Management* 34 Nº 9–10 (2018): 732–49.

148 Ana Babić Rosario, Kristine de Valck, and Francesca Sotgiu, 'Conceptualizing the Electronic Word-of-Mouth Process: What We Know and Need to Know about eWOM Creation, Exposure, and Evaluation', *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 48 Nº 3 (2020): 422–48.

149 Agarwal and Bandeli, 'Examining Strategic Integration', and Holmstrom, 'Narrative and Social Media'.

150 J.M. Bryson, 'The Future of Strategizing by Public and Nonprofit Organizations', *PS: Political Science & Politics 54* Nº 1 (2021): 9–18; Mustafa Cosar Unal, 'Strategist or Pragmatist: A Challenging Look at Ocalan's Retrospective Classification and Definition of PKK's Strategic Periods between 1973 and 2012', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 Nº 3 (2014): 419–48.

151 Henry Mintzberg and James A. Waters, 'Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent', *Strategic Management Journal* 6 Nº 3 (1985): 257–72.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

On the one hand, social media are a tool for collecting external data (e.g., using automated tools to scrape data on WOM communication, such as tweets). For numerous types of organisations (political parties), this data represents a key aspect of marketing research,[152] which, in turn, is one of the most important steps in strategy formulation.[153] On the other hand, as we have described, one of the key factors mediating the impact of social media is WOM,[154] which can only be controlled to a certain level due to its organic nature. In other words, once social media communication goes online, it takes on a life of its own.

There are also several cases of communicators facing unintended consequences, ranging from unpopular posts to large-scale negative reactions,[155] That is, while social media contain elements that enhance political organisations' capabilities to shape the landscapes they operate in, they also have aspects that induce ambiguity and force political organisations to adapt continuously to emerging strategic options. In essence, social media represent a feedback loop where strategy is simultaneously a deliberate and emergent phenomenon.

Finally, regarding practical implications, the insights this paper provides can serve individuals working in positions involving strategic communications. More specifically, in this paper, we discussed a number of specific findings from the literature on social media, WOM, and opinion leadership. Gaining a better understanding of these findings will help strategic communicators build more efficient social media campaigns.

Furthermore, this paper implies a number of questions that strategic communicators should ask when working on a social media campaign.

152 Pablo Barberá, Andreu Casas, Jonathan Nagler, Patrick J. Egan, Richard Bonneau, John T. Jost, and Joshua A. Tucker, 'Who Leads? Who Follows? Measuring Issue Attention and Agenda Setting by Legislators and the Mass Public Using Social Media Data', *American Political Science Review* 113 Nº 4 (2019): 883–901.

153 Mark Van Rijmenam, Tatiana Erekhinskaya, Jochen Schweitzer, and Mary-Anne Williams, 'Avoid Being the Turkey: How Big Data Analytics Changes the Game of Strategy in Times of Ambiguity and Uncertainty', *Long Range Planning* 52 Nº 5 (2019): 101841.

154 Ana Margarida Barreto, 'The Word-of-Mouth Phenomenon in the Social Media Era', *International Journal of Market Research* 56 Nº 5 (2014): 631–54.

155 Belinda Kintu and Karim Ben-Slimane, 'Companies' Responses to Scandal Backlash Caused by Social Media Influencers', *International Journal of Market Research* 62 Nº 6 (2020): 666–72.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.4

In a given case should we be focusing on an organic social media campaign, paid social media ads, or both? Which social media channels have a good fit with our goals? How much control do we have over the message characteristics (which aspects of the message are we allowed to change)? How much control do we have over our own characteristics as the message source (are we allowed to reposition our brand as a part of this campaign; if so, to what extent)? How much control do we have over the receivers of the message? Do we have discretion over whom to target and do we have time and resources preliminarily to affect receiver attitudes before projecting our main message? Are we going to focus mainly on digital channels and social media, or will we support the marketing efforts on digital channels by using traditional channels as well? What effect do we expect our campaign to have on sWOM and eWOM, but also traditional WOM (how will we measure success)?

Future Research

While this review helped to consolidate insights from the streams of research on social media platforms and WOM communications, it also uncovered several limitations which present areas of future research.

First, in line with the general focus of marketing literature, the majority of the studies we reviewed examined commercial institutions and products. While notable exceptions exist, marketing research with a specific emphasis on political settings is relatively scarce. Similarly, there is little or no marketing research that distinguishes between strategic political communications versus tactical political communications, although this is an important difference worth future research effort. One possible reason for this shortcoming is the lack of sufficient interdisciplinary research connecting marketing and strategic communications. We hope that this paper may serve to increase research in this relatively underexplored area.

Second, except for personality traits, the literature has largely overlooked perspectives on traits and individual differences. However, there are several

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other classes of traits (physiological, endocrinological, neurological) that are known to affect behaviours.[156] Some of these traits, such as the facial width-to-height ratio, can be collected automatically (scraped) from social media and used to make predictions, such as which individuals are most likely to emerge as opinion leaders.

Third, this paper focused predominantly on organic aspects of social media marketing as a primary driver of WOM communication, but paid advertising in digital environments represents another interesting area of subsequent research.

Finally, it is also worth noting that this literature contains certain methodological limitations, including a relative lack of longitudinal studies and field experiments, which represent another challenge for future researchers to overcome.

156 For a review, see Aybars Tuncdogan, Oguz Ali Acar, and Daan Stam, 'Individual Differences as Antecedents of Leader Behavior: Towards an Understanding of Multi-Level Outcomes', *Leadership Quarterly* 28 № 1 (2017): 40–64.

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Disinformation and Scholarly Communications

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Keywords—*disinformation, strategic communications, strategic communication, United States, COVID-19, Donald Trump*

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Abstract

Much has been written lately on disinformation, particularly regarding right-wing extremism and COVID-19. Few attempts, however, have been made to classify specific forms of disinformation, and little attention has been paid to disinformation's impact on scholarly communications. This essay identifies three types of disinformation affecting academic publishing based on authorial intent: parodic, which critiques the scholarly process through mimicry and humour; opportunist, which seeks to promote the author's scholarly image; and malicious, which distorts the reader's perception of a controversial issue like vaccination or climate change. In doing so, the paper provides an overview of notable instances of published disinformation, such as the

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Sokal affair, while highlighting the current threat of pandemic-related disinformation posing as scholarly research. The malicious disinformation section also explores how academic and pseudoscientific parlance can be adopted by white nationalists and conspiracy theorists. This paper demonstrates that a taxonomic approach to published disinformation can simultaneously make identifying falsified academic research easier, while exposing vulnerabilities in the publishing system. Furthermore, it also attempts to raise awareness of published disinformation as not just a problem confined to academia, but rather a contributor to the ongoing 'culture wars' and a potential threat to both public health and national security.

Introduction

Disinformation has been recognised in recent years as a rapidly growing problem, particularly after the 2016 United States presidential election.[1] The development of social media and America's increasing political polarisation have contributed to an increasingly large number of citizens receiving information from dubious sources. This has led to academics such as Simon Blackburn[2] and Lee McIntyre[3] to refer to American society as being 'post-truth'.[4] While discussion surrounding disinformation and fake news has waxed and waned since Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president, the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election[5] has resulted in disinformation becoming more prevalent than ever. Disinformation's threat to international security and political stability has been demonstrated by world events ranging from the Russian invasion of Ukraine[6] to Canada's Freedom Convoy protests[7] and the ongoing aftermath of the 'Big Lie' and 2021 US Capitol insurrection.[8]

1 Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, 'Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31 Nº 2 (2017): 211–36.

2 Simon Blackburn, *On Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

3 Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Boston: MIT Press, 2018).

4 Dominic Malcolm, 'Post-Truth Society? An Eliasian Sociological Analysis of Knowledge in the 21st Century', *Sociology* 55 Nº 6 (2021): 1063–79.

5 Amy Mitchell, Mark Jurkowitz, J. Baxter Oliphant, and Elisa Shearer, 'Misinformation and Competing Views of Reality Abounded throughout 2020', *Pew Research Center*, 22 February 2021.

6 Jason Abbruzzese, 'Russian Disinformation, Propaganda Ramp Up As Conflict in Ukraine Grows', *NBC News*, 24 February 2022.

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In his seminal essay 'What Is Disinformation?', Don Fallis defines disinformation as 'nonaccidentally misleading information'.[9] Whereas misinformation is simply misleading information regardless of intent, disinformation intentionally deceives its audience. While much has been written since 2016 on disinformation, most research focuses specifically on 'fake news' and its impact on social media and news coverage. Comparatively little attention has been paid to disinformation's effect on scholarly communications. Scholars writing on disinformation in academic publishing have primarily focused on predatory publishers, unscrupulous for-profit entities that use deceptive practices and often publish factually dubious papers. Whereas predatory publishers are notorious propagators of disinformation, reputable peer-reviewed academic publications have traditionally been seen as largely immune to disinformation. Reports of journals that have fallen prey to published academic disinformation have mostly centred on elaborate hoaxes, such as the Sokal and Grievance Studies affairs. Only recently has disinformation in academic publishing been widely viewed as a serious threat due to an avalanche of pandemic-related research, some of which is factually untrue.[10]

This paper argues that there are roughly three types of disinformation impacting scholarly communications which can be classified according to authorial intent: *parodic disinformation*, which mimics scholarly discourse in order to critique the publication process; *opportunist disinformation*, which is designed to promote the author or publisher's scholarly image; and *malicious disinformation*, which seeks to distort the public perception of a scientific or sociopolitical issue. These three types of disinformation

7 Charlie Angus, 'Lessons from the Convoy: We Are Losing the War on Disinformation', *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, 22 February 2022.

8 Tovia Smith, 'They Believe in Trump's "Big Lie": Here's Why It's Been So Hard to Dispel', *NPR*, 5 January 2022.

9 Don Fallis, 'What Is Disinformation?', *Library Trends* 63 Nº 3 (2015): 406.

10 Victoria L. Rubin, 'Disinformation and Misinformation Triangle: A Conceptual Model for "Fake News" Epidemic, Causal Factors and Interventions', *Journal of Documentation* 75 Nº 5 (2019): 1013–34; Anthony King, 'Fast News or Fake News? The Advantages and the Pitfalls of Rapid Publication through Pre-Print Servers during a Pandemic', *EMBO Reports* 21 Nº 6 e50817 (2020).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

have been ordered from least to most concerning, with malicious disinformation currently threatening to drown out scientifically rigorous research regarding COVID-19 and vaccinations. By taking a taxonomic approach to disinformation, this paper hopes to make identifying factually dubious research easier and promote increased discussion of the existential threat disinformation poses to academic publishing and academia at large. Finally, this paper will examine how disinformation posing as academically or scientifically credible research has consequences that reverberate beyond scholarly publishing. The paper's third section examines two currently relevant trends of malicious disinformation co-opting academic parlance: falsified COVID-19 research seeking to erode public trust in vaccines, and white nationalist propaganda attempting to prove biologically the genetic inferiority of Jews and African Americans. These two cases will hopefully demonstrate how falsified scientific information can erode public trust in scientific and political institutions, and consequentially threaten national security.

Parodic disinformation

In 1996 a New York University physics professor named Alan Sokal submitted a paper to the cultural studies journal *Social Text* titled 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity'.[11] Sokal's paper, which humorously proposed quantum gravity to be socially constructed, was written as a joke; nonetheless, the paper was taken seriously by *Social Text* and published in its May issue. This attracted national attention, prompting journalists and academics to refer to the event as the 'Sokal affair'. Sokal's paper is an archetypal example of *parodic disinformation*, which uses imitation and humour to critique the publishing system, while intentionally being realistic enough to be accepted for publication. In writing his essay, Sokal intended not to cause public disbelief in quantum mechanics, but rather to test the limits of the publishing process and what he calls 'the

11 Alan Sokal, 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity', *Social Text* 46/47 (1996): 217-52.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

intellectual arrogance of […] postmodernist literary theory'[12] represented by writers such as Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. As Sokal wrote in the magazine *Lingua Franca* a few months after his essay's publication, when he revealed his paper to have been a hoax, 'I decided to try a modest (though admittedly uncontrolled) experiment: Would a leading North American journal of cultural studies […] publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if *(a)* it sounded good and *(b)* it flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions?'[13] Sokal goes on to explain that 'while my method was satirical, my motivation is utterly serious […] what concerns me is the proliferation, not just of nonsense and sloppy thinking per se, but of a particular kind of nonsense and sloppy thinking: one that denies the existence of objective realities, or (when challenged) admits their existence but downplays their practical relevance'.[14]

The Sokal affair sparked widespread debate not just on whether or not Sokal's actions were justified, but on critical theory, postmodern philosophy, and the academic publishing industry. Sokal's essay is generally seen within the context of the 'science wars', a series of public spats between scientists and postmodern theorists on the nature of intellectual inquiry. In his essay 'Cultural Studies and Its Discontents: A Comment on the Sokal Affair', Ken Hirschkop argues 'his parody was unmistakably aimed not at science studies in general but at those who would install cultural studies as the new queen of the sciences'.[15] The Sokal affair typifies what Jim Schnabel refers to as 'hoaxlike deception in science', in which a scientist performing a hoax passes it off as scientifically rigorous in order to expose an inadequacy in the targeted field. Schnabel argues the scientist is 'most likely to be successful when his or her views about the targeted researcher's methodology and knowledge claims are orthodox with respect to his or her intended audience'.[16] By mimicking the language and rhetoric of postmodernist theorists, Sokal

12 Alan Sokal, 'A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies', *Lingua Franca* (1996): 62-64.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ken Hirschkop, 'Cultural Studies and Its Discontents: A Comment on the Sokal Affair', *Social Text* Nº 50 (1997): 131.

16 Jim Schnabel, 'Puck in the Laboratory: The Construction and Deconstruction of Hoaxlike Deception in Science', *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 19 Nº 4 (1994): 459.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

succeeded in passing off his paper as credible cultural studies research and subsequently provoked public debate regarding the 'unintelligible' research and merits of postmodern thought versus scientific knowledge.

Since the Sokal affair a number of academics have submitted parodic disinformation to academic journals, the most notable being the 'Grievance Studies' affair or 'Sokal Squared' scandal. Between 2017 and 2018 three academics—James A. Lindsay, a mathematician; Peter Boghossian, an assistant professor of philosophy at Portland State University; and Helen Pluckrose, a medievalist—submitted a series of essays on identity studies they referred to as 'Grievance Studies' to peer-reviewed journals in the social sciences. Some of their successfully published papers include: a study of canine rape culture in Portland dog parks; 'Our Struggle Is My Struggle: Solidarity Feminism As an Intersectional Reply to Neoliberal and Choice Feminism', a feminist reworking of a chapter from *Mein Kampf*; and an essay titled 'Going In through the Back Door: Challenging Straight Male Homohysteria, Transhysteria, and Transphobia through Receptive Penetrative Sex Toy Use', which recommends that men anally self-penetrate 'to become less transphobic, more feminist, and more concerned about the horrors of rape culture'.[17] By the time their hoax was revealed by the *Wall Street Journal*, seven of their twenty papers were either published or accepted for publication.

Like Sokal's essay, the papers were designed to simultaneously be absurd enough for the careful reader to recognise as parody, yet convincing enough to have a chance at publication. Another similarity with Sokal is that these essays were meant to mimic and lampoon critical theory and postmodernist rhetoric, as well as the current state of academic publishing in the social sciences and humanities at large. As the trio later explained in an article for *Areo*, the fact that some of their essays made it through the peer review process

17 Alexander Kafka, '"Sokal Squared": Is Huge Publishing Hoax "Hilarious and Delightful" or an Ugly Example of Dishonesty and Bad Faith?', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3 October 2018.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

> isn't so much a problem with peer review itself as a recognition that peer review can only be as unbiased as the aggregate body of peers being called upon to participate […] the skeptical checks and balances that should characterize the scholarly process have been replaced with a steady breeze of confirmation bias that blows Grievance Studies scholarship ever further off course […] this isn't how research is supposed to work.[18]

Polarised debate erupted regarding the efficacy of the authors' actions. As reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 'some scholars applauded the hoax for unmasking what they called academe's leftist, victim-obsessed ideological slant and low publishing standards, [while] others said it had proved nothing beyond the bad faith and dishonesty of its authors'.[19] Harvard government professor Yascha Mounk lauded the trio for exposing how 'some of the leading journals in areas like gender studies have failed to distinguish between real scholarship and intellectually vacuous as well as morally troubling bullshit',[20] while University of Washington biologist Carl Bergstrom derided the hoax as 'a hollow exercise in mean-spirited mockery'.[21] Mikko Lagerspetz argues that 'the boundary between a seriously written paper and a "hoax" gradually became blurred' due to the Grievance Studies affair.[22] Lagerspetz also ties the affair into the larger US 'culture war', noting the 'political distrust' of gender studies and other fields often targeted by conservatives for promoting a far-left agenda in classrooms.

Although publication of parodic disinformation by academic journals remains rare, the Sokal and Grievance Studies affairs continue to inspire copycats seeking to critique and humiliate scholarly journals. As recently

18 Helen Pluckrose, James A. Lindsay, and Peter Boghossian, 'Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship', *Areo*, 10 February 2018.

19 Alexander Kafka, 'Sokal Squared'.

20 'What the "Grievance Studies" Hoax Means', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 October 2018.

21 Ibid.

22 Mikko Lagerspetz, '"The Grievance Studies Affair" Project: Reconstructing and Assessing the Experimental Design', *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 46, № 2 (2020): 402.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

as November 2021, *Higher Education Quarterly* published a now retracted paper, titled 'Donor Money and the Academy: Perceptions of Undue Donor Pressure in Political Science, Economics, and Philosophy',[23] whose authors' names, Sage Owens and Kal Avers-Lynde, III, were soon discovered to spell out SOKAL III in their initials.[24] The paper claims to study academics who are influenced by donations from right-wing benefactors into promoting conservative causes and political candidates. Although the paper's true authors were never identified, they were likely motivated to critique and deceive the publishing process for having a perceived liberal bias. The *Chronicle for Higher Education* reported that UnKoch My Campus, a left-wing student organisation seeking to investigate the influence of the Koch Foundation and other right-wing donor groups on college campuses, was contacted by the individual purporting to be Sage Owens asking to have the study promoted.[25] The organisation's executive director cited suspicion that 'the hoax […] target[ed] her organization by seeking to spread misinformation and undermine the work of academic researchers'.[26] The incident was then covered by the Republican Party affiliated publication the *National Review*, which was told by the individual writing as Owens 'we wanted to see in this case if [it] would be possible to publish a paper in an elite journal when the paper is full of blatant and clear statistical errors'.[27] Notably, 'Sage Owens' refused to disclose a motive to the *Chronicle for Higher Education* when contacting them, stating 'we plan to reveal the full extent of this hoax later'.[28] Giving a motive statement to the *National Review* instead suggests that the paper's authors were likely conservative activists courting a Republican audience and that they sought to critique the academic publishing and higher education systems for having a perceived pro-liberal, anti-Republican bias.

23 Sage Owens and Kal Avers-Lynde, III, 'Retracted: Donor Money and the Academy: Perceptions of Undue Donor Pressure in Political Science, Economics, and Philosophy', *Higher Education Quarterly* (2021).

24 Eric Kelderman, 'Another "Sokal" Hoax? The Latest Imitation Calls an Academic Journal's Integrity Into Question', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 December 2021.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Zachary Evans, 'Academic Journal Publishes Hoax Paper Alleging Right-Wing Donor Influence in Universities', *National Review*, 1 December 2021.

28 Kelderman, 'Another "Sokal" Hoax?'

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

As exhibited by the discourse surrounding both the Sokal and Grievance Studies affairs, parodic disinformation exists to offer critique and test the limits of the publication process. Parodic disinformation operates in an ethically grey area, prompting dialogue over whether the author's actions were justified or merely exploitative. It also has an inherent entertainment value compared with typically dry academic rhetoric which allows it to capture widespread attention and facilitate public dialogue. The Sokal and Grievance Studies cases also demonstrate how parodic disinformation primarily targets the social sciences and humanities. This reflects how these fields have a reputation of viewing truth more subjectively than the hard sciences do; as a result, a hoax women's studies article is more likely to pass the peer review process than one denying climate change. Humanities and social sciences journals' relatively open acceptance of truth thus makes them an easier target of criticism and successfully published disinformation than STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) fields. Parodic disinformation's targeting of social sciences and the humanities demonstrates their perhaps unequal standing in public and scholarly opinion compared with the hard sciences. Parodying social science disciplines like sociology and gender studies through fabricated academic research works implies they are both less serious and less true than the 'real' sciences.

The Sokal III incident, clearly inspired by Sokal and 'Sokal Squared', demonstrates how parodic disinformation is generally skewed towards the politically conservative. The paper's ironic characterisation of academics as bought by corporate donors simultaneously parodies the left's perceived fixation on the Koch Foundation and other Republican-affiliated organisations, while suggesting that liberals rather than conservatives control academic discourse and the scholarly publishing process. This arguably plays into the common, factually inaccurate conservative narrative that the Democratic Party has an unhealthy influence on higher education, and that academia is biased against Republicans. Parodic disinformation can be viewed as a factor in the wider 'culture wars', which have inflamed American culture in recent decades and possibly contributed to the election of Donald Trump and the eventual January

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

6 rally. When the original Sokal affair was published in the early 1990s, books critiquing higher education such as Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* were popular among conservatives.[29] Higher education remains at the culture wars forefront, as evidenced by laws being passed that seek to ban critical race theory and homosexuality from being taught or discussed in K-12 classrooms.[30] Parodic disinformation's lampooning of the scholarly communications process thus risks feeding into the perception of academic publishing and America's education system at large as untrustworthy, politically biased and corrupt, whether or not it intends to.

Opportunist disinformation

Whereas parodic disinformation seeks to challenge and critique the scholarly process through imitation and humour, *opportunist disinformation* is designed merely to pad the author's academic résumé. This also differs from parodic disinformation in that falsifying data to appear credible is more prevalent in the hard sciences than social sciences. Medical fields are particularly susceptible to falsified data, with data falsification being cited as the most common cause of retraction from publication in medical disciplines such as obstetrics and gynecology.[31] Unscrupulous scholars can employ a variety of deceptive strategies in hopes of bolstering their image. Adam Marcus and Ivan Oransky's essay 'Why Fake Data When You Can Fake a Scientist?' details how some scholars create imaginary aliases to make their papers appear more credible.[32] They describe how one now discredited academic created a fictional co-author for several of his essays, while another attempted recommending himself as a peer

29 Judith S. Eaton, 'Dinesh D'Souza's Illiberal Education: A Review Essay', *Community College Review* 19 Nº 4 (1992): 7–14.

30 Adrian Florido, 'Teachers Say Laws Banning Critical Race Theory Are Putting a Chill on Their Lessons', *NPR*, 28 May 2021; 'Florida House of Representatives Passes "Don't Say Gay" Bill', *BBC News*, 24 February 2022.

31 L.M. Chambers, C.M. Michener, and T. Falcone. 'Plagiarism and Data Falsification Are the Most Common Reasons for Retracted Publications in Obstetrics and Gynaecology', *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology* 126 Nº 9 (2019): 1134–40.

32 Adam Marcus and Ivan Oransky, 'Why Fake Data When You Can Fake a Scientist?', *Nautilus*, 24 November 2016.

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reviewer for his own papers using a combination of real and faked aliases. The automatic paper-generating software SciGen, which was originally created to expose conference scams, ended up being used by academics and students to generate fake papers in order to pad their résumés.[33] Mara Hvistendahl's reporting for *Science* details how an underground publication ring based in China sold authorship credits to those desperate to get published.[34] Many of these sold papers were likely generated through SciGen by peddlers wishing to make a profit.[35]

Numerous academics have also managed to expose vulnerabilities in the peer review system. In 2014 the *Journal of Vibration and Control* made headlines for retracting sixty articles produced by a fraudulent 'peer review and citation ring'; a year later, major medical publisher BioMed Central made headlines for retracting forty-three papers due to faked peer reviews.[36] In a separate 2015 incident, Springer, which controls BioMed Central and several other publishers, retracted sixty-four articles across ten of its journals for having submitted faked peer review reports.[37] The blog *Retraction Watch* monitors instances of peer-reviewed publishers retracting papers due to data fabrication, plagiarism, and other deceptive tactics, and operates a database of retracted articles.[38]

Opportunistic disinformation published in peer-reviewed journals can occasionally have real-world consequences, particularly in the medical field. Writing for *Science*, *Retraction Watch* correspondent Adam Marcus reports how medical researcher Joachim Boldt in a paper for *Anesthesia & Analgesia* fabricated data claiming intravenous hetastarch solutions containing colloids were safe, despite previous findings linking hetastarches to kidney damage and occasional death. Marcus mentions how multiple medical societies pulled guidelines they enacted endorsing

33 John Bohannon, 'Hoax-Detecting Software Spots Fake Papers', *Science*, 27 March 2015.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Fred Barbash, 'Major Publisher Retracts 43 Scientific Papers amid Wider Fake Peer-Review Scandal', *Washington Post*, 27 March 2015.

37 Ewen Callaway, 'Faked Peer Reviews Prompt 64 Retractions', *Nature*, 18 August 2015.

38 Retraction Watch Database.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

colloids based on Boldt's research,[39] and researchers from the University of Winnipeg found that critically ill patients exposed to hetastarches were at 'statistically significantly greater risks of kidney damage and death'.[40] Academics who had worked with Boldt speculate he was primarily motivated by self-aggrandisement, with one noting 'he became one of the most distinguished anaesthetists and his motivation was to publish, publish, publish' and another commenting Boldt was 'flown first class to speak at various meetings around the world […] wined and dined and considered to be one of the leading experts in his field'.[41]

Opportunistic disinformation can be propagated not just by scholars, but by publishers themselves. The term 'predatory publisher' was coined by University of Colorado-Boulder librarian Jeffrey Beall, who until 2017 operated the widely cited listing of predatory publications *Beall's List*.[42] Most predatory journals use the standard open access gold model, charging a fee for successfully submitted essays, and either forgo the peer review process or fabricate peer review rubrics.[43] Predatory publishers utilise numerous unethical tactics, ranging from cross-referencing and self-citing their own articles to artificially inflating H-indexes to boost their impact factor, in an attempt to appear more credible.[44] In 2016 the Federal Trade Commission sued notorious predatory publishing company OMICS International for fraud, alleging the publisher

> claims distinguished experts as editorial board members and as speakers at its conferences without their consent; fails to disclose publishing fees ranging from hundreds to thousands of dollars until after articles are accepted; cites phony impact factors (a measure of prestige indicating how often a journal's articles get cited elsewhere); and maintains that journals are indexed in PubMed when they aren't.[45]

39 Adam Marcus, 'A Scientist's Fraudulent Studies Put Patients at Risk', *Science* 362 (2018): 394.
40 Ibid.
41 Jacqui Wise, 'Boldt: The Great Pretender', *BMJ* 346, March 2013: 17–18.
42 Stef Brezgov, 'List of Publishers', *ScholarlyOA*, 27 May 2019.
43 Zachary Taylor, 'The Hunter Became the Hunted: A Graduate Student's Experiences with Predatory Publishing', *Publishing Research Quarterly* 35 Nº 1 (2019): 129.
44 Ibid., 123.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

Due to their prioritisation of profit over quality, predatory publishers are notorious proliferators of hoax academic papers. In a sting operation aimed at exposing predatory publishers, *Science* correspondent John Bohannon details how he submitted faked scientific papers to hundreds of journals from *Beall's List*, 82 per cent of which accepted them.[46] While predatory publishers go to great lengths to appear reputable, careful attention to detail can often expose them. Zachary Taylor notes how 'grammar errors in written feedback, an absence of scholarly indexing, and inaccurate rubric numbering are a few examples of how predatory publishers—and their inattention to detail—can be identified and avoided'.[47] Despite their often glaring errors, however, many medical-themed predatory publishers profit from drug companies seeking to tout their products, often backed by questionable data. Esmé Deprez and Caroline Chen's *Bloomberg Businessweek* investigation into OMICS International details how researchers for pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer, AstraZeneca, and Gilead have submitted studies to OMICS despite its shoddy reputation. They note how predatory publishers can become 'a venue for companies to publish studies that aren't sufficiently groundbreaking for the lead journals, or those they'd prefer not be subject to rigorous vetting—either to get them out sooner or to avoid scrutiny'.[48]

Although many scholars submit to predatory publishers by mistake, others do so intentionally for a variety of reasons that reflect some of academia's inadequacies. As Zachary Taylor observes, graduate students and emerging scholars are more likely to submit to predatory publishers due to widespread pressure to 'publish or perish'.[49] Opportunistic disinformation is also common in developing nations where scholars face more inequities than their North American or European counterparts,

45 Esmé E. Deprez and Caroline Chen, 'Medical Journals Have a Fake News Problem', *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 29 August 2017.
46 John Bohannon, 'Who's Afraid of Peer Review?', *Science* 342 Nº 6154 (2013): 60–65.
47 Taylor, 'Hunter Became the Hunted', 136.
48 Deprez and Chen, 'Medical Journals Have a Fake News Problem'.
49 Taylor, 'Hunter Became the Hunted', 122.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

and from which many predatory journals originate. Adeyinka Tella's essay 'Nigerian Academics Patronizing Predatory Journals' describes 'desperation at the thought of missing out on promotion [and] long waits for reviews from reputable journals'[50] as reasons for their common usage in Nigeria. As Serhat Kurt observes in her essay surveying authors who publish in predatory journals, 'scholars in the developing world felt that reputable Western journals might be prejudiced against them and sometimes felt more comfortable publishing in journals from the developing world'.[51]

Opportunist disinformation can reflect a dangerous, Machiavellian view of scholarly publication as an 'end justifies the means' way to get ahead rather than to contribute truthful and meaningful knowledge to the scholarly record. Predatory publishers' dis-informative tactics illustrate how the academic publishing model can be misused to both deceive unwitting scholars and court those seeking to publish factually dubious data in order to make a profit. Opportunistic disinformation can also expose not only vulnerabilities in the academic publishing system which bad actors can take advantage of, but inadequacies in academia that pressure scholars into employing unscrupulous tactics.

Malicious disinformation

Malicious disinformation is perhaps the most threatening and influential form of disinformation covered in this essay, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in that its motives reach beyond the realm of scholarly communications. While authorship of malicious disinformation can be opportunistic in nature, its key attribute is a wilful intent to distort the public perception of an issue through fabricated data and misleading claims. This form of disinformation often operates counterintuitively to reputable academic research by seeking to erode rather than strengthen public trust in scientific and governmental institutions. Proliferators of

50 Adeyinka Tella, 'Nigerian Academics Patronizing Predatory Journals', *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 51 No 3 (2020): 182–96.

51 Serhat Kurt, 'Why Do Authors Publish in Predatory Journals?', *Learned Publishing* 31 No 6 (2018): 141.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

malicious disinformation tend to target divisive topics like vaccinations and climate change, exploiting pre-existing biases with fabricated data that reinforces their beliefs.

Perhaps the first major case of malicious disinformation in scholarly publishing was that of now disgraced British physician Andrew Wakefield's 1998 essay 'Ileal-Lymphoid-Nodular Hyperplasia, Non-Specific Colitis, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder in Children' in the renowned medical journal *The Lancet*. Wakefield's claims that twelve children developed autism from the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine[52] were proven after publication to be fabricated and *The Lancet* the article; retracted the *Sunday Times* reported years later that Wakefield intentionally manipulated data to suggest a link to autism.[53] Despite this, Wakefield's essay significantly damaged public trust in vaccinations and is widely attributed to have intensified the burgeoning anti-vaccination movement.[54] As noted in the article 'The Anti-Vaccination Movement: A Regression in Modern Medicine', Wakefield's paper indirectly caused vaccination rates to decline worldwide:

> The damage, however, was already done and the myth was spread to many different parts of the world, especially Western Europe and North America. In the UK, for example, the MMR vaccination rate dropped from 92% in 1996 to 84% in 2002. In 2003, the rate was as low as 61% in some parts of London, far below the rate needed to avoid an epidemic of measles. In Ireland, in 1999–2000, the national immunization level had fallen below 80%, and in part of North Dublin, the level was around 60%. In the US, the controversy following the publication of the

52 A. Wakefield et al., 'Ileal-Lymphoid-Nodular Hyperplasia, Non-Specific Colitis, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder in Children', *Lancet* 351 No 9103 (1998): 637–41.

53 Brian Deer, 'MMR Doctor Andrew Wakefield Fixed Data on Autism', *Sunday Times*, 8 February 2009.

54 Azhar Hussain, Syed Ali, Madiha Ahmed, and Sheharyar Hussain, 'The Anti-Vaccination Movement: A Regression in Modern Medicine', *Cureus* 10 No 7 e2919 (2018): 1.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

> study led to a decline of about 2% in terms of parents obtaining the MMR vaccine for their children in 1999 and 2000. Even after later studies explicitly and thoroughly debunked the alleged MMR-autism link, the drop in vaccination rates persisted.[55]

While instances of published malicious disinformation have sporadically occurred since the Wakefield scandal, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a disturbing influx of malicious disinformation disguised as reputable scientific research. The World Health Organization director proclaimed in February 2020, 'we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic'.[56] Although COVID-19 disinformation has mostly been reported on in the context of social media and 'fake news' outlets like Infowars, numerous scientific journals are publishing dis-informative data related to the pandemic. Some of the currently most widely viewed scientific papers perpetuate COVID-19 disinformation. Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva notes the current popularity of journal articles touting disproven claims of hydroxychloroquine as a successful COVID-19 treatment, and he identifies 'members of the public, young students, early career researchers, clickbait-hungry media outlets, or academics […] that are unable to critically assess the academic and scientific content, and flaws, of biomedical literature [as being] at greatest risk of being carriers of disinformation'[57] related to the virus.

The influence of Andrew Wakefield's fabricated scholarship on the MMR vaccine can be felt in disinformation linking the COVID-19 vaccines to autism. The non-profit organisation AutismOne, which focuses on exposing vaccines that cause autism,[58] held its 2021 annual pseudoscientific medical conference in September themed 'Autism in the Age of COVID-19', targeting coronavirus vaccines.[59] The event's

55 Ibid.

56 Tedros Adhanom, 'Munich Security Conference', *World Health Organization*, 15 February 2020.

57 Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva, 'An Alert to COVID-19 Literature in Predatory Publishing Venues', *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 46 Nº 5 (2020): 1.

58 Jonathan Jarry, 'Masks Fall When Antivaxxers Congregate', *McGill Office for Science and Society*, 11 June 2020,

59 AutismOne Conference 2021.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

headliner, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr, is an environmental lawyer who was inspired by Wakefield's *Lancet* paper to become an anti-vaccine activist and has frequently collaborated with Wakefield 'exposing' vaccines.[60] Kennedy is a member of the 'Disinformation Dozen', identified by the Center for Countering Digital Hate as twelve individuals responsible for around 65 per cent of COVID-19 vaccine misinformation shared on social media.[61] Another member of the Disinformation Dozen, Rizza Islam, posted a February 2021 video to his Instagram account targeting African Americans with anti-vax misinformation alleging that the COVID-19 vaccines cause higher rates of autism among non-white children, echoing Wakefield.[62]

A major contributing factor to COVID-19 disinformation's rampant spread is the torrent of pandemic-related research overwhelming publishers and pressuring them to expedite or waive the peer review process. Victoria Rubin cites 'information overload' as a major factor of disinformation's spread, noting that 'few news readers can spare the time and energy to fact-check every piece of information they come across'.[63] The current deluge of COVID-19 research therefore makes it particularly difficult for non-academics overloaded with new information to differentiate between credible data and disinformation. The overwhelming volume of COVID-19 papers is also resulting in a decreased percentage of research being peer reviewed. Anthony King's essay 'Fast News or Fake News? The Advantages and the Pitfalls of Rapid Publication through Pre-Print Servers during a Pandemic' describes how many medical scholars are forgoing the peer review process and publishing their research on preprint servers such as medRxiv due to pressure to publish COVID research as quickly as possible. King notes that while preprint servers are proving useful in making important medical research publicly available at rapid speed, the lack of peer review has resulted in a deluge of hoax preprints spouting disinformation, such as a paper comparing COVID-19 to

60 Jonathan Jarry, 'The Anti-Vaccine Propaganda of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.', *McGill Office for Science and Society*, 16 April2021.

61 Imran Ahmed, *The Disinformation Dozen*, Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021.

62 Ibid.

63 Rubin, 'Disinformation and Misinformation Triangle, 1022.

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HIV.[64] Willa Tavernier echoes King's nuanced view of preprints having both risks and merits in her essay 'COVID-19 Demonstrates the Value of Open Access', arguing that 'while the absence of peer review on these platforms has the potential to widely disseminate misinformation, the robust use of preprint servers by the scientific community has worked to rebut spurious claims, in effect crowdsourcing rapid expert peer-review'.[65]

While nearly all COVID-19 researchers view disinformation as a threat, many are divided or unsure on what practices should be taken to combat its spread. As noted by King and Tavernier, preprints are a particularly controversial topic due to the double-edged sword of expediency and susceptibility to disinformation. According to a survey on COVID-19 misinformation published in the *Journal of Korean Medical Science*, slightly over half (50.8 per cent) of scholars surveyed responded that preprints cannot be relied upon, and 62.5 per cent 'affirmed that peer review is a mandatory system for prepublication checks despite the need for fast processing and dissemination of scholarly articles on COVID-19'.[66] The survey also reflected divided opinion regarding changing retraction practices, with '23.4% proposing lower threshold, 31.3% suggesting otherwise, and another 36.7% being not sure'.[67]

Outside academic journals, malicious disinformation frequently borrows or mimics language from scholarly sources, distorting the facts in the process, in order to shape a political narrative. Jevin West and Carl Bergstrom's paper on 'Misinformation in and about Science' utilises the term 'citation misdirection' to describe how mis/disinformation often misquotes or manipulates statistics from scholarly reports in order to distort the truth to its own ends.[68] As an example, West and Bergstrom describe how NBC News in 2017 tweeted a distorted statistic from an academic paper quoted in one of the organisation's news articles. While

64 King, 'Fast News or Fake News?'.

65 Willa Tavernier, 'COVID-19 Demonstrates the Value of Open Access: What Happens Next?', *College & Research Libraries News* 81№ 5 (2020): 226.

66 Latika Gupta et al., 'Information and Misinformation on COVID-19: A Cross-Sectional Survey Study', *Journal of Korean Medical Science* 35 № 27 (2020).

67 Ibid.

68 Jevin D. West and Carl T. Bergstrom, 'Misinformation in and about Science', *PNAS* 118 № 15.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.5

the original study noted that applications from international students decreased at 40 per cent of schools, the NBC News tweet asserted that 'International applications at American schools are down nearly 40%'.[69] The authors note how this was tweeted during a period of massive protests against the Trump Administration's immigration policy, and that the NBC News Twitter account attempted to echo the liberal backlash with its distortion.[70]

Malicious disinformation is designed to prey upon and exacerbate our politically polarised climate, furthering the public erosion of trust in scientific and governmental institutions. Polarising topics such as COVID-19 and vaccinations are ripe targets for malicious disinformation due to the combination of information overload and the politicisation of science. Trust in medical professionals can be measured as roughly divided between political party lines. An August 2019 Pew Research poll cites 48 per cent of Democrats having a 'great deal' of faith in scientists, compared with only 27 per cent of Republicans.[71] Americans are also politically divided on medically proven mitigation efforts such as social distancing, with a June 2020 Johns Hopkins University poll reporting '89% of Democrats viewed social distancing as very important, relative to 72% of Independents and 66% of Republicans'.[72] Americans are therefore more likely when seeking COVID-related information to turn to sources that conform to their political beliefs, with many rejecting peer-reviewed research in favour of social media.

Malicious disinformation can distort and mimic academic, scientifically credible language in an attempt to promote conspiracy theories and extremist ideologies. In his scholarly analysis of online QAnon data, Matthew N. Hannah notes how the individual behind the movement known as Q often 'relies on a slippage between disparate data—sets of signs collected by the adherents through online research—and those

69 Ibid., 3.

70 Ibid.

71 Cary Funk et al., 'Trust and Mistrust in Americans' Views of Scientific Experts', *Pew Research Center*, 2 August 2019.

72 Colleen Barry, Hahrie Han, and Beth McGinty, 'Trust in Science and COVID-19', *Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health*, 17 June 2020.

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same data interpreted as information provided by Q in the drops and by other anons on social media and elsewhere, which are then deployed through authoritative visualizations to recruit and guide newcomers into the movement'.[73] As Hannah notes, Q's posts, or 'drops', bear out what Haken and Portugali describe as 'the paradoxical relationship between having more data while receiving less accurate information'.[74] In other words, Q creates the illusion of credibility by referencing a plethora of sources, while in the process forsaking accuracy for narrativity.

Academic language is similarly co-opted by white supremacists and other extremists in order to promote hateful and racist ideologies. Aaron Panofsky and Joan Donovan's study on genetic ancestry testing among white supremacists demonstrates how articles on the neo-Nazi website Stormfront often mimic the language of scientific publications in an attempt to 'prove' the biological inferiority of Jews and other ethnic and racial minorities.[75] Panofsky and Donovan note how Stormfront users 'read and debate academic articles, download their genetic data and analyze it in resources they consider more informative, and some seek to cultivate allegiances with academics they believe sympathetic to their ideas', thus engaging in a form of 'citizen science' that borrows from scientific knowledge and reshapes it to rationalise their white supremacist beliefs.[76] Beverly Ray and George Marsh's report 'Recruitment by Extremist Groups on the Internet' details how hate groups co-opt scientific-sounding language in order to both rationalise their ideologies and attract new members.[77] One prominent neo-Nazi institution described by Ray and March, National Alliance, employs pseudoscientific language on its website to disparage African Americans based on their physiology:

73 Matthew N. Hannah, 'A Conspiracy of Data: QAnon, Social Media, and Information Visualization', *Social Media + Society* 7 Nº 3 (2021): 3.

74 Ibid.; Hermann Haken and Juval Portugali, 'Information versus Data', in *Information Adaptation: The Interplay between Shannon Information and Semantic Information in Cognition*, Hermann Haken and Juval Portugali (eds), SpringerBriefs in Complexity (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), pp. 11–17.

75 Aaron Panofsky and Joan Donovan, 'Genetic Ancestry Testing among White Nationalists: From Identity Repair to Citizen Science', *Social Studies of Science* 49 Nº 5 (2019): 653–81.

76 Ibid., 675.

77 Beverly Ray and George E. Marsh, 'Recruitment by Extremist Groups on the Internet', *First Monday*, 6 Nº 2 (2001).

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> The culture of a race, free of alien influences, is telling evidence of that race's essential nature. The African Negro with a cow-dung hairdo, a bone through his nose, and teeth filed down to sharp points, in other words, presents to us a far more accurate image of the Negro essence than does the American Black in a business suit who has been trained to drive an automobile, operate a typewriter, and speak flawless English […]. Negro culture inferiority is the consequence of the physical inadequacy of the Negro brain in dealing with abstract concepts. On the other hand, the Negro shows an ability approaching that of the White at mental tasks requiring only memory. That is why the Negro can be trained relatively easily to adapt to many aspects of White culture […]. It has been well known since the large-scale intelligence testing of U.S. Army recruits in World War I that the average Negro IQ is approximately 15 per cent below that of the average White. Apologists for the Blacks have tried to explain away the earlier test scores as being due to the effects of segregated schools and Black poverty; i.e. they claimed the tests were 'culturally' biased.[78]

The above passage attempts to mimic academic parlance with phrases such as 'culture inferiority' and cites meaningless statistics to appear verifiable. These pseudo-academic phrases are paired with racialised eugenic language used by Nazi Germany, the Confederate States of America, and other regimes that were for centuries espoused to 'scientifically' demonstrate the inferiority of non-whites. National Alliance and other hate groups deliberately combine outdated, racist terminology with more modern, academic-sounding phrases in attempt to legitimise their

78 Ibid.

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eugenic propaganda by creating the impression that their publications reflect established scientific knowledge.

Malicious disinformation that poses as scientifically accurate information should be treated as not merely an epistemological concern, but an issue of national and international security. Writing for *Security and Defence Quarterly*, Wojciech Łukasz Sługocki and Bogdan Sowa note how disinformation 'is used to polarize views among the civilian population and generate distrust of state actions'.[79] They detail how medical disinformation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has severely eroded public trust in governmental and medical institutions worldwide, and has consequentially frozen government operations and health responses worldwide by sparking massive revolts against vaccines.[80] Dr Tara Kirk Sell of the Center for Health Security at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health similarly warns that medical disinformation related to COVID-19 has negative implications for US national security, and suggests that the National Security Council collaborate with the 'departments of Health and Human Services, Defense, Homeland Security, the State Department, and the intelligence community' to curb its spread online.[81] Malicious disinformation regarding COVID-19 has also fuelled hatred towards targeted racial and ethnic minorities blamed for spreading the virus, as indicated by the rapid rise in violence against Asian Americans since 2020.[82] Similarly, pseudoscientific malicious disinformation is used by extremist movements such as neo-Nazi organisations and QAnon to recruit, mobilise, and justify their beliefs.

79 Wojciech Sługocki and Bogdan Sowa, 'Disinformation as a Threat to National Security on the Example of the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Security and Defence Quarterly* 35 Nº 3 (2021): 70.

80 Ibid.

81 Tara Kirk Sell, 'Meeting COVID-19 Misinformation and Disinformation Head-On', *Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health*.

82 Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, Report to the Nation: Anti-Asian Prejudice & Hate Crime, CSUSB, 2021.

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Conclusion

This article's taxonomic approach to disinformation in academic publishing demonstrates the variety of motives behind fabricating scholarly research. While disinformation intends to deceive, the motivations behind that deception are not always the same. Parodic disinformation serves to critique the publishing process; opportunist disinformation seeks to take advantage of the scholarly process for self-gain; and malicious disinformation manipulates the scholarly process in order to sow public distrust regarding divisive issues. Although all forms of disinformation can disrupt the scholarly process, malicious disinformation poses a far greater threat to academic publishing than the other two forms, as well as having greater outreach beyond academia. Furthermore, although parodic disinformation exists in a morally grey area, reports of obviously fabricated joke essays being accepted by predatory publishers can reveal just how willing these publishers are to publish disinformation in order to make a profit.

Analysing forms of disinformation in scholarly communications also exposes weaknesses in the academic publishing system at large. Parodic disinformation's disproportionate focus on the humanities and social sciences show how research in these fields is widely perceived as inferior compared with scientific research. Opportunist disinformation can illustrate how factors such as pressure to 'publish or perish' can motivate researchers to fabricate data or turn to predatory publishers. Malicious disinformation regarding COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerabilities of preprint servers during an infodemic. Being published by an academic journal allows disinformation to garner more perceived credibility and a wider audience than most disinformation posted on social media. This can also result in disinformation being covered by news publications as credible research, further aiding its spread.

While disinformation within scholarly communications threatens to weaken and destabilise the publishing process, its impact beyond journals and the academy should concern officials ranging from medical officials to national security analysts and politicians. Parodic disinformation can

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wittingly or unwittingly inflame public culture-war-related tensions and exacerbate political polarisation by reinforcing the narratives that academia is beholden to a liberal agenda, and that cultural studies such as gender studies, queer theory, and critical race theory are pretentious and irrelevant. Opportunistic scientific disinformation spread by unscrupulous researchers seeking to improve their research profile can consequentially put patients in medical danger. Malicious disinformation poses the greatest danger in that it deliberately seeks to erode public trust in scientific and political institutions. Medical disinformation concerning vaccines has exacerbated the COVID-19 health crisis and contributed to massive anti-government, anti-science protests, such as the Freedom Convoy trucker movement. Malicious disinformation can co-opt academic language in order to mobilise support for conspiracy theories and racist extremism. The confluence of the COVID-19 infodemic and increased global support for far-right extremism should demonstrate to both academic researchers and the general public that pseudoscientific disinformation can result in the loss of lives and political instability; that further research on disinformation and how to combat it is needed; and that scholarly research based on facts is more vital than ever.

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Persuasion Not Propaganda: Overcoming Controversies of Domestic Influence in NATO Military Strategic Communications

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Keywords—*military strategic communications, influence, propaganda, NATO, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Smith-Mundt, Psy-Ops, public affairs*

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Abstract

There are significant differences of opinion between the thirty member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as to the appropriate place of influence within military strategic communications. This paper finds that the sensitivities of some nations regarding influence stem from concerns of being accused of propaganda. While definitions of propaganda are diverse and complex, NATO's particular definition is unhelpful in distinguishing between propaganda and the legitimate rhetorical influence activities of NATO and its nations. Therefore this paper proposes a new definition of propaganda for NATO, incorporating academic arguments of propaganda as a co-produced strategic process of deception. By creating distance from

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NATO's communications activities, this new definition is intended to guide NATO nations beyond the sensitivities and towards a common approach to communications influence operations.

Introduction

There are significant differences of opinion between the thirty member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as to the appropriate place of influence within strategic communications.

Debates over the limits of persuasion, and the appropriateness of campaigns which aim to change attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours, are common. Such debates encompass what strategic communications is and is not, which activities contribute to it, and where the boundaries are. Within these discussions, one of the most polarising debates is whether it is ever appropriate for military strategic communications to aim to influence a domestic audience.

Starting from the premise that a unified approach to communications is vital, if NATO is to properly compete and contest within information warfare, this article aims to help guide NATO nations towards a common approach on communications influence operations.

At the outset, the article will demonstrate significant differences between NATO nations regarding whether it is appropriate for a military to aim to influence its domestic audience. It will use the UK and US as examples of nations at opposite ends of the debate, and outline why such differences can be detrimental to NATO's joined-up strategic communications activities and message cohesion.

The US will be used as a case study to explore the reasons behind the sensitivities. From this foundation, the paper aims to build the case that some of the sensitivities are misplaced, and contain inherent contradictions. It will do this in the following way.

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First, it will suggest that a communications mandate of 'inform, not influence' is built on flawed logic. There is no such thing as value-free information. There is, or should be, an intent behind all military communications: we are always trying to persuade audiences to see the world as we do.

Second, citing legal experts, it will suggest that the mandate is based on an erroneous interpretation of historical law. At the heart of this misinterpretation, the paper shall find, is the term 'propaganda' and, specifically, the desire to protect the American people from it.

Finding that the crux of the sensitivities surrounding influence lies in propaganda, the article will then embark on an exploration of that subject. It will scrutinise definitions of propaganda, and suggest that the US's and NATO's definitions of the term are problematic.

As a primary step towards overcoming the sensitivities and building a more helpful definition for NATO, the article will first suggest the need to explain transparently NATO and NATO nations' influence activities, such as psychological operations (PsyOps). Failing to explain openly and transparently what PsyOps are and are not means that the practice is often misrepresented. This misrepresentation only adds to sensitivities surrounding influence.

Once legitimate influence activities are properly acknowledged, this transparency in turn allows us to explore the differences between these activities and propaganda. Using this understanding, this article then notes two key facets of propaganda which are useful in building a new definition for NATO: firstly, propaganda as a strategic process of deception, and secondly, the practice as a co-production between producer and consumer.

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Among the many definitions of propaganda, this article suggests that a formulation following Jowett and O'Donnell's definition,[1] and incorporating the argument of propaganda as a co-produced strategic process of deception, would best serve NATO. The new definition differentiates propaganda from NATO's rhetorical influence activities, which should help guide NATO nations beyond the sensitivities and towards a common approach to communications influence operations.

Differences of opinion on StratCom influence

Opinions as to the appropriate place of domestic influence within strategic communications vary widely between NATO nations. The US and UK, for instance, sit at opposite sides of this debate.

The UK Ministry of Defence has proposed a definition for defence strategic communications:

> advancing national interests by using Defence as a means of communication to influence the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of audiences.[2]

It explicitly lists attitude and subsequent behaviour change as main strategic outcomes of defence communications strategy formulation and execution, 'both at home and abroad'.[3]

Meanwhile the US, which shall be used as a case study, rejects the idea that military communications targeted at an American audience should be designed with behaviour change as an aim. Traditional doctrine has held that public affairs may not 'focus on directing or manipulating

1 Originally 'The deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist': G. Jowett and V. O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2006), p. 7. A slight amendment to this formulation for NATO will be suggested in the conclusion.

2 UK Ministry of Defence, *Defence Strategic Communication: An Approach to Formulating and Executing Strategy*, Joint Doctrine Note 2/19, April 2019 [Accessed 15 March 2021].

3 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

public actions or opinion',[4] and the culture of public affairs is that the mission is to 'inform not influence'.[5] For instance, new recruits joining the US military in communications roles train at the US military's Defense Information School (DINFOS), where they are taught that there are different 'Information Capabilities'. Of these capabilities, strategic communications is explained as conducted only by governments, not militaries. MISO—military information support operations (formerly known as PsyOps: more on this later)—can influence, but only foreign audiences. Civil-military operations (CMO) can also influence, but only local populations in a foreign operational area. Meanwhile public affairs can be conducted by a military *and* can be employed towards a US domestic population—but its purpose is to 'inform' only.[6] Of the 'Information Capabilities', there is none which appears to mandate the US military to purposefully influence its domestic audience towards cognitive or behavioural change.

The US and UK militaries are two examples at opposite ends of a sliding scale of acceptability of domestic influence, with the twenty-eight other NATO nations scattered across this spectrum, too.

NATO policy

As the US is perhaps NATO's most influential member, its doctrine has significantly informed NATO military communications policy. In 2008 NATO's highest politico-military body, the North Atlantic Council (NAC), stipulated that 'information operations activities focused on influence and counter command […] may only take place as part of

4 United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Military Information Support Operations*, 7 January 2010, *incorporating* Change 1, 20 December 2011, Joint Publication 3-13.2 [Accessed 10 April 2022].

5 See discussions in J. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Georgetown University Press, 2012); C. Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011); and M. Armstrong, 'Holmes, Caldwell, Psy-Ops and the Smith-Mundt Act', *MountainRunner.us,* 28 February 2011 [Accessed 10 April 2022]. This is also the case for instance in the Canadian Armed Forces: see J. Janzen, 'What If the Pen Is the Sword? Communicating in a Chaotic, Sensational and Weaponised Information Environment', *Canadian Military Journal* 19 № 4 (2019).

6 See DINFOS Online Learning, *Information Capabilities (IC) Descriptions* [Accessed 9 March 2022].

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

an OPLAN [Operation Plan] and thus with NAC approval, including definition by the NAC of adversaries and potential adversaries'.[7] This meant that communications with intent to influence were for a long time only permitted as part of a defined mission or operation, and focused on a foreign local population or on those NATO was explicitly defined as fighting. As in the US, communications directed at NATO populations were to 'inform' only.

The debate over influence has moved on significantly since then within NATO military communications structures. When Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, it also unleashed 'information warfare' targeting NATO's populations. NATO nations became bombarded with disinformation, which attacked NATO's very centre of gravity—its unity. Facing this threat, NATO acknowledged that a passive approach of merely 'informing' of its activities might not be sufficient to fight in this new kind of war: it needed to compete more strongly in the domestic information sphere. Modern counter-propaganda efforts require persuasion and influence as a considered part of a domestic audience communications strategy.

NATO's most recent Military Policy on Strategic Communications, MC 0628, therefore talks of desired 'effects' of StratCom policy among friendly audiences and the need for a commander to 'inform and influence audiences through actions and words'.[8] The organisation accordingly began defining military StratCom as a process to *shape* the information space:

> The integration of communication capabilities and information staff function with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the Information Environment (IE), in support of NATO aims and objectives.[9]

7 'NAC Decision reflected in cover page to MC 422/3(Final), 08 Jul 08)', cited in *NATO Military Public Affairs Policy*, MC 0457/2, February 2011, p. 14 [Accessed 20 March 2021].

8 MC 0628: *NATO Military Policy on Strategic Communications* (2017). Nevertheless the publication highlights the need to avoid the perception that NATO is 'inappropriately influencing audiences or the media': the importance of influence is recognised, as long as it is not inconsistent with NATO policy. This hints at the underlying debates between nations (which must all sign off on the policy in order that it be agreed) regarding the place of influence within military strategic communications.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

NATO started adopting the UK government's 'OASIS'[10] campaign model, which specifies objectives of 'home' communications and does not shy away from domestic change as a strategic goal.[11] To give one example, at the time of writing, NATO has been undertaking a politico-military communications campaign entitled #WeAreNATO, showcasing NATO values, capacities, and capabilities with photos, videos, and other products, in order to 'reinforce the NATO brand and improve the understanding and value of the organisation among key audiences in member countries'.[12] This campaign does more than explain what NATO is and does: its published aims are 'to shift perception of a target audience' which includes citizens of NATO nations. This entails not just informing. Its social media posts invite readers to engage with and share content. Its online 'campaign toolkit' sees NATO as a 'brand'; has 'colour guidelines'; and provides campaign graphics and artwork for download. This campaign, and public affairs in general, *is about influence*.[13] Such an approach is standard public affairs practice and should be neither surprising nor controversial.

NATO communications doctrine and practices therefore reveal an understanding that all communications—including those undertaken by military members and with a domestic audience in mind—can and should intend to influence. Among NATO nations themselves, however, what influence means and when it is and is not appropriate remains a sliding scale. While perceptions are changing, the use of military strategic communications to influence domestic audience perception continues to raise eyebrows among some NATO nations. This article focuses principally on the US as demonstrative of the controversy.

9 Ibid.

10 The UK government's OASIS (objectives, audience/insights, strategy/ideas, implementation, scoring/evaluation) framework is a series of steps to guide communications campaigns: UK Government Communication Service, *Guide to Campaign Planning: OASIS* [Accessed 26 December 2022].

11 For instance: Countering Propaganda: NATO Spearheads Use of Behavioural Change Science, NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 12 May 2015.

12 *We Are NATO: Defence and Security Campaign Toolkit* [Accessed 21 March 2021].

13 'Smart PA *is* about influence': Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 42.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

Why is this diversity of approach a problem?

A diversity of approach is a challenge for an organisation whose centre of gravity is its unity. Strategic communications is at the forefront of information warfare. To 'fight' effectively, strategic communications officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) arriving to fill NATO billets need to be clear on their mission and the extents, and limits, of their mandate. When this mandate runs counter to what they have been taught during basic training at home, it can result in confusion and ineffective (or erroneous) application of policy to practice.

NATO's enhanced Forward Presence mission is an example. The rotational deployment of four multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland under NATO flags is intended, as explained on the website, to 'demonstrate Allies' solidarity, determination and ability to defend Alliance territory'.[14] At first glance, this communications aim would seem to fit nicely into the 'inform' mandate. If sufficient photos, videos, and press releases make it into the media, publics will be deemed to have been informed, and solidarity demonstrated.

But NATO wants to demonstrate its solidarity, determination, and ability *towards* a purpose. NATO's statement that the mission 'is a tangible reminder that an attack on one is an attack on all'[15] provides an indication of this purpose. In fact, the mission aims to assure NATO publics that NATO is present, is united, and can defend them. It also aims to deter adversaries from a potential attack on NATO soil. And assurance and deterrence are cognitive aims well beyond the 'demonstrate' surface.

Failure to recognise that 'demonstrating' is in fact 'demonstrating towards a purpose', as some nations' communications approaches do, can cloud StratCom planning and practice. It could mean that two military officers communicating on this same mission could potentially have different

14 NATO, 'NATO's Military Presence in the East of the Alliance' [Accessed 21 January 2022].

15 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

aims in mind: one might be aiming for cognitive influence, the other to merely 'inform'. This entails the risk that communications will be less effective in their contribution to overall mission success.

Recognising this challenge, NATO is currently redesigning its strategic communications training courses at the NATO School in Oberammergau and at the Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga. New courses will clearly explain military communications—including those targeted at domestic audiences—as influencing activities. Nevertheless these courses require a reframing of what some attendees have been told their national mandate is. And while military officers and NCOs are usually seconded to NATO billets for two to three years, they are nevertheless still answerable to their national chains of command. There will inevitably be some confusion, if not friction. It would be simpler, clearer, and ultimately more conducive to mission success if NATO nations, individually as well collectively, began to approach strategic communications in comparable ways.

Towards this, this article aims to contribute to current efforts to create a common approach to NATO nations' communications influence operations. To do so, it will first build the case that some national sensitivities are misplaced and contain inherent contradictions, with a view to overcoming them.

'Inform, not influence' is flawed logic

At the outset, a communications mandate of 'inform, not influence' is built on flawed logic. As Christopher Paul, senior social scientist at the RAND Corporation, testified to the House Armed Services Committee:

> Informing without influencing is impossible: there is no such thing as value free information. Every provision of information passes on the attitudes and beliefs of the speaker or writer, and seeks

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

> to serve some purpose. 'Letting the facts speak for themselves' presupposes that the facts have something to say, and that it is something the speaker wants said. Every provision of information is an act of persuasion.[16]

Even where a communicator attempts to be as objective as possible, communications will inevitably be coloured by bias of background, history, culture, and other factors. Indeed, the Alliance itself is founded on shared values rooted in Western democracy, different from value systems of alternative models of governance elsewhere in the world. NATO's communications will, we would hope, reflect these values.

Further, as any other organisation, it should not be assumed that NATO will *try* to be as objective as possible. Truthful and factual, yes, but not disinterestedly objective. The information NATO uses to inform and educate inevitably supports NATO's messaging and overall communications objectives. It does not also publicise Russian narratives in the interests of objectivity—nor is it expected to do so.[17] Arguing, as many NATO nations doctrinally still do, that public affairs communications should merely 'educate' a public towards 'informed choice' denies that there is a clear direction and objective for such education. The suggestion that public affairs should inform without influencing therefore falls at the first hurdle. There are in fact indications that even those nations which are in the 'inform, not influence' camp acknowledge the contradictions inherent in the doctrine—as evidenced by debates in Pentagon circles over the difference between 'influencing' versus 'actively informing' or 'informing with intent'.[18]

16 C. Paul, *Getting Better at Strategic Communication*, Testimony to US House of Representatives, 12 July 2011 [Accessed 3 March 2021].

17 This is not to suggest that NATO seeks to hide negative information counter to its messaging. Such information is freely available and revealed when requested; any attempt to conceal negative information would risk reputational damage and be counterproductive.

18 Cited in Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 46.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

All strategic communications therefore aspire to influence people,[19] whether this is acknowledged openly or tacitly. In light of this, why is domestic influence in military strategic communications contested by some nations?

Why is domestic influence controversial to some nations?

Why is domestic influence in military strategic communications contested by some nations? This is not a debate entered into elsewhere. In the corporate world, the term 'strategic communications' is used uncontroversially to describe activities designed to make the corporate entity 'look good' and to influence consumers towards certain behaviours (we expect Coca-Cola to try to influence us to buy its product). Meanwhile governments try to influence domestic populations towards healthy choices such as stopping smoking, limiting alcohol, wearing a mask, or accepting vaccinations. These kinds of communications are routine, and often regarded in Western society as effective means of promoting the public good.

The difference is that such domestic strategic communications activities are conducted by commercial or political communicators—not the military. Sensitivities around domestic influence by the military reveal concerns over propagandising a domestic public.

In the US the foundations of this sensitivity are built on a 1948 law known as 'Smith-Mundt' and its amendments.[20] Officially the US Information and Educational Exchange Act, the 1948 law gave the secretary of state the authority to conduct information activities abroad, marking a shift from military to civilian control over efforts to influence foreign publics.

19 J. Techau, *What Makes Communications Strategic? Preparing Military Organizations for the Battle of Ideas*, Research Paper no. 65, NATO Defense College, February 2011 [Accessed 10 April 2022].

20 US Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, Pub. L. No. 80-402, 62 Stat. 6 (1948), Popularly known as the Smith-Mundt Act and identified with sponsors H. Alexander Smith and Karl E. Mundt. The 2013 Smith-Mundt Modernization Act lifted some of the 1948 restrictions on domestic access to government-funded media intended for foreign audiences.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

Amendments in 1972 and 1985 sought to prevent the domestic dissemination of information products that were produced as a result. Therefore the purpose of Smith-Mundt is often characterised as protecting Americans from attempts at influence by prohibiting the domestic distribution of propaganda.[21] As legislative analyst Matthew Weed succinctly outlines, 'These provisions have been interpreted as attempting to curtail the intentional or unintentional propagandizing of the American populace through exposing it to public diplomacy materials whose purpose is to influence foreign public opinion.'[22]

It was this interpretation of the Smith-Mundt law that led to criticism of former US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld back in 2002, when he brought together public affairs and PsyOps under one 'Office of Strategic Influence'. Critics accused him of setting up a 'propaganda arm' and Congress demanded that the office be shut down.[23] Later, in 2008, the Pentagon's inspector general released an audit which found the Department of Defense (DoD) 'may appear to merge inappropriately' its public affairs with operations that try to influence audiences abroad,[24] which was characterised as possibly crossing the line into propaganda.[25] 'Violation of Smith-Mundt' was cited by the media as a reason that Lt Gen. William Caldwell was brought under investigation (and subsequently cleared) during his post as a commander in Afghanistan.[26] Meanwhile fear of violating Smith-Mundt has been argued as a reason that US

21 D. Murphy, 'Strategic Communication: Wielding the Information Element of Power', in *U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Issues,* vol. 1: *The Theory of War and Strategy,* J. Boone Bartholomees (ed.), (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Publications, 2012), pp. 159–72. See also, for instance, W. Sager, 'Apple Pie Propaganda? The Smith–Mundt Act before and after the Repeal of the Domestic Dissemination Ban', *Northwestern Law Review* 109 Nº 2 (2015): 551–46. Sager suggests the 2013 repeal of parts of Smith-Mundt gives the federal government greater power to covertly influence public opinion with 'surreptitious government propaganda'.

22 M. Weed, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Legislative Proposals to Amend Prohibitions on Disseminating Materials to Domestic Audiences,* Congressional Research Service, 21 September 2012 [Accessed 15 March 2021].

23 'Pentagon Sets Sights on Public Opinion', *NBC News,* 5 February 2009 [Accessed 11 September 2021].

24 United States Department of Defense Inspector General, *Organizational Structure and Managers' Internal Control Program for the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) and American Forces Information Service,* Report No. D-2009-028, 10 December 2008 [Accessed 11 September 2021].

25 'Pentagon Sets Sights on Public Opinion'.

26 M. Hastings, 'Another Runaway General: Army Deploys Psy-Ops on U.S. Senators', *Rolling Stone,* 24 February 2011 [Accessed 10 April 2022], and E. Reeve, 'Where Is the Military's Line between Psy-Ops and P.R.?', *The Atlantic,* 24 February 2011 [Accessed 10 April 2022].

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

military counter-propaganda operations were not as effective as they might otherwise have been in Iraq.[27]

But Smith-Mundt expert Matthew Armstrong takes issue with what he terms the US military's 'accepted wisdom' of using Smith-Mundt in debates on influence.[28] Three of the challenges he raises are of particular note to this discussion. First, Armstrong highlights that neither the original law nor the amendments cover campaigns specifically designed for domestic consumption. Second, he argues that this law does not apply to the US military. Third, the internet allows domestic audiences free access to materials not intended for them. To these important points I add my own challenge: whether or not we agree that the law is being erroneously applied, this legislation is characterised as protecting from propaganda—not influence.[29]

I shall address each of these points in turn, and then concentrate the core of this article on the last point: the debate on the conceptual differences between propaganda and rhetorical influencing activities conducted by the West.

First, in 1972, the 1948 act was amended to specifically prohibit domestic dissemination of information prepared for foreign publics, stating that such materials 'shall not be disseminated within the United States, its territories, or possessions'. This was then followed in 1985 by a provision (the Zorinsky Agreement) which prohibits using public diplomacy funds 'to influence public opinion in the United States'. But, as Armstrong highlights, outlawing the distribution of funds and materials destined for foreign audiences is not the same thing as prohibiting campaigns which have been designed at the outset to persuade (and influence) home audiences. Smith-Mundt does not appear to cover designated domestic influence campaigns.

27 A. Garfield, 'The US Counter-Propaganda Failure in Iraq', *Middle East Quarterly* 14 Nº 4 (2007): 23–32.

28 M. Armstrong, discussion with author, 9 April 2021. Armstrong explores in great depth the misinformation and contradictions associated with Smith-Mundt on his blog *MountainRunner.us*.

29 See the website *Smith-Mundt*, whose tagline is 'confront propaganda' [Accessed 10 April 2022].

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

Second, even following the 1972 and 1985 amendments, Armstrong asserts that prohibitions would categorically not apply to US military public affairs.[30] He notes that there was no discussion that this legislation applied in 1948, 1972, or 1985 to any agency other than the Department of State, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), or the United States Information Agency. He further highlights that this is a Title 22 law: it covers foreign relations, not normally the DoD.[31] Weed, writing in 2012 in support of modernisation of the legislation, summarised:

> Although current legislation seems to apply the restrictions of these provisions only to certain activities of the Department of State and broadcasting by the BBG, other agencies, including the Department of Defense, have considered themselves bound by the provisions, potentially limiting their communications activities unnecessarily.[32]

Erroneous interpretation of the law—which Armstrong terms the 'myth' of Smith-Mundt—has entered corners of the US military collective consciousness, conforming to the belief that US military public affairs personnel 'inform but do not influence'.[33] However, there appears to be nothing in Smith-Mundt that covers domestic influence campaigns, and even if there were, Armstrong argues, it would not apply to the US military.

Third, in an information age, it is no longer possible to hold a monopoly over audience segmentation. The internet creates supranational communities not bound by physical geographic boundaries. It is meaningless to talk of protecting US audiences from 'foreign propaganda'

30 M. Armstrong, email exchange with author, 12 April 2021. See also M. Armstrong, 'Mind Games: Why Rolling Stone's Article on the Military's Domestic Psy-Ops Scandal Gets It So Wrong', *Foreign Policy*, 1 March 2011 [Accessed 10 April 2021].

31 M. Armstrong, 'Neglected History, Forgotten Lessons: A Presentation and a Discussion', *MountainRunner.us*, 2 April 2021 [Accessed 10 April 2021].

32 Weed, *U.S. Public Diplomacy.*

33 M. Armstrong, discussion with author, 9 April 2021.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

when such materials are available to a domestic audience at the click of a button. This was the reason that, as far back as 2003, Rumsfeld acknowledged in a secret memo that 'information intended for foreign audiences […] is increasingly consumed by our domestic audience'.[34] As the UK MoD's Joint Doctrine Note 1/12 expressively puts it, 'what is said in Helmand is heard in Huddersfield'.[35]

This invites a further point. Citations of Smith-Mundt in debates on influence generally reveal concerns about propagandising a domestic public. But propagandising goes far beyond influencing.

Confusion is understandable. 'Propaganda' is a complex and diverse term, such that even proponents apparently on the same 'side' of the argument often talk past each other. In an essay critiquing Armstrong's arguments, *Wired* writer Sharon Weinberger uses Smith-Mundt to suggest public affairs should 'inform' only in order to avoid propagandising.[36] This would seem to be the same (Armstrong would say flawed) logic as the US military's. However her argument then breaks with the US military's as she also argues that, to avoid propagandising, crafted messages should not be within the toolkit of public affairs. She states: 'The role of public affairs is to convey information, not messages'. Weinberger's opinion that crafted messages are akin to propaganda is a valid theory—definitions of propaganda are diverse, as shall be discussed below. However, it is not an argument that the US military would seem to agree with. Field manual guidance states that 'it is imperative for PA personnel to rapidly develop themes and messages to ensure that facts, data, events, and utterances are put in context'.[37] While the US military also uses Smith-Mundt's citation of propaganda to claim that influence is not permitted, it does not include crafted messages under this heading. Interestingly, Weinberger cites US military doctrine to support her

34 *Information Operations Roadmap, 30 October 2003*, The National Security Archive, posted 26 January 2006 [Accessed 11 September 2021].

35 UK Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution*, Joint Doctrine Note 1/12, January 2012 [Accessed 10 April 2022].

36 S. Weinberger, 'Debating Domestic Propaganda, Part II', *Wired*, 12 August 2008 [Accessed 10 April 2022].

37 US DoD Joint Publication 3-61 (Public Affairs), 17 November 2015, incorporating Change 1, 19 August 2016 [Accessed 28 March 2021].

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

point, despite going much further than the military in the activities she deems propaganda.[38] Arguments over what propaganda is and is not, and subsequently how this should affect the place of influence in military communications, are therefore complex, confusing, and at times contradictory.

Armstrong's arguments explain how Smith-Mundt does not apply to US military domestic communications. Yet sensitivities surrounding domestic influence persist, indicating this does not seem sufficient to resolve the issue. Rather, if we are to move forward with the aim of guiding NATO nations towards a common approach to communications influence operations, it will be necessary to unpack and explore the underlying sensitivities. This requires sifting some of the complexity associated with the term 'propaganda', since it is with this term that the crux of sensitivities regarding influence lies.

What is propaganda?

The term *propaganda* derives from the Latin *propagare* (to spread or enlarge). Historian and Senior Associate Fellow of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Gill Bennett notes that its gerund form *propaganda* 'carries a purposive meaning'[39] (*should be* or *intended to be* disseminated), which suggests that propaganda does not just inform, but persuade.[40] It first appeared in Europe in 1622, during the Counter-Reformation, when Pope Gregory XV established the Congregatio de propaganda fide (Office of the Propagation of the Faith) to supervise missionary efforts to spread Roman Catholicism against Lutheranism and Calvinism. As an act of propagating, then, it carried no associations

38 To back up her claim that crafted messages have no place in public affairs, Weinberger quotes the Pentagon's 'Principles of Information' that public affairs activity 'is to expedite the flow of information to the public; propaganda has no place in DoD public affairs programs'. Thus she equates crafted messages with propaganda—which the US military itself does not seem to do. Weinberger, 'Debating Domestic Propaganda'.

39 G. Bennett, 'Propaganda and Disinformation: How a Historical Perspective Aids Critical Response Development', in *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda,* P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy and N. Snow (eds) (London, California, New Delhi and Singapore: SAGE Publications, 2020), p. 246.

40 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

with lies[41] but, as Bernays claimed, it was a 'wholesome word' of 'honourable parentage'.[42] It is important to note that its genesis denotes a positive, rather than a negative, because it gives context to later academic arguments that propaganda can often be truthful and straightforward, as shall be explored below.

The meaning of 'propaganda' gradually evolved over centuries, for a long time valueless or suggestive of positive or negative action.[43] Before 1914 it referred to the process by which 'the converted attempted to persuade the unconverted'.[44] It was due to British communications techniques and the aftermath of World War I that overwhelmingly pejorative overtones emerged. Renowned scholar of communications and propaganda Phil Taylor described a turning point in the semantic journey of propaganda as soldiers returning from the battlefields were shocked at the war fervour at home, 'and by the consequent perceptual gap that had clearly opened up between the civilian image of the war and the reality of the soldiers' experience'.[45] The word became discredited as both civilians and soldiers realised that nationalism had been systematically 'whipped up' for the Great War—concealing the horrors of the trenches and using atrocity propaganda to contrive falsehoods about the enemy.[46]

Popular discomfort with propaganda was cemented in World War II. Set against Soviet, British, and US state communications, Nazi use of propaganda became a defining tool of governance, to odious effect. Given this history, 'propaganda' now colloquially denotes 'dirty tricks'

41 M.C. Miller, Introduction to *Propaganda* by E. Bernays (1928; New York: Ig Publishing, 1955), p. 9. Page references are to the 1955 edition.

42 Bernays, *Propaganda*, p. 50, quoting *Scientific American*.

43 As indeed it continues to be in some non-Western nations. For instance the term 'propaganda' in a Chinese context often has neutral connotations, referring to dissemination of public information: 宣傳 'propaganda; publicity'. The Chinese Communist Party for instance has a 'Central Propaganda Department', often termed a 'Publicity Department' when referred to in Western communications to avoid the pejorative implied in the English translation.

44 P. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era* (1990; Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 4. Page references are to the 2003 edition.

45 P. Taylor, 'Strategic Communications and the Relationship between Governmental "Information" Activities in the Post 9/11 World', *Journal of Information Warfare* 5 № 3 (2006): 1–25.

46 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

utilised by 'hidden persuaders', 'mind manipulators', and 'brainwashers'.[47] Yet closer inspection reveals a more complicated reality. Despite its commonplace interpretation, there is considerable 'definitional fog' about what constitutes propaganda:[48] L. John Martin, in his 1958 work on propaganda under international law, collected twenty-six definitions.[49]

Today, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines propaganda as:

> The systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view. Also information disseminated in this way; the means or media by which such ideas are disseminated.[50]

Jacques Ellul, one of the preeminent scholars in the field of propaganda studies, would have argued that this description of propaganda's aims does not go far enough:

> The aim of modern propaganda is no longer to modify ideas, but to provoke action. It is no longer to change adherence to a doctrine, but to make the individual cling irrationally to a process of action […] It is no longer to transform an opinion but to arouse an active and mythical belief.[51]

Scholars Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell pick up on cognitive manipulation and direction of action in their definition. It is this definition which shall later serve as a foundation on which to build a new definition of propaganda for NATO:

47 Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind,* p. 1.

48 P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy and N. Snow (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda* (London, California, New Delhi and Singapore: SAGE Publications, 2020), p. xxv.

49 J. Martin, *International Propaganda: Its Legal and Diplomatic Control* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p. 10.

50 *OED Online*, March 2021 [Accessed 20 March 2021].

51 J. Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes,* trans. K. Kellen and J. Lerner (1965; New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 25. Page references are to the 1973 edition.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

> The deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.[52]

NATO's current definition focuses on content rather than action, denoting propaganda as:

> Information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view.[53]

NATO's definitional focus on content adds to national sensitivities

A definitional focus on content is unhelpful to NATO nations' inform/influence debate. This is because, while there is nothing necessarily erroneous about NATO's definition of propaganda, it exacerbates national sensitivities by opening NATO up to accusations of conducting propaganda itself. As James Farwell, strategic communications advisor to the US DoD and Special Operations Command, highlights, use of the word 'especially' in definitions such as NATO's means that disseminated information does not have to be biased or misleading to fall under the definition of propaganda.[54] While not going as far as Jacques Driencourt's adage 'everything is propaganda',[55] any '*information used to promote a political cause or point of view*', misleading or not, is logically captured under NATO's definition. And as has been stressed above, NATO communications, as those of any organisation, are always promoting a particular point of view.

52 Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, p. 7.

53 *NATO Term* (NATO's terminology database), 'propaganda' [Accessed 21 March 2021].

54 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 25.

55 J. Driencourt, *La propagande, novelle force politique* (Paris: Libraire Armand Colin, 1950).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

This echoes many academic arguments. Ellul for instance highlighted the idea that propaganda is composed only of lies is erroneous,[56] and nothing in any of the preceding definitions of propaganda—including NATO's—renders lying a prerequisite for something to be 'propaganda'. Elements of truth (whole truths, half-truths, or misapplied truths) in propaganda communications are often intrinsic to what makes them compelling: only when claims are plausible do they hold power. Even the US military explicitly recognises that much propaganda is 'honest and straightforward'.[57] While Western institutional recognition of this is generally helpful in practice to signpost adversary propaganda, NATO's definition is problematic. Since NATO's definition focuses on content rather than practice, it is not then apparent what distinguishes propagandic information from the communications of Western nations and NATO itself. Therefore a focus on content, while not necessarily erroneous, merely contributes to extant national sensitivities and the fear of being accused of propaganda when undertaking influence communications.

The US DoD definition seemingly skirts the danger of being accused of propaganda by simply adding the word *adversary* to its definition. Hence:

> Any form of *adversary* communication, especially of a biased or misleading nature, designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly.[58]

But this does not stand up to academic scrutiny. The use of the word *adversary* as the qualifier means that propaganda can only ever be 'something done by other people'[59]—it is a catch-all that shields America from ever being accused of it. It attaches a subjective value to the

56 K. Kellen, Introduction to Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. v.

57 US DoD Joint Publication 3-61.

58 US DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, Joint Publication 1-02, 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 February 2013) [emphasis added]. The more recent JP 1-02 (through 15 February 2016) does not include 'propaganda' among its definitions.

59 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 25.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

definition, forcing us to take sides: word-for-word the same message, communicated in the same way, at the same time, could fall under either 'enemy propaganda' or 'US messaging' depending on the originator. As a subjective term, the word *adversary* also indicates the opposite—a Talib could correctly use this definition to claim that US communications directed at him, as his adversary, are propaganda, whereas his own communications are not. By this definition, propaganda is all and none of the communications by the US or the adversary, depending on which side of the argument one falls. Turning Driencourt's assertion on its head, propaganda could be everything; equally it could be nothing. This limitation makes understanding propaganda problematic; similarly, employing *adversary* renders it more, not less, difficult to differentiate the activities from legitimate Western military influence practices.

Towards a new definition for NATO

The US definition does not stand up to academic analysis. Meanwhile NATO's definition is not necessarily erroneous but is nevertheless unhelpful, since it adds to national sensitivities by failing to distinguish propaganda from NATO's legitimate influencing activities.

Even if semantic definitions and academic debates allow space for propaganda to be truthful and straightforward, Farwell highlights that propaganda is popularly viewed pejoratively, as an effort to lie, trick, deceive, or manipulate.[60] Taylor similarly notes that, colloquially, propaganda is understood as 'dirty tricks' utilised by 'mind manipulators',[61] and Nicolas O'Shaughnessy highlights that 'deception is not some essential essence of propaganda's definition but it is critical to the popular understanding of propaganda'.[62] And as he argues, no working definition of a term can be separated out from its colloquial uses.[63] Indeed in

60 Ibid p. 3.

61 Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind,* p. 1.

62 N. O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (Manchester, New York and Vancouver: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 7.

63 Ibid., p. 15.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

everyday communications, NATO's leaders and communicators often use the term propaganda interchangeably with disinformation,[64] which, although the NATO Standardization Office has no officially agreed definition, always implies purposeful deceit.[65]

Given the vast and contradicting scholarship, no definition of propaganda will be perfect—defining propaganda has been characterised as a 'maddeningly elusive' task.[66] But NATO's definition can be improved upon to reflect the way its leaders use the term, and to make it practicable for the organisation. A new definition which distinguishes propaganda from NATO influence activities for its publics would help NATO nations to move forward on the inform/influence debate. In creating such a definition, it would be advisable to incorporate academic arguments which reflect the colloquial understanding of propaganda (and the way NATO itself uses the term in public) involving intent to deceive.

What about PsyOps?

When trying to originate a new definition of propaganda for NATO that clearly distinguishes it from NATO's activities, there is an immediate hurdle. If intent to deceive is key to popular understandings of propaganda, how can we distinguish propaganda from PsyOps?[67] PsyOps is doctrinally a form of strategic communications, aimed at influencing the perceptions

64 European Parliament, *At a Glance: Understanding Propaganda and Disinformation*, November 2015 [Accessed 29 March 2021].

65 G. Bennett, 'Propaganda and Disinformation', p. 246. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines disinformation as 'the dissemination of deliberately false information esp. when supplied by a government or its agent to a foreign power or to the media, with the intention of influencing the policies or opinions of those who receive it; false information so supplied' (*OED Online*, March 2021 [Accessed 20 March 2021]).

Compare 'misinformation': 'The action of misinforming someone' / 'Wrong or misleading information', which covers the accidental spreading of mistruths (*OED Online*, March 2021 [Accessed 25 March 2021]).

66 O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 13.

67 'PsyOp' is defined by NATO as 'Planned activities using methods of communication and other means directed at approved audiences in order to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives': *NATO Term* [Accessed 19 March 2021]. See C. Lamb, cited in Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 5. See also pp. 25–26 for a discussion on what Farwell terms the US DoD's 'neat but disingenuous' use of language in distinguishing between propaganda and PsyOps.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

and shaping the behaviour of foreign audiences. Dropping leaflets over Baghdad to urge populations not to support insurgents; building a well to persuade Afghan villagers to think favourably about foreign forces; using loudspeakers to broadcast news to North Koreans about the attractions of life in the South. Yet to echo Farwell's interview with Christopher Lamb of the National Defense University, PsyOps 'is inherently biased' and 'may mislead the audience'.[68] Leaflets dropped may purport to be from another source than the Western force; informational adverts in a local newspaper may not bear the mark of a Western military, if so desired by a commander.

The US recognises three different forms of PsyOps—White, Gray, and Black—depending on transparency of attribution. NATO itself only conducts white PsyOps (products disseminated and acknowledged by the sponsor or accredited agency).[69] As with public affairs products, NATO's PsyOps products must be based on evidenced, factual information, attributable to NATO or a concurring partner, in order to preserve Alliance credibility. PsyOps in the NATO realm is, then, uncontroversial and merely a different influence tool that sits alongside other information capabilities, including public affairs. As Taylor so pithily put it, 'why should there be such a stigma surrounding a process of persuasion designed to get people to stop fighting, and thus preserve their lives, rather than having their heads blown off?'[70]

Nationally, however, PsyOps can also include grey PsyOps (products that do not specifically reveal their source)[71] and black PsyOps (products appearing to emanate from a source other than the true one).[72]

It is helpful here to recall the NATO and US definitions of propaganda:

68 C. Lamb, cited in Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 5.

69 NATO, *Allied Joint Publication for Psychological Operations AJP-3.10.1*, Edition B, Version 1, September 2014 [Accessed 21 March 2021].

70 Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind*, p. 8.

71 UK National Elements: NATO, *Allied Joint Publication for Psychological Operations AJP-3.10.1*.

72 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

> NATO: 'Information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view.'[73]
>
> US: 'Any form of adversary communication, especially of a biased or misleading nature, designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly.'[74]

Excepting the loaded term 'adversary' which has no objective significance, grey PsyOps could clearly come under the 'biased or misleading' header of propaganda, and black PsyOps would qualify as 'deception'. It will be for some an uncomfortable realisation that both grey and black national PsyOps activities apparently sit within NATO's and the US's own definitions of propaganda. Indeed the terms delineating the different forms of PsyOps were first coined in 1949 by US Strategic Services officer Daniel Lerner, who termed the practice 'White, Gray and Black Propaganda'.[75] Meanwhile, President Eisenhower created a psychological warfare unit that saw PsyOps as 'the dissemination of propaganda designed to undermine the enemy's will to resist, demoralize his forces, and sustain the morale of our supporters'.[76]

The deceptive nature of certain forms of PsyOps adds to the reasons why current NATO and US definitions of propaganda are unhelpful. To help overcome sensitivities around influence, the difference between propaganda and the legitimate rhetorical influence activities conducted

73 *NATO Term,* 'propaganda'.

74 US DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, Joint Publication 1-02, 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 February 2013).

75 D. Lerner, *Psychological Warfare against Nazi Germany: The Sykewar Campaign, D-Day to VE-Day* (MIT Press, 1949), cited in K. Marsh and J. Williams, *Strategic Communication* (London: Offspin Media, 2017), p. 49.

76 Paddock Jr., *Psychological and Unconventional Warfare, 20,* citing Historical Records Section, AGO, Reference aid no. 7, Records Pertaining to Psychological Warfare in Custody of Historical Records Section, 8 November 1949, 5, RG 319, P&O 091.412 (7 October 1949), F/W 25/2, National Archives, cited in Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 9.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

by NATO and its nations, including deceptive PsyOps, needs to be made clear.

The need to explain PsyOps transparently

As a first step in making this distinction, it would be helpful if legitimate PsyOps activities were discussed with more transparency. Failing to explain openly and transparently what PsyOps are and are not means the practice is often misrepresented, and makes it seem as if a government has something to hide with its influencing activities. PsyOps is regulated under law as an activity mandated only against a foreign public, usually in a theatre of war. While PsyOps can deceive, domestic influence activities must always be truthful and transparent.

But rather than explain transparently the difference, the US approach seems instead to stifle the debate. During his tenure then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued the need to replace the term PsyOp(s) to repair negative perceptions of the practice, lamenting that 'PSYOP tends to connote propaganda, brainwashing, manipulation, and deceit'.[77] Consequently, it has been renamed frequently since 2010, shifting away and back to MISO.[78] Rebranding PsyOps as MISO, it was felt, would neutralise the term in the eyes of government agencies and across American society.[79] In NATO and other organisations, however, the name PsyOps endured and is sporadically still used in the US military too. The debacle demonstrates the unease of some nations surrounding open and frank discussion of the range of influence activities conducted under strategic communications. The problem becomes about what people's *perceptions* of PsyOps are, rather than what it is: as propaganda acquired sinister associations in the vernacular, so too has PsyOps, having in popular culture connotations of mind control. But introducing

77 *Changing the Term Psychological Operations to Military Information Support Operations*, 12 December 2011, MARADMINS 715/11 [Accessed 20 November 2022].

78 Secretary of Defense Memorandum, 'Interim Naming Convention', cited in D. Cowan and C. Cook, 'What's in a Name? Psychological Operations versus Military Information Support Operations and an Analysis of Organizational Change', *Military Review,* 6 March 2018.

79 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

opacity to a name to protect it from accusations of not being transparent suggests hypocrisy. Far from reassuring publics, name changes serve only to confuse and give the impression that a government has something to hide. And failure to explain transparently this influence activity merely exacerbates the credibility dilemma NATO and its nations seek to avoid.[80]

In fact, ironically, Western military leaders seem to display less squeamishness when discussing kinetic influence activity abroad, including dropping bombs for cognitive effect, than they do when discussing PsyOps. To take an extreme case, in 2017 a MOAB—GBU-43 Massive Ordinance Air Blast (colloquially among soldiers, the Mother Of All Bombs)—was dropped as much to destroy ISIS's underground tunnels in Afghanistan as to convey shock and awe.[81] This is the largest non-nuclear bomb dropped in US history. It weighs 22,600 pounds, has to be transported by cargo plane, and creates a 150-metre shockwave on impact. Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan General Nicholson said it was the right bomb to overcome ISIS's bunker and tunnel defences.[82] But as scholars Bolt, Betz, and Azari highlight, 'fulfilling military objectives is only part of the battle […] this remains a contest for narrative and symbolic space'.[83] Accordingly, the US made sure that the blast of its 'shock and awe' weapon was felt well beyond the site of impact, by ensuring the footage was released to the public afterwards.[84]

This constitutes a psychological influence operation much like any other. Yet attempts at influence involving force are talked about in military circles without the apparent discomfort that accompanies operations restricted to the cognitive space where there is no kinetic manifestation. Press releases are written and footage released, as they were following

80 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power,* p. 3.

81 J. Crosbie, 'The Mother of All Bombs Is a Psychological Weapon: Someone Wanted to Make a Statement', *Inverse,* 16 April 2017 [Accessed 3 March 2021].

82 'U.S. Bombs, Destroys Khorasan Group Stronghold in Afghanistan', *US CENTCOM,* press release 13 April 2017 [Accessed 11 September 2021].

83 N. Bolt, D. Betz, and J. Azari, *Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Understanding the Phenomenon* (Royal United Services Institute, 2008).

84 US Department of Defense (@DeptofDefense), 'A #MOAB bomb strikes #ISIS cave & tunnel systems in eastern #Afghanistan. The strike was designed to minimize risk to Afghan and U.S. Forces', *Twitter,* 14 April 2017 [Accessed 21 March 2021].

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

the MOAB explosion. Meanwhile coercion, 'an attempt to influence the behaviour of another by using force, or the threat of force',[85] is openly listed as a 'success mechanism' within the US military's *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept,* as one extreme of its 'Influence Spectrum' of strategic communications.[86] Munitions uniquely 'of the mind', such as PsyOps, seem often more controversial and less talked about by some national militaries than even lethal physical munitions deployed inter alia for psychological effect.

This seems to be because, in a democratic society, kinetic or coercive strategic communications activities are inherently understood to be targeted at an adversary. Rhetorical military influence activities, however, are conducted both against adversaries (in theatres of war, i.e., PsyOps) and domestically (#WeAreNATO). While only those deployed against adversaries (and when undertaken by nations) entail deception, there is a certain discomfort in these two distinct methods of rhetorical influence nesting within the same nomenclature. Much of the sensitivity around influence campaigns seems to come from a fear by military strategic communicators that they might be misunderstood as using foreign deception techniques (such as PsyOps) on domestic audiences. Therefore, it seems, they avoid the conversation altogether.

But concern that a public might be unable to distinguish between foreign and domestic influencing techniques is infantilising. Just as domestic audiences can understand dropping a bomb as an influence activity but know it would never be used against them by their own government, so can they understand that there are communications influence techniques which would only ever be used abroad. Reticence to discuss the difference transparently only adds to the confusion and misrepresentation. In the same vein, refusing to acknowledge that public affairs activities of national militaries or NATO might include aims to persuade and influence domestic audiences, for fear that such activities

85 G. Schaub, 'Deterrence, Compellence, and Prospect Theory', *Political Psychology* 25 № 3 (2004): 389–411, cited in US Department of Defense, *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept*, October 2009.

86 US Department of Defense, *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept.*

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

might be misconstrued as deception, only risks communicators seeming untransparent and their activities suspect.

The above discussion brings into the open the difference between foreign and domestic influencing techniques. Transparently explaining NATO and national StratCom activities in this way allows a clear path to be laid towards understanding how these activities differ from propaganda, guiding us to a more practicable definition of propaganda for NATO.

Propaganda as a process

This article has highlighted deception as innate to popular understandings of propaganda and the way in which NATO uses the term. However, military deception and the practice of PsyOps demonstrate how 'aim to deceive' is insufficient in a new definition to understand the communications activities of NATO nations' militaries as distinct from propaganda. As O'Shaughnessy explains, 'to say that propaganda is manipulative is to define a necessary but not sufficient characteristic of the term'.[87]

To understand the differences, we should instead concentrate, as O'Shaughnessy suggests, on the *essence* of propaganda.[88] Scholar Edgar Henderson's characterisation of propaganda as a *process*[89] offers a way forward. First, it is not the content of a message which is important, but the overall process and aim of a wider communications strategy which makes something propaganda. As the European Parliament stresses in a comprehensive study of disinformation and propaganda: 'to fully understand the scope of the problem, there is a need to acknowledge emerging practices that are dangerous because of their potential for

87 O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda,* p. 7.

88 Ibid., p. 18.

89 'The process which deliberately attempts through persuasion-techniques to secure from the propagandee, before he can deliberate freely, the responses desired by the propagandist': E. Henderson, 'Toward a Definition of Propaganda', *Journal of Social Psychology* 18 (1943): 71–87, cited in Martin, *International Propaganda*, p. 11.

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divisiveness, rather than the misleading content'.[90] While PsyOps is one communications tool deployed at the tactical level, propaganda is a strategic process. This process of deception sees lies and truths employed to varying degrees:

> Propaganda is necessarily false, when it speaks of values, of truth, of good, of justice, of happiness—and when it interprets and colors facts and imputes meaning to them. It is true when it serves up the plain fact, but does so only for the sake of establishing a pretense and only as an example of the interpretation that it supports with that fact.[91]

The essence of propaganda is therefore not to tell one lie, but an embellished web of truths and lies towards constructing a new 'alternative truth'—perhaps the inspiration for George Orwell's 'all propaganda is lies, even when it is telling the truth'.[92]

To give a practical example, the choice of name for Russia's COVID-19 vaccination—Sputnik V—was labelled 'propaganda' in Western media,[93] whereas the US's 'Operation Warp Speed' vaccination programme was not. The Russian moniker was a nod towards the world's first artificial Earth satellite, launched by the USSR on 4 October 1957: space-age symbolism supporting Russia's narrative of the country as a global leader. The choice of name was seen to declare victory in the 'race for a vaccine',[94] echoing 1950s Russian pride and global competition, repackaged for a modern age. Meanwhile, the US's 'Operation Warp Speed'[95]—the

90 J. Bayer, N. Bitiukova, P. Bard, J. Szakacs, A. Alemanno, and E. Uszkiewicz, *Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law in the EU and Its Member States,* European Parliament, February 2019 [Accessed 2 March 2021], p. 30.

91 Ellul, *Propaganda,* p. 59.

92 G. Orwell, diary entry, 14 March 1942, cited in C. Fleay and M. Sanders, 'Looking into the Abyss: George Orwell at the BBC', *Journal of Contemporary History* 24 Nº 3 (1989): 512.

93 A. Kramer, 'Russia Approves Coronavirus Vaccine before Completing Tests', *New York Times*, 11 August 2020 [Accessed 2 March 2021]; *'*Sputnik V: Here's Why Russia Chose This Historic Space Name for Its COVID-19 Vaccine*', Money Control,* 12 August 2020 [Accessed 2 March 2021].

94 V. Srinivasan, 'Vaccine Nationalism: Russia Ushers in Relic of Cold War Era Races', *The Federal,* 11 August 2020 [Accessed 2 March 2021].

95 Officially announced on 15 May 2020.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

federal programme 'to accelerate the development, manufacturing, and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics'[96]—was named after a 1950s sci-fi concept made famous by US television series Star Trek, referring to travel at faster-than-light speeds. The American name was also an apparent attempt to positively influence audience perception with a culturally shared evocation of high-speed technology. However, it was dismissed as a catchy and amusing pop-culture reference,[97] rather than given the label of 'propaganda' which hangs over the Russian designation.

This is because the Russian name should be seen in the context of Russia's weaponisation of the COVID-19 pandemic: the 'Sputnik V' name was part of an overall propaganda strategy to undermine the Western vaccination programme, and indeed the West and NATO itself. Russia's propaganda strategy included the spreading of disinformation regarding potential side effects of Pfizer and Moderna and invented claims of forced inoculation.[98] There were spurious Russian reports of positive COVID-19 cases in the ranks of NATO's continuing to exercise troops, claiming that NATO was placing local citizens at risk.[99] A fabricated letter, allegedly from NATO's secretary general to the Lithuanian minister of defence, spoofed a NATO Command email address to communicate that NATO troops were pulling out of Lithuania due to the pandemic (it aroused immediate suspicion due to multiple spelling and grammar mistakes).[100] There was even manipulated video footage of a NATO press conference, altered to show the conference addressing the impact of COVID-19 on NATO's troops in Lithuania.[101] This was no mere trivial

96 T. Lopez, 'Operation Warp Speed Accelerates COVID-19 Vaccine Development', *DoD News*, 16 June 2020.

97 M.L. Kelly, 'The Trekkie Community Reacts to the Use of "Their" Term', *NPR*, 27 May 2020 [Accessed 1 June 2021]; D. Smith, 'Trump's "Warp Speed" Vaccine Summit Zooms into Alternative Reality', *The Guardian*, 9 December 2020.

98 J. Barnes, 'Russian Disinformation Targets Vaccines and the Biden Administration', *New York Times*, 5 August 2021; D. Shesgreen, '"Russia Is Up To Its Old Tricks": Biden Battling COVID-19 Vaccine Disinformation Campaign', *USA Today*, 8 March 2021.

99 '"Chumovyye" manevry NATO v Latvii: Tseli, sredstva i veroyatnyye posledstviya' ['Freaky' NATO Manoeuvres in Latvia: Goals, Means and Probable Consequences], *Sputnik*, 13 April 2020 [Accessed 2 March 2021].

100 Details in 'NATO's Approach to Countering Disinformation', *NATO,* 17 July 2020 [Accessed 3 March 2021].

101 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

annoyance, but an all-out Russian information attack; the pandemic was termed a 'new battleground' of international information warfare.[102] In this context, naming a vaccination Sputnik V as part of a layered hybrid strategy to destabilise adversaries is a different activity to influencing people to think favourably about a counter-pandemic plan by calling it Operation Warp Speed.

Propaganda as co-production

A second important characteristic of propaganda is that of co-production between consumer and producer.[103] As a co-production, propaganda rarely manipulates passively. This is no straightforward 'hypodermic needle' communication:[104] propaganda is a process of creation *with* the recipient, and the recipient 'a willing accomplice in their own persuasion'.[105] Propaganda is therefore often based on fear, substantiating people's existing prejudices and calling to an individual's need in modern society for self-identity and self-validation.[106] It must always appeal to a consumer's inner convictions (which Ellul termed 'guiding myths') which gives the producer a 'sub-propaganda' base[107] from which to develop further distortions. Propaganda thus serves the needs of both consumer and producer[108]—the consumer of having their identity and 'world view' validated; the producer of shoring up power through communications. Unlike PsyOps, then, which are tactical materials deployed *against* an

102 M. von Hein, 'Disinformation and Propaganda during the Coronavirus Pandemic', *Deutsche Welle*, 31 March 2020 [Accessed 3 March 2021].

103 See N. O'Shaughnessy, *Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand* (London: C. Hurst, 2016).

104 H. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927; Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2013).

105 P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy, and N. Snow, Introduction to Baines et al., *SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*, p. xxvi; O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 114.

106 J. Ellul, cited in R. Marlin, 'Jacques Ellul's Contribution to Propaganda Studies', in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies,* J. Auerback and R. Castronovo (eds), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

107 Ibid.

108 Baines et al., Introduction, p. xxxvi.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

adversary or foreign public in a theatre of war, propaganda is based on a narrative created *with* the recipient: it is an 'invitation to shared fantasy'.[109]

Once propaganda is understood as a multifaceted process of deception with a strategic aim, co-produced by consumer and producer, it is easier to appreciate how NATO's communications activities designed to educate, persuade, or influence do not constitute propaganda.[110] Indeed propaganda is the antithesis of rational persuasion.[111] As a strategy, propaganda is manipulative, even when telling the truth.[112] And as O'Shaughnessy suggests, propaganda 'dramatizes our prejudices and speaks to something deep and even shameful within us […] it is a co-production in which we are willing participants'.[113] This cannot be equated with deceptive communications activities of Western nations against foreign audiences, such as PsyOps. Neither can it be equated with domestic influence activities as part of a public affairs plan designed to increase support for NATO and its activities.

A way forward

Western military strategic communications does, and should, aim to influence domestic audiences. NATO's acceptance and recognition of this has progressed significantly in recent years. Yet sensitivities remain in certain NATO nations' militaries over the separation between communications influence activities and propaganda, leading to confusion among publics and self-censorship among practitioners. Sensitivities derive from misunderstandings and are perpetuated by

109 N. O'Shaughnessy, 'From Disinformation to Fake News: Forwards into the Past', in Baines et al., *SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*, p. 66; O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 110. We might argue that all communications, including PsyOps, are to a certain extent co-produced (meaning-making is iterative, since messages are received as well as sent). However, PsyOps materials are individual tools created by the military at the tactical level and deployed towards a foreign audience, rather than the complex strategy and protracted process of co-authorship that characterises propaganda.

110 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power,* p. 26: 'Communications activities designed to educate, persuade or influence do not, by themselves, constitute propaganda.'

111 O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 16.

112 Ibid., p. 18.

113 Ibid., p. 4.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

misleading definitions and a failure to engage the debate head-on. But shying away from talking about legitimate influence activities exacerbates, rather than avoids, the problem.

As part of this problem, NATO's loose definition of propaganda ('information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view'[114]) reflects neither the complexity of propaganda, nor the centrality of strategic manipulation inherent in common understandings of the term. It fails to capture how NATO communicators publicly discuss propaganda. And NATO's failure to define it more clearly leaves it open to unjustified accusations of conducting propaganda itself.

Revising NATO's definition of propaganda in a way that shifts focus away from content to a more holistic understanding of propaganda could address this problem. To be of functional public use, such a definition needs to incorporate the points above as well as the pre-existing popular connotations involving deceit, which most definitions fail to do.[115]

A useful definition reflecting these points can be arrived at using Jowett and O'Donnell's definition as a foundation, and integrating this paper's argument of propaganda as a co-produced strategic process of deception:

> A deliberate, systematic, and co-produced strategic process of deception to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour, aimed at achieving a response that furthers the intent of the propagandist.[116]

Academic definitions of propaganda are numerous and diverse. But within this diversity, it would be productive for NATO to choose a definition which works for, not against, the organisation. This article's proposed

114 *NATO Term,* 'propaganda'.

115 See, for instance, A. Wanless and J. Pamment, 'How Do You Define a Problem Like Influence?', *Journal of Information Warfare* 18 Nº 3 (2019): 1–14.

116 Originally as given in note 1.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.6

change to NATO's definition, which is based on the academic literature, would help separate propaganda from the legitimate influence activities engaged in under strategic communications by NATO and its nations. Such a definition, it is hoped, will help certain NATO nations overcome their concerns of being accused of projecting propaganda in domestic communications activities. As a result, this definition should help guide NATO nations towards a joined-up approach to communications influence operations. NATO's centre of gravity is its unity: a common approach to strategic communications would seem vital for NATO and its nations to be as effective as possible in competing and contesting on the battlefields of information warfare.

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Democracy, Power, and Our Failing Imaginations

A Review Essay by Paul Bell

Liberalism and Its Discontents
Francis Fukuyama. London: Profile Books, 2022.

Disorder: Hard Times in the 21st Century
Helen Thompson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Keywords—*democracy, energy, power, narratives, influence, imagination, strategic communications, strategic communication*

About the Author
Paul Bell is an independent strategic communications consultant who first focused on its application in conflict while a director of the South African commission overseeing the elections which brought Nelson Mandela to power. Since 2004 he has worked across the Middle East and North Africa, notably in Iraq following the US invasion. He now resides in Tbilisi, Georgia, where he continues to consult and write. The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author.

These are hard times for liberal democracy. On 24 February 2022 an electoral autocracy, Russia, invaded an electoral democracy, Ukraine, and swore to wipe its sovereignty off the face of the earth—the consequences need no elaboration here. On the same day the V-Dem Institute published its annual review of the global state of democracy; it made grim reading: 'The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen is down to 1989 levels'—thirty years of democratic advance have been

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wiped out. 'Dictatorships are on the rise and harbor 70% of the world population—5.4 billion people'; 26 per cent of the world's population live in closed autocracies and 'electoral autocracy [is] the most common regime type and harbors 44% of the world's population—3.4 billion people'.[1]

A fortnight later, I received for review two books that were published within weeks of one another, and that seemed to bookend my own attempts to understand both the war and the retreat of liberal democracy captured by the V-Dem report. The first was Francis Fukuyama's *Liberalism and Its Discontents*; the second, Cambridge don Helen Thompson's *Disorder: Hard Times in the 21st Century*.

If you're born into a democracy, you probably think Winston Churchill was right in telling the British House of Commons in 1947, two years after the defeat of Nazism, that democracy was the worst form of government except for all the others that had been tried. In 1989, as Soviet communism was retreating from its military hegemony in Eastern Europe, Fukuyama published his seminal essay, *The End of History*, sticking the word 'liberal' in front of 'democracy' and saying much the same thing: there could be no advance beyond liberal democracy to some better form of governance—and he's been living down the (unwarranted and uninformed) scorn this provoked ever since.

In a smooth and studied tone of thoughtful warning, Fukuyama delivers his 'discontents'—which, as I read them, are largely the outputs and outcomes of exploitation by populists, identity activists, and our geopolitical adversaries, of perceived inequality and grievance in every possible sphere and class of our liberal democracies, all massively amplified by the internet. He is making to all intents and purposes a plea for moderation. He observes that while democracy, or what passes for governance in the name of the people, is almost universally accepted, it is liberalism and the three pillars on which it rests that have come under attack. The first pillar is pragmatic: liberalism is the best means

1 V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report, 2022*.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

we have for managing the economic, social, cultural, and religious diversity of our societies. But that pragmatism is now under pressure from different groups who have difficulty accepting the diversity that exists in their societies. The second pillar is moral: liberalism confers equally on citizens the right to make decisions for themselves without undue interference from governments or broader society. But that is threatened now by multiple failures to recognise that human autonomy is not unlimited, and by the growing power of nationalist and group identities. The third pillar is economic: property rights and the freedom to transact powerfully connect liberalism to growth and modernisation, while democracy tempers the inequalities created by market competition. But that has been damaged now by neoliberalism and its increasing detachment from equality and justice, and from the inequalities that have flowed from that in the name of efficiency.

In the final analysis, it is our liberal democracies that Fukuyama is addressing, in particular the United States. Probing its political fragility, its gridlock, and that vital ingredient of a functioning democracy that is vanishing before our eyes—losers' consent—he warns that 'if the US does not fix its underlying structural problems, it will not be able to compete effectively with the world's rising authoritarian powers'.

Fukuyama's remedies? Conservatives need to accept that demographics are real and not going away. A warning to the progressive left that, whatever its devotion to critical theory, actual diversity is not going away either, and to public representatives that it is the *quality* and impersonal even-handedness of government, rather than its size, big or small, that are important to electorates—and following on from that, the desirability of devolving power to the lowest appropriate levels of government, and of protecting both free speech and the idea that citizens do *not* owe each other uniformity of thought. Fukuyama asserts the primacy of individual rights over group rights, regardless of the extent to which individuals are shaped by their group identities—but he adds a corollary: there are limits on human autonomy; autonomy may be 'a basic human value [but it is] not the sole human good that trumps all other visions of the good

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

life'. In a pointed rebuke to cancel-culturalists and economic freebooters, Fukuyama writes that successful liberal societies

> cannot be neutral with regard to the values that are necessary to sustain themselves as liberal societies. They need to prioritize public-spiritedness, tolerance, open-mindedness, and active engagement in public affairs if they are to cohere. They need to prize innovation, entrepreneurship, and risk-taking if they are to prosper economically. A society of inward-looking individuals interested only in maximizing their personal consumption will not be a society at all.

And finally that plea—for it can be only a plea—for moderation: the old Greek axiom 'nothing in excess', that principle of last resort, 'for a liberal order that was meant to calm political passions from the start'.

This is all flawlessly rational, but where is reason in a world driven to ever-increasing madness by those passions, and ultimately controlled, as Helen Thompson's *Disorder* seems to suggest, by the demand for a primary power that is neither political nor philosophical but thermodynamic?

Thompson, a political economist, looks through an entirely different lens at how we got here. Her *Disorder* places energy at the heart of a century and more of global geopolitics and leaves you feeling that, however sharp and menacing the threats to liberal democracy, however fierce the clash of our ideas about how we distribute power, money, and opportunity, or about the role of the state, individualism, or identity, in all these things our political fortunes have been merely bobbing along on a turbulent global sea of oil and gas.

Disorder is an 'incredible hulk' of a book; an ugly read, relentlessly and mercilessly dry, but an immensely muscular analysis all the same. It arrived with impeccable timing, just as Russian troops were staged

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

on the Ukrainian border for a war whose logic, pre-launch, seemed impossible to comprehend—even in Kyiv, where I was until days before its outbreak—yet which has also fulfilled all the conditions illustrated by Thompson's thesis: the primacy of energy supply, the iron grip of energy dependencies east and west, the determinism of the global dollar. Unless the reader has a good working familiarity with these subjects, one has to stick with it. But for all that, the picture that emerges is fascinating.

Thompson's historical breakpoint is different to the conventional ones—significantly, not the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 but the Suez crisis of 1956. Nasser's closure of the Canal provokes an Anglo-French military response. The US reaction is contrary: about to become a net importer of oil, it wants Europe to be less dependent on American oil; it also expects the British Empire to guarantee energy security in the Middle East; and yet, in this dawning postcolonial era, it will not countenance Britain and France behaving like imperial powers in defence of Europe's energy interests. Consequently, three things happen: the French turn their attention to Algerian oil; Europe begins to focus on nuclear power; and, crucially, Europe turns to Soviet oil and subsequently gas.

From here it is a fairly straight line to 2022. Ukraine's geostrategic importance as a transit route for Russian energy supplies to Europe, which Russia has been determined to diminish, and its political switch away from Russia towards the European Union. Germany shelves Nord Stream 2 in late 2021; Russia invades Ukraine three months later; Russian energy supplies to Europe are brutally cut; Russia closes Nord Stream 1; marine gas pipelines are sabotaged. Meanwhile, through the preceding three decades, the growing energy demand from China and much else besides, including the 2008 Eurozone crisis and a European Union whose individual governments and their fiscal policies are willy-nilly tied to the monetary will of the European Central Bank.

At the far end of this thesis's pipeline are the inescapable fact that economic growth and the planet's ability to feed itself are functions of energy conversion; the conundrum that the energy revolution on which

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

limits to climate change depend is itself still largely dependent on fossil fuels; the pain of our transition to lower-density energy; the likelihood that geopolitical conflicts will arise where energy resources are located (look no further than Ukraine); and an uncomfortably high degree of uncertainty about whether the democracies will sink or swim in the face of it all. Thompson offers no remedies, just a hard-eyed truth about how tough this is all going to be, especially for liberal democracies, which seem increasingly unable to cohere around the difficult choices that have to be made to overcome these challenges.

The tones of these two books are quite different. Fukuyama reaches out to his reader with a sagacity tinged with sadness and measured warning, while reminding us we have will and agency. Thompson leaves her reader feeling like a laboratory specimen under the scrutiny of a magnified, emotionless eye, hopelessly pinned down by demands and events there is no controlling. Her thesis comes off the page like a philosophy-flattening steamroller—in the face of which Fukuyama's 'discontents' seem reduced to a self-indulgent identity-sideshow that merely weakens our ability to avoid the steamroller. True to his faith, Fukuyama aspires to the repair and perfecting of liberal democracy, this highest form of governance. Thompson's economic realism, on the other hand—unlike the political realism of, say, a John Mearsheimer, which derides morality as a fool's errand in a world of power and pragmatism—is that much more dismaying is its depiction of a demand for energy that, while driven by human expansionism, seems beyond all human agency to control. It is a notion that, while perhaps unintended, induces a sense of paralysis, as if our polities, democratic or otherwise, liberal or authoritarian, are trapped in the back seat of an energy juggernaut that has swept our political identities aside and taken control of our national destinies. As if the Eternal Monitor were holding out to humankind two different sets of books, one in either hand, in the left Rousseau and Rawls, in the right Hobbes and Darwin—saying of those in His left hand, 'These are terrific; they'll remind you that your life on earth has moral and individual dimensions.' And of those in His right, 'But you're going to have to fight for it, so these are more likely to get you through.'

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

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Three decades have passed since Fukuyama published that seminal first essay. In that time we've had Gulf War One, the disastrous mission-creep that was Afghanistan, the hubristic invasion of Iraq (as if a big dose of democracy would also deliver a stable oil supply), an unproductive War on Terror, the 'Arab Spring', the rise and fall of Islamic State, and the turmoil, savagery, and repressive backlash that followed; the rise of China, of populism, and of revanchism; the retreat of US military engagement in the Middle East. Throughout that time, while Fukuyama was defending his thesis, I—a mere speck of tumbleweed in these crosswinds—have found myself caught up and close up in three struggles for democracy in countries whose fates were or have become precious to me—first in Africa, then in the Middle East, and now a third in the Caucasus.

These days I live in Georgia, a former colony of the former Soviet Union. Most Saturdays, about lunchtime, I stroll down the hillside above Tbilisi's historic Old Town towards the shops along Rustaveli, the capital's principal boulevard. I pass through the upper reaches of Sololaki, down its gently decaying streets, past its dilapidating nineteenth-century apartment blocks with their buckling window frames, iron beams buttressing them against the risk of tremors from the southern Caucasus. I skirt the potholes, tread carefully across the cobbles, keep an eye downward for the *merde de chien* deposited on the pavements by the city's strays, and observe with growing love and melancholy the signs of Tbilisi's gradual surrender to forces beyond its control. A population suddenly grotesquely swollen by the influx of Russians escaping sanctions or the draft. A *faux*, inflationary boom floating on a stagnant economy. A neglectful regime that daily machinates to impede Georgia's desire to move closer to the West.

As I walk down the hill, I pass a school. It specialises in mathematics and science. It's a weekend, but inside its classes are packed, and out on the street, mothers and fathers, siblings and grandparents are waiting, men sitting silently in cars, mothers milling about at the gates and

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

chatting animatedly among themselves, the street quietly buzzing with anticipation as they wait for the bell and for their children to emerge from their morning of lessons. And always as I pass by, I experience a feeling that is hard to describe. Part the pleasure of seeing these strivers strive, and part the passing of the shadow of a sadness that falls where hopes glimmer on a dark and swollen sea, like trawlers at night. Here are parents putting into their children's education whatever means they can muster because it is the best they can do to secure them against a future that for Georgia is increasingly uncertain. Sadly, with that education, the best of those young people are that much likelier to leave the country, taking their skills in search of opportunity in Europe and the US that Georgia cannot provide. They will contribute instead by sending money home to support their families. This isn't growth, it's managed decline, while Georgia's rich get richer and its poor … well, tough luck.

The Georgians are a people of intensely felt national identity yet also a nation which struggles—or so it seems to me—to cohere around a sense of national community and mutual responsibility. Most of them aspire to a democratic form of government and they are pretty clear-eyed that Georgia is very far from being one. But barring a small minority among Georgia's elite, its people have little idea how to achieve it. Georgia's political elites have done little more than acquire the language of democracy, and they use it not as the floor on which to build a liberal democracy, but as plaster they slap onto a wall of concrete power built on traditions of authority and absolutism that militate against any development of the habits and practices on which the functioning of a liberal democracy depends.

I saw the same as I came to political maturity in South Africa thirty years ago. In the course of its struggle against apartheid, the African National Congress, the country's primary liberation movement, had acquired the language of liberal democracy and used it to undermine apartheid's legitimacy and moral foundations. That language, framed by the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the dismantling of colonialism, aroused the indignation of the world against apartheid's

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

iniquities and justified the use of violence to combat injustice, the denial of fundamental human rights to black South Africans, and the economic servitude and deepening poverty to which they had been consigned. There was no denying the moral power of the ANC's case for racial equality and economic justice. On the other hand, there was little examination of the actual depth, nay the superficiality, of the ANC's *actual* commitment to the liberal democratic principles it espoused and which were also essential to the achievement of its stated aspirations. To question that commitment was tantamount to rejecting the case for apartheid's abolition; if you had doubts about what would become of the country under majority rule, you swallowed them in the face of the far greater moral imperative to end apartheid, and you acquiesced in the certainty that *any* such transition was bound to be difficult. That the transition was relatively peaceful was considered more than enough to be going on with, and you should be grateful!

In my own small way I was part of that transition, serving with the electoral commission which oversaw the election that brought Nelson Mandela to power in 1994. As director of information, I was responsible for delivering a campaign whose objective was to inspire an electorate about to be enfranchised for the first time, to defend the election against revanchists and spoilers determined to see it fail, and to keep faith in the electoral commission's promise to deliver a safe and secret vote. We delivered that miracle—against all the odds. Yet five years later, with Mandela now departed from office, I left the country. Two years before, I had taken the decision to go, after an interview with the man who succeeded Mandela, Thabo Mbeki. He spent the first half castigating my magazine for the insightful analysis it had published earlier that year of his style and thinking, and which foreshadowed the arrogance, hubris, and error that saw his presidency collapse in humiliation. And in the second half, it became clear to me that his version of the new South Africa had no use for white liberals like me.

I left behind many friends whose courage in staying I applaud. They had fought alongside their black comrades, and had been jailed, banned,

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

beaten, and vilified under apartheid. When Mandela took office they took up those administrative posts that became available to them before being eventually driven out by affirmative action and cadre deployment (the ruling party's placement of its own people in key positions, regardless of merit). The same happened to former colleagues from my days in newspapering—men and women were swept out who, over decades, had taken huge risks to expose the violence and myriad injustices visited on their black compatriots. From afar I saw those passionately committed efforts to support the transformation of a country being washed away by the tide of moral, intellectual, and financial corruption that welled up after Mandela's presidency.

Today, the ANC has been in power for almost three decades. In that time, the economy and state coffers have been bled dry by the ruling party's shameless abuse of power and naked self-enrichment, by staggering levels of corruption, and by the destructive, wilful neglect of national economic infrastructure. Is there hope for change? Observers grasp at straws. Support for the ANC has been slipping in the major cities and there are similar signs of slippage in the rural areas that have provided voting fodder for the ruling party. But the ANC will, if it has to, throw in its lot with a populist offshoot founded by a former leader of its youth wing, whose own moral probity is no better. Just as worrying has become the decentralisation of political power to ANC-controlled provinces, whose leaders use their centrally funded budgets to consolidate their fiefdoms, entrenching cronyism and corruption at every level of government. So deeply has this seeped into the structures of executive and legislative power, from the presidency down, that you can see no realistic prospect of its eradication. Those with power cling to it through graft, cronyism, and assassination, transforming a country whose constitution was considered one of the most progressive in the world into a gangster state whose leaders and media satraps gaslight the population into believing that their ever deepening impoverishment and hopelessness are still the legacy of apartheid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

And finally Iraq. In 2004, a year after the US invasion, I arrived in Baghdad and began what would become an eight-year losing battle. Our job was to persuade the Iraqi people to develop the habits, practices, and institutions that might stabilise their benighted polity and deliver the security and consensus on which peace and socio-economic advancement depend. But the US occupation, meant ostensibly to convert Iraq to a progressive Middle East democracy but intended also to secure for the US a grateful, oil-rich client state, had instead collapsed that state and transformed its governance from mere authoritarian oppression, brutality, and genocidal attacks on the Kurds into a maelstrom of sectarian violence and terrorism that turned daily life, already difficult, into a murderous, destructive hell from which the country still struggles to recover.

Back then, the first thing I learned was not to talk about 'democracy'. The word was spat back at us in focus groups and in vox pops. What was left of the state was breaking down all around them. They were besieged by terror and random violence. Their streets and markets were running in bystander blood. There were no jobs. Power supplies were constantly disrupted. One of my bodyguards was shot in the leg and bled out after the Shia hospital to which his comrades took him refused to admit him because he was Sunni. 'If this is *democracy*,' people told us, 'we want nothing to do with it.' Their contempt was visceral. We dropped the word from our vocabulary. We told our stupefied client there was no choice: the entire notion of democracy had been thoroughly rubbished by the chaos that had ensued in its name. From then on we focused on ideas ordinary Iraqis had some chance of recognising—the mutual, identical suffering of families on either side of the civil war; the fact that the past would not get any better but the future still could; the *sine qua non* that was reconciliation; the hard choices that would have to be made to deliver stability, peace, and a form of government that might give them some say over their own destiny and some hope of economic security.

Success was hard to measure. Notably I remember making an ad which ran on television for several weeks in the two months before the January

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

2005 election. Its objective was to persuade Iraqis to band together in the face of intimidation at the polls, and come out to vote. And in *The Times* the day before polling day, I saw an interview with a former Iraqi air force colonel who told the reporter he had a plan. He and his friends would vote in the morning, and if it was safe they would go back home and fetch their wives to vote in the afternoon. 'We got the idea from the ad,' he said. After the first wails of my newborn children, those seven words were the happiest sound of my life. *That* was impact. The election was conducted without disruption or significant intimidation. As to the rest of our eight years of campaigning, whose scale and intensity were unprecedented and have not been seen since, I used to tell my team, 'Look, the more successful we are, the fewer people will die.' It was the only measure of any real importance to me. If there was any point in being in Iraq, it was that, and I know that sentiment motivated many otherwise deeply disillusioned US soldiers and diplomats. It was the best we could hope for. After the surge in 2007, numbers of deaths *did* begin to decline significantly, but it was impossible to disaggregate the impact of our communications from a multiplicity of other factors. In the end, we were mood music; the credit belongs to the soldiers and civilians, Iraqi and coalition, the men and women on the ground.

Then America went home, the sectarian conflict roared back to life in the shape of Islamic State, and today, if Iraqis are any better off, it is only to the extent that they are not dying in as many numbers as during the occupation. As for their politics, it remains gridlocked and at the mercy of armed militia, all protecting their political factions, while the economy, which should be rich, is moribund with unemployment almost twice what it was at the end of the occupation. My Iraqi friends, including those who lost loved ones to Saddam's torturers or American missiles, are either in despair or in exile—the latter being, as my Georgian and South African friends will also testify, merely a better quality of despair.

South Africa, Iraq, and Georgia are vastly different countries, but apart from their histories of colonial occupation and their vanishing middle classes they have in common a culture of power in which the winner takes all; an experience of democracy that runs little farther than the acquisition of its language—then travestied by their ruling elites in the name of 'the people' in order to legitimate or mask their entrenchment and self-enrichment; and the demonisation of political adversaries.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

The Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, whose book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, published in 2014, has since made him a philosophical superstar, has postulated that humankind succeeded in overtaking the Neanderthals and other early human predecessors by developing language, learning to cooperate, and imagining what we cannot see. This enabled us to drive other species into extinction. (How should we feel about that?) Now he is arguing that technological advances will see us fusing artificial intelligence into our biological beings, evolving into a more advanced form of human in which consciousness (our ability to feel things) and intelligence (our ability to solve problems) begin to diverge, and that this phenomenon will inevitably be limited to the rich, which will see humanity diverging into weaker and stronger species. That's all in the future—two hundred years if we last that long. Right now we have to figure out how to deal with that—along with climate change and the struggle over energy. And yet here we are, steadily losing our capacity to do all that because we are losing our will and desire to communicate, to imagine what we cannot see, or to cooperate—particularly, most worryingly, within our own nations.

Hariri, interviewed in the London *Sunday Times* in October 2022, talked about

> the breakdown of a unifying nationalism. At its core, nationalism is the feeling that you are connected to the other people in your country, that you care about them. For instance, you pay your taxes so that somebody you never met on the other side of the country will have good healthcare. But in many countries, politics is so divided that this unifying identity has broken

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

> down. One of the key conditions of democracy is the ability to have a public debate about the key issues of the day, that we can talk with one another. Once people see their political rivals as enemies, democracy simply becomes untenable.[2]

And there's the rub. We are making our democracies—liberal or electoral—increasingly less tenable in a world that is otherwise drifting dangerously towards what the V-Dem 2022 report calls 'autocratization'. Autocracies are strengthening while we are weakening our own ability and resolve to resist that trend.

I was in Ukraine just before war broke out, supporting its territorials with the development of a strategy for a campaign to drive recruitment. We produced the campaign very fast—we could have had it out in half the time, had it not been for the cumbersome process of securing authorisation to launch. Tick tock, tick tock. In the event, within days of the launch, Putin took over as recruiting sergeant, doing a far finer job than we could ever have done. The campaign theme was simple enough, 'We're defending what's ours—our homes, our families, our land', and it was spot on. Putin, lost in his own fog, had no idea what lengths the Ukrainians would go to, to defend what is theirs. Our campaign became redundant the moment the first shot was fired. And yet before that shot, the horrifying reality of this war had seemed unimaginable to Ukrainians.

And so it is with us, too, the citizens of our liberal democracies, even here on the doorstep of a brutal war that is being fought as totally and remorselessly as the Russians dare. We, too, are suffering a failure of imagination. Lost in the narrows of our identity politics, handcuffed to self-interest and our obsession with power, we are failing to imagine the consequences for our way of government of our ever more manipulative, toxic-narrative-making, framing, mythologising, disinforming public discourse. We look at Putin's Russia, or read Margaret Atwood's

2 Olaf Blecker, 'Yuval Noah Harari on "Good Nationalism", Putin and the Future of Democracy', *Sunday Times Magazine* [London], 16 October 2022.

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The Handmaid's Tale, and think, 'That's awful, but it couldn't happen here.' But the signposts are there—the 2016 Brexit vote, the 2021 invasion of the US Capitol, the regression of liberalism in Poland and Hungary, the rolling back of abortion rights, to name just some of the lowlights.

Given all that, where does it leave my commitment to stratcom? In one dimension, anyway, I've had to think carefully about election campaigns and whether or not to get involved in them. Winning has become so ugly. No one is interested in policy; it's too complicated and dull. Publics are increasingly focused on identity, the media are interested only in controversy, and politicians care only—I know this is a cynical generalisation—about votes and power. Public service, and that sense of the nation as an overarching 'community of communities' in which we pay taxes and observe laws for the sake of the common weal and people we'll never meet but we know are us, is all but dead. It's true that those opportunities that come my way are often with opposition parties challenging for power, and possessed of all the language of social justice, equity, reform, and honest, open, accountable government. Yeah, yeah … Take a deeper look and you see the likelihood that those you help win will soon become like those you helped replace. They have the language; it's the behaviours they lack. You can, of course, just not get too overinvested; take your clients at face value; deploy the simplistic, divisive, and destructive narratives that winning demands in these times of identity politics, dismally short attention spans, and saturation micro-targeting—they know how *that's* done and *that's* what they damn well want; and take the money and run. And there are, too, always going to be circumstances in which the adversary is so bad that campaigning to get rid of them warrants dispensing with overindulging in concerns about whatever comes next—that was certainly the case in South Africa.

In another dimension, I've had to think about how the liberal democracies spend money on strengthening democratic institutions and practices in less democratic—or *de-democratising*—states. From what I've seen, the governments don't participate; it's not in their interests. It's the opposition parties that participate, and the outcomes, if anything, serve mostly to

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.7

sharpen division. Certainly my experience of Georgia has suggested we need to go deeper, and perhaps rethink the nature of influence, rather than stratcom per se, as we try to address the long-long-term challenge of helping other cultures to make that deep shift in the meaning and purpose of power: from power held at almost any cost in defending one's position, privilege, and patronage, with all the precariousness that entails, to power shared and ceded, and therefore able to stabilise because it serves more widely across the diverse interests contained within a nationhood.

In a de-democratising polity, this is a massive leap. There's no making it in one bound, in the course of one electoral cycle, let alone a donor financial cycle. This is intensive, backroom work, in every corner and corridor where the elites, those in and out of power, meet and clash. This is influence work, different to stratcom, under the radar, below the level of conventional diplomacy and development aid, where identifying common interests, dealing with fears on every side, and building trust layer by dermal layer must take place if we are to help people to *imagine* a better way of managing their affairs and futures. *That* is how I think of stratcom now, and of where it can most count. I think of it as influence, creating acts of experience that enable people to imagine their futures differently, and using those to build domestic *peace processes* across those societies in which our own (pretty fractured) democracies engage. For all my apparent ennui and disappointment, I'm still enough of a believer to believe the effort worthwhile. The alternative, as a long-dead South African president once said, is too ghastly to contemplate.

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The Ugly Mirror *Avots*

A Review Essay by Anda Boluža

Aivars Kļavis, *Avota laiks* (Riga: Zvaigzne, 2021)

Avots, Neiburgs Hotel, Riga, Latvia

Keywords—*censorship, youth, graphic design, deconstruction, Soviet symbols, Aesopian language, fear, national identity, playfulness, strategic communications, strategic communication*

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Introduction

Latvia was under communist rule for almost half a century. The imposed regime brought not only deportations, imprisonments, grief, and fear, but also the pain of lost independence. The vision of the dreamland taken away, of prosperous and thriving Latvia, was kept alive through personal memories in many Latvian families. The spirit

1 The author is grateful to David Crowley, Head of the School of Visual Culture at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, for his kind support.

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of Latvianness that survived under the socialist regime and a longing for essential freedom were the main driving forces of the nation that stood against the enforced communist plan.

Now, as the European Union faces threats of war, the story of regained independence offers a new perspective. It proves that the spirit of freedom does not cease to exist with the fact of occupation. Despite strict censorship and the control of communication channels in totalitarian political systems, it nevertheless finds its voice. This article looks back at the events of the 1980s that led to the restoration of independence in Latvia and investigates the role of the press, in particular the youth magazine *Avots*, paradoxically financed by the Communist Party. Could Soviet authority be undermined through artistic expression, and how could the magazine's covers subvert official ideology? Moreover, could art and design have any impact on politics and foster events to shape the future of a nation?

* * *

In the old town of Riga stands the former headquarters of the Soviet state radio broadcaster. It's an imposing building; its masonry survives, pockmarked with bullet holes lest we forget the frailty of nascent democracy. But these days it's foreign tourists who pass through these squares and narrow streets, more intent on photographing Latvia's restored Jugendstil Art Nouveau and Baltic bourgeois architecture.

Some even enjoy the chic hospitality of hotels in the area such as the boutique Neiburgs and its restaurant where the country's erstwhile independence movement has found a fresh way to garnish the culinary experience. For diners, the walls of its restaurant display the covers of *Avots*, albeit with few pretensions to being an art gallery, and more as a statement of interior design.

Avots (The Source), a magazine that flourished in the dying days of Soviet Latvia, captured an explosion of artistic, cultural, and political talent,

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particularly with its striking covers designed by some of the country's leading artists from the 1980s. In a timely book written by the former editor of *Avots*, Aivars Kļavis contemplates the challenge of writing a museum piece of publishing history—a conundrum at a historic moment in the Cold War: '30 years already, everything is already rusty, already covered—but, well, try to remove the rust of myths and still get their essence. I mean, another five years and it really couldn't be done any more.'[2] For Kļavis, meanwhile, the creative awakening of *Avots* has left the legacy of a set of values and principles which still matter today in admittedly different circumstances. However, the return of authoritarianism's reach from its geographical neighbour, against the backdrop of war in Ukraine, feels like a cold wind blowing unabated from the east.

In the late 1970s the Press Building was constructed in Riga for the specific purpose of publishing the press for the entire Soviet republic. By putting masses of publicists, reporters, and editors under the same roof—where space was also allocated to censors, KGB (Committee for State Security) agents, and printers—the Communist Party (CP) of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (the Latvian SSR) could organise the control of journalistic work in a much more effective way. On special occasions, such as the October Revolution anniversary celebration, the twenty-two-storey building was decorated with a huge banner bearing a portrait of Lenin,[3] as if to mark the unquestionably significant role of the press in conveying the idea of communism.

However, as soon as the concept of glasnost challenged the established view of a socialist press as a propaganda tool of the party, the building was turned into a symbolic battleground of opposing actions and views. Furthermore, on 5 May 1987 members of the dissident organisation Helsinki-86 gathered in front of the Press Building in order to celebrate the Day of the Press.[4] In particular, they had come to greet Jānis Britāns, editor-in-chief of *Cīņa*, the official daily press organ of the CP of the Latvian SSR. With their mouths plastered over with tape, this silent

2 Aivars Ozoliņš, 'Aivars Kļavis: Tā bija misija, nevis darbs', *Ir*, 13 December 2021.
3 Ēriks Hānbergs, *Preses nams ne mirki nav rimis* (Riga: SIA Due, 2008).
4 'Helsinku grupa viesojas pie Preses nama', *Auseklis* № 6 (1988): 37.

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yet provocative act drew the attention of all the staff in the building. While some newspapers continued to serve the interests of the CP without questioning its politics, others such as the weekly *Literatūra un Māksla* (Literature and Art) did not hesitate to take advantage of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms to shed new light on previously indisputable facts and ideas. The polarisation of society—in publishing circles in particular—was illustrated by the fact that while *Literatūra un Māksla* was subjected to public criticism, Alfrēds Rubiks, chairman of the executive committee of the Riga City soviet, raised the wages of those working for *Cīņa*. Although theoretically glasnost was activated from the top, the local leadership, by contrast, retained a conservative stance and was slow to adopt new perspectives on the operations and role of the press. As late as May 1988, Boris Pugo,[5] first secretary of the CP of the Latvian SSR, stated that 'the Soviet press is not a private shop and no one must forget it!'[6]

Avots: A New Beginning

In 1986 two rooms in the Press Building were allocated[7] to the team at *Avots*, the magazine of literature and culture for young readers. The directive to publish a new magazine was passed in Moscow by the Central Committee of the CP of the Soviet Union[8] and thus might have been interpreted as a political tool introduced from the top. In fact, such magazines were planned also in Estonia, Lithuania, and other Soviet countries in order to support reforms in general.

In the Latvian SSR, two versions of the magazine were launched as the content had to be available in both Latvian (*Avots*) and Russian (*Rodnik*).[9]

5 Boris Pugo continued his career in Moscow as the minister of the interior of the USSR until 1991, when he committed suicide after the failure of the August Putsch.

6 Boriss Pugo, 'Padziļināt demokratizāciju, audzināt patriotus', *Padomju Jaunatne* № 88 (1988): 1–3 (p. 3).

7 Aivars Kļavis, *Avota laiks* (Riga: Zvaigzne, 2021), p. 38.

8 Ibid., p. 17.

9 Latvia's ethnic demography in 1989: Latvians 52 per cent (1,387,757); Russians 34 per cent (905,515).

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The main purpose of the monthly, namely, to serve the young, originated in the policy of the leadership encapsulated in the title of Gorbachev's speech 'Youth Is the Creative Force of Revolutionary Renewal' at the XX Congress of the Komsomol in April 1987. According to Hilary Pilkington, youth became one of the central issues of political debate in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.[10] The author introduces two paradigms specific to Soviet ideology: youth-as-constructors-of-communism and youth-as-victims-of-Western-influence. The tension between these two poles constituted the seemingly never-ending debate on the role and tasks of Soviet youth. If hitherto popular opinion had held that 'every ounce of energy used on the dance-floor was energy which could, and should, have been invested in building a hydroelectric power station',[11] then in the days of perestroika other ways of how to spend leisure time became legitimised. Rock music, previously regarded as a weapon in the psychological armoury of America, was officially accepted. Thus, even if *Avots* was intended as a tool to manipulate Soviet youth, the limits of openness and liberalisation appeared to have been loosened due to the unprecedented speed and scale of change in the principles of the USSR.

In times of such uncertainty, *Avots* nevertheless found its unique character. However, the story behind the cover of its first issue reveals the difficulties the editor-in-chief, Aivars Kļavis, and his team encountered. The cover (see p. 236) was designed by the young artist Andris Breže. His exhibition created with Ojārs Pētersons and Juris Putrāms in the Gustavs Šķilters Museum in Riga had been banned by the Ministry of Culture of the Latvian SSR in 1984.[12] For *Avots* magazine his concept had been to use the motif of a nib for the cover designs for the entire year of publication. The nib was turned into a Christmas tree in December and in August it was transformed into a sundial. However, the design of the first cover was changed by Kļavis at the last minute at the printers, without the knowledge of the artist. The printers were instructed to stop the printing process until the cover illustration drawing was reworked.

10 Hilary Pilkington, *Russia's Youth and Its Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 118.

11 Ibid., p. 69.

12 The formal reason for the closure was stated as the inflammability of one of the exhibits. Mark Allen Svede, 'Many Easels, Some Abandoned' in *Art of the Baltics,* Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (eds), (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp. 185–274 (p. 251).

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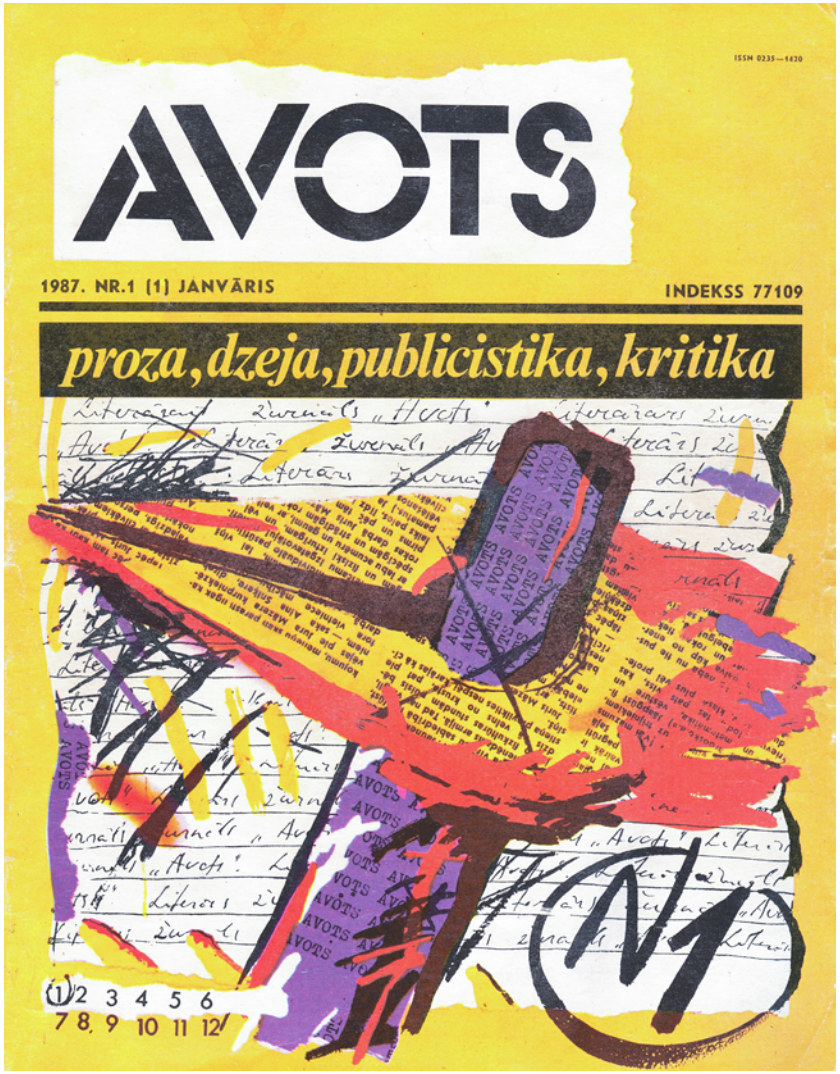

Avots, 1987, no. 1. Cover design by Andris Breže.

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According to Kļavis, the motif of the nib on the cover was interpreted by the higher authorities as a phallus penetrating a vagina symbolising the Soviet press.[13] Kļavis, accused of cowardice by his staff, commented:

> The true heroic deed was to make sure the first issue was printed and the magazine was still published afterwards. Had *Avots* been published with that cover, it would have been its first and last issue—there would be nothing after that. Because the attitude towards *Avots* was absolutely unambiguous—what kind of people has Kļavis gathered there: extremists, anti-Marxists, apolitical types and generally dangerous individuals. *Avots* is explosive material, that much is clear; therefore it has to be extinguished while there's still time and everything has not yet gone up in flames.[14]

Although at the time of its launch the weight of censorship was slowly diminishing, both the layout and content of every issue of *Avots* still had to be approved by the censors. Censorship was carried out primarily by the local branch of the Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs of the USSR in collaboration with the Administration of Propaganda and Agitation of the Central Committee of the CP of the Latvian SSR and the KGB. The institution was renamed regularly. However, in everyday parlance the body of censors was most often referred to as Glavlit, from its Russian title, *Glavnoye upravleniye po delam literatury i izdatel'stv*. The pages of newspapers show that censors were still able to regulate the press as late as 1989,[15] until eventually the censorship agency in Latvia was liquidated by a decree the new government passed on 10 August 1990.

13 Kļavis, *Avota laiks*, p. 99.

14 Aivars Kļavis, '... Mani atpakaļ realitātē vienmēr noliek dzīve', *Latvju Teksti* № 10 (2012): 6–10 (p. 9).

15 On 6 March 1989 the newspaper *Atmoda* published a short comment on its pages that the material had been cut by Glavlit.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8

While the ruling regime maintained various ways of controlling the public's voice, this task largely rested upon editors. Should criticism and reprimands fail to discourage any editor from publishing views opposing those of the state, the common practice was to fire the scapegoat and assign their post to another candidate, thus intensifying the process of self-censorship. Sandra Kalniete, one of the leaders of the Latvian Popular Front, describes this aspect:

> Even after the Congress [the founding congress of the Latvian Popular front in 1988] each of us still had a tenacious internal censor within ourselves. This censor worked automatically, and independently of our own will. Time had to pass before our first reaction would no longer be 'no, I cannot say this; no, I cannot do this'. I don't remember the first time I met this subconscious self-imposed objection with a counter-question—'why not?' In any case, the answer to this question was the start of the dismantling of the time-tested restraint mechanism.[16]

Secrecy surrounding the body of censorship led to a situation where authors actually did not know who had made editorial changes, since 'Glavlit's existence was, of course, an open secret.'[17] Taking into account the responsibility laid upon editors, any changes imposed on texts might just as well have resulted from an editor's caution and unwillingness to take a risk, and this aspect further complicated the relationship between Kļavis and his team.

The Central Committee of the CP of the Latvian SSR also maintained control over the media through regulation of paper supplies and printing facilities. When publishing *Avots*, regulation was referred to by Andra

16 Sandra Kalniete, *Es lauzu, tu lauzi, mēs lauzām, viņi lūza* (Riga: Jumava, 2000), p. 90.

17 Joseph Gibbs, *Gorbachev's Glasnost* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1999), p. 6.

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Neiburga, the magazine's art director, in the pages of the magazine in 1987:

> First, an answer to those many readers who express militant disgust about the small amount of colourful images in this magazine. You express a suspicion that this is due to the 'hackwork' or 'stinginess' (?) of the editor. Therefore I am informing you that each publication has a strictly controlled number of pages which can be in full colour, two colours, and black and white. Our magazine has the following: 16 pages in colour, 32 pages in two colours, and the rest are supposed to be in black and white. We are only allowed to choose one spot colour for each issue. We have chosen the colour yellow for this and also a number of future issues.[18]

Even if the range of colours accessible to the magazine was dictated from above, the designers turned the ascetic colouring into a visual trait specific to *Avots*. Yellow was used in black-and-white layouts to create sharp contrasts and expressive rhythms of graphic elements.

Another barrier the creative team of *Avots* had to overcome was the reaction of readers. The design of the magazine seemed so radical that the editorial board received not only positive comments, but also complaints from subscribers who were not used to such rough aesthetics. A letter from a traumatised reader was published in the issue of May 1987:

> The design of the new magazine shocked me so much, that I couldn't sleep for several nights. I have never seen an uglier magazine in my life. Looking at this magazine, I was taken over by horror. Was it necessary to study for many years

18 A. Neiburga, 'Lasītāju vēstuļu apskats', *Avots* № 5 (1987): 80.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8

> at the Academy of Art, in order to smear some black and yellow stains, draw some crosses (like an illiterate person) and add some finger prints (like in a criminal case)?[19]

Other readers expressed similar comments, such as 'Do these lines require five years at the Academy of Art? I, a worker, could draw them in two minutes' and 'I am surprised the artistic editor—a woman, to boot—was capable of allowing something this ugly and appalling.' Neiburga, the art director, replied, 'Do not be ashamed of your ignorance (probably, you are not responsible ??? for that), but do not make the ignorance the measure of knowledge,'[20] and resigned her position. The design and layout of *Avots* was nevertheless retained when Neiburga's post was taken over by Sarmīte Māliņa.

However, not only its design contrasted radically with established Soviet standards, but also its content. If previously Soviet press organs were obliged to praise the political system and its leader, celebrate achievements of the working class, and stress society's solidarity on its way towards communism, on its way to glasnost publications gradually exchanged optimistic views for openly critical comments of the system and fragments of previously forbidden texts. *Avots* published not only works by Latvian authors from the times of independent Latvia banned during the Soviet era, but also an interview with Joseph Brodsky (expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972) and his text on tyranny; George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945); and Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1952)—to name a few.

Moreover, *Avots* had the nerve to be the first to breach the limits. Oļegs Mihaļevičs, one of the *Rodnik* editors, remembers: 'Our articles were followed thoroughly by journalists of other publications. In journalism, there existed what could be called a law of precedent: if it got into the new issue without repression, it meant we could do it as well.'[21] Nellija

19 Ibid. (translated by Marianna Auliciema for *Dizaina Studija* № 24 (2010), published by Neputns).
20 Ibid.
21 Kļavis, *Avota laiks*, p. 225.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8

Janaus from the Central Committee of the CP of the Latvian SSR now admits, 'We, at the committee, were afraid of *Avots*, since we did not know ourselves what was allowed and what was not.'[22] Access to previously unavailable information made the magazine attractive to a wide audience. In 1987 the circulation of *Avots* was 100,000 copies, yet this had reached 145,000 by 1990. During these years, the circulation of the Russian version, *Rodnik*, increased more than threefold as it gained popularity in the rest of the Soviet Union.

The steps taken by *Avots* are notable when looking back at the formation process of authoritative discourse. Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak writes:

> Party speeches and documents written in the [Central Committee] were increasingly subjected to endless editing, behind closed doors, to produce texts that minimized the subjective stamp of the author and were preferably identical in style and structure to texts previously written by others; this led to a progressive uniformity, anonymity, and predictability of authoritative language.[23]

At the same time, Yyurchak stresses a profound shift within Soviet culture during the late period, opening up spaces of indeterminacy, creativity, and unanticipated meanings in the context of strictly formulaic ideological forms.[24] Indeed, as shocking as *Avots* may seem, it in fact shows the internal shift of paradigms that had been taking place for decades behind the frozen exterior of the official parade.

Avots was launched at the time when the creative energy generated by artists and writers in the course of the 1970s and early 1980s was eventually released during the Gorbachev era. Political and social reforms the leader introduced profoundly accelerated the liberalisation

22 Ibid., p. 127.
23 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 74.
24 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8

of the artistic scene. Art historian Mark Allen Svede uses the term 'renaissance' to describe processes in those days: 'Despite some ominous eleventh-hour bureaucratic retrenchment and the lingering possibility of reprisals, glasnost did animate Latvia's art communities. Painting and print-work entered something of a renaissance in the mid-1980s.'[25] Moreover, the designer and art critic Jānis Borgs, writing in 2010, characterises this particular period as 'a state-funded paradise in the creative sense'.[26] Different experimental shows took place, sometimes held in less well-known exhibition halls or cafes, and performances were carried out publicly on the streets (for instance, the 'Bronze Man' in 1987 by Miervaldis Polis, who was pictured on the cover of *Avots* in August 1990). In this context, the creative team of *Avots* was formed of like-minded intellectuals.

The covers of *Avots* were designed by Breže in 1987, Māliņa in collaboration with Sergejs Davidovs in 1988, Ojārs Pētersons in 1989, and Kristaps Ģelzis in 1990.[27] The artists collaborating knew each other personally and often worked together for other art projects and exhibitions as well. 'The work was connected with people with whom one wanted to associate; that was the most important thing. If I had had to design the cover for the magazine *Zvaigzne*, for example, it would have felt like a state commission,' recalled Ģelzis.[28] This liberated atmosphere of *svoi* (from Russian, meaning a circle of close and trusted friends), young artists and designers, served also as a springboard for disrupting the stagnated visual structures of authoritative discourse.

Deconstruction of symbols was most evident on the cover of the October 1987 issue designed by Breže (see p. 243). Clearly, the designer—like all art directors working in the Soviet republics at the time—was required to refer to the seventieth anniversary of the Great October Revolution

25 Svede, 'Many Easels', p. 262.

26 Jānis Borgs, 'The Soros Era' in *Nineties*, Ieva Astahovska (ed.), (Riga: Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2010), pp. 43–59 (p. 44).

27 The tradition of collaboration with a single artist in order to produce cover designs for the entire year ended in 1991, and thus *Avots* lost its unique and coherent visual character just before it was finally shut down.

28 Kristaps Ģelzis, personal conversation, 29 January 2010.

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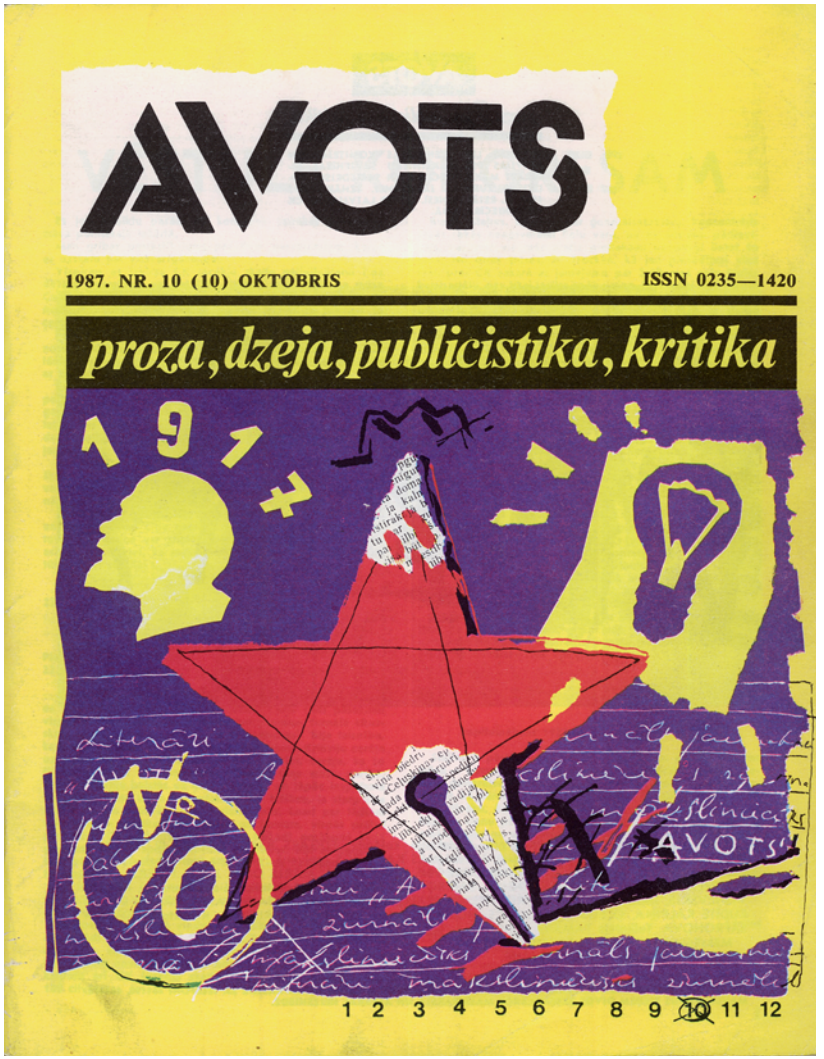

Avots, 1987, no. 10. Cover design by Andris Breže.

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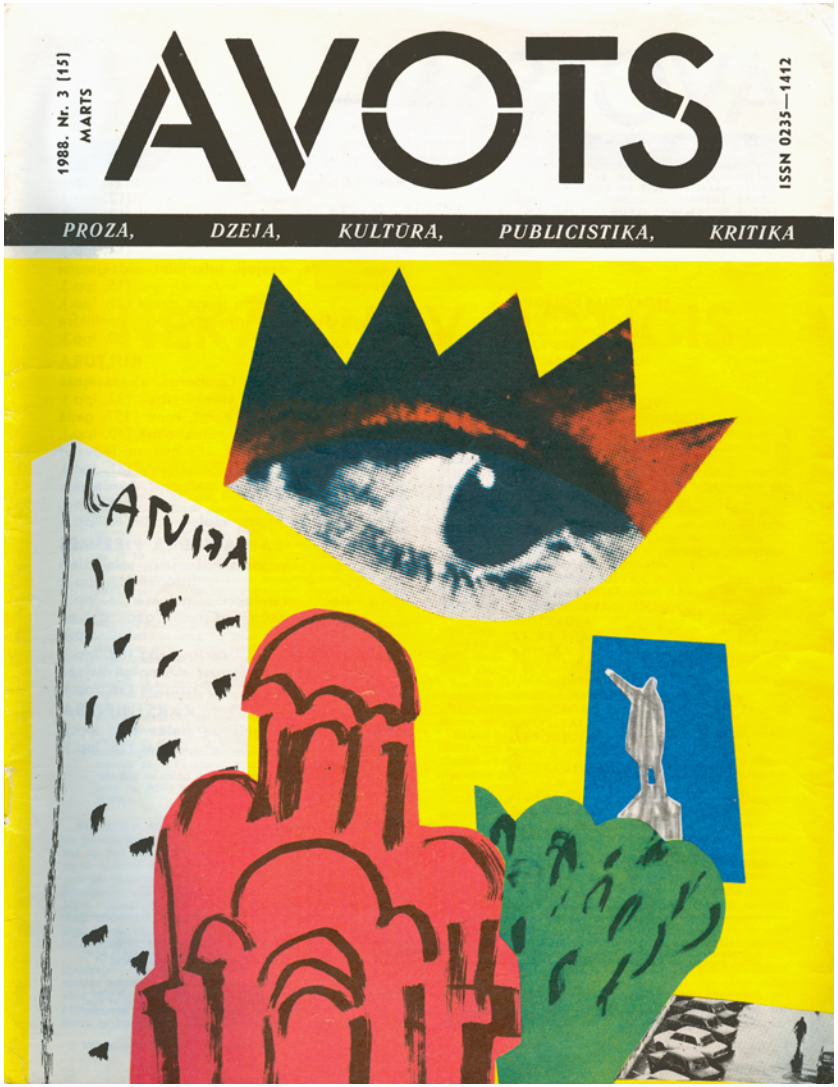

Avots, 1988, no. 3. Cover design by Sarmīte Māliņa.

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of 1917. According to his design concept, one of the points of the red star, the traditional symbol of communism, was rendered as a nib and drained of colour by the act of writing. Ironically, a hybrid combination of nib and red star seems a perfect illustration of Soviet ideology and propaganda as an authoritarian diktat of the CP. Moreover, the star, standing on two points, one of which was colourless, looked as if it had gone lame. Furthermore, the cover features an unorthodox portrait of Lenin, a figure whose representation formed an entire canon in the Soviet Union. As Yurchak writes, artists used certain prototypes in order to produce visual representations of the leader. The author emphasises that 'Lenin's death mask and head cast were not ordinary ideological images, but semiotic "indexes" that pointed to one of the key organizing concepts of Soviet ideology, its master signifier "Lenin".'[29] However, Breže did not follow official stylistic and established traditions in his design, ignoring the principle of hierarchy by approaching the subject in an informal manner. Rendering the Old Bolshevik in silhouette, the artist reproduced only the most characteristic features such as Lenin's beard in his sketchy drawing. The significance of modifying what hitherto could not be altered—a 'sacred' symbol in Soviet iconography—has to be underlined. In fact, Breže's work foreshadowed a later debate on the legacy of Lenin. Graeme Gill, in his book *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*, writes that in the following years historians depicted Lenin 'in a new light, as a much less kindly and gentle leader than he had formerly been portrayed'.[30]

Even if Breže's version was a less typical image of Lenin than was usual in official periodicals, it was still based on an existing graphic canon. However, another artist contributing to *Avots*, Juris Urtāns, took a much more radical step. In 1989 his surrealistic drawing published on the back cover of *Rodnik*, the Russian version of *Avots*, depicted a man's head crushed in a mousetrap. However, the face bore too much resemblance to Lenin. As a result, the image came to be seen as scandalous, and the

29 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 56.

30 Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 259.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8

editorial team had to respond to numerous calls and letters from worried Soviet readers.

Sarmīte Māliņa also referenced the image of the Soviet leader. She designed the March 1988 issue cover (see p. 244), depicting the statue of Lenin that stood in Riga city centre. Such statues were mandatory elements in public spaces in numerous socialist cities. However, the proportions and arrangement of visual elements in her design signified that the relevance of the statue and, in fact, the leader was diminishing. In Māliņa's drawing the statue was overshadowed by a tall white building bearing the name 'Latvija' (Latvia). Such a building did indeed stand next to the statue on the central street in Riga, yet in this depiction it was deprived of any architectural qualities in order to embody the idea of Latvia as a state. Eventually, not only artists but also political activists used various methods to undermine Lenin's role. Kalniete writes about a mass demonstration organised on 18 November 1989: 'This time the front had the courage to cover Lenin's profile attached above the stand with a cloth of unbleached linen.'[31]

'It was only when Lenin was undermined as a master signifier, in the late 1980s, that the Soviet socialist system quickly collapsed,' declares Yurchak.[32] Although the Soviet system's metanarrative was based on Lenin as a master signifier, the state's ideological mechanisms employed other symbols too. One that stood for the achievements of communist rule was an electric light bulb. In everyday conversation it was often referred to as 'Ilyich's lamp', since Lenin had made a considerable political and economic investment in total electrification of the country. It was his plan, the GOELRO, initiated in 1920 that served as a prototype for the five-year plans underlying centralised Soviet economics. However, the shifting perception of socialism also affected this symbol. While Breže played around with it on the cover of the previously mentioned October 1987 issue, Māris Ārgalis drew two surrealistic versions of the bulb where a standard filament was replaced by an animal's skull and a pig's tail.

31 Kalniete, *Es lauzu*, p. 278

32 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 74.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8

His illustrations accompanied the publication of Orwell's *Animal Farm* in *Avots* in 1988. Even if these graphic interpretations did not constitute explicit political protest, the imperfection and instability of the system was nevertheless declared directly through the image's grotesque nature.

Sirje Helme, Estonian art historian, writes on the Soviet period that irony and the grotesque were 'a vehicle for expressing dissent, contrasting with the demanded atmosphere of overall optimism. Irony and the grotesque spoke of the opposite: skepticism, lack of trust, and entrapment. The grotesque was considered a manifestation of distrust in the accepted norms.' [33] Ramona Umblija, art historian and editor of the book *Posters in Latvia*, underlines similar methods of conveying alternative views. She writes that 'in the arts of the Soviet era, the allegory plays a most significant role. Hidden meanings, direct or indirect visual, literary and acoustic hints, metaphoric imagery, poetic language and hyperbole are particularly favoured.'[34] In her view it was a common understanding that permeated society at that time and that permitted everyone, regardless of their specific understanding of the language of art, to perceive the information coded by the artists. In this respect Svetlana Boym talked about 'the counter-memory'. She wrote that

> while there are vast differences between the USSR and Eastern and Central Europe, one could speak about one common feature of the alternative intellectual life in these countries from the 1960s to the 1980s: a development of 'counter-memory' that laid a foundation of democratic resistance and arguably was a prototype of a public sphere that already had emerged under the Communist regime. Counter-memory was for the most part an oral memory transmitted between close friends

33 Sirje Helme, 'Nationalism and Dissent' in *Art of the Baltics*, Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (eds), (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp. 6–16 (p. 14).

34 Ramona Umblija, 'The Event 1984: Measuring Time with Asides' in *Daba. Vide. Cilvēks. 1984–2004*, Inese Baranovska (ed.), (Riga: Artists' Union of Latvia, 2004), pp. 45–72 (p. 53).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8

Avots, 1988, no. 10. Cover design by Sarmīte Māliņa.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8

> and family members and spread to the wider society through unofficial networks.[35]

Boym describes it as 'not merely a collection of alternative facts and texts but also an alternative way of reading by using ambiguity, irony, doublespeak, or private intonation that challenged the official bureaucratic and political discourse.'[36]

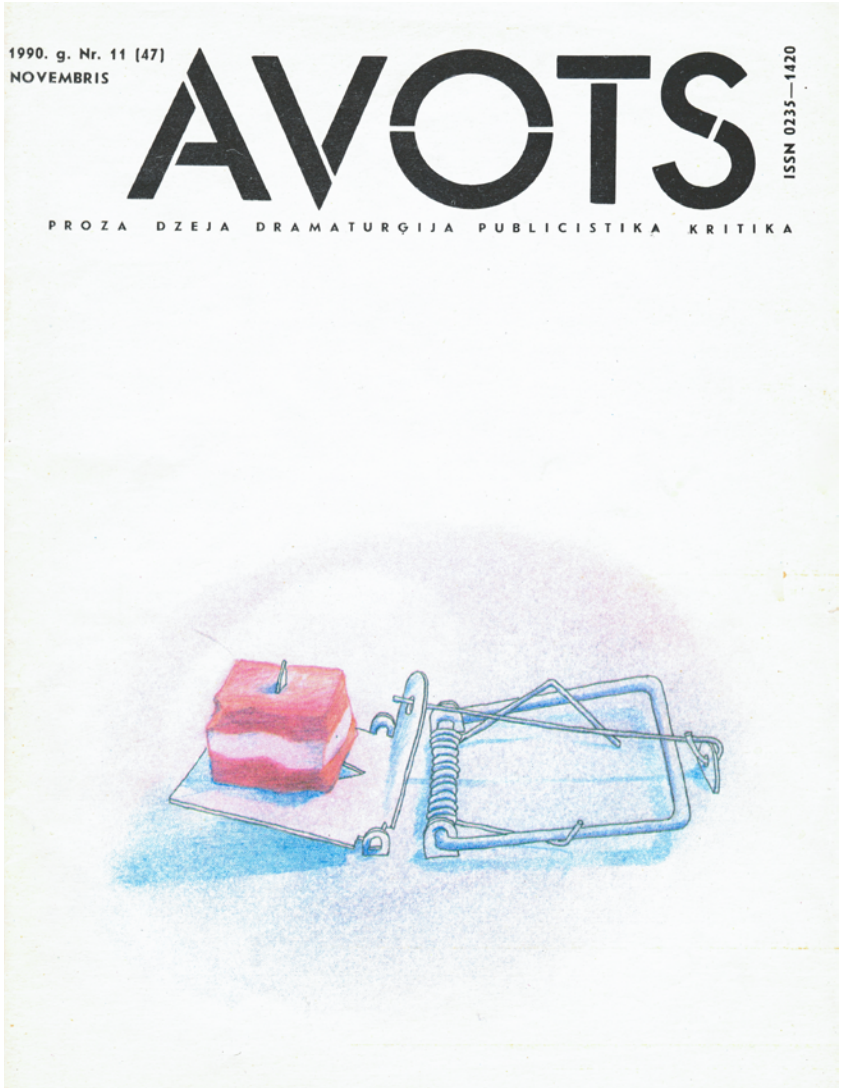
Grotesque drawings and collages published on *Avots* covers did indeed declare the imperfections of the system. However, they cannot be interpreted as dissident since the leadership of the CP itself initiated a public discussion of the distortions of Soviet discourse at that time. As Umblija wrote on 26 August 1988 in *Literatūra un Māksla*, 'not so long ago, this distinctive "Aesopian language" was essentially the only way a poster artist could openly express his or her opinion. Now, it seems, code is no longer compulsory.'

In contrast to Breže's drawings, the cover Māliņa designed for the October 1988 issue (see p. 248) did not challenge the meaning of established Soviet symbols, but represented completely different political symbols. Instead of signs typical of communist ideology, the artist portrayed the Latvian national flag, censored during the Soviet period, yet often carried during political demonstrations at the time, and the statuette of Liberty which, having been the main sculptural element of the Freedom Monument, was in the process of becoming the representation of an independent Latvia. Yet again, although such a composition comprising symbols of Latvian statehood might seem exceptional and provocative, by the end of 1988 the majority of local publications embraced the issue of national identity.

What makes the contribution of *Avots* exceptional is the fact that *Avots* approached the subject of national identity in a playful manner. On the cover by Māliņa, the photographic silhouette of Liberty is combined with

35 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 61.
36 Ibid., p. 63.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8



Avots, 1990, no. 11. Cover design (front) by Kristaps Ģelzis.

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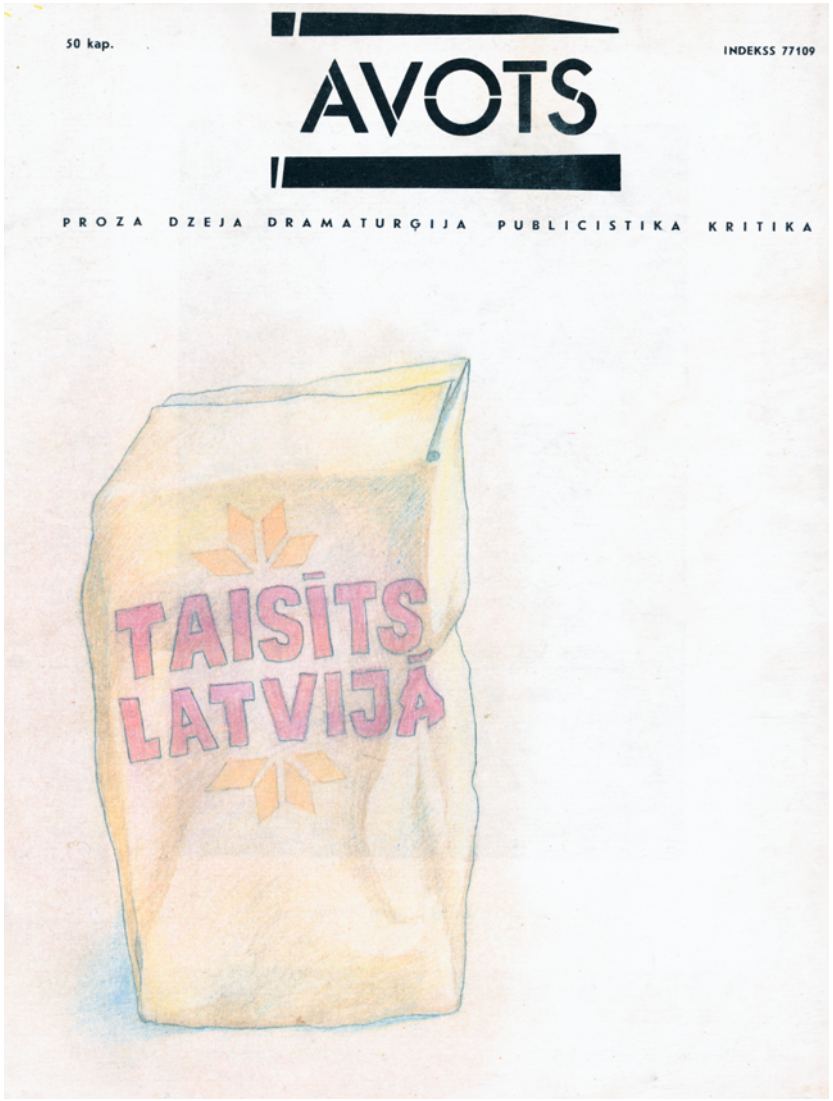

Avots, 1990, no. 11. Cover design (back) by Kristaps Ģelzis.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8

a motif of a pair of eyes, as if signifying that the nation was animated and alive. This corresponds to the statement by Gill on the glasnost period: 'Henceforth society would not only respond to the rulers in the form of a reflexive mirror, but would begin to shape symbols and their meaning openly in a form that was markedly different from that projected from the top.'[37]

The motif of the Latvian national flag was also used by Ģelzis, on the front cover of the November 1990 issue of *Avots* (see p. 250). He had drawn a mousetrap in a realistic manner, yet instead of cheese the national flag was depicted as the bait. Therefore, in terms of Latvian–Russian relations one might argue that the author had illustrated Latvia as a tasty morsel, which had unexpectedly led to a trap. The back cover of the issue (p. 251) features a drawing of a bag of sugar with large letters forming the title 'produced in Latvia', though in those days Latvia was part of the Eastern bloc and therefore known as the Latvian SSR. In an interview, Ģelzis admitted

> this 'dynamically agitated product' [the cover] was not beautiful and lovable; it had to be aggressive in a positive way. I think that all of us who have worked on it have been patriotically humane in our choice, meaning—we have been thinking about people. There was only as much politics as we had hopes for nationalism.[38]

Helme agrees, noting that 'artists did not need to think in terms of political categories; their interests were mostly related to the exploration of art's various expressive forms. Yet inevitably each step that was taken against the prescribed canons was also a political decision.'[39] Even if it was not so much a deliberate and well-planned protest against the system, the playfulness and ease with which the artist had approached the question

37 Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy*, p. 223.

38 Anda Boluža, *'Avots*: The Source of Eternal Youth and Vigour', *Dizaina Studija* № 24 (2010): 53–55 (p. 54).

39 Helme, 'Nationalism and Dissent', p. 14.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8

of identity demonstrated the actual liberation that could not be found, for example, in the rigid and strict design of dissident publications such as *Auseklis*, produced by the dissident organisation Helsinki-86.

Paradoxically, *Avots* was shut down in 1992 due to lack of finances after Latvia had gained its independence. It was a product of glasnost that in the hands of writers and artists was turned into a mirror reflecting the ugly and shocking truth of the Soviet system, yet at the same time mirroring the sincere dream of Latvia as a free and liberated nation. It demonstrates that art and design can have a powerful role in decisive historic moments and that artistic expression is inseparable from political processes even if this is unintended. In fact, although many years have passed since its heyday, the phenomenon of *Avots* is still widely discussed and acclaimed through articles and other publications, proving that the story behind it is both timeless and relevant.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.8

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Russia v The World: Was That Inevitable?

A Review Essay by James P. Farwell[1]

Germany's Russia Problem
John Lough. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021.

Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate.
M.E. Sarotte. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.

Keywords—*post-Cold War, Russia, America, Germany, NATO, expansion, enlargement, Partnership for Peace, strategic communications, strategic communication*

About the Author
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Two exceptional new books add powerful insight into Russia's worldview and the challenges surmounting the West in forging an actionable collective security agreement for Europe and the US.

Chatham House's John Lough has weighed in with a critical analysis in *Germany's Russia Problem* that examines the complex relationship between

1 James Farwell's opinions are his own and not those of the US Government, or any of its departments or agencies, or of COCOM.

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Germany and Russia. Johns Hopkins Cold War historian Mary Sarotte has provided her brilliant *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate*, an intricately researched and splendidly written, detailed history of engagements among US administrations, former Warsaw Pact nations that now hold NATO membership, and Russian leadership. Lough has written a long book, over 500 pages, and so rich in detail that, despite the fluid writing, reading and digesting it requires focused attention.

Each book offers a parallel theme. The old saw 'timing is everything'[2] comes a little into play in reading Lough's fine work but does not undercut the book's importance or analysis of Germany's disposition towards Russia before the invasion of Ukraine. His book details and critiques Germany's ambivalent posture towards Russia and its faint-hearted response to the threats that Russia poses to Germany through its extensive influence in civil society and on security policies. The invasion turned matters upside down and opened German eyes, exposing a ruthless dictatorship that exploited German sensibilities to advance Russia and weakened German security.

Lough understood the challenge before the invasion made reality manifest, and he deserves significant credit for his cold-eyed, objective analysis of the reality of the strategic situation. He didn't predict the invasion, but he understood Ukraine's central role in European security and how Russia played the game. He understood that 'contrary to the established thinking in Berlin and many EU capitals, […] Russia is key to resolving Europe's Ukraine problem. The underlying problem is Russia, not Ukraine'.[3]

Let's give Lough the high marks he deserves and look at the book's analysis, written before the invasion, which identifies critical elements that combined to bring Russian strategic views out of the dark and into cold daylight. A challenge for Germany is—or, until the invasion,

2 *Germany's Russia Problem*, p. 181.

3 Ibid., p. 188.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

was—to devise policies that accelerate Russia's return to Europe, while ensuring that Europe could support a reforming Russia better than the failed policies that emerged as the Soviet Union collapsed.

Lough advises that 'fear, sentimentality, ambivalence, economic complementarity, residual *Ostpolitik* ['new eastern policy', or policies related to normalisation of relations between West and East Germany] reasoning and a sense of obligation to Moscow for allowing Germany to reunify' distort and inhibit its behaviour. The guilt factor arises from the Second World War and the barbarity that the Nazis wreaked upon Russians—17 million out of 34 million Soviet citizens under arms perished—and what many Germans perceive as Russia's surprisingly charitable view towards their nation in the aftermath.

Lough points out that for 'today's generation of German policymakers, German reunification was the key event in their lives',[4] giving rise to a debt they believe they owe Russia. One result was the failure in Germany to define its interests or to develop a strategy to advance them. Lough is far-sighted in his assessment of tensions between Germany's desire and Russia's conceptual approach to building security. He pronounces them incompatible and finds that Germany holds a romanticised, naive view towards Russia and its influence in Germany to generate sympathy for its positions. Russia's trump card has been to play on a myth of Russian victimhood to trigger a sentiment of German moral failure toward Russia.

Lough examines the historical, social, and economic ties between the two nations concisely and clearly. The more exciting aspects examine more contemporary political and diplomatic relations. Lough recognises that Russia saw the 'colour' revolutions as a US conspiracy to oust Vladimir Putin from power.

Westerners find Putin's paranoia irrational and absurd. But there's no reason to suppose that Putin failed to believe his rhetoric. He well articulates his view in a July 2021, 5000-word essay, 'On the Historical

4 Ibid., p. 183.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'.[5] There he argues that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, bound together by one language, economic ties, the Orthodox faith, and the rule of princes. Putin faulted Ukraine's political leadership—explicitly, not the Ukrainian people—for rewriting history to edit out all that bound Russia and Ukraine. He denounced 'radicals and neo-Nazis' while dismissing the 1930s genocide of Ukrainians at the hands of Josef Stalin.

However, mad events—generally of his own making—may have caused Putin to become, as he has always been, highly articulate. However misinformed he may be about the history of Ukraine and the attitudes of its citizens, Putin makes his case directly. Politics doesn't give rise to many universal truths, but one is that we need to pay attention to what politicians say in public more than what they say in private.

Putin was upfront in declaring that the 'true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia' and pronouncing Russians and Ukrainians to be 'one people'. He concluded his essay with the statement that 'what Ukraine will be—it is up to its citizens to decide'. It's an odd statement for a Russian who has transformed himself from a clever tactician, who was increasing Russian prosperity and enhancing its influence and standing abroad, into a war criminal. Apparently, while concluding that although Ukrainians should decide their future for themselves, Putin felt they merited a helping hand in the form of rocket attacks, missile strikes, and butchery of innocent women and children.

Although events overtook him, Lough demonstrates prudence in favouring strength while cautioning against policies that produce unproductive forms of confrontation with Russia. He notes that forcing Russia into a 'besieged fortress' posture would lead to repression. That prediction proved accurate, as Putin moved to put his country inside an information bubble. As Ukraine has piled on new victories and Russia has reportedly suffered 100,000 casualties, blowback from mobilising 300,000 new

5 'Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"', *Official Website of the President of Russia*, 12 July 2021.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

troops and right-wing nationalist criticism have burst that bubble.[6] Putin doesn't currently face a popular uprising, and while his position with the elites has weakened, he seems secure now.

Lough points out that confrontation encourages the Kremlin's appetite for meddling outside its borders as part of an effort to protect the Putin regime by shaping the external environment to its benefit. And although events nullify this observation, Lough argues that confrontation offers an opportunity to divide NATO and exploit weaknesses. It turned out that NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, NATO leaders in Europe, and President Joe Biden had stiffer spines than Putin expected. Putin also achieved what no Western leader had succeeded in doing. Instead of undermining NATO, he unified and revitalised it with a new mission of containment.

And while this essay does not focus on China, one notes as a sidebar that the vigorous Western response to Russia's invasion ought to make China think twice before launching an invasion of Taiwan. Any Chinese leader who thinks that would be a home run needs to think again.

Much of Lough's book details weakness in German attitudes which have leaned since the close of World War II to pacifism, leading to a toothless military. Germany participated in the Afghan war but insisted on sending an ambulance into battle. Colleagues who served on the frontlines had contempt for Germany's participation there. After Russia seized Crimea, Germany offered a weak-footed response that must have encouraged Putin's convictions that he could invade Ukraine without worrying about a formidable NATO response. Even Angela Merkel, fluent in Russian and viewed as a strong chancellor who understood Russia, fell victim to naivety in judging Russian attitudes and likely behaviour. She is as much at fault as anyone for tolerating Nord Stream 2, even though it was apparent that dependency on Russian gas supplies opened up strategic vulnerabilities.

6 'Ukraine War: US Estimates 200,000 Military Casualties on All Sides', *BBC News*, 10 November 2022; Michael Weiss and James Rushton, 'Putin's Mobilization Draws Public Blowback, Especially in Minority Regions', *Yahoo!* News, 26 September 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

Perhaps only the poisoning of Russian dissident leader Alexei Navalny shocked her out of her doldrums. Why Navalny stood apart from the previous assassinations of journalists Yuri Shchekochikhin and Anna Politkovskaya and political leaders Boris Nemtsov—a killing that sent shockwaves through Moscow's political elite—and Sergei Yushenkov is unclear. I've always respected Merkel's ability, but like all politicians she showed a knack for nearly catastrophic misjudgements, including how she handled the crisis of Middle East refugees, which threatened to destabilise Europe. Throughout, Lough questions why Germany persisted with the same policies for so long when they failed, accelerated the emergence of a Russian system hostile to the EU and NATO, and worked against Germany's own interests.

The bane of any author writing about current history is watching unfolding events render aspects of exemplary scholarship obsolete. Anyone who dips into these waters risks that. But Lough's thinking is measured. He articulates his theme about Germany's naivety powerfully. And at every turn, he shows nearly a fortune-teller's ability to guess the future correctly.

Dr Sarotte's epic study, *Not One Inch*, is provocative reading for anyone—scholar, practitioner, layperson—who wants to understand how 2022 became the tragic year it did in Eastern Europe. The book lays out her views as to why relations between Moscow and Washington deteriorated so badly after a period of promise when the Soviet Union was collapsing and events propelled the unification of Germany. Events did not propel the expansion eastward of NATO.

Sarotte provides clarity through a tightly organised book structure divided into three parts. The first, covering 1989–92, opens with the Berlin Wall falling. Horrified Russian leaders believed that Russian sacrifices during World War II privileged them to dominate Central and Eastern Europe. Helmut Kohl pushed to consolidate Western advantages while Russian politics made that possible. Kohl and Bush correctly predicted hardliners would try to oust Gorbachev. They worked to unify Germany

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

and expand NATO beyond its Cold War border. Bush had handled the upheaval reasonably well, but in working to unify Germany, foreclosed options for extending transatlantic security except by extending NATO beyond the Cold War line—and with that, the Article V obligations.

In 1993 and 1994 came Bill Clinton & Co. Unexpectedly, power in Russia fell to Boris Yeltsin. He was greedy and ambitious, but he wanted good relations with the West. He and Clinton established a rapport. General John Shalikashvili authored the Partnership for Peace plan (PfP) to develop a regime of collective security in Europe that included Russia. Yeltsin's foolish use of force to crush opponents in Chechnya and skilled manoeuvring by Clinton cohorts Richard Holbrooke, Tony Lake, and Strobe Talbott quashed the PfP plan in favour of aggressive NATO expansion. Clinton's decision to stop the plan—which Ambassador George Kennan and others judged foolish—foreclosed the option of incremental expansion of NATO that, in Sarotte's view, might have assuaged Russian paranoia about rapid NATO expansion. I'd add that this expansion carried fateful consequences for what transpired in Ukraine between 2014 and the present.

Sarotte's third part examines the period 1995–99. She chronicles Clinton's aggressive embrace of NATO expansion that foreclosed options to limit the location or number of new allies, the pace at which they were added, or the membership benefits they enjoyed. She describes Clinton's efforts to save Yeltsin's political neck. This section is especially fascinating. Although the book doesn't reach into the US elections in 2016, the account of Clinton's actions places complaints about Russian meddling in American politics in a different light.

In early 1990 George H.W. Bush had led a closely knit small team of himself, Secretary of State James Baker, and National Security Advisor General Brent Scowcroft. As the Soviet Union faced collapse, they had favoured a measured pace of change that would not trigger reversals. Cascading events from Hungary and then East Germany trapped Mikhail Gorbachev, who found himself unable to control unleashed forces or

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

to keep the Soviet economy together. Gorbachev wanted to save, not destroy, the Soviet Union, but was locked in a trick box with no way out.

In the meantime, Germany posed a stark challenge. Gorbachev tried to impose a condition on unification that banned a foreign nuclear presence on its soil in West or East Germany, a view that 84 per cent of Germans happened to share. The instinct for pacifism would persist until February 2022. It was a good move by Gorbachev. He wanted to separate Soviet–German relationships from discussions about other countries and to handle the resolution bilaterally. The idea mortified the Bush team, which sought a broader agreement addressing NATO's future, not just Germany's. Kohl wasn't willing to wait. He hurried towards that goal with Bush's support, although they were careful to avoid action that publicly humiliated the Soviet leader.

What about NATO? Gorbachev seemed to favour a pan-European organisation that included the USSR. The latter had legal rights as one of Germany's four occupying powers and troops in Germany. He had leverage but remained unclear about how to employ it. Bush stayed focused. He wanted to maintain NATO and secure its future by including within it a united Germany. But Kohl held the cards. German reunification did not require Germany's membership in NATO. The Bush team realised that deal would undermine NATO.

Sarotte's account of how the leaders managed the situation is very interesting. She reports that Bush had to deal separately with Kohl and his foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher. Kohl ran a coalition government that required the support of Genscher's FDP, although the converse was not true, as Genscher could have formed a government with other coalition partners. A critical problem was that Genscher made noises about not expanding to the East.

Baker made a fateful trip to Moscow. There he suggested verbally to Gorbachev and then to Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze that Germany join NATO, but that in this scenario NATO would not move

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

'one inch eastward from its present position'. Baker later retrenched, apparently under pressure from Bush, but the Soviets had taken his initial pronouncements as a promise. The Bush team has since argued that it was floating a trial balloon, although Baker repeated it at a press conference. Baker later pulled back, but he was a careful, cautious negotiator.

Seeking to remove Soviet reservations about reunification, Kohl embraced Baker's view. As Kohl expressed that sentiment to Gorbachev, Genscher advised Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze: 'For us, it is clear: NATO will not extend itself to the East.' Still, Gorbachev temporised until Kohl suggested letting Germans themselves decide. Kohl wasted no time announcing Gorbachev's agreement and moving forward. The Soviets thought Kohl had pulled a fast one and Gorbachev had dropped the ball, agreeing to reunification with no conditions. But Kohl got away with it. He was a wily operator.

The debate over what was promised persists, but Sarotte's research shows why the Soviet Union—and subsequently Russia—believed it had a commitment from the US and Germany not to expand NATO. Gorbachev should have got it in writing, as Bush did not agree with Baker or Genscher. Bush favoured expansion. Bush and his team adroitly achieved their goals. Bush sought a strong NATO and set the foundation for maintaining one in the post-Cold War era. Germany reunified and joined NATO without any concession that would ban foreign troops or weapons from its soil. This set the stage for accession to NATO by Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Gorbachev was relegated to arguing for including Russia in NATO or some European collective security agreement. Bush would have probably done well to pay closer heed to Gorbachev's suggestion.

Bush's election defeat in 1992 shocked Bush himself. History doesn't reveal its alternatives, so what a second Bush term might have looked like is speculation. Brent Scowcroft told me they intended to focus on bringing peace to the Middle East. But the future of NATO would never have been far from their minds. The change in administration did not

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

favour the future. My feeling about Bush & Co. is that they formed the ablest national security team since Eisenhower's presidency. They were strategic. They thought over the horizon. Pragmatism, not hubris or ideology, drove their policies.

Sarotte makes a reasonable case that the US and the West were less fortunate when Bill Clinton took over the Oval Office. Poor judgement by Clinton and a cohort of advisors led by National Security Advisor Lake, Holbrooke, and Clinton's Yale university sidekick Talbott upended efforts to stabilise European security.

Sarotte believes that Clinton's most far-reaching national security decision—a perverse one—was to derail the PfP. Sarotte touts the initiative as one that envisioned a key role for Russia. At first embraced by Clinton and backed by his chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Shalikashvili, Secretary of Defense William Perry, and statesmen such as George Kennan, it might have worked, she believes.

The PfP was proposed in October 1993 at a meeting of NATO defence ministers. The concept encouraged states to build democracy and strengthen security cooperation between states not part of NATO. It contemplated eventual membership in NATO for Central and Eastern European nations, including possibly Russia. Clinton liked the idea until Lake, Holbrooke, and Talbott worked him over when Clinton backed off support.

German Chancellor Helmut Kohl liked PfP. But his focus was on unifying Germany. Sarotte documents his strategy of bribing an essentially bankrupt Russia with financial support in exchange for not opposing reunification. Clinton's team dealt the PfP one set of blows. Boris Yeltsin dealt it a separate set by insisting on special privileges. Tensions over Bosnia further weakened Russian support for the plan.

Then Yeltsin initiated the First Chechen War. The war emboldened Russia sceptics, who argued that the West should expand NATO to meet

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

a potential Russian military threat. Naively, Clinton's team convinced themselves that they could persuade Russia that expansion posed no danger.

Then there was Ukraine. No party could adequately define Ukraine's role in a collective security structure. In concept, the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances signed by the US, UK, and Russia in December 1994 was going to assure Ukraine's territorial integrity and that of Belarus and Kazakhstan—with the Russian Federation, UK, and US agreeing to refrain from threatening or using military force or economic coercion against them.

The agreement has caused confusion. It provided *assurances*, not *guarantees*, mainly arising out of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Much has been made about whether the three nations erred in giving up nuclear weapons. They did not. They may have had weapons, but Moscow had the codes to use them. The understandings implicit in the agreement went nowhere as cooperation between Russia and the US broke down. This chicken came home to roost in 2021 and 2022.

Sarotte clearly favours the PfP, and makes a good case for it. Still, one must recognise that a strong competing school of thought rejects the view that Putin—or those standing behind him—was ever open to amicable relations between Russia and the West. This school of thought believes that the Russian security apparatus remained powerful despite Yeltsin's efforts to promote a rapprochement, and was merely waiting for the right opportunity to reassert itself. These voices remain deeply sceptical of Russian political intentions. One might recall that Ronald Reagan's famous line 'trust but verify' is actually a Russian proverb. Those assessing Russia's security mindset would do well to read an interview in the Estonian weekly *Eesti Ekspress* with the heads and employees of the state security agencies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.[7] They clearly believe that sceptics of Russian intentions are not sceptical enough.

7 Eero Epner, '"Human Life Has No Value There": Baltic Counterintelligence Officers Speak Candidly about Russian Cruelty', *Eesti Ekspress*, 17 October 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

The genocidal tactics that Russia has employed in Ukraine certainly support their view.

At some point, Clinton convened Friday-night strategy meetings of close political advisors in the White House residence. Friends attended these. They revered Clinton. Yet all noted that until his final months in office, when Clinton applied the full force of his brilliant intellect to seeking a Middle East peace, national security occupied no priority for him.

In those meetings, he generally referred questions on national security to Tony Lake and, later, Lake's successor, Sandy Berger. Indeed, in 1995, as essential events unfolded leading to the 1999 accession to NATO of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, more personal activities distracted Clinton. It was no accident that he appointed two weak secretaries of state, Warren Christopher and Madeline Albright. Christopher may have been a fine lawyer, but as secretary of state he achieved little. Albright was smart but naive about world politics. Clinton assumed that neither would do much, thus avoiding getting him into trouble. Neither did, although the effect, combined with Lake's blundering tenure at the NSC, caused the US to stand idly by while Serbia committed genocide against Bosnian Muslims, and Hutus did the same to Tutsis in Rwanda. Both genocides, especially that in Rwanda, were easily avoidable.

Sarotte criticises both the Bush and Clinton teams. She contends that both operated on mistaken assumptions about post-Soviet Russia and to understand the extent to which the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe looked to Moscow like imperial collapse. The book was written before the events of 2022, but one can see that actions taken in the 1990s proved a precursor to the current war.

Sarotte joins Ambassador Kennan in criticising the decision to expand NATO so quickly. The Alliance expansion added to the burdens of Russia's fragile young democracy when it most needed friends. Kohl and Baker stand out as the two prescient, solid players in the byzantine

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

manoeuvres that governed NATO's fate. Baker understood politics and politicians. One sometimes feels that academics and think-tank gurus who style themselves as national security experts view foreign leaders as a different species.

US political consultants—by background, I'm one—have long handled most election campaigns worldwide. Election consulting lets one see foreign leaders up close and personal, in a different context than diplomats or military attaches do. Their masks are off. Different cultures produce distinct idiosyncrasies, but politicians tend to be more alike than one might expect. A master of political art, Baker understood that and was able to deal with them effectively.

Kohl understood politics but more importantly he understood Russia and its leaders. In Sarotte's telling, Kohl struggled valiantly to reassure post-Soviet Russia that Europe posed no threat, and to find ways to integrate Russia into Europe. Baker and Kohl recognised there was greater value in easing tensions and avoiding unnecessary steps that would aggravate them and cause the collapse of Russia's fledgling democracy.

Yeltsin had many abilities, but he was emotional and an alcoholic in failing health. Realising that Yeltsin—supported by his foreign minister, Andrey Kozyrev—offered the best hope for amicable relations with the US, Clinton pulled out all the stops to save Yeltsin's election bacon. The 2016 election gave rise to complaints that Putin was stupid for using social media to disrupt the US election and elect Donald Trump. Doubtless, Trump's election pleased him, but like most US political insiders, it never crossed his mind that Trump might prevail. He seems to have been more interested in discrediting and crippling Hillary Clinton before she became president. Putin hated her, and anyone who believes that personal relationships—or hostility between political leaders—don't count doesn't understand politics.

Russia meddled. Its meddling did not alter the outcome of the presidential election. Putin and his cohorts are war criminals who are committing

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genocide in Ukraine. Given how events have unfolded in Ukraine, one hopes Russians oust him. It's not clear stability in Europe, with knock-on effects elsewhere, is possible while he retains it. But let's go back a few years and look at what Bill Clinton did and why, perhaps, Putin is not entirely out of line in scoffing at complaints that Russia interfered in a US election. The US has hardly proven a bystander to Russian politics.

Consider Clinton's actions. In 1996 he sent capable consultants, Dick Dresner, George Gorton, and Joseph Shumate, to advise Yeltsin's campaign. They acted through his daughter, Tatyana Yumasheva. Later, the Russians tried to downplay their contribution. But I know Dresner well and have worked with him. Their story of making a real difference through their polling and advice on strategy and media is true.

Clinton tasked his CIA director, John Deutch, to advise Yeltsin on re-election. Finally, in the name of foreign aid, Clinton shovelled billions to Yeltsin. Think about that. What do you suppose would be the reaction had Clinton used Russian political consultants, taken advice from the head of the FSB, and accepted—let's use millions rather than billions of—campaign dough from Russia? I have no problem with what Clinton did to save Yeltsin, but hypocrisy is the cardinal sin in politics.

The collapse of the PfP arguably ensured acerbic relations between Russia and the West. Putin's paranoia was not novel to Russians. Border insecurity and obsession with its perceived lack of respect from the West have always permeated Russian diplomacy. The first tsar, Ivan IV, Peter the Great—whose portrait, not Lenin's, hangs in Putin's office—Catherine the Great, and a succession of Russian leaders up to and including Putin shared those traits.

Sarotte's scholarship teaches the importance of having the right leaders at the right time. Bush was much better informed and more prudent than the impulsive Clinton, and his team was wiser than its successors. Clinton should have achieved greatness as president. As a politician, he possessed energy and enthusiasm. He had a rapport with voters. He was

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

well read. He possesses a top-notch intellect. Those who worked with him—his White House senior staff—loved him, however difficult he could be in private. But he spread himself out across the board.

Bill and Hillary Clinton have trodden a bumpy road as partners. He capitulated to her agenda from 1992 to 1994, as highlighted by her 'Hillarycare' proposal that helped cost the Democrats control of Congress in 1994. After that, he shunted his wife aside and triangulated between liberals and conservatives. Politically that was shrewd and it produced historic welfare reform and a balanced budget.

Kohl was stolid, solid, and a testament to what pragmatic leadership could accomplish. But his example demonstrates the need for a united NATO effort to deal with Russia. As Sarotte points out, he had deep pockets and was willing to fork out huge sums of money to secure Russian approval for uniting his country. He and Bush share credit for getting that done. At the same time, there was no forgiveness of Russian financial debts—a failure Sarotte feels, I think correctly, might have helped uphold Russian democracy.

Kohl's successor, Gerhard Schröder, lacked Kohl's knowledge of Russia or his ability. After serving as chancellor, he became chairman of the board at Nord Stream AG and of Rosneft, and in 2022 drew criticism for complicity in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He may yet be sanctioned for his involvement with Putin.

Yeltsin hoped to establish a viable democracy in Russia and partner with the West on an equal footing. His foreign minister, Kozyrev, laboured to help Russia achieve both ends. Both failed. One cannot discern how Moscow would ultimately have reacted to a more cautious enlargement of NATO. And one has to consider the firm desire of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to join.

Sarotte's view that leaders should have given the Partnership for Peace a chance is shared by many Russian experts. They believe it would have

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.9

enabled Washington to avoid choosing too soon between Russia, Central Europe, and Eastern Europe, and post-Soviet republics such as the Baltics and Ukraine. The PfP could have kept Western options open. It would have allowed NATO to expand in the face of new threats. It also provided options for a post-Soviet state, Sarotte notes, that expanding the Alliance did not.

Both Lough's and Sarotte's books reinforce the importance of leadership that looks over the horizon—the prerequisite of strategic communications. Politicians cannot mail-order a crystal ball. William Faulkner wrote that the past remains a part of our present, but the clues offered can help define a clear vision of what lies ahead. Faulkner was insightful.

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Home before Dark: China's Approach to The Russian War in Ukraine

A Review Essay by
Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova

China's Foreign Policy Contradictions: Lessons from China's R2P, Hong Kong, and WTO Policy
Tim Nicholas Rühlig. Oxford University Press, 2021.

Home before Dark
TV series by Dana Fox and Dara Resnik. Apple TV+, 2020.

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Introduction

Questions surrounding the foreign policy strategy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) are plentiful, especially when a real-world problem of Chinese foreign policy response beyond slogans and

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keywords of PRC elites arises—most recently, China's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Consequently, critics expect the China watcher community to uncover a masterplan, an overarching strategy, that China is careful not to fully reveal but that nevertheless could be pieced together through histories, speeches, policies, initiatives, and visuals, if only one were sufficiently knowledgeable and meticulous to find and contextualise the clues.

Tim Rühlig's latest book challenges the very existence of an explicable, translatable, and, therefore, predictable Chinese foreign policy. 'The lack of academic consensus on how to describe China's approach to the rules and institutions underlying the international order', he writes, 'is the result not primarily of theoretical differences, but of *contradictory* Chinese foreign policy. This book summarizes and explains these contradictions and sets out their implications for the future international order.'[1] Such built-in contradictions are in fact a major roadblock to a popular international attempt to buy into a 'Beijing consensus'. With such an inconsistent track record from Beijing, other countries just don't know what they are getting themselves into. The book features an unpacking of the Chinese Party-State, the 'One Country, Two Systems' in Hong Kong, approaches to welfare, and WTO policy, among other topics.

This review essay, however, will focus on one particular contradiction scrutinised in Rühlig's work: that of China's approach to security and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) policy. I shall then apply these conclusions to China's approach to Russia's war in Ukraine. It suggests that China's position on Russia's R2P argument or indeed to the whole of Russia's war in Ukraine is neither neutral nor 'middle ground'. Actually, it is a series of contradictory statements and actions that are allowed to coexist and overlap in PRC messaging, adding up to support that falls just short of casting itself squarely in the Russian worldview.

1 Tim Rühlig, *China's Foreign Policy Contradictions: Lessons from China's R2P, Hong Kong, and WTO Policy* (Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 2.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.10

In other words, for China, it is not about avoiding venturing into the Russian camp. Rather, it is about making it home safely before nightfall. China has no problem lending a hand to the Russian position. Where China draws the line is at setting up camp and moving into it.

Home before Dark: A Policy Metaphor

'Look, I just didn't want you to get hurt, okay?' says the father to his young daughter, the protagonist of the Apple TV+ series *Home before Dark*, as she sets out to uncover secrets in a small town the family just moved to.[2] The father is fully aware that he cannot keep her from venturing into risky situations; he knows her too well. But he is hoping to decrease the risk, believing that as long as she's free to explore during daylight and his little girl is home and in bed before nightfall, they can go back to the starting line, the status quo. Forget the close calls, the jump scares, the bruised knees, and, most importantly, the conflicts of the day before, because there is always a chance of starting over and wiping the slate clean the following morning. Making it home before dark means averting the consequences. Indeed, the parent's rule for the child to make it 'home before dark' does not constrain any action the child might or might not take by daylight. The metaphor serves only as a reminder that when night falls the consequences tend to catch up with you.

The image of nightfall, the 'dark', is something we have been introduced to from our childhoods. It is almost a point of no return, a moment after which going back to the initial position becomes increasingly hard—a divide between safety and danger, and the threshold beyond which a game setting beckons real life hazards. What's more, the parent's plea is universal—just like the day and night divide—a global parenting standard.

2 *Home before Dark*, created by Dana Fox and Dara Resnik (Apple TV+, 2020).

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No wonder, then, that the perception of there being a line between consequences and no consequences, and getting away with just about anything without being particularly careful as long as one makes it back in time to square one, stays with people as they become adults. Retreat to safety before dark is so deeply ingrained at the individual level that it would not be too much of a stretch to apply this metaphor to political behaviour, including foreign policy.

The Russian StratCom Version of the UN's Responsibility to Protect

Today as Russia wages war in Ukraine, perhaps a suitable case for exploring a 'home before dark' mindset, there is a particular Chinese foreign policy contradiction in the security realm: the Responsibility to Protect. 'China's changing but contradictory approach to security issues in general and military intervention in particular', Rühlig writes, 'is even more apparent in regard to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), an emerging norm that fundamentally redefines security in terms of human rather than collective security.'[3]

Just a year after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the international community watched mass murder unfold again, this time in Europe, in the former Yugoslavia, seemingly unable to prevent it. Time and again, preventive actions would fail, as states fell back on the principle of sovereignty and annihilated a number of their own subjects. 'Through error, misjudgement and an inability to recognize the scope of the evil confronting us, we failed to do our part to help save the people of Srebrenica from the [Bosnian] Serb campaign of mass murder,'[4] read the 1999 United Nations Report of the Secretary General pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/35.

3 Rühlig, *China's Foreign Policy Contradictions*, p. 3.

4 United Nations Peacekeeping, *Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 53/35: The Fall of Srebrenica (A/54/549)*, 15 November 1999.

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Helplessness in the face of human suffering created a momentum in the UN for a new international norm, accelerating an already nascent debate over drafting a norm that would create an opening to override the sacred principle of state sovereignty should a state fail to protect all populations within its own borders. The initiative succeeded and a new paradigm of international law, the Responsibility to Protect, came into being. The 'Responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity' section of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, paragraph 139 (wording China agreed to), states: 'The international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, in accordance with Chapters VI and VIII of the Charter, to help to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.'[5] The United Nations defines R2P as 'a political commitment to end the worst forms of violence and persecution. It seeks to narrow the gap between Member States' pre-existing obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law and the reality faced by populations'.[6]

Six years after R2P was introduced during the UN World Summit, grounds for applying the doctrine in real life arose. In February and March 2011 a wave of 'Arab Spring' popular uprisings spread throughout Libya and Syria. The incumbent rulers, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and Bashar al-Assad in Syria, cracked down on protesters. As the violence escalated, civil wars ensued in both countries, and the governments resorted to war crimes and crimes against humanity in their efforts to regain control. [7] Armed conflicts in Libya and Syria led to broad calls for military intervention from outside, providing R2P with 'its most crucial test on the practical level'.[8] Both conflicts are widely recognised as compelling R2P situations because they 'appealed to the doctrine's full

5 United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 16 September 2005*, p. 30.

6 United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 'Responsibility to Protect: About'.

7 Yasmine Nahlawi, *The Responsibility to Protect in Libya and Syria: Mass Atrocities, Human Protection, and International Law* (Routledge, 2020), section 6.1, section 7.1.

8 Peter Hilpold, 'From Humanitarian Intervention to the Responsibility to Protect', in *The Responsibility to Protect (R2P): A New Paradigm of International Law?*, Peter Hilpold (ed.), (Brill, 2015), p. 2.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.10

scope so that robust measures, including the use of force, were required to counter seemingly deliberate and gross failures of the respective governments to protect their populations'.[9]

China's fundamentally different policies towards Libya and Syria represent a case of China's contradictory policy. In the Syrian case, the PRC rejected intervention on the grounds of defending state sovereignty. In Libya, China did nothing to prevent foreign intervention by the NATO-led coalition and against the will of the Libyan government.[10] Syria and Libya show a contradiction between two comparable cases. China's narrative approach to Russia's war in Ukraine presents that same paradox, but within a single case.

R2P in the UN understanding, or by any other measure, has no bearing on Russia's invasion and war in Ukraine. Still, interestingly, it was this exact argument that Russia used in its communication and to which China, to some extent, lent a shoulder in its public space. Therefore, one might argue that this contradiction in PRC foreign policy—the approach to R2P and its application—is exemplary of a broader 'home before dark' approach to Russia's war in Ukraine. First, it is important to establish the Russian line of argument in relation to R2P. Then, the echoes of the Russian argument need to be established and tracked in Chinese foreign policy communications.

Russia's version of R2P was added to the Russian Constitution in 2020 with its 'protection of compatriots' interpretation: 'The Russian Federation provides support to compatriots living abroad in exercising their rights, ensuring the protection of their interests and preserving the all-Russian cultural identity.'[11]

Announcing the attack on Ukraine at dawn on 24 February 2022, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, used a national

9 Nahlawi, *Responsibility to Protect in Libya and Syria*, introduction, p. 2.

10 Rühlig, *China's Foreign Policy Contradictions*, p. 41.

11 Russian Federation, State Duma, 'Novyy tekst Konstitutsii RF s popravkami 2020', 3 July 2020, Article 69.

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adaptation of the R2P argument: 'It is necessary to immediately stop this nightmare—the genocide against the millions of people living there, who rely only on Russia, only on us.'[12] Even though the claim has been refuted, including in the most recent OSCE report on civilian deaths in the conflict-affected regions of Eastern Ukraine—which concluded that the main cause of civilian deaths was 'cases where civilians have found ammunition, grenades or UXO [unexploded ordnance] and have detonated them while mishandling or dismantling them, including to extract parts to sell for scrap metal while trying to earn a living'[13]—the narrative alone is enough.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov used the same argument at length on 1 March in his video address to the UN Human Rights Council's 49th session, blaming the UN and using the need to protect as justification for Russia's actions:

> In the face of gross violation of the rights of Russian and Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine, an eight-year war against them that bears every sign of genocide, the stubborn refusal of the West to get the Ukrainian authorities to fall in line and the absence of any response from UN human rights bodies, the OSCE or the Council of Europe, Russia could not remain indifferent to the fate of Donbass and its 4 million people.

He continued,

> President Vladimir Putin resolved to recognise the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and, at the urging of the leaders of the DPR and LPR, to launch a special military operation to protect

12 RIA novosti, 'Tekst obrashcheniya prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina', 24 February 2022.

13 OSCE, 'Thematic Report of the Impact of Mines, Unexploded Ordnance and other Explosive Objects on Civilians in the Conflict-Affected Regions of Eastern Ukraine, November 2019 – March 2021', May 2021.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.10

> their residents in accordance with the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with these republics. The goal of our actions is to save lives by fulfilling our allied obligations, as well as to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine so that this never happens again.[14]

A month later, the communication of the Russian invasion as an act of protection was still foremost, tying the UN into the argument, as yet another speech of Sergei Lavrov suggests:

> [We] were forced to launch a special military operation in Ukraine aimed at protecting people from the military threat to which they had been exposed for eight long years, as well as at the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine. […] Over the past two years, at the expense of the Foundation [for the Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad], experts from the human rights structures of compatriots have prepared a series of fundamental analytical reviews exposing massive violations of the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. These include manifestations of neo-Nazism and xenophobia encouraged by the Ukrainian authorities, facts of targeted persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church. All reports are submitted to Russian law enforcement agencies, the Investigative Committee, specialized

14 Botschaft der Russischen Föderation in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks at the High-Level Segment of the UN Human Rights Council's 49th session, via Videoconference, March 1, 2022', 2 March 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.10

> multilateral structures, including within the UN system.[15]

Both statements amount to accusing the UN of not applying the R2P logic as a justification for Russia having to take matters into its own hands as a consequence.

Many have flagged that Putin's and Lavrov's R2P logic has taken root in the Chinese information space. Jordyn Haime offers a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon in the article 'China Adopts Russia's "Denazification" Myth to Rationalize Invasion of Ukraine'.[16] The Russian R2P rationale is repeated in Chinese state media when reporting the war in Ukraine, or *Wukelan jushi*—'the Ukraine situation', as it's known in Chinese discourse—including via the Russian propaganda story that 'Ukrainian "neo-nazis" opened fire on Chinese students, injuring two'.[17]

This could lead to the conclusion that China is fully backing the Russian approach to the *Wukelan jushi*, including how it applies Russia's national variation to the R2P argument. However, the story of 'Ukrainian neo-Nazism' and, consequently, its implied R2P argument is absent from official PRC statements. Igor Denisov writes: 'Despite the increased proximity between the Chinese and Russian positions […] China has made no pronouncements on Russia's desire to "denazify and demilitarize" Ukraine. […] The Chinese silence can hardly be seen as a tacit agreement with Russian talking points—rather the opposite. This is where the division between the positions of Moscow and Beijing runs.'[18]

15 Botschaft der Russischen Föderation in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 'Vystupleniye Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V. Lavrova na zasedanii Komissii General'nogo soveta partii "Edinaya Rossiya" po mezhdunarodnomu sotrudnichestvu i podderzhke sootechestvennikov za rubezhom, Moskva, 28 marta 2022 goda', 29 March 2022.

16 Jordyn Haime, 'China Adopts Russia's 'Denazification' Myth to Rationalize Invasion of Ukraine', *Times of Israel*, 6 March 2022.

17 CGTN Europe (@CGTNEurope), '#BREAKING Russian President Vladimir Putin says Ukrainian 'neo-nazis' opened fire on Chinese students, injuring two', Twitter, 3 March 2022.

18 Igor Denisov, '"No Limits"? Understanding China's Engagement with Russia on Ukraine', *The Diplomat*, 24 March 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.10

China's understanding of R2P leaves room for manoeuvre for national governments. A semi-official Chinese version of R2P known as 'Responsible Protection' was introduced in 2012: the 'Chinese initiative is intended to, first, provide criteria or guidelines for UNSC decision-making on the appropriateness of military intervention, and second, ensure that any such authorized action is monitored and supervised adequately so as to reduce the risk of R2P being used as a smokescreen for other strategic objectives such as regime change'.[19]

Pan Yaling from the Center for American Studies, Fudan University, Shanghai, writes that China 'firmly and consistently supports the international moral consensus embodied in the "responsibility to protect" principle'. However, 'compared with the moralism and extremism practiced by the West in promoting the "responsibility to protect" principle, China's contribution has far-reaching international political significance, that is, it has achieved a balance between the internal diffusion and external diffusion of international norms'. China's approach, she writes, is 'not only conducive to the construction of more just and reasonable international norms and international order, but also conducive to the development of the theory and practice of major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'.[20] Huo Yiwen from Hebei University of Economics and Business also underscores a specific Chinese approach to R2P, namely 'the development of the theory of "responsibility to protect" based on Chinese characteristics, aiming at the dilemma of "responsibility to protect" in practice, […] a feasible plan with Chinese wisdom'.[21] According to such readings, China, while not opposed to R2P on moral grounds in principle, adopts an approach which does not mirror the UN formula. This would give China room to back the Russian R2P argument even when it lies outside the scope of the UN's R2P. China, however, chooses not to.

19 Andrew Garwood-Gowers, 'China's "Responsible Protection" Concept: Reinterpreting the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and Military Intervention for Humanitarian Purposes', *Asian Journal of International Law* 6, № 1 (2014): 89–118, p. 3.

20 潘亚玲, 中国与"保护的责任"原则的发展,《国际观察》2016年 第6期.

21 霍艺雯. 论"保护的责任"理论的发展与完善[D] [On the Development and Perfection of 'Responsibility to Protect' Theory]. 河北经贸大学, 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.10

This Chinese approach, rooted in a strategic dilemma, depending on the degree of proximity assumed to exist between Russia and China, can be called consistent ambiguity, a balancing act,[22] or an implicit backing of Russia via non-action. All of these readings can be brought back to the deeper foreign policy contradiction Tim Rühlig describes.

Ambiguity or Contradiction? … Yes

China's communication, albeit favouring the Russian story, does not go as far as to back Russia's war and echo pro-Kremlin rhetoric. Information on Russian R2P logic is available to Chinese society. The *Global Times* Chinese edition quotes Vladimir Putin in a publication reposted on other media channels, including ifeng.com and 163.com: 'Unfortunately, in our neighbouring country—Ukraine, we have long seen the rampant neo-Nazism […] All this is accompanied by an unprecedented and rampant anti-Russian wave in the so-called politically correct Western civilized countries.'[23] And yet, China's foreign policy actors voice messages in official and state media channels where they appear to value the sovereignty of Ukraine. Foreign Minister Wang Yi remarked in a phone call with his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba: 'China's fundamental position on the Ukraine issue is open, transparent and consistent. We have always advocated respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries.'[24] This is Beijing's approach that Chairman Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang called 'promoting talks for peace in its own way':[25] Anything that could be read as promoting a US agenda or siding with the West at large is not on the table for Beijing because it negates the opportunity brought by Russia's war in Ukraine: to use the conflict as proof that the US is bad

22 Meia Nouwens, 'China's Difficult Balancing Act in Russia–Ukraine Crisis', *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 4 March 2022.

23 张江平, 王力, 普京：在乌克兰早就能看到新纳粹主义猖獗，一些西方"伙伴"却对此视而不见, *Huanqiu wang*, 17 May 2022.

24 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Wang Yi Speaks with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on the Phone', 2 March 2022.

25 State Council, People's Republic of China, 'Premier Calls on China, EU to Enhance Dialogue, Coordination, Deepen Cooperation', 1 April 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.10

for global security. Neither is going all-in supporting Russia because China is not interested in being dragged into Russia's stand-off with the West. The option that remains is the refuge of ambiguous statements, paradoxical signals, and contradictory remarks.

Let us examine the first factor—China's interest in demonstrating that the West, specifically the US, has a detrimental effect on global security. In China's interpretation, Russia's actions are a consequence of being pushed 'to the wall' when 'the US drove five waves of NATO expansion eastward all the way to Russia's doorstep':[26] the accession of Poland, Hungary, and Czechia in 1999; the accession of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004; the accession of Albania and Croatia in 2009; the accession of Montenegro in 2017; and last the accession of North Macedonia in 2020. China prefers to attack the US and NATO as the 'culprit and the leading instigator of the Ukraine crisis'.[27] This reading understandably serves China's agenda in its vicinity, notably the South and East China Seas.

But the idea that the sheer proximity of the US's security architecture to Russia's borders warrants war is a non-sequitur even by China's measure. Consequently, one more link is needed to justify Russia's signalled grievances and its attack on a sovereign neighbouring state. Russia's R2P claim that the Ukrainian side has been conducting 'genocide' serves this purpose. But overamplifying it could lead China down the slippery slope of admitting that something 'human-rightsy' trumps state sovereignty. China's solution: China's state media are comfortable with repeating the Russian story about 'neo-Nazis' in Ukraine and the need to protect threatened Russian-speakers: 'The frenzy of Ukrainian neo-Nazis has reached a level that causes indignation. Recently, a video of "Ukrainian militants using the mobile phone of a fallen Russian soldier to humiliate his mother" sparked outrage on overseas social media.'[28] In

26 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 23, 2022', 23 February 2022.

27 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on April 1, 2022', 1 April 2022.

28 乌克兰新纳粹镜面带笑容：俄罗斯人，你儿子死了, Sina, Source: Huanqiu Wang, 27 March 2022.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.10

the meantime, they come full circle to finding a way to blame the US for the emergence of neo-Nazis in Ukraine,[29] serving the 'it's all because of the US' narrative. Hence, 'Some scholars bluntly stated that the United States is the main culprit behind the current chaos in Ukraine, and it intends to instrumentalize the neo-Nazi forces ... " From the perspective of totalitarian form, racism, and methods of war, the United States is a country that provides soil for the breeding of neo-Nazism."'[30] A *Global Times* article republished on Sina.com quotes Zhang Yifei of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Officially, China is silent on this aspect of Russian strategic communications. The R2P argument is out there; no need to put it into the mouths of state foreign policy officials.

The second factor determining China's approach is the goal of avoiding being dragged into a US–Russia stand-off and becoming bound to the losing side. There has been no swift Russian victory despite the official Russian account of the 'first phase of the special operation being mostly complete'.[31] Siding with a weak-looking side associated with war atrocities and having few friends does not make a lot of sense for China. The Bucha horror in Ukraine had invoked comparisons with the Nanjing Massacre in Chinese social media. Witness: 'As Chinese people who have the memories of the Nanjing massacre, those who can still defend massacre of civilians have utterly lost their conscience.'[32] This fear is especially apparent, if one is inclined to believe that Vladimir Putin during his Olympic visit to Beijing failed to inform Xi Jinping fully while presenting China's president in an unfavourable light. Chinese officials, however, continue to repeat with great confidence that China 'is on the right side of history', but unlike the US its actions show restraint.

29 Huang Lanlan and Cui Fandi, 'GT Investigates: Evidence Suggests US May Have Supported Neo-Nazi Azov Battalion', *Global Times*, 7 March 2022.

30 新纳粹主义为何在这些国家蔓延?, Sina, Source: Huanqiu wang, 18 May 2022.

31 Interestingly, China's CGTN reporting on the issue has attempted to balance the Russian and the Ukrainian narratives, quoting both senior Russian military official Sergey Rudskoy and the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy: 'Russia Says Main Tasks of First Stage of "Special Military Operation" Achieved', CGTN, *YouTube*, 26 March 2022.

32 Weibo user quoted in 'China's U.N. Envoy Calls Violence in Ukraine's Bucha "Deeply Disturbing"', *Japan Times*, 6 April 2022.

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The contradiction between the two goals described above is so dramatic that it is impossible to hide it beneath ambiguous wording. Even the Ukrainian Association of Sinologists—people who know China intimately and have written on its ambiguous nature—are calling for clarity: 'For many years, the People's Republic of China has opposed global hegemony, condemned all forms of aggression, and advocated for world peace. Today, when Ukraine is a victim of Russian hegemony and military aggression, voices are heard in China justifying it. Ukraine has the right to request that China express a clear attitude toward Russia's actions.'[33]

What comes out of China's contradiction, then, is a 'home before dark' approach to positioning itself in this conflict. China is not neutral, nor has it adopted a middle ground. It is venturing out of the middle ground into the Russian camp, showing rhetorical support for Russia. Meanwhile it maintains the reading that Russia's 'special operation' is not about encroaching on Ukraine or undermining its sovereignty. Rather, it is about standing up to US hegemony, while allowing the story of Russia's R2P argument to circulate within China's tightly controlled information space. But China also ensures that it comes home before nightfall every time, taking measures not to be tied permanently to Russia, strategically signalling that 'this is not our war',[34] and worshipping at the altar of 'sovereignty and territorial integrity'[35] in its conversations with Ukrainian counterparts. In spite of calling Russia central to China's proclaimed 'community for a shared destiny in the new era',[36] Russia's destiny remains one China is reluctant to share.

And Western pressure is having an effect too. The position US President Joe Biden is taking when highlighting 'the implications and consequences if China provides material support to Russia as it conducts brutal attacks

33 Ukrainian Association of Sinologists, 'Appeal of the Ukrainian Association of Sinologists', 13 April 2022.

34 European Commission, 'Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Michel following the EU-China Summit via videoconference, 1 April 2022.

35 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Wang Yi Speaks'.

36 中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦关于新时代国际关系和全球可持续发展的联合声明, 中华人民共和国中央人民政府, Source: Xinhua, 4 February 2022.

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against Ukrainian cities and civilians'[37] is one of being either with us or against us. China is aware of the newly unified West, so much so that Xi Jinping can only urge the EU 'to form its own perception of China [and] adopt an independent China policy'.[38]

Still, as its summit with China on 1 April has shown, the EU is moving in a similar direction to that of the US. President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen opened her statement at her press conference with: 'Indeed, today's Summit was certainly not business as usual. It took place in a very sober atmosphere. It took place against the backdrop of the Russian war still unravelling in Ukraine.'[39] A few months later, the organisers of a major trade expo in Shanghai did not play a pre-recorded video address of the President of the European Council that 'was set to criticise Russia's "illegal war" in Ukraine and call for reduced EU trade dependency on China': China is coming to terms with the realisation that the EU does not believe its statements of neutrality.[40]

When Night Falls: The Future of China's Foreign Policy Contradictions in Ukraine

When the worried father tells his inquisitive daughter not to stay out after nightfall, he is aware that it is a near impossible request. What's more, it is the whole point of the TV show. As the girl detective becomes more invested in her investigation, it becomes harder and harder for her to make it home to safety each night. Screenwriters and their viewers know and expect that the child is bound to miss the curfew sooner or later. The moment will come when there will be no more waking up to a morning of no consequences.

37 The White House, 'Readout of President Joseph R. Biden Jr. Call with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China', 18 March 2022.

38 'Xi Jinping: China, EU Should Bring More Stability to a Turbulent World', CGTN, 1 April 2022.

39 European Commission, 'Statement by President von der Leyen'.

40 Martin Quin Pollard and Jan Strupczewski, 'Exclusive: China Cancelled EU Leader's Video Address at Opening of Major Trade Expo', 8 November 2022.

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How long can China hide in the safety of its ambiguous 'home before dark' approach to Russia's war in Ukraine? As the days grow longer and the war drags on, there is a risk that China could be venturing further into the Russian worldview. However, Beijing openly siding with Moscow, militarily or economically by helping Russia circumvent Western sanctions, seems implausible at this point. Tim Rühlig suggests that countries tend to be less than excited by China's rise precisely because of its foreign policy inconsistencies. China already has a trust and image problem.[41] And outspoken support towards Russia will not help China's case or attempts to save face.

It is hard to predict how long China's 'home before dark' ambiguity will last, and on which side China will ultimately set up camp if caught out by nightfall. While the search for an overarching, consistent, and predictable framework of understanding continues, perhaps there is something to be said for the use of this metaphor in lifting the veil on PRC foreign policy behaviour in Ukraine.

41 Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, 'How Global Public Opinion of China Has Shifted in the Xi Era', Pew Research Center, 28 September 2022.

EVERYTHING COMMUNICATES

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