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# **DEFENCE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS**

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NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence



**How the global war on terror killed the prospect of justice for Kenyan victims of violence**

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Defence Strategic Communications

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NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence

Riga, Kalnciema iela 11b, Latvia LV1048

[www.stratcomcoe.org](http://www.stratcomcoe.org)

Ph.: 0037167335463

[linda.curika@stratcomcoe.org](mailto:linda.curika@stratcomcoe.org)

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Defence Strategic Communications

# FOREWORD

Over the last three years this journal has sought to deepen the foundations of Strategic Communications as a field of academic inquiry. Uniquely, it has undertaken this task by encouraging a debate between not only scholars but policy makers, practitioners, and writers of military doctrine. And into this community we have welcomed the contributions of journalists schooled in the ways of governance, insurgency, and war. Ours is an emergent field of research; at least, under the nomenclature of Strategic Communications. Often that very label is misleading and we are tempted to interpret the themes and ideas to which it attaches in a way that barely scratches the surface of history. Forgetting that societies have for thousands of years engaged in communicating politically, we often neglect the point that persuasion and coercion, and the continual calibration between the two, sit at the heart of humanity's exercise of power.

Too little thinking is invested in the genealogy of this field. Strategic Communications' origins have been myopically accredited to business affairs or geopolitics over the last two decades. NATO traces its public use of the term to the Bucharest Summit a decade ago in April 2008. But the story doesn't start there. Nor indeed does it end there. NATO considers public diplomacy, public affairs, military public affairs, information operations, and psychological operations all to sit within the co-ordinated remit of its Strategic Communications. Some of these concepts, however, fail to align seamlessly with the definitions many states

apply within their national security cultures. Despite NATO's investment in research, doctrine, and terminology, when trying to separate out these sometimes troublesome concepts, a host of others—that actually describe real jobs filled by real people in the world of political communications—are absent from this list. How should political marketing, advertising, corporate branding, nation branding, public relations, and most uncomfortably, propaganda be understood in the same roll call?

Strategic Communications entails the long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses in societies. It adopts a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests, that encompass everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment. This speaks more to process. To apply that to intention and attainment in the world of politics, it addresses the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects, using words, images, actions and non-actions in the national interest or the interest of a political community. Strategic Communications recognises that time is both its friend and its enemy. By contrast, crisis communications, and the more malleable public relations (read image management), focus on the immediate: they fix short-term crises in politics and set-backs at the corporate or personal image level. Strategic Communications is usually directed at foreign governments and their populations. But when digital information technologies perpetually breach sovereign borders and what was in the analogue era a national broadcast footprint, historic binaries of home and abroad rapidly dissolve; so too the binary of government and people. That makes it difficult, if not unwise, to conceive of it as some kind of hermetically sealed message projection directed at foreign states. Feedback and blowback operate in split-second dynamic loops.

What makes Strategic Communications strategic is a recognition that one party cannot influence the thinking or behaviour of another party without first negotiating a path through a continually changing and noisy environment, having set out from a less than ideal starting place while moving towards an unstable end-point. By the same token, it has largely freed itself from the classical moorings that some thinkers still consider essential to setting its definitional limits. Namely, that its aims and activities must be associated with the pursuit or cessation of war, understood as kinetic engagement. Nevertheless, as much as a number of military-minded scholars might favour one interpretation yet other politically-centred thinkers decline these constraints, there is often consensus

around its operational components or processes of delivery: defining a message; identifying a specific audience; intending to achieve not simply an effect but real, measurable change; while being judged by all that is seen and heard, intentionally or otherwise. Not so far, then, from the linear maxim of communications that held sway some 70 years ago: namely, Harold Lasswell's 'who says what in which channel to whom with what effect'.

However, more nuanced concepts have crept into the way we discuss this field today where information flows can never be controlled, not even managed, but at best influenced. Today Strategic Communications is increasingly imagined as a holistic undertaking. When formulated by states we talk of cross-government or whole of government approaches, of fusion, and of different ways of treating information in the state's armoury. DIME—Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economics, with its distinct preserves, is challenged increasingly in the instantaneous and digitally-connected 21<sup>st</sup> century, so that Information becomes subsumed into those other three pillars of state engagement, DME. Nevertheless, historians may argue it was ever thus. For thousands of years, states or administrative elites seeking to control populations and challenge foreign elites for resources and control of territory, have always mobilised the full array of assets at their disposal.

In 1887 a unique cache of documents—the Amarna Letters—was unearthed at the ancient site of a pharaonic palace in Egypt. What this correspondence with Egypt revealed was an early record of a system of international relations (nearly 3,500 years ago) between great powers, independent powers, and vassal states where its leaders called themselves 'Great King' while conducting diplomacy, strategic affairs, marriage, and trade as part of a 'brotherhood'. This system stretched across modern Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and the Levant. The intersection of symbolism and reality is a fine one. Images carved onto the walls of palaces built nearly 3,000 years ago in Assyrian Mesopotamia bear witness to the Strategic Communications of King Ashurbanipal. Military conquest of Egypt and Elam (southern Iran today) is depicted alongside raging conflicts across Babylonia; the forced movement of entire populations to create new agricultural economies to benefit his conquering state is celebrated with the same confidence as his library of 10,000 works that would enhance understandings of science, medicine, literature, magic, and statecraft. A blend of coercion and persuasion, these campaigns etched in stone for millennia attempt to influence elites and terrify populations in places like Nimrud, Nineveh, and Babylon.

They serve also to remind us of more recent messaging campaigns into those same centres in Iraq in the early part of this century. The work of the Information Operations Task Force (IOTF) of the US, ISIS/Daesh, and Iran spring to mind.

Of further concern to this journal is that so much discussion in this field is conveniently bundled up and labelled as ethics only to be shelved for a later conversation. At a time when there is a growing demand among younger generations in Western societies to engage with values, so little effort is made to refresh those ethical codes that should govern our political behaviour. Strategic Communications is shot through with tensions. But it is nothing if not an unrelenting self-critique of the ethics—not simply efficacy—of a set of actions. Understandable when human beings set out to persuade or coerce others into embracing what the sudden recipient of attention had previously not considered or even resisted doing, then the dichotomy between truth and lies is never far from the surface. These shades of grey hanker after a black and white morality, a simplicity to take us beyond digestible notions of power—soft, hard, smart, and latterly sharp; all of which are contained within Strategic Communications. Yet use of force—hard power—has always been a home for both threat or punishment (implicit or explicit use of military violence). Use of persuasion and attraction—soft and sharp—have always played host to cooperation and on occasions withdrawal of that friendliness (economics and trade), often to devastating effect.

Do we ever think: who gets to call themselves Strategic Communicators? Put another way, who qualifies to wear the jacket? We regularly default to assume that states do. Then we elide uncritically to insurgent movements, political parties, and further down the scale to individuals. Where should we draw the line and why? If Strategic Communicators are not to slip into being simply political communicators and even further individual communicators, they must retain some inherent characteristics that define the collective and the single actor's relationship to it. Countries usually position their policies in 'the national interest', demarcating their own sovereignty. Does that invite insurgent movements who use both persuasion and coercion to join the Strategic Communicators' club? ISIS/Daesh was, however fleetingly, a nascent state before its territorial destruction, fostering emergent institutions and statist ambitions. By contrast, al-Qaeda has never sought the trappings of sovereign statehood. Are they not Strategic Communicators? Many—almost household names—in different ways and with different outcomes, have sought more than sectarian identity; rather they wanted to be recognised as states-in-waiting.

A priority for an academic journal such as *Defence Strategic Communications* is to interrogate unquestioned assumptions. In a world of crafted and customised communications launched into an internet ocean of voices and faces, the question of who can count themselves legitimately as Strategic Communicators goes beyond a state on state, state on sub-state, or state on trans-state challenge. We should go further and ask whether it is confined to democratic actors alone, although we are discovering in these turbulent political times that illiberal democratic governments are challenging the freedoms that populations are keen to ascribe to democracy. Russia, with its cloak of electoral democracy, does not recognise the term Strategic Communications. But they know what we mean: for them the ‘projection of foreign and security policy’ obviates the need for neologisms. China, meanwhile, has no qualms in calling political communications propaganda, but abroad prefers to speak the language of diplomacy. Wherein lies the problem in our own tradition because we do baulk at the P word, burdened by the legacy of two World Wars (perhaps even the obfuscation of truth-telling over Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq) and remain suspicious of governments communicating to their populations on all sides of ideological divides. To the average woman and man on the street in the West, however, propaganda simply means to tell lies for political gain. And Strategic Communicators don’t do that, do they?

According to certain academics, that popular understanding is to completely misunderstand propaganda. An uphill battle of persuasion it may seem, but for the scholar Jacques Ellul all human communication fits into his detailed typology—everything we communicate is propaganda: propaganda is everything. For fellow academic Philip Taylor, propaganda can only succeed when it incorporates elements of something the population chooses to recognise as a truth. As he puts it, ‘myth needs to be rooted in some reality if propaganda is to succeed’. Similarly, the scholar Nicholas O’Shaughnessy describes it as a willing co-production between government and people that is best framed in an all-consuming mindset. Each of these conclusions explores a different ethical dilemma and complicates any discussion of persuasion and coercion, otherwise known as Strategic Communications.

I suggested earlier that this field of research may or may not be confined to the ideology of liberal democracy. By visiting different parts of the world with their divergent problem sets, we gain insights into how alternative perspectives can enhance and progress our discussions. Consequently, in this 6<sup>th</sup> issue of *Defence Strategic Communications* we welcome contributions from different regions and continents.



We also look back in time in search of a genealogy that will help us shine a light on the path into the future. If Strategic Communications is to grow as an academic field it must unearth a richer legacy than reciting parallel tropes linking propaganda studies to the 16th - century European Counter-Reformation.

Italian scholar, Filippo Tansini is searching for the origins of early modern practice of Strategic Communications in 16th - and 17th - century Venetian opera and theatrical performance. Against the backdrop of the wars between Venice and the Ottoman empire, his research identifies three aesthetic types: elite operatic performance on a spectacular scale, staged works for fee-paying audiences by commercial impresarios, and more impromptu news dissemination through itinerant street actors. Tansini draws interesting comparisons with changes unfolding in today's media landscape.

Tasio Franchi and Leonardo Perin Vichi from the Brazilian Army Command and Staff School, and Brazil's Navy War College, bring their historical analysis of Mexico's Zapatista insurgency into a broader understanding of how insurgent movements merge popular grievance into local storytelling. There is more than a hint of magical realism that emerges from the jungle to infuse accounts of how indigenous people of southern Mexico have been wronged continually by the central state. What makes this so fascinating is the realisation that Zapatista (EZLN) forces were the first revolutionary movement to recognise the potential of the internet to mobilise support globally.

Karen Allen, a celebrated BBC journalist, travels to Kenya to investigate how that country's elites resisted the International Criminal Court (ICC) and demands for security sector reform following violence meted out by its forces after the elections of 2007–08. The Global War on Terror (GWOT) and fight against neighbouring Somalia's al-Shabaab both provided and reinforced a discourse behind which the Kenyan government could hide its strategies of opposition.

Brazilian researcher Raphael Camargo Lima turns the spotlight on contrasting ways that Russia and China are seeking to gain influence in troubled Venezuela today. Both employ balancing strategies, he argues, rooting his discussion in balancing theory while attempting to extend the bounds of Strategic Communications theory. He concludes that Russia uses hard balancing via information campaigns in order to undermine American regional hegemony, and China soft balancing through information campaigns that promote its own resource security while presenting itself as a credible force in Great Power politics.

Russia reappears in two further articles. The researchers John Gallacher and Marc Heerdink analyse cyber-enabled information operations on Twitter and Reddit emanating from Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA). Much has been said about the effects of their destabilising disinformation campaigns via social media. But little evidence has been found to measure change in attitudes or behaviour in their supposedly vulnerable target populations. The researchers employ causal analysis modelling to address this gap in current scholarship and to suggest how countermeasures might be shaped by governments. Two other academics, Charles Kriel and Alexa Pavliuc, also pursue a line of inquiry into the online activities of the IRA. Following up on a dataset made available by Twitter in 2018, they analyse tweets released to influence the US, UK, and Venezuelan elections. Their inquiries highlight a failure to allow for time as a key factor in the visualisation of tweets, consequently misrepresenting important trends.

This journal has established its own space encouraging the review essay as a lively and provocative literary form. During a visit to the Tate Britain gallery in London, practitioner Paul Bell reflects on a lifetime's communicating into the frontline of countries torn apart by conflict. There he assesses the retrospective of war photographer Don McCullin, a man who has born witness to more than his fair share of human suffering. Bell ponders on the killing fields of the Middle East and goes on to explore what Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) policy has achieved. It prompts him to issue a challenge that investing in on-the-ground resilience measures has a better chance of achieving positive change than well-intentioned messages launched into the ether.

Malik Dahlan is a mediator, negotiator, and law professor who reflects on the turbulent and disturbing relationship between information, social media, and truth telling. Truth decay amid digital explosion leads him to a deep concern for Strategic Communications in this age of Information and Disinformation. He concludes soberly: 'National security now seems more vulnerable than it ever did in the era of mutually assured destruction, and the ethical horizon that lends perspective to that security has never seemed more occluded.'

Meanwhile communications practitioners Tara Flores and Philip Hall consider technological developments on the African continent. They attempt to bring a more measured understanding of China's investment into mobile technologies there, considering first its 'alternative cyber-sphere' or 'splinternet' back home. From the closed platform of WeChat, an embedded mobile app for China's citizens—a one-stop shop for all life's needs—with its consequent implications

for state surveillance and data harvesting, they turn their focus abroad to how Chinese technology outstrips American competitors in Africa's dynamic consumer populations by offering products and costs more finely attuned to local marketplace demand. These two practitioners raise the question of how long the Western digital status quo can endure.

In these pages our contributors set out to invest greater intellectual insight into Strategic Communications so that our field can better engage with what it is and where it comes from—a path we have already begun to tread in recent issues with notable success.

Dr Neville Bolt, Editor-in-Chief  
Spring 2019

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# HOW THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR KILLED THE PROSPECT OF JUSTICE FOR KENYAN VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

Karen Allen

## Abstract

This article assesses the dynamics of resistance and cooperation by Kenyan elites to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the ongoing pressure for reform to Kenya's security services, which were heavily implicated by a commission of inquiry into the post-election violence (PEV) of 2007/08.<sup>1</sup> This article highlights the specific context of the global war on terror (GWOT) and Kenya's role as a strategic partner in fighting the Somali Islamist group al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's African affiliate, as well as being a victim of al-Shabaab attacks. The terrorism narrative served to reinforce Kenya's existing strategies of opposition. This does not imply that conflating justice and security issues was a strategy intentionally adopted from the outset. However, this article suggests that over time the utility of doing so became apparent. Moreover, the response of Kenya's leaders to events at the ICC and Kenya's resistance to security sector reform are worthy of close scrutiny. They highlight what appears to be an international realignment of principles of justice, driven by pragmatism. They also demonstrate the fragility of international justice mechanisms and how it is virtually impossible to divorce them from political contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Kenya, 'Commission of Inquiry into Post Election Violence' (CIPEV), Final Report, 16 October 2008.

**Keywords**—*International Criminal Court, strategic communications, Kenya, global war on terror, GWOT, al-Shabaab*

### About the Author

**Karen Allen** has been a correspondent with the BBC for more than 25 years, with 13 years based in East and Southern Africa. She is a senior associate at the Institute of Security Studies in Pretoria and a visiting fellow at King's College London.

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### Introduction

When judges at the International Criminal Court (ICC) confirmed in March 2015 that they were ‘terminating’ the case against Kenya’s serving President Uhuru Kenyatta,<sup>2</sup> and the following year that of William Ruto,<sup>3</sup> for their alleged roles in the 2007/08 post-election violence (PEV),<sup>4</sup> it exposed the limitations of a court heavily reliant on state co-operation to function. It also threw into sharp relief the constraints of indicting a man who would become the sitting head of state, and his future deputy, in a country that is a key player in the global war on terror (GWOT). In a statement at the time, Fatou Bensouda, the Chief Prosecutor of the ICC, lamented that the people of Kenya had been ‘deprived of justice’ because of the ‘severe challenges’ associated with the case, including witness intimidation; bribery; and the withholding of information. She publicly lambasted the Kenyan government for their ‘failure to fully cooperate’.<sup>5</sup> Despite this statement, there has been a noticeable absence of any long-term consequences for Kenya’s powerful political class.

This article examines the factors which helped to drive resistance by Kenyan elites to the ICC, and the extent to which Kenya’s role in fighting regional and international terrorism protected it from sanction. There is no attempt to assign a value to the apparent privileging of security over justice issues. But I conclude

2 International Criminal Court Case № ICC-01/09-02/11, Decision on the Withdrawal of Charges Against Mr Kenyatta, 13 March 2015.

3 Questions and answers arising from the decision of no-case to answer in the case of Prosecutor v Ruto and Sang, International Criminal Court Case № ICC-01/09-01/11, [n.d].

4 The CIPEV Report documented how more than 1,100 individuals were killed many more displaced following disputed elections.

5 Statement of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, on the Withdrawal of Charges against Mr. Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta, International Criminal Court, 5 December 2014.

that Kenya's contribution to the GWOT appears to have bought it significant political capital at a critical time.

### **Does International Relations Theory Provide an Explanation?**

The principles that underpin international justice mechanisms are frequently framed through pragmatism rather than through the paradigm of legalism.<sup>6</sup> Legalism is founded on the normative belief that the principle of holding alleged criminals to account is entrenched in states with shared liberal values. In contrast, pragmatism or 'prudentialism'<sup>7</sup> conceives that support for international tribunals is inconsistent, and is based on balancing 'politics, pragmatism, and normative beliefs'.

Another tool of analysis is balance of power theory which helps explain how states such as Kenya respond to power and power vested in institutions, such as the UN and ICC,<sup>8</sup> by holding them in check through non-military means. This article also seeks to explain the apparent contradictions in that states such as Kenya publicly resist ICC investigations, whilst at the same time remaining party to its founding ethos, The Rome Statute.<sup>9</sup> Compliance and resistance are conceived in terms of 'soft balancing', using non-military means to project power.<sup>10</sup>

It has also been instructive to examine the deterrent effect of tribunals when assessing the dynamics of opposition, or what Sikkink and Lutz describe as 'justice cascade' theory.<sup>11</sup> This idea rests on the assertion that successful human rights prosecutions shape the direction of future politics by entrenching the norm of individual criminal accountability.<sup>12</sup> Yet emerging scholarship, including Jelena Subotic,<sup>13</sup> reveals how states are able to appropriate justice mechanisms for their own domestic agendas, thereby limiting any deterrent or justice cascade effect.

6 Gary Jonathan Bass, *Stay the Hand of Vengeance: The Politics of War Crimes Tribunals*, (Princeton University Press, 2000).

7 Zachary D. Kaufman, *United States Law and Policy on Transitional Justice: Principles, Politics and Pragmatics* (Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 5–158.

8 Beth Elise Whitaker, 'Soft Balancing in Weak States: Evidence From Africa', *International Affairs* Vol. 86, No 5 (2010): 1109–27.

9 Susanne Mueller, 'Kenya and the International Criminal Court (ICC): Politics, the Election and the Law', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* Vol. 8, Issue 1 (2014): 25–42.

10 Whitaker, 'Soft Balancing'.

11 Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions Are Changing World Politics* (W. W. Norton Company, 2011).

12 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

13 Jelena Subotic, *Hijacked Justice: Dealing with the Past in the Balkans* (Cornell University Press, 2016).



The current literature lacks scholarship on African agency and how domestic policy factors help to shape policies of resistance.<sup>14</sup> This paper seeks to investigate the influence of one particular component, Kenya's active participation in the global war on terror (GWOT), and probe whether it acted as a re-enforcement mechanism for domestic strategies of opposition.

This article draws on the author's experience as a foreign correspondent for an international media platform during the time of the PEV, and the years following the ICC case. It is built on primary and secondary sources, to establish the theoretical basis upon which transitional justice functions in practice, defined by the United Nations as the 'full range of processes and mechanisms, associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale abuses'. Primary sources, including court documents, speeches, and UN and government papers, were used as evidence of Kenya's conduct throughout the ICC process, and of the shifting responses of the international community. These sources also provide evidence of the ongoing security relationship between Kenya, Somalia, and key Western security partners. Secondary sources were used to set out the debates over established theoretical paradigms relating to transitional justice. These resources were supplemented with media commentary, blogs, and analyses to establish a descriptive narrative of events as they happened. Elite interviews, including those with diplomats, government officials the security services and members of civil society, were conducted to substantiate the findings from primary sources and shed light on the decision-making process, which often occurred behind closed doors. Elite interviews were also conducted with recipients of justice i.e. victims. A number of Freedom of Information requests were also submitted but responses were limited and vague. It is also worth noting that as strategic allies, the US and the UK adopted policies on Kenya and Somalia and terrorism that were broadly aligned but not identical. However, for the purpose of this paper they are referred to generically as 'Western powers'.

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14 Stephen Brown and Chandra Lekha Sriram, 'The Big Fish Won't Fry Themselves: Criminal Accountability for Post-Election Violence in Kenya', *African Affairs* Vol. 111, Issue 443 (April 2012): 244–60; Thomas Obel Hansen and Chandra Sriram, 'Fighting for Justice (and Survival): Kenyan Civil Society Accountability Strategies and Their Enemies', *International Journal of Transitional Justice* Vol. 9, Issue 3 (2015): 406–27; Whitacker (2010) Stephen Brown and Rosalind Raddatz, 'Dire Consequences of Empty Threats? Western Pressure for Peace, Justice and Democracy in Kenya', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* Vol. 8, Issue 1 (2014): 43–62; Gabriel Lynch, 'Electing the "Alliance of the Accused": the Success of the Jubilee Alliance in Kenya's Rift Valley', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* Vol. 8:1 (2013): 93–114; Veit Bachmann, *European External Action: The making of EU Diplomacy in Kenya*, (London: Routledge, 2018); Mueller, 'Kenya and the ICC'.

## Kenya's Experience of Terrorism

When Islamist militants staged a dramatic shopping mall siege in the centre of Nairobi in 2013, Kenya's strategic links to the global war on terror (GWOT) were played out on a world stage.<sup>15</sup> Many Kenyans described Westgate as their '9/11', underscoring Kenya's status as both a victim of terrorism regionally and internationally, and an important actor in seeking to combat it. In 2019 an attack on a prominent international hotel in Nairobi,<sup>16</sup> which had some features of the Westgate siege, sought to remind the world of Kenya's continuing vulnerability to terrorist attacks.

Kenya has long been a key strategic partner for the West and for the UK and US in particular. During the Cold War it was an important buffer to Communist influences in East Africa and the Horn of Africa.<sup>17</sup> By the late 1990s Kenya's role as an anchor state was cemented by virtue of its 'geopolitical position, its proximity to the Horn of Africa and to Somalia in particular.'<sup>18</sup>

In the wake of the fall of the Siad Barre regime in 1991 in Somalia, Kenya's neighbour was widely characterised as a 'lawless society where crime and radical ideologies flourished', making the region a priority for the wider GWOT.<sup>19</sup> Over the next two and a half decades, what was initially conceived as a regional conflict<sup>20</sup> acquired features of what are called 'New Wars'—ideologically driven warfare, unconstrained by borders; attracting foreign fighters and presenting a global threat.<sup>21</sup> That threat has seen Kenya, an important Western ally, become both a battleground and a recruiting pool for a new generation of Islamist fighters who associate themselves with al-Shabaab.<sup>22</sup> Kenya's involvement as a regional policeman deepened with its military intervention into Somalia in 2011 designated '*Operation Linda Nchi*' ('Protect the Nation').<sup>23</sup> Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) were subsequently absorbed into the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in 2012. The Kenyan government failed to predict the level of 'blowback' that its

.....  
15 The siege resulted in 67 deaths.

16 'Gunmen storm Nairobi's Dusit Hotel' *Washington Post*, 2019.

17 Charles Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence* (I.B Tauris, 2013), p. 89.

18 The *National Security Strategy of the United States 2002*, p. 11, names Kenya as a key 'anchor' requiring 'focused engagement'.

19 Samuel Aronson, 'Kenya and the Global War on Terror: Neglecting History and Geopolitics in Approaches to Counterterrorism', *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* Vol. 7, No 1&2 (November 2013): 24-34.

20 Mary Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong: Faith War and Hope in a Shattered State*, (Zed Books, 2017).

21 Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, (Stanford University Press, 2012).

22 Anneli Botha, 'Radicalisation in Kenya: Recruitment to al-Shabaab and the Mombasa Republican Council' (Institute of Security Studies, 2014).

23 Colonel Pius T. Migue et al., *Operation Linda Nchi: Kenya's Military Experience in Somalia*, (Kenya Literature Bureau, 2016).

military adventures into Somalia would deliver. Al-Shabaab justifies its escalated activity as a response to the presence of KDF on Somali soil. This in turn has contributed to growing concern about terrorism in the region.<sup>24</sup>

Kenya is vulnerable to attack and presents an 'attractive target' for terrorists because of its 'geography, ethnic composition, political stability, unstable neighbours, poverty, Islamic fundamentalism and lax law enforcement'.<sup>25</sup> The KDF has received extensive training, finance, and hardware from the US, the UK, and other regional players to boost its capacity to respond to this threat.<sup>26</sup> Such close 'linkages' in fighting terrorism appear to have provided Kenya with a degree of leverage in withstanding international and domestic pressure to address challenges at home.<sup>27</sup> This 'African agency', may help us understand how Kenyan politicians seized upon Western officials' fear of violence and disorder '...to resist Western pressure for democratization and accountability for large scale political violence.'

Following the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, the United States' military footprint in Somalia was part of a wider humanitarian and peacekeeping effort under President H.W. Bush to protect relief workers.<sup>28</sup> The operation came to an abrupt end after a failed US attempt to kidnap a prominent warlord. It ended in tragedy when 18 Americans were killed, and scores of others injured in the so-called 'Black Hawk Down' incident. This led to wholesale US withdrawal from Somalia, leaving behind a power vacuum which enabled extremism to flourish.<sup>29</sup>

American interest in Somalia was revived five years later after the twin attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam in 1998, which changed the course of US foreign policy.<sup>30</sup> As links to an emerging global terror network involving al-Qaeda's Osama Bin Laden became more apparent,<sup>31</sup> Kenya itself began 'a more concerted counter terrorism strategy'.<sup>32</sup>

24 *Global Terrorism Database* (2011–2016).

25 'Managing the Disruptive Aftermath of Somalia's worst Terrorist Attack', Briefing No. 131/AFRICA, International Crisis Group, 20 October 2017.

26 According to the US Congressional Research Service, 'the U.S. provides Kenya with over \$8 million in anti-terrorism law enforcement support annually. Lauren Ploch Blanchard 'Kenya, In Focus', Congressional Research Service, July 6, 2011

27 Brown and Raddatz, 'Dire Consequences', p. 46.

28 Under the principle of humanitarian intervention President Bush sanctioned the deployment of 25,000 US troops to Somalia.

29 Aronson, 'Kenya and the Global War on Terror', p. 28.

30 Ibid., p. 24

31 Documents seized during the operation to arrest Osama Bin Laden also reveal his ties to al-Shabaab

32 Aronson, 'Kenya and the Global War on Terror', p. 26; After 1998 Kenya established the National Security Intelligence service to supplement the \$100 million East African Counter Terrorism Initiative. Whitaker, 'Reluctant Partners: Fighting Terrorism promoting Democracy in Kenya', *International Studies Perspectives* Vol. 9, Issue 3 (2008): 254–71, p. 257.

By 2003 President George W. Bush was stating publicly that ‘stabilizing Somalia is essential in sustaining the war against terrorism’,<sup>33</sup> as part of a wider strategy post 9/11. It led to a significant increase in political attention and resources by the United States to East Africa and the Horn of Africa to help train and equip Somali and Kenyan forces.<sup>34</sup> US terrorism funding ‘increased roughly 15 times its previous value in the immediate year following the [9/11] attack’.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, Kenya faced legal challenges and demands for greater government accountability, when in 2010 ICC indictments were issued against key leadership figures, singled out for their alleged role in Kenya’s 2007/08 PEV. There is a wealth of literature on the tension between democracy and security. Here we are concerned with the dynamics of how the two ideals have jostled for primacy during the ICC cases and the years that followed.

From the security perspective, a defining moment came in 2013 with the Westgate shopping mall attack, the biggest terrorist attack on the Kenyan homeland to date. Using social media, Al-Shabaab representatives claimed it was in retaliation for Kenya’s incursion into Somalia in 2011 but also highlighted concerns about impunity by ‘baiting the Kenyan leadership for their rampant corruption and collective targeting of the entire Muslim community in Kenya’.<sup>36</sup> Thus Al-Shabaab sought to link perceived injustices in Kenya and Somalia to issues of security.<sup>37</sup>

Westgate was a catalyst that boosted bilateral ties between Kenya and its Western partners. Whilst the US has been engaged in increasing the capacity of the regional force AMISOM, it has launched drone attacks on key Somali targets from a rapidly expanding base in Djibouti.<sup>38</sup> The UK has focused its efforts on police training, especially counter terrorism police training with funding of around £18.6 million.<sup>39</sup> This has entrenched Kenya’s role as a key security partner. However, allegations of impunity directed in particular at the Kenyan police open up questions as to how committed Kenyan state actors are to improving security and professionalising the Kenyan police and intelligence services.<sup>40</sup>

33 Mogire and Ade, 2011 quoted by Aronson, *Kenya and the Global War on Terror*, p. 28.

34 *National Security Strategy of the United States 2002*, p. 17.

35 Aronson, ‘United States Aid to Kenya: A Study on Regional Security and Counterterrorism Assistance Before and After 9/11’, *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* Vol. 5, № 1 (2012): 119–26, p. 119.

36 Muriithi Mutiga, ‘Corruption a key plank in Shabaab’s quest to sow chaos and state failure’, *Daily Nation*, 5 October 2013.

37 Human Rights Watch ‘Death and Disappearances: Abuses in Counterterrorism operations in Nairobi and Northeastern Kenya’, 19 July 2016.

38 Discussions with Rashid Abdi (ICG).

39 Foreign and Commonwealth statistics referenced in Elite interview with British government official.

40 Independent Medico-legal Unit (Kenyan NGO) Report on *Deaths From Police Bullets 2017*, 29 March 2018.

## Kenya and the ICC

Although Kenya has a long history of violence associated with elections,<sup>41</sup> the use of systematic violence reached its pinnacle following disputed elections in late 2007. Subsequent prosecutions at the ICC<sup>42</sup> resulted from failed attempts to find a domestic solution. The Commission of Inquiry into Post-election Violence (CIPEV) recommended a 'special tribunal' with an 'international component' to investigate the attacks. However, it had a provision that in the event of a tribunal not being established, 'the special prosecutor shall be requested to analyze the seriousness of the information received with a view to proceeding with an investigation and prosecuting such suspected persons'.<sup>43</sup>

On 9 July 2009, a sealed envelope with the names of suspects, which had been entrusted to former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who was serving as chairman of the AU Panel of Experts,<sup>44</sup> was handed to the ICC Chief Prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo.<sup>45</sup> In March 2010 the Chief prosecutor opened his investigation using his *proprio motu* powers.<sup>46</sup> Then, in 2012, charges of crimes against humanity were confirmed against six individuals, but this number was later reduced to four.<sup>47</sup>

Following this unprecedented use of prosecutorial powers,<sup>48</sup> the ICC case against the Kenyan leadership began to collapse steadily. By December 2014, the Chief Prosecutor of the ICC dropped charges against President Uhuru Kenyatta.<sup>49</sup> In April 2016 the court subsequently 'terminated' the case against his deputy William Ruto,<sup>50</sup> who, at the time of the 2007/08 violence, had been Kenyatta's arch rival. However, with the threat of ICC indictments hanging over

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41 CIPEV Report, p. 26.

42 Decision on the Confirmation of Charges Pursuant to Article 61(7)(a) and (b) of the Rome Statute in the Case of The Prosecutor v. William Samoei Ruto and Joshua Arap Sang, International Criminal Court Case No ICC-01/09-01/11-373, 4 February 2012; Decision on the Confirmation of Charges Pursuant to Article 61(7)(a) and (b) of the Rome Statute in the Case of The Prosecutor v. Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta, International Criminal Court Case No ICC-01/09-02/11-382, 29 January 2012.

43 CIPEV Report, p. 473.

44 Elisabeth Lindenmayer and Josie Lianna Kaye, *'A Choice for Peace? The Story of Forty-one Days of Mediation in Kenya'* (New York International Peace Institute, August 2009).

45 Mueller, *'Kenya and the ICC'*, p. 30.

46 *proprio motu*, trans. 'on his own initiative'.

47 Indictments were issued against William Ruto, Uhuru Kenyatta, Joshua Sang, Francis Muthaura.

48 Previous ICC cases had been referred by the UN Security council or the states themselves.

49 Decision on the Withdrawal of Charges Against Mr Kenyatta, International Criminal Court Case No ICC-01/09-02/11, 13 March 2015.

50 Charges Vacated in the Case of The Prosecutor v. William Samoei Ruto and Joshua Arap Sang, International Criminal Court Case No ICC-01/09-01/11, 5 April 2016.

both men, Ruto and Kenyatta struck a deal and became running mates in the 2013 Presidential elections.<sup>51</sup>

The dynamics of the court's relationship with Kenya's ruling establishment were exposed after the halting of the cases. One judge publicly blamed the 'troubling incidence of witness interference and intolerable political meddling' by the Kenyan authorities as a key factor, as well as the withholding of key information including official telephone records.<sup>52</sup> Those authorities have faced limited sanctions as a result of this documented non-cooperation.<sup>53</sup>

Steven Brown offered perhaps the best description, observing that Kenya pulled off an extraordinary bluff as it 'appeared to frustrate the court's endeavours while giving just enough of an impression of co-operation to keep donors at bay'.<sup>54</sup> Other commentators blame the structural limitations of the ICC for the collapse of cases, and a legitimacy deficit due to the absence of key powers, such as the US, as signatories to the Rome Statute.<sup>55</sup> Critics also blame 'the failure on the part of the prosecution to take appropriate steps to verify the credibility and reliability of evidence on which it intended to rely at trial'.<sup>56</sup>

Notwithstanding these structural criticisms, Kenya's role in the GWOT provides an important context in which the ICC cases were held. Justice did not operate in a politics free bubble. Indeed, Ruto sought to conflate justice and security in the wake of the Westgate attack in 2013.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore an attempt to invoke Article 16 of the Rome Statute (see below) also sought to link the two issues.

Kenya's security operations in Somalia increased substantially between the end of the PEV period and the halting of the ICC cases. Whilst the court cases stood and fell on their own merits, this security context sheds light on the utility of pragmatism in the face of Kenyan defiance of the court. It also highlights the tension between politics and the law.

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51 'Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto Seek Kenyan Alliance', *BBC News Online*, 27 November 2012; Also Hanson (2015) suggests the ICC case influenced when this coalition was formed and it is 'not impossible' that they 'would have joined forces' prior to the election, p. 20.

52 'Kenya's William Ruto's case dismissed by ICC', *BBC News Online*, 5 April 2016.

53 The ICC issued arrest warrants in 2013 and 2015 against three Kenyans accused of witness tampering. The cases are on-going.

54 Brown and Raddatz, *Dire Consequences*, p. 53.

55 David Bosco, *Rough Justice: The International Criminal Court in a World of Power Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

56 Patrick Gathara, 'Did Kenya get justice at the ICC?', *Al Jazeera*, 7 December 2014.

57 'Shock: Ruto Claims Westgate Mall Attack was Arranged to Fix Him and President Kenyatta', *Kenya Today*, 23 September 2013.

The Kenyan leadership in 2013 attempted to link the ICC case to growing security concerns in the region.<sup>58</sup> The African Union, acting on behalf of Kenya, lobbied the UN Security Council heavily to defer Kenyatta's case as sitting head of state under Article 16 of the Rome Statute.<sup>59</sup> It argued that the presence of the President and Vice President in Kenya was vital to national security because an escalation of insecurity in Somalia was being projected into Kenya.<sup>60</sup> Kenya's Ambassador to the UN argued for a deferral to 'prevent an aggravation of the situation' and to 'provide time...to consider how best to respond to the threat to international peace and security in the context of the Kenyan situation.'<sup>61</sup> It may not have been a deliberate threat, but the ambassador's words served as a potent reminder to Kenya's Western allies of the strategic importance Kenya played in security matters.<sup>62</sup>

With news that the cases had 'collapsed', elite interviews for this article capture a clear sense of 'relief' that this 'inconvenient' diplomatic and legal hurdle had been removed, enabling the restoration of normal relations to focus on fighting terrorism and promoting bilateral trade.<sup>63</sup> The extent to which Kenya's external role as a key security partner provided some form of 'insulation' from sustained international pressure to address accountability deficits during the ICC case and its aftermath (particularly pressure to address police impunity) is hard to quantify. Nevertheless, even if the privileging of global security over justice for Kenyan victims of PEV was unintended, it suggests that neorealism, and with its belief in the primacy of security, appears to have won the day.<sup>64</sup>

### Explaining the Dynamics between Kenya and the West

A number of theories of international relations may assist us in understanding (i) the strategies of opposition by the Kenyan government to the ICC, as well as (ii) the responses of international actors. Whilst none provides a definitive explanation, I argue that each helps to shed light on what was a dynamic relationship.

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58 Mark Kersten, 'A Brand New Low Ruto Blames the ICC for Westgate Tragedy', *Justice in Conflict*, 23 September 2013.

59 Article 16 provides for deferral of an investigation or prosecution for up to 12 months; Interview with a Western source revealed that Britain was heavily lobbied by Kenya to support the push for an Article 16 deferral.

60 UN Security Council Resolution Seeking Deferral of Kenyan Leaders Trial, SC/ 11176, 15 November 2013.

61 UN SC document S/2013 Letter from Kenyan Ambassador Seeking to defer case invoking Article 16, Overview of Security Council Letters on Deferral of Kenyan Cases, UN Document S/2013/624, 22 October 2013.

62 This is discussed in more detail at the end of this article.

63 Elite interviews with Western sources with knowledge of Kenya expressed this sentiment adding that following election in 2013 it was only 'a matter of time' before the ICC cases 'went away'.

64 For an in-depth discussion on realism and international tribunals, see Kaufman, *United States Law and Policy on Transitional Justice*.

## Pragmatism Versus Legalism

The pragmatism versus legalism paradigm is defined by Judith Shklar as the tension between legalism, a normative belief by liberal states that ‘moral conduct is to be a matter of rule following and moral relationships’, and pragmatism, which considers the consequences of imposing a set of rules and is less rigid in its application.<sup>65</sup> International tribunals are conceived as part of a ‘growing universality of norms’.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, when in March 2010 Luis Moreno-Ocampo, Chief Prosecutor of the ICC, opened an investigation into the PEV, he maintained in an interview for this article that his decision was driven by rigid legalist principles rather than political beliefs ‘I followed the rules of my job, hoping that the political situation would adjust to my job’.<sup>67</sup> His actions were guided by what some scholars such as Snyder call a ‘logic of appropriateness’.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, proponents of legalism consider it a static principle that cannot be ‘bartered’ for political expediency.<sup>69</sup> Yet in the Kenyan case, arguably just such ‘barter’ took place.

Pragmatists, in contrast to legalists, ‘take a firmly consequentialist view’.<sup>70</sup> If we accept Bass’s assertion that ‘the war crimes policy of liberal states is a push and pull of idealism and selfishness’,<sup>71</sup> it follows that ideas of transitional justice stand in direct competition with international policy priorities such as security or trade. Therefore, the tension between legalism and pragmatism is essentially one between the law and politics.<sup>72</sup> As the Kenyan ICC cases got underway, two factors propelled the pragmatist agenda: the emerging political consequences of indicting individuals who would become the head and future deputy head of state, and the growing international concern about the security situation in the region. Lord Mark Malloch-Brown,<sup>73</sup> who worked closely with Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General when the ICC was created, describes how the court

65 Judith Shklar, *Legalism: Law, Morals and Political Trials* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 1.

66 Ibid.; Norms that relate to individual criminal responsibility.

67 Elite Interview with Luis Moreno-Ocampo former Chief Prosecutor ICC (May 2018).

68 Jack Snyder and Leslie Vinjamuri ‘Trials and Errors Principle and Pragmatism in Strategies of International Justice’ *International Security* Vol. 28, No 3 2003–04

69 Bassiouni (2002) as cited by Leslie Vinjamuri and Jack Snyder, ‘Advocacy and Scholarship in the Study of International War Crime Tribunals and Transitional Justice’, *Annual Review of Political Science* Vol. 7 (2004): 345–62, p. 347.

70 Ibid., p. 353.

71 Bass, *Stay the Hand*, p. 8.

72 Bassiouni as cited by Vinjamuri and Snyder, ‘Advocacy and Scholarship’, p. 347. Kenneth Waltz argues that ‘war in international relations is the analogue of the state in domestic politics’ in *Man the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (Columbia University Press, 1959/2001), p. 96.

73 Former UK Minister for Africa and Deputy Secretary General of the UN Lord Mark Malloch-Brown hereafter referred to as MMB.



was ill prepared and not designed to deal with such conflicts, ‘pursuing a case against people who are still in government ...was out of the space contemplated by the drafting of the Statute... The ICC is legalism, but it has to operate in a highly political environment’.<sup>74</sup> This apparent shift away from principled legalism coincided with the growing influence of external factors, in particular the threat of insecurity posed by non-state actors in neighbouring Somalia. It was this threat that the Kenyan elites exploited. Lord Malloch-Brown observed that ‘it wasn’t a plot from day one’ to undermine the court with a number of narratives, including the security narrative; [however] the broader security relationship with the UK<sup>75</sup> was always a drumbeat in the background’.<sup>76</sup> The extent to which this ‘drumbeat’ drowned out other noises is beyond the scope of this paper, and, despite freedom of information requests, much of the documentation from this time remains classified.

What is established beyond question by public statements at the time, is that there was a gradual shift in the commitment of external actors to hold Kenya’s elites to account through the ICC.<sup>77</sup> For example, US President Obama originally offered his endorsement of the court in 2010 when the ICC cases were opened, declaring that Kenya was ‘on a path towards an era of accountability and equal opportunity’.<sup>78</sup> However, by late 2013 the international messaging appeared to waver with telephone calls from the Oval Office directly to President Kenyatta, expressing sympathies at the security situation. Whilst this is normal diplomatic practice, the public messaging was at the very least, confusing. Furthermore, despite President Kenyatta still being indicted on charges of crimes against humanity, UK Prime Minister David Cameron took the controversial step of inviting Kenya’s new Head of State to the London conference on Somalia—a high profile security event. The invitation, diplomatic sources insist, was consistent with the policy of maintaining only ‘essential contact’.<sup>79</sup> However, activists described it as a ‘betrayal’ because it diluted the international narrative that alleged atrocity perpetrators should be held to account.<sup>80</sup>

74 Elite Interview MMB (April 2018).

75 This included access to Kenya-based training facilities for British troops, which MMB felt may have been ‘overstated’ by the British Ministry of Defence.

76 Elite Interview MMB (April 2018).

77 Notwithstanding criticism of the ICC’s own administrative shortcomings.

78 *Statement by President Obama on the International Criminal Court*, The White House, Announcement from the Office of the Press Secretary, 15 December 2010.

79 The term ‘essential contact’ was used by US Assistant Secretary of State to warn Kenya’s leadership before the 2013 polls, that ‘actions have consequences’.

80 ‘Kenya’s Uhuru Kenyatta to meet UK’s David Cameron’, *BBC News*, 6 May 2013; UK justification was that Kenyatta was ‘co-operating and was not the subject of an arrest warrant’.

Further security concerns added momentum to the pragmatic agenda. Four months after Kenyatta's London visit came the Westgate shopping mall siege, Al-Shabaab's most audacious attack on its neighbour.<sup>81</sup> William Ruto, like Kenyatta an ICC indictee at the time, used the moment when the global spotlight was shining on Kenya to conflate Kenya's security challenges with the quest for justice at the ICC. In a series of press interviews, Ruto stated that the ongoing cases at the ICC were compromising Kenya's security and asserted that he believed the Westgate attack was specifically linked to his presence at the ICC.<sup>82</sup> Despite Ruto's public efforts to undermine the court, the UK remained silent. Moreover, its military assistance to Kenya was increased.<sup>83</sup> At the same time growing concerns about witness intimidation and bribery were being raised in court by lawyers, civil society, and the press.<sup>84</sup> Yet these serious allegations against Kenya's elite and security services were being met with apparently little diplomatic consequence.<sup>85</sup> Given such awkward trade-offs, there has been much commentary on whether the compromises made at that time 'destroyed' the ICC. There has also been debate about whether in retrospect, it was a misjudgement to bring the cases to court at all.<sup>86</sup> In the future the eventual declassification of further documentation would provide an opportunity for further scrutiny of the shifting position of Western elites.

## The Justice Cascade

Justice cascade theory enables us to examine whether the ICC experience has delivered any lasting legacy for Kenya.<sup>87</sup> The theory, developed by Kathryn Sikkink and Ellen Lutz, represents a shift in societal norms 'towards holding individual state officials, including heads of state, criminally accountable for human rights violations.'<sup>88</sup> What divides proponents and opponents of this

81 Daniel Howden, 'Terror in Nairobi: The Full Story Behind the Al-Shabaab Mall Attack', *The Guardian* 04 October 2013.

82 'Shock: Ruto Claims Westgate Mall Attack was Arranged to Fix Him and President Kenyatta', *Kenya Today*, 23 September 2013.

83 Elite interviews with Western sources indicated an escalation in support by the UK for border security and police training in the immediate aftermath of Westgate. Exact details remain classified.

84 Briefing Paper by Open Society Justice Initiative 'Witness Interference in Cases Before the International Criminal Court' and discussion on Article 70 cases: November 2016. At the time of writing, so-called Article 70 cases were still on-going; Walter Menya, 'ICC-Wanted-Man Walter Barasa Ready to Surrender', *Daily Nation*, 4 March 2018.

85 In contrast with the UK's imposition of visa bans on Kenyan nationals as part of targeted sanctions, e.g. in 2005 former Security Minister Chris Murungaru was the first Kenyan banned from travelling to the UK because of corruption allegations.

86 Michela Wrong, 'Has Kenya Destroyed the ICC?', *Foreign Policy*, 15 July 2014.

87 Sikkink describes human rights prosecutions as 'high profile symbolic events that communicate and dramatize norms' in Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade*, p. 257.

88 Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade*, p. 5.

theory is the key question of sequencing. Namely, does justice or politics shape behaviour in entrenching and diffusing norms? Sikkink cites the Pinochet case as a landmark moment.<sup>89</sup> She argues that this event ‘socialized’ citizens to the ‘normative process of observing trials’.<sup>90</sup> However, critics believe certain political conditions are a prerequisite for legal precedents to have force in shaping future behaviour. Put simply, courts and their judiciaries need to be perceived as independent and fair by the public for such norms to be diffused.<sup>91</sup> Given that the ICC was portrayed by its opponents as a political court representing ‘white man’s justice’, this article argues that its potency to effect durable domestic behavioural change is highly nuanced.

### Soft Balancing

The third prism through which we can examine the Kenyan experience is balance of power politics, in particular, soft balancing.<sup>92</sup> The prominent realist scholar Steven Walt observes that weaker states adopt non-military strategies to ‘manage and limit’ US power.<sup>93</sup> This may include asserting their independence internationally at the UN whilst remaining allies with hegemons.<sup>94</sup> This ‘two level game’<sup>95</sup> has seen Kenyan leaders dismiss Western criticism of their internal affairs but continue to remain firm allies with respect to security.<sup>96</sup> Kenya’s leaders were clearly the focus of a 2013 speech by President Obama in which he affirmed that the US is ‘interested and invested not in strongmen but in strong institutions...honest police forces that can protect the peoples’ interests instead of their own’.<sup>97</sup> Kenya’s governing elite responded to this public dressing down by portraying the President’s speech as tacit US support for opposition challenger Raila Odinga.<sup>98</sup> It accused the West of ‘lawfare’ or the ‘use of legal means for political and economic ends’,<sup>99</sup> yet in spite of this public denunciation of apparent Western meddling, the relationship between Kenya and the US

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89 This challenged the idea of sovereignty by issuing an arrest warrant in Britain seeking the Chilean leader’s extradition to a Spanish court to be tried for crimes allegedly committed in Chile.

90 Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade*, p. 258

91 This point was confirmed in an elite interview with Kenya’s former Chief Justice Willy Mutunga. ‘In any society politics and the political leadership are critical... they have the resources they are backed by machinery to support or undermine the courts’.

92 Whitaker, ‘Soft Balancing’, p. 1110.

93 Stephen M. Walt, ‘Taming American Power’, *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 84, No 5 (September/October 2005): 105–20.

94 Whitaker, ‘Soft Balancing’, p. 1113–14.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 256.

96 ‘The Prodigal Grandson Returns: Barack Obama is popular in Africa but has not paid continent enough attention’, *The Economist*, 25 July 2015.

97 President Obama University Cape Town Speech, 30 June 2013

98 Lynch, ‘Electing the “Alliance of the Accused”’, p. 106.

99 *Ibid.*

has remained strong.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, the Western funds have kept on flowing. Furthermore, China, now Africa's largest trading partner,<sup>101</sup> is asserting itself beyond the economic sphere by increasing its military presence in the Horn of Africa.<sup>102</sup> This has enabled Kenyan elites to play the US off against China as part of a soft balancing policy, tacitly supported by China's policy of keeping its nose out of its allies' internal affairs.<sup>103</sup>

## Domestic Influences

A key question is whether by its very existence, the ICC has 'shaped' domestic political dynamics in Kenya. Has it helped to entrench elites who have created new alliances? Or has it been a catalyst for change, forcing actors to 'think twice' before embarking on potentially violent courses of action? This article suggests it has achieved all these to varying degrees at different points in time.

The Kenyan experience at the ICC, although unique, has some parallels with cases where elites sought to sabotage, frustrate, or hijack the legal process. Jelena Subotić's research on the Balkans<sup>104</sup> demonstrates that states exhibit markers of compliance with tribunals but 'pursue quite localized political agendas'.<sup>105</sup> They, in effect, seek to 'hijack' the tribunal process to protect their own interests when threatened. It is interesting to observe that Kenya exhibited many such 'markers of compliance' with the ICC, for example by seemingly co-operating with initial requests for information, yet as time passed, evidence suggests that it used court cases to 'withhold diplomatic access' and frustrate everyday business for key international players at a critical time.<sup>106</sup>

Initially, Kenya was a public supporter of the ICC when in 1999 it signed the Rome Statute, ratifying it six years later despite US pressure not to do so.<sup>107</sup> Kenya did not challenge the legitimacy of the ICC until the court was turned against its own political elite following the PEV. As the political stakes were raised, opposition narratives to the court increased and it was seen as a threat to Kenyan sovereignty.

100 IPSOS Opinion poll foreign relations trend April 2015–July 2017 slide presentation shared by IPSOS Kenya.  
101 Chris Alden, 'China in Africa the relationship matures', *Strategic Analysis* Vol. 36, № 5 (September 2012): 701–07.

102 'China formally opens first overseas military base in Djibouti', *Renters*, 1 August 2017.

103 Walt, 'Taming American Power', cites 'blackmail' as a tactic as part of soft balancing.

104 Subotić, *Hijacked Justice*, p. 6.

105 Ibid., p. 167.

106 Interview with Dr Muthoni Wanyeki of the Open Society Foundation (April 2018).

107 Kenya resisted pressure to sign bilateral immunity agreements with the US, despite threats of reduced aid. These would have given US service personnel immunity from prosecution. Kenya ratified the Rome Statute in March 2005.

This explains the apparent contradiction of Kenya being both a signatory to the ICC's founding statute and also a vocal critic of the court.

More specifically, Kenyan elites exhibited compliant behaviour. They initially appeared to co-operate with the court's timelines; they also sought to retain international legitimacy by remaining a signatory to the Rome Statute.<sup>108</sup> They further appeared to indulge in public displays of co-operation such as consenting to proceedings that the court be televised. Yet gradually, Kenya's *de facto* non-cooperation with the ICC was captured in the ICC court papers.<sup>109</sup> It amounted to a carefully crafted 'defence strategy'.<sup>110</sup> This included Kenyan elites mobilising international organisations against the ICC, introducing legal challenges to delay the court and intimidating, discrediting, or bribing witnesses and infiltrating human rights organisations.<sup>111</sup> They further used technical amendments to impede access to statements of witnesses who had recanted their testimony out of fear.<sup>112</sup>

ICC indictments against two of the most powerful figures in Kenyan politics almost certainly helped shape the political landscape in Kenya, in a way that might not otherwise have happened. Thus the external actor—the ICC—had an influencing effect on Kenya's internal domestic behaviour.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, it appears the ICC case helped to shape the narrative of conflict,<sup>114</sup> through its selectivity and targeting of potential indictees.<sup>115</sup> In turn, this selectivity helped nurture a potent counter-narrative which Ruto and Kenyatta used as a broader defence strategy.

The pair were rivals during the 2007 presidential campaign and represented different ethnic groups, which broadly, although not exclusively, mirrored the

108 The African Union would later pass a resolution for collective withdrawal from the ICC. 'African Union Backs Mass Withdrawal from the ICC', *BBC News*, 1 February 2017.

109 Government of Kenya's Submissions on the Status of Cooperation with the International Criminal Court, or, in the alternative, Application for Leave to File Observations Pursuant to Rule 103(1) of the Rules of Procedure and Evidence, International Criminal Court Case No ICC-01/09-01/11-670 09-04-2013, 8 April 2013, p. 7.

110 Mueller, 'Kenya and the ICC', p. 26.

111 The prosecution alleges that 16 witnesses stopped cooperating or refused to testify. Also the defence team for Ruto claims one defence witness was murdered in 2015. There is also extensive reportage on the use of social media to expose the identity of witnesses. Human Rights Watch, 'Recent International Criminal Court Developments on Kenya, South Africa: Questions and Answers', 27 January 2016.

112 For more on the debate over Amending Rule 68 of the Rome Statute see 'Kenya Cases at the ICC: Under-standing Rule 68 Controversy through 15 Dates', International Federation for Human Rights, 12 February 2016.

113 Rather than a causal link Hansen argues it was a tool 'adding fuel to existing tensions', Thomas Obel Hansen, 'Transitional Justice in Kenya: An Assessment of the Accountability Process in Light of Domestic Politics and Security Concerns', *California Western International Law Journal* Vol 42, 2011, p. 19.

114 *Ibid.*

115 In Kenya's case, criticism has focused on the ICC's failure to indict Raila Odinga, a key Presidential challenger in the 2007 elections.

two main sides of the violent clashes during the PEV. The ICC case appeared to have provided a catalyst for forging a political alliance between the two men and their respective ethnic communities to secure electoral victory in 2013.<sup>116</sup>

The purpose of this political coupling was more than simply securing electoral power. It sought to 'deflect the court and to insulate the indicted men from its power once they won the election.'<sup>117</sup> Thereafter they could exploit the tools of state to frustrate the court process and threaten witnesses.<sup>118</sup> This deal enabled them to craft an anti-ICC narrative across a broad alliance of Kenya's 42 ethnic groups and to neutralise the opposition, which they portrayed as allies of outsiders seeking to assault Kenya's sovereignty.<sup>119</sup> Secondly, this political 'marriage' enabled the allies to portray the ICC as having 'chosen sides', denting its legitimacy and portraying it as an institution which 'casts itself as the interpreter and enforcer of justice'.<sup>120</sup>

However, despite the court being under fire by many politicians, opinion poll data two years after the PEV, indicated that 68% of Kenyans supported the ICC in its early stages.<sup>121</sup> The possibility of an alternative, in the form of a special tribunal in Kenya as recommended in the CIPEV report,<sup>122</sup> continued to be an important line of argument deployed by ICC critics as a tool to mobilise opposition to the court. This continued even as the ICC pre-trial hearings got underway. In reality, an alternative court never materialised, but that didn't halt the anti-ICC narrative.<sup>123</sup> Kenya's allies on the continent maintained the ICC was being used as a neo-colonial weapon to 'punish Africa as a whole', despite many African cases having been self-referrals.<sup>124</sup> This line of argument regarding

116 Ruto and Kenyatta, announced in December 2012 they would stand together in the 2013 election. Hansen argues the alliance may have happened anyway but the presence of the ICC indictments, influenced when this coalition was formed. Hansen, 'Transitional Justice', p. 20.

117 Mueller, 'Kenya and the ICC', p. 29.

118 *Application for a Ruling on the Legality of the Arrest of Mr. Dennis Ole Itumbi*, International Criminal Court Case ICC-01/09-105 21-09-2012, 21 September 2012; *Decision on the Withdrawal of Charges Against Mr Kenyatta*, International Criminal Court Case No ICC-01/09-02/11, 13 March 2015.

119 Media reports reveal the role played by foreign firms like Cambridge Analytica in shaping Uhuru's political campaigns in 2013 and 2017. See Larry Madowo 'How Cambridge Analytica Poisoned Kenyan Democracy' *Washington Post*, 20 March 2018.

120 Adam Branch, 'ICC and Human Rights Enforcement' in *Displacing Human Rights: War and Intervention in Northern Uganda* (Oxford University Press, 2011), Chapter 6.

121 Steadman Poll quoted in 'Most Kenyans want violent suspects tried by ICC', *Reuters*, 20 July 2009.

122 CIPEV Report, p. 429–41.

123 See Lynch, 'Electing the "Alliance of the Accused"', p. 30, for a detailed description of the stalling in the establishment of a special tribunal and pressure from Kenya's Attorney General to try the cases at the East African Court of Justice (EACJ).

124 Victor Peskin, 'Caution and Confrontation in the International Criminal Court's Pursuit of Accountability in Uganda and Sudan', *Human Rights Quarterly* Vol. 31, No. 3 (2009): 655–691; REF State which ICC Africa cases are self-referrals.

selectivity and alleged anti-African bias almost certainly provided a catalyst for states like Gambia, Burundi, and later South Africa, to threaten withdrawal from the Rome Statute.<sup>125</sup>

At the same time as this anti-Western sentiment was gaining traction, there is evidence that international voices of criticism over Kenya's conduct grew softer. Western sources interviewed for this paper described their realisation that speaking out was simply making matters worse and impeding diplomatic access to key Kenyan contacts. Mark Malloch-Brown observed that 'countries like the Netherlands still wanted to do the right thing, in terms of exerting pressure on Kenya to fully cooperate with the court, but they lost the firepower to do so with Britain and the US peeling away.'<sup>126</sup> It begs the question why weren't internal and external actors able to deploy counter-narratives to rebut those from Kenyan elites? Two factors emerge. The first was a lack of coherence: divisions within the international donor community were an 'impediment to influence'.<sup>127</sup> Those interests included strategic interests. Secondly, divisions among the Kenyan public about who was most culpable for the PEV, made it hard to address a single audience. Human rights activists on the ground described a polarised ethnic discourse. Ordinary Kenyans wanted 'justice but only for their own survivors...and it served the government to perpetuate this myth'.<sup>128</sup>

Nevertheless, ICC optimists, including Moreno-Ocampo, argue that cases against members of Kenya's elite did provide a legacy helping to drive forward institutional change.<sup>129</sup> Kenya's new Constitution was an important development insofar as it established in law international human rights norms and the rights and responsibilities of Kenyan citizens and the state.<sup>130</sup> Would this have happened anyway? It is impossible to say. However this entrenchment of democratic values has been tempered by a failure to address historically rooted impunity in Kenya, which has a history of using political violence as a means of control.<sup>131</sup> It exposes the limits to political transformation and democracy in Kenya, explained partly by the fact that many individuals associated with

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125 For a good overview see Tim Murithi, 'Pan-Africanism and the Politicization of the International Criminal Court', *Journal of African Union Studies*, Vol 3, Issue 1 (January 2014): 61–82.

126 Elite Interview MMB (April 2018).

127 Brown and Raddatz, *Dire Consequences*, p. 49; Interviews with Western officials reveal divergent positions between, for example, the Netherlands and Britain on how forceful their criticism should be of Kenya's apparent non-cooperation.

128 Ibid.

129 Elite Interview Moreno-Ocampo (May 2018).

130 *Constitution of Kenya, 2010*

131 Bachmann, *European External Action*, p. 131, gives examples of State of Emergency imposed under Moi.

past acts of violence remain in positions of power and have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.<sup>132</sup>

### Is Terrorism the Trump Card?

A critical question is whether the security context and Kenya's role in the GWOT was weaponised to oppose the ICC or simply became one of many issues that provided an important context but little else?<sup>133</sup>

Did this deepening security relationship render the presence of ICC indictments an 'inconvenience'<sup>134</sup> to international diplomats 'because it was fingering people who they felt they had to do business with in the fight against terrorism'?<sup>135</sup> Or did Kenya over-state its importance in counter-terrorism activities (as some UK government officials suggest), extracting political capital from this domestically and regionally, but failing to materially alter the West's position on the ICC?<sup>136</sup>

The record shows there was a temporal association between fighting a growing terrorist threat in Kenya and the wider region and the unfolding diplomatic, judicial and political drama at the Hague. The immediate aftermath of the 2013 Westgate attack saw an increase in the flow of US and UK commitment and funding to fighting terrorism.<sup>137</sup> According to the US Congressional Research Service, 'the U.S. provides Kenya with over \$8 million in anti-terrorism law enforcement support annually, the largest such allocation to any sub-Saharan African country'.<sup>138</sup> It continues, 'Funding to the KDF particularly for counterterrorism-related training and equipment, has increased more than three-fold since 2013, and will reach over 120 million USD in financial year 2016'.<sup>139</sup>

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132 Academics frequently cite the example of Henry Kosgey who was summoned to hear before the ICC's pre-trial chamber but whose case was later dropped. At the time of writing he was the second-longest serving member of the Kenyan parliament.

133 'Country Reports on Terrorism 2016', US Bureau of Counter-Terrorism (July 2017)

134 In an elite interview, John Githongo argues that by 2013 the ICC had become a 'massive inconvenience'. (April 2018).

135 Ibid.

136 Elite interview with a Western official revealed that UK foreign Secretary William Hague was 'utterly adamant' in his support for the court but feared a threatened mass-walkout by African states could fatally wound the court. (May 2018).

137 Lauren Ploch Blanchard, 'Kenya: In Focus', Congressional Research Service, 6 July 2011, Updated 29 August 2018.

138 Elite interviews with Western officials confirm that UK stepped up its border security in the immediate aftermath of the Westgate attack, but precise details remain classified.

139 Ibid.



In response to the growing threat posed by Al-Shabaab inside Kenya, in October 2011 the KDF began operations in neighbouring Somalia under the codename *Operation Linda Nchi*—‘Protect the nation’.<sup>140</sup> The ‘invasion’ (it is extensively referred to as invasion in the academic literature) would be cited by Al-Shabaab as one reason for launching the attack on the Westgate Mall two years later.<sup>141</sup> Based on available evidence, it seems highly plausible that the primacy given to the terrorism narrative (even if presumed rather than overt) appears to have provided a re-enforcement mechanism to Kenya’s domestic strategies of opposition to the ICC and subsequent calls for security sector reform. UK officials maintain in interviews that attempts at conflating justice and security by Kenya did not influence their own stance towards ICC cases. One Western source said the more substantial counter-terrorism conversations with Kenya came in 2014–15. The implication is that no trade-off took place. Yet on several occasions the Kenyan government explicitly attempted to conflate security and international justice. Most notably when it took the matter of the ICC investigations to the UN Security Council, attempting to invoke Article 16 of the Rome Statute. Kenya countered that pursuing cases against Ruto and Kenyatta represented a ‘threat to security’. It further argued that indicting such senior figures would be a ‘distraction’ from the regional and international task of fighting terrorism.<sup>142</sup>

Kenya failed to win the argument at the Security Council but by conflating security and justice, Kenyan elites were appealing to a domestic and African regional audience, already sensitive to perceptions of Western bias at the UN.<sup>143</sup> The response from the UK was reportedly unequivocal. Despite attempts by the Kenyans to use backdoor methods to strong-arm the British government into supporting Article 16,<sup>144</sup> which included the circulation of fabricated letters purporting to be from UK government officials,<sup>145</sup> the UK position remained steadfast: pursuing the case posed no threat to international peace and security, a threshold requirement for Article 16.<sup>146</sup> A separate Western source described

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140 Col Oscar Migue et al., *Operation Linda Nchi*.

141 Al-Shabaab spokesman Ali Mohamud Rage stated ‘Kenya will not get peace unless they pull their military out of Somalia’—quoted on multiple social media platforms at the time including ‘Al-Shabab Locks Kenya into an Endless Circle of Death’, *Mail and Guardian*, 7 November 2014.

142 Draft resolution on a deferral of the ICC proceedings against President Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy, UN Security Council Document S/2013/660, 15 November 2015.

143 For background see N. Waddell and P. Clark (eds), *Courting Conflict? Justice, Peace and the ICC in Africa* (London: Royal African Society, 2008).

144 Elite interview with Western source with close knowledge of Kenya described numerous attempts at lobbying the UK to back Article 16. (April 2018).

145 Detail provided by a Western official (May 2018).

146 Detail provided by a Western official who attributed this tactic to a UK-based public relations firm.

‘urgent’ discussions about the need to respect the ICC on the one hand and work with Kenya on security issues on the other. These he said, ‘were discussed at the highest level of British government’,<sup>147</sup> adding that although the presence of the ICC cases gave ‘acuteness’ to the trade-offs, nevertheless support for the ICC remained a ‘bedrock of UK policy’.<sup>148</sup>

Notwithstanding the UK insisting it was being consistent in its support for the ICC, some scholars suggest that attempting to invoke Article 16 at the UN had a more nuanced purpose for Kenyan elites, designed to strike a chord with voters. That is to say the process of invoking Article 16 was more important than the end result. Scholars argue that such showcasing at the UN acted ‘as a secular pulpit through which Kenya and its allies could express concerns about the ICC and its interventions’ in general. It further emphasised the point that it was African troops, rather than Americans, fighting the al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Shabaab in Somalia.<sup>149</sup>

Whitaker is among a number of prominent scholars<sup>150</sup> who argue that the critical role countries such as Kenya play in the GWOT strengthened the hand of incumbents by giving them ‘tools and justifications to resist democratic pressures’.<sup>151</sup> Established civil society voices in Kenya argue the security narrative was significantly ‘elevated’ after the Westgate attack, and forced ‘a recalibration of security and intelligence ties’ between Kenya and its Western allies.<sup>152</sup> Kenya’s apparent appropriation of the security narrative in the light of the Westgate attack, has almost certainly contributed to a greater unchecked ‘securitisation’ of the Kenyan state in the aftermath of the ICC cases, further deepening concerns about impunity’.<sup>153</sup> ‘The Kenyan government as the main securitisation actor, has justified security focused policies based on the threat posed by al-Shabaab, yet some scholars<sup>154</sup> suggest the bigger threat to security in Kenya may be internal, driven by an entrenched accountability deficit.’<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, the state security machine’s ‘collective punishment’ of the

147 Elite interview with a Western diplomatic source (April 2018).

148 Referring to Britain’s position in April 2012 the source affirmed that Britain would be a ‘robust supporter’ of the ICC.

149 Discussion with Dr Mark Kerston—Editor *Justice and Conflict* (April 2018).

150 Whitaker, *Reluctant Partners*, p. 255.

151 Ibid.

152 Elite interview with Maina Kiai—veteran Kenyan human rights activist and lawyer (May 2018).

153 The *National Security Strategy of the United States 2002* stresses the need to work with African states to ‘help build up the law enforcement and intelligence infrastructure to deny havens for terrorists’, p. 10.

154 The UN estimates 50% of Al-Shabaab fighters are Kenyan.

155 Bachmann, *European External Action*, p. 134.

Muslim community following terrorist incidents, may be fuelling insecurity.<sup>156</sup> Even if the impact is marginal, evidence of extrajudicial killings, harassment, and the rounding up of large numbers of ethnic Somali Kenyans in the name of counter-terrorism, has supported the argument that a lack of accountability may have fuelled radicalisation and ‘facilitated the spread of Al-Shabaab in the country and the broader region’.<sup>157</sup>

The terrorism context has also provided a ‘justification’ for Kenyan elites to resist security sector reform in the wake of the ICC experience. A key question persists whether such emboldening would have occurred in the absence of the ICC cases. The ICC provides a link because, although no members of the police force were indicted, the finding of the CIPEV report, which informed the ICC prosecution, was clear in its assessment that the police bore the heaviest burden of the deaths following the PEV.<sup>158</sup> That report concluded the need for reform was urgent.<sup>159</sup> That members of Kenya’s elite were able to help derail the very mechanism designed to achieve accountability suggests the ICC experience constitutes an important ‘victory’ from which Kenyan elites continue to draw strength. Whilst it is true that resistance to security sector reform in Kenya is historically deep-rooted,<sup>160</sup> the increased threat of global terrorism has elevated the ‘central position of traditional state security institution’ as part of ‘security governance’.<sup>161</sup> Furthermore, in positioning itself as the legitimate securitisation actor, the Kenyan government has advanced policies that surely raise questions about its democratic credentials.<sup>162</sup> These include the proposed closure of the Dadaab refugee camp in the face of widespread international criticism<sup>163</sup> and wholesale rounding up of ethnic Somali Kenyans and Swahili Muslims as apparent collective punishment following the Westgate siege. A subsequent report estimated that one third of those killed died at the hands of the police.<sup>164</sup> State machinery, including the military and police, has been positioned as

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156 Elite interview with JG ‘Kenyans are very sensible about terrorism, they know it exists but the most dangerous thing is the Kenyan government as expressed by the Kenyan police’. (April 2018)

157 On forced detentions and summary deportations see Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2014: Kenya*.

158 Ibid.

159 Brown and Raddatz, ‘*Dire Consequences*’, p. 46.

160 Bachmann, *European External Action*, p. 139.

161 Ibid.

162 Human rights campaigners cite examples of detention without trial and in an elite interview WM spoke of the police’s failure to implement court decisions releasing detainees (May 2018).

163 Ruto declared Dadaab a ‘Centre for Radicalization’ in a speech to the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.

164 ‘The Swahili Muslim community is assumed to be far more radicalized than current information suggests.’ Aronson, *Kenya and the Global War on Terror*, p. 29.

a ‘protector’ of citizens in the face of terrorist attacks.<sup>165</sup> Yet that same state machinery continues to be implicated in extrajudicial killings and abductions.<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, a report in 2017 from the International Centre on Transitional Justice examining police reform in Kenya<sup>167</sup> found ‘a seeming inability to vet senior police officers’ who had been involved in corruption, torture, and other human rights allegations.<sup>168</sup> It concluded that ‘there is now a sense that the police are insulated from accountability demands for which the vetting process was supposed to achieve’.

The introduction of tough new anti-terrorism laws in Kenya, which extended the right to detain suspects and restrict media reporting of security issues, received widespread support from the US and UK with limited caveats about human rights issues.<sup>169</sup> Yet the legislation had the consequence of demonising opposition voices and entrenching powerful elites by providing cover for the Kenyan security forces to squeeze Kenya’s democratic space. As the bill was still in its early stages, the Kenyan government ‘de-registered’ more than 500 non-government organisations, a handful of which it claimed had links to terrorism. Yet it was widely seen as a move to silence dissent.<sup>170</sup> This neutralised the ability of civil society to check the abuse of power.

Whilst the external terrorism threat from across the border in Somalia should not be minimised, critics question whether Kenyan elites have overstated the situation and suggest that a greater threat is in fact the absence of meaningful security sector reform in Kenya.<sup>171</sup> Corruption and impunity alone cannot account for the complexities of terrorism and insurgencies.<sup>172</sup> Sarah Chayes in ‘Thieves of State’,<sup>173</sup> argues they provide an enabling environment and ‘increase the likelihood of a severe international security event’.<sup>174</sup> Kenya as the target

165 For an in depth investigation of security narratives in Kenya see N. A. A. Voppen, ‘The Securitization of Somali Refugees in Kenya’, Masters thesis, Utrecht University (2017), p. 18.

166 Human Rights Watch, ‘Kenya: Killings, Disappearances by Anti-Terror Police’, 18 August 2014; Independent Medico-legal Unit (Kenyan NGO) Report on Deaths From Police Bullets 2017, 29 March 2018.

167 Police reform was a requirement stipulated in the CIPEY Report, p. 470.

168 Christopher Gitari Ndungu, ‘Failure to Reform: A Critique of Police Vetting in Kenya’, ICTJ Briefing, 21 November 2017, p. 2.

169 ala Abdelgadir, ‘Kenya’s Troubling New Anti-terrorism Legislation’, Council on Foreign Relations, Guest Post on Africa in Transition, 31 December 2014; Human Rights Watch, ‘Kenya: Security Bill Tramples Basic Rights’, 13 December 2014.

170 ‘Kenya “deregisters” NGOs in anti-terror clampdown’, BBC News, 16 Dec 2014.

171 Human Rights Watch ‘Death and Disappearances’.

172 Edward Mogire and Kennedy Mkutu Agade, ‘Counter-Terrorism in Kenya’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* Vol. 29, Issue 4 (2011): 473–91, p. 479.

173 Sarah Chayes, ‘Corruption the Unrecognised Threat to International Security’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 6 June 2014, p. 21. cites examples of Al-Shabaab bribes to security personnel the Westgate Mall.  
174 Ibid., p. 23.

of terrorist acts, exercises its constitutional right to act in self-defence.<sup>175</sup> But at times it has continued to do so in a manner that violates international obligations with apparently little consequence.<sup>176</sup>

## Conclusion

Kenya's strategies of opposition to the ICC were dynamic, highly context-specific, and continued as further accountability reforms, such as police reform, were advocated by civil society after the halting of the cases.<sup>177</sup> These strategies reflected political developments in Kenya and the accumulation of power by Kenyatta and Ruto, whose supporters were able to appropriate or 'hijack' the justice process whilst still rhetorically co-operating with the court. These strategies shifted as the global context changed and the global security agenda appeared to gain primacy over justice issues. Willy Mutunga, Kenya's former Chief Justice, suggests that security and Kenya's role as a key strategic ally of the West, were important factors in the resistance by Kenyan elites to cooperate with the ICC: 'but whether it was a decisive factor is hard to pin down' he admits, simply because the context kept changing. It is difficult to disaggregate security imperatives from other factors such as bilateral trade and the influence of China, yet to disregard the security context and its leveraging potential would surely be an oversight.

Were Kenya not a strategic partner, would it have been able to 'get away' with the level of resistance it showed to the ICC? Other African states investigated by the court have not had the same strategic importance (with the possible exception of Uganda),<sup>178</sup> making a direct comparison hard. Other factors like the UK's concern that isolating Kenya would increase the threat of mass African withdrawal from the ICC, would appear to have contributed to pragmatism prevailing. It suggests a constant recalibration of interests over time, among both Kenyan elites and international parties.<sup>179</sup> The absence of consequences for Kenya's limited rhetorical co-operation at the ICC, would seem to suggest an ongoing

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<sup>175</sup> *Constitution of Kenya, 2010*

<sup>176</sup> HRW accuses Kenya of countless violations of international humanitarian law, Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2014: Kenya*.

<sup>177</sup> CIPEV Report, p. 470–78.

<sup>178</sup> Uganda US Marine corps has been delivering training and equipment to the Ugandan military

'US Marines strengthen Uganda capabilities for AMISOM', Marine Corp Forces Africa 9 December 2015

<sup>179</sup> Elite interview with Foreign Office official suggests a mass walkout from the ICC was the greater concern prior to Westgate.

reticence by the international community to publicly condemn impunity.<sup>180</sup> From the British standpoint the absence of consequences may be driven by a reluctance to re-awaken anti-neo-colonialist narratives of the kind articulated during the ICC case out of fear of further damaging the strategic relationship. 'Kenya still hasn't forgiven us for not supporting them more at the ICC' observed one Western source.<sup>181</sup>

Has the failure to explore other legal mechanisms to hold Kenyan elites accountable resulted in the norm of individual criminal responsibility being undermined? One survivor of physical and sexual violence during the PEV, who was interviewed for this article,<sup>182</sup> said she was 'demoralized' by the outcome of the ICC cases. For her and other ICC witnesses,<sup>183</sup> compensation is now the priority, a concept which appears to reflect what this author characterises as 'transactional' justice rather than criminal justice.<sup>184</sup>

However in other settings it is worth noting that there have been recent successes in war crimes prosecutions in regional and national courts in Africa, such as in Chad where the former leader Hissène Habré was convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity in a Senegalese court.<sup>185</sup> This suggests the appetite for justice exists but the mechanism by which it is delivered divides opinion, with a hybrid court of the kind used to try Habré being touted as a potential model for the future.<sup>186</sup>

The long-term consequences of failing to address domestic impunity, and fears that it could fuel insecurity, has become a theme of recent study. The experience of Afghanistan is a case in point and parallels can be made with Kenya.<sup>187</sup> Furthermore, research on Al-Shabaab's cross-border recruitment reveals that the appeal of terrorist organisations to some potential recruits is closely linked to their concerns about impunity.<sup>188</sup>

180 Increasingly, criticism has been channelled through multinational organisations such as the EU. For a broad discussion on this issue see Bachmann, *European External Action*.

181 Elite interview with a Western source with close knowledge of Kenya.

182 Elite interview PEV victim 'Ms P' (June 2018)

183 Victims' response to the Prosecution's notice of withdrawal of the charges against Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta, International Criminal Court Case № ICC-01/09-02/11, 9 December 2014.

184 Ibid.

185 Celeste Hicks, *The Trial of Hissène Habré: How the People of Chad Brought a Tyrant to Justice* (Zed Books, 2018).

186 Hicks, 'The Habré Trial: The Future for African Justice?', *African Arguments*, 2 May 2017.

187 Chayes, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security* (WW Norton and Company, 2015), p. 14–15 referencing the 'abusive behaviour of the Afghan government' discusses the notion of 'corruption as a critical threat to the stability and security of the realm'.

188 Botha, 'Radicalisation in Kenya'.

The Kenyan experience has revealed how justice and accountability for ordinary Kenyan citizens appears to have been subordinated to the 'bigger prize' of preserving global security'.<sup>189</sup> Given the fragility of international justice mechanisms, should proponents of international tribunals be more conscious of political context in the future? I concur with the hypothesis that 'the greater the apparent threats to national security...the more deeply entrenched the rules of exception'.<sup>190</sup> That exceptionalism was a potent weapon which Kenyan elites deployed and continue to deploy. Pre-empting such strategies and assessing the risk of indicting individuals who are still serving in positions of state authority and have the backing of powerful allies,<sup>191</sup> could benefit the ICC's sponsors as they seek to project the court as an effective institution.

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<sup>189</sup> Elite interview LMO argues 'the ICC is a paradigm of security for all member states' but in the real world global security largely equates to US security.

<sup>190</sup> Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, 'Review of Conflict and Compliance: State Responses to International Human Rights Pressure by Sonia Cardenas', *Perspectives on Politics* Vol 5, No 4 (December 2007): 857–58.

<sup>191</sup> Kenyatta has been honoured by China, the US, and the UK with multiple state visits.

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# ANALYSING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS THROUGH EARLY MODERN THEATRE

Dr Filippo Tansini

## Abstract

Historically, theatrical performances have often reflected power-related processes of communication and influence. Theatrical representations send messages and provide commentary on influential events and social change. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy dramatic upheaval in the political realm and dynamic innovations in all aspects of theatrical production resulted in new communication dynamics that can be seen as the precursors to many concepts and techniques used today. In this paper, three forms of early modern theatre—the ‘Theatre of the Prince’, entrepreneurial theatre, and street performance—are analysed through the theoretical framework of social representation put forward by Serge Moscovici to identify early modern trends in communication and influence that laid the groundwork for strategic communications.

**Keywords**—*strategic communications, social representations, early modern theatre, propaganda, propagation, diffusion, historical studies*

## About the Author:

**Filippo Tansini**, PhD in Renaissance Theatre, Sapienza University of Rome, is a Social Media Intelligence Analyst (SOCMINT). His research interests focus on strategic and crisis communications, social media dynamics and information warfare, textual analysis and data mining.

## Performance Practices and Strategic Communications

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Italian territories were a place of political and social upheaval and of experimentation and evolution in power relationships, social practices, and the arts. The Italian states explored different forms of administration and discursive practices of power; the exchange of information and news among citizens began to grow and take shape, gradually becoming ‘public opinion’ as we understand it today;<sup>1</sup> and it was at this time that innovations in theatrical practices led to the birth of modern theatrical and musical performances as we know them in the West today.

During this period, the Italian territories were troubled by wars that would redefine Europe’s geopolitical balance of power. This confluence of political and artistic developments was fruitful and heralded a cross-pollination of ideas that became the seed stock for many practices we take for granted today. It can be argued that the representation of power and the engagement of a public sphere, newly reimagined as both an audience and a political force, were developed on Italian stages during the early modern period.<sup>2</sup> The spectacular and scenic culture of early modern Italy was among the main vehicles for creating and disseminating artistic ideas, collective imagery, and representations of political power.<sup>3</sup>

Today, sovereign bodies and institutions design campaigns daily that shape ideas, disseminate opinions, and propagandise favourable positions. In this paper, I explore the various ways representations of political power were expressed through the Italian scenic culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,<sup>4</sup> and use social representation theory to tease out the relationship between theatrical representations and the practices the *ancien régime* used to communicate power.<sup>5</sup>

1 Giovanni Ciappelli, Valentina Nider, Fulvio Ferrari, and Michele Sisto, *La invención de las noticias: las relaciones de sucesos entre la literatura y la información (siglos XVI–XVIII)* (Trento: Università di Trento. Dipartimento di lettere e filosofia, 2017).

2 Jürgen Habermas, Thomas Burger, and Frederick Lawrence, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); Mike S. Schäfer, ‘Digital Public Sphere’, in *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, Mazzoleni Gianpietro (ed.), (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 322–28; Massimo Rospoche, *Beyond the Public Sphere: Opinions, Publics, Spaces in Early Modern Europe* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012).

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4 Nathalie Rivère de Carles, *Early Modern Diplomacy, Theatre and Soft Power: The Making of Peace*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

5 Serge Moscovici, ‘The Phenomenon of Social Representations’ in *Social Representations*, R. M. Farr & S. Moscovici (eds), (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

## Social Representations and Strategic Communications

Social psychologist Serge Moscovici's *theory of social representation* states that a social representation is a:

[...] system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history.<sup>6</sup>

Social representations 'shape what is loosely termed a social consciousness, the consciousness of a period, a class or a nation as a whole'.<sup>7</sup>

Moscovici identifies three macro-communicative needs within any social group: the need to make a foreign element familiar, the need to create a shared field of communication, and the need to form a common identity.<sup>8</sup> Social representations respond to these needs. Denise Jodelet observes that social representation 'is a form of knowledge, socially elaborated and shared, having a practical and concurrent purpose for the construction of a reality common to a social whole'.<sup>9</sup>

Moscovici theorises that meanings associated with the ideas we use to understand and interpret the world cannot be considered definitive acquisitions and describes the creation and transformation of ideas shared within any social group. Moscovici sees these shared practices, ideas, and values as being in a state of continuous change.<sup>10</sup> Subject to the communicative push of intrinsic and extrinsic mutations, this transformation of ideas occurs through the interrelated dynamics of *anchoring* and *objectification*.

6 Serge Moscovici, 'Foreword', in *Health and Illness: A Social Psychological Analysis*, C. Herzlich (ed.), (London: Academic Press, 1973), p. ix–xiv.

7 Moscovici, 'Notes Towards a Description of Social Representations', *European Journal of Social Psychology* Vol. 18, Issue 3 (1988): 211–50, p. 228.

8 Moscovici, 'Foreword', in *Health and Illness*, p. xiii.

9 Denise Jodelet, 'Connaitre sans savoir et savoir prendre: un art populaire d'emprise sur la folie', in *L'espace thérapeutique. Cadres et contextes*, Michele Grossen, Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont (eds), (Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1992), p. 48.

10 Moscovici, 'The history and actuality of social representations', in *The Psychology of the Social*, U. Flick (ed.), (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 209–47; Serge Moscovici, *Le rappresentazioni sociali*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005).

*Anchoring* refers to the way an unknown element is compared to a known element that belongs to the reference system of the receiving group (e.g. Daesh refers to its Western enemies as ‘crusaders’, locating current adversaries in the same frame of reference as known past aggressors). *Objectification* refers to the mental transformation of unfamiliar abstract concepts into familiar, concrete ideas (e.g. the Battle of Waterloo: using a single battle to symbolise an entire military campaign).<sup>11</sup> Anchoring and objectification are used constantly to recreate shared representations through a dialogic process, making unknown phenomena known.

### *Reasons to (strategically) communicate*

The study of *social representations* concerns their function within the communicative process. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, political power actively engaged in creating and controlling shared representations within social groups through theatrical performance.<sup>12</sup> I argue that strategic communications in the modern, Western sense can trace its origins to these years of conflict and geopolitical tension among European sovereigns. This is not by chance. As Moscovici writes: ‘there would be hardly any reason to communicate if there were no tensions, asymmetries or conflicts between interacting parties’.<sup>13</sup> Communication is intrinsic to achieving any of the political objectives of State action.<sup>14</sup> Communicative dynamics are, by definition, an attempt to influence. They, therefore, exploit the clash between ‘partisans’ and ‘opponents’:

Many of the psychologists I know separate the phenomenon of communication from the phenomenon of influence [...] I consider the distinction between these two phenomena as artificial. Every message, every linguistic emission is based on a persuasive intention [...] My theory is a theory of influence; but by the same token it is a theory of the communicative process that normally takes place between the partisans and the opponents of different points of view.<sup>15</sup>

11 Moscovici, *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 51.

12 J. Ronnie Mulryne, Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly, and Margaret Shewring, *Europa Triumphans: Court and Civic Festivals in Early Modern Europe*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Lois Rosow, ‘Power and Display: Music in Court Theatre’, in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Music*, Tim Carter, John Butt (eds), (Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 197–240.

13 Ivana Marková, ‘Persuasion and Propaganda’, *Diotogenes* Vol. 55, № 1 (2008): 37–51, p. 43.

14 Moscovici, ‘Silent Majorities and Loud Minorities’, *Annals of the International Communication Association* Vol. 14, Issue 1 (1991): 298–308, p. 301. Themes explored also in Moscovici, *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

15 Moscovici, *Social Representations*, p. 276.

The dynamics that guide discursive practices of power originate from conflict or asymmetry between parties and aim at an ideal *reductio ad unum*: namely, reconciliation between the actors involved. Therefore, when such communication takes place, it is strategic by its very nature: it aims to produce or influence shared social representations among its receivers.

### *Communicative dynamics and the audience*

Moscovici identifies three fundamental dynamics of communication, or modes of expression, that arise from this complex process of sharing, creating, and transforming ideas: *propaganda*, *propagation*, and *diffusion*. Each of these three dynamics is present to varying degrees in any exchange, originating in uneven relationships between participants expressing different objectives in the communicative process. Each has a specific communicative objective, message form, and type of recipient.

Moscovici defines *propaganda* as ‘a mode of expression used by a group in a situation of conflict, and as the instrumental or action-oriented elaboration of that group’s representation of the object of the conflict’.<sup>16</sup> Conflict is the essential reagent. The dominant group employs propaganda because: ‘the assertion of the group’s identity requires opposition and it gives rise to the elaboration of a representation of the object that creates it’.<sup>17</sup> Propaganda tends to unite interlocutors into a single position opposed to a third pole, which is the real target of communicative action, and so tends to create stereotypes.<sup>18</sup> This objective is pursued through identifying and representing an enemy outside the social group of reference. ‘The group comes to define itself in terms of the enemy’,<sup>19</sup> establishing a direct and circular relationship between a conflict the group is facing with the outside and the group’s internal contradictions, considered to have arisen from conflict with the external enemy. In order to accomplish this, propaganda transforms disparate pieces of information relating to the conflict into a single representation, producing order in the world of meanings shared within the group.

16 Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis: Its Image and Its Public*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 314.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 313.

18 Moscovici, *Social Influence and Social Change*, (London: Academic Press, 1976), p. 497; Markova, ‘[Amedee or How to Get Rid of It: Social Representations from a Dialogical Perspective](#)’, *Culture and Psychology* Vol. 6 (2000): 419–60.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 310.



A corollary of this function is the tendency for propaganda to use simplified messages. Complexity in the world is reduced, and conflict is resolved by accepting the unity of the new representation: this is the key feature of propaganda as a tool for strategic communications.

‘The shaping of a representation transcends the real because the representation appears to be a duplicate of the real, but tends to lend it a certain permanence, to find something stable in a changing environment, and to find something constant in the initial fluidity of the links [...]’.<sup>20</sup>—

In short, propaganda uses simplified messages to unite the dominant group and its subordinates in opposition to a third party, considered to be the enemy from which conflict arises, in order to strengthen group cohesion.

*Propagation* describes a dynamic within the social group that strengthens the group’s shared vision of a particular social representation. Propagation has two distinct functions: first, to organise and transform a shared theory into a set of ideas compatible with principles that identify the group; second, to integrate new themes that impose themselves on the group’s attention by anticipating effects and reinforcing existing shared social representations. Propagation creates attitudes within a social group. Moscovici defines this effect as:

[...] a psychical organization with a negative or positive orientation with respect to an object [...]. An Attitude is not a collection of specific and heteronymous opinions or responses, but an organized arrangement of all those opinions and responses. It has a regulatory function: it has a selective effect on everything the subject does or thinks. [...] The creation of an attitude is expressive of the subject’s relationship with a socially pertinent object. The action that might ensue is only probable. But if it does take place, its context and value are preordained.<sup>21</sup>

In short, propagation refers to communication aimed at orienting the culture shared among the members of a group toward certain principles and at influencing their future attitudes through the attribution of meanings that are already recognised as legitimate and collective.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>22</sup> Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 325.

Finally, *diffusion* concerns the distribution and dissemination of information, resulting in the creation of opinions among different social groups. For Moscovici the first substantial difference in the diffusion of news, compared to propaganda and propagation, is the non-hierarchical nature of this form of communication. In diffusion, the prime agent of communication establishes an equal relationship with its audience—neither the hierarchy characteristic of propaganda nor the division characteristic of propagation separates communicator from public. Indeed, the communicator functions as an intermediary, transmitting or diffusing acquired knowledge to others. Stylistically, diffused messages are ‘concrete, attractive and rapid’, tending to adapt to the audience, rather than the reverse.<sup>23</sup>

The diffusion of information creates a complex landscape. As different value systems are bound to coexist in any heterogeneous audience, be it in a public square of the sixteenth century or the virtual arena of the twenty-first, a communicator employing diffusion of information does not explicitly seek to influence the behaviour of its recipients. Diffusion ‘produces effects but does not try to get results [...]. Its goal is to get people talking and not to get them to take action’.<sup>24</sup> *Diffusion* of information creates opinions. Unlike stereotypes triggered by *propaganda* and re-signification produced by *propagation*, diffusion is not directed toward immediate goals, rather the dynamic is ‘unstable, malleable and specific, or in other words contradictory’.<sup>25</sup>

*Strategic communications: hybrid since the sixteenth century*

The Italian Renaissance was a century of hybrid transformation. During this period, we witness the rediscovery and creation of theatrical and dramaturgical forms, accompanied by many different scenic genres.<sup>26</sup> Discourses of political power successfully exploited this new complexity of form and content. As Moscovici theorises, the result is a complex informational horizon where propaganda, propagation, and diffusion coexist, even within the same scenic event. Any artistic or political event of the early modern era might be examined to see how it creates, transforms, and spreads social representations through

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 358.

<sup>26</sup> On Early Modern dramaturgy poetics see: Renzo Cremante, ‘L’elaborazione della grammatica tragica cinquecentesca: applicazioni intertestuali’, in *Nascita della tragedia di poesia nei paesi europei [...]*, Maria Chiabò, Federico Doglio (eds), (Roma: Centro studi sul teatro medievale e rinascimentale—Venezia, Accademia Olimpica, 1991), pp. 147–71; Pieri Marzia, *La nascita del teatro moderno in Italia tra XV e XVI secolo*, (Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1989).

complex processes of anchoring and objectification. This complexity closely resembles the contemporary information landscape of strategic communications where many different actors, pursuing divergent purposes and through a wide variety of communicative dynamics, genres, and messages, are projected into the arena of global communications. This article does not explore contemporary strategic communications, rather it describes the historical moment when these modern communications practices first appeared.

### Performance Culture Between the 16<sup>Th</sup> and 17<sup>Th</sup> Centuries

Europe's scenic culture began to formalise and acquire the components we now recognise as modern theatre (actors, recited text, scenes, audience, organised stage representations) during the early sixteenth century in Italy.<sup>27</sup> This paper first considers the promoting agent (prince, impresario, street singer) in the communicative relationship involved in theatrical representations, then explores the dialogic nature of the relationship between the promoter of a 'spectacular action' and the social representations it evokes among the audience or recipients (courtiers & visiting dignitaries, theatre-goers, public in the street) of that action.<sup>28</sup> Within this perspective, the Italian performing panorama in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries offers several typologies of scenic productions to illustrate the process of social construction of shared representations.<sup>29</sup>

To simplify, I shall discuss only three types of theatrical performance or spectacle: *Teatro del Principe* [Theatre of the Prince]—shows organised by a State commissioner; *entrepreneurial theatre*—the private productions of profit-making enterprises; and *Commedia dell'Arte* or street performances by professional companies of wandering actors and acrobats, or *saltimbanchi*. Each of these forms of theatrical representation is staged or organised by a different entity with a particular social position and pursuing a particular purpose.

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27 Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti, Maria Pia Mussini Sacchi, *Teatro del Quattrocento: le corti padane*, (Torino: Unione Tipografica Editrice Torinese, 1983).

28 Michail Bachtin, *Rabelais and His World*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.);

Bachtin and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

29 Fabrizio Cruciani, *Teatro del Rinascimento: Roma 1450–1550*, (Roma: Bulzoni, 1983);

Silvia Carandini, *Teatro e spettacolo nel Seicento*, (Roma: Laterza, 1999).



Figure 1. Engraving of a set designed for 'The Golden Age' (Piacenza, Bazachi, 1690), an opera commissioned by the Dukes of Farnese for the marriage between Odoardo Farnese and Dorotea Sofia of Neuburg. Raccolta Drammatica, Braidense National Library, Milan

### *Three types of theatre, three audiences, and three dynamics of social representation*

*Theatre of the Prince* refers to a complex performance culture including: recitation or singing, spectacular openings, simulated battles, tournaments and rides, and other hybrid genres.<sup>30</sup> This type of theatrical representation reached maturity in the heyday of the Italian courts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The power of sovereigns and princes became well established, and the will of the Prince became the prime mover in the social, political, and cultural life of his state encompassing everything from the microcosm of the

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<sup>30</sup> For a definition of 'Teatro del Principe', see Carandini, *Teatro*, p. 94; A more specific description of Court theatrical culture can be found in Cesare Molinari, *Le nozze degli dei: saggio sul grande spettacolo italiano nel Seicento*, (Roma: Mario Bulzoni, 1968); Renzo Cremante, *Teatro del Cinquecento*, (Milano: R. Ricciardi, 1988). On European Court Festivities see: Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly and Anne Simon, *Festivals and Ceremonies: A Bibliography of Works Relating to Court, Civic, and Religious Festivals in Europe 1500–1800*, (London: Mansell, 2000) and J. Ronnie Mulryne and Elizabeth Goldring, *Court Festivals of the European Renaissance: Art, Politics, and Performance*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

individual<sup>31</sup> to the organisation of city space.<sup>32</sup>

The Theatre of the Prince (see Figure 1) was usually performed on landmark occasions when a festive event was designed to shape and communicate a preferred understanding of extraordinary events, circumscribing potentially conflicting positions. Theatrical representations organised by the courts evolved over time.<sup>33</sup> At the outset, spectacular events were related to great public festivities and involved the whole city in celebrations. Over time, as princely power consolidated, spectacles were used to reaffirm the position of common citizens within the exercise of that power—that of the subject dazzled by the wonder of a power beyond his reach. Eventually, scenic events were hidden from the eyes of the people: theatrical performances no longer served a ludic function between sovereign and subjects. Scenic events became to all intents *instrumentum regni*—an exercise of the sovereign's power. The dynamics expressed by these events were many, but all were strongly conditioned by the communicative will of the sovereign to influence the audience.

We can say that the central dynamic of the *Theatre of the Prince* is *propaganda*. Through the medium of the spectacular event the State (Prince) purposely



Figure 2. Engraving for 'The Adoration of the Magi' by Alessandro Adimari (Florence, Papini, 1642). *Raccolta Drammatica*, Braidense National Library, Milan

31 Carlo Ossola, *Dal Cortegiano all'Uomo di mondo: storia di un libro e di un modello sociale*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1987).

32 Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher Wand, (New York, N.Y. Zone Books, 1997); Guy Fitch Lytle and Stephen Orgel (eds), *Patronage in the Renaissance*, (Princeton: Princeton University, 2014.).

33 Giovanni Attolini, *Teatro e spettacolo nel Rinascimento*, (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1988), pp. 31–35.

represents an ideological vision—such as the prosperity of the kingdom, its foreign policy objectives, or the nobility of the sovereign—on the stage in an attempt to remove any difference of perspective between its interlocutors (population, nobles, ambassadors, and foreign states).

*Entrepreneurial theatre* involved shows organised by an *impresario* or entrepreneurial company in a private venue (see Figure 2). These theatrical representations were aimed at an audience of subscribers and occasional spectators. In the mid-sixteenth century, some families began to rent large properties where recited shows were presented. Such entrepreneurial families began receiving profits from ticket sales, seat and stage rentals, the sale of food, and gambling. Investment in rooms adapted specifically for such shows resulted in more opulent stage sets and improved conditions for spectators. Over a span of thirty years, between the 1580s and early 1600s, Venice became one of the first European centres for stage-shows, and among the first to establish a system of private theatrical performances.<sup>34</sup> In the seventeenth century, Venetian theatres had established theatre seasons and played to full houses. This system soon witnessed a further innovation. Operas, which had been the prerogative of a very small elite at court, began to be performed for the public. These were refined and grandiose performances created for select paying spectators. From this point on theatres multiplied and the opera became a fashionable and essential part of any successful theatre season. Venice would remain Europe's main production centre for musical plays until the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>35</sup>

*Entrepreneurial theatre* developed into a market for theatrical production that linked the survival of the enterprise to the success of its performances against a background of competing theatres. Crucially, this delicate balance between the pressures of artistic expression and profitable enterprise depended on the ability of those involved to read and interpret the taste of audiences. Ideas conveyed by operas dynamically played to and overlapped with public expectations. Moscovici's concept of *propagation* captures the main features of this communicative experience—an exchange of shared representations within an already defined social group (paying spectators enjoying the theatre season in Venice or elsewhere). Entrepreneurial theatre played to the tastes of its audience, reinforcing existing attitudes and increasing the public's overall resilience to external change. At times the propagation dynamic was accompanied by propagandistic attempts to influence the perceptions of the group.

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34 Carandini, *Teatro*.

35 Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice the Creation of a Genre*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).



*Commedia dell'Arte* was the most elusive culture of spectacle, including wandering street performers, troupes of professional actors, tumblers and acrobats, comedians, barkers, and street scammers (see Figure 3). Street performance in early modern Italy was a real subculture, with each sub-genre having its own characteristics. What unites this varied caravan of cultural operators and charlatans is its self-sufficiency and freedom to travel, gather information, and disseminate it.

The performances moved from square to marketplace and from town to city, diffusing news and ideas among heterogeneous (by location and social background) social groups with the consequent effect of fostering and spreading new viewpoints. Diffusion is treated here only as a prevalent mode of communication. Actually, acrobats often zealously served kings and princes by spreading artificial news or gathering precious information in foreign countries. This was a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon: singers, actors, and composers of popular poems, but also scammers and street barkers, engaged in short organised or improvised stage events in the piazzas of the cities through which they travelled. What characterised these scenic productions was the irregular nature of their performances, the low quality of texts (often composed or adapted specifically for each new piazza), and the nomadic nature of their activity.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 3. 'A mountbank at a fair selling turbans captured at Buda in September 1686' by Bolognese engraver Giuseppe Maria Mitelli. The cartouche above reads: *Who wants the turban to dress up?* The sign on the left reads: *The charlatan came from Buda conquered on September 2, 1686, referring to the war between the Hapsburg and the Ottoman Empire.* British Museum

36 Ezio Raimondi, *Un teatro delle idee*, (Milano: Bur, 2011), pp. 157–65.

Their most notable trait from a communications perspective was their formidable capacity to gather information and diffuse it to a large and heterogeneous public, given the diversity of these performances.<sup>37</sup>

### Theatre of the Prince or Theatre of Propaganda



Figure 4. 'Entry of the prince of Tuscany as Hercules, in front of him a large procession of horsemen and foot soldiers, processing around the large statue of Atlas in center, the Duomo and the Pitti Palace to left in the background, spectators surrounding from all sides, from *Il mondo festeggiante*' by Stefano della Bella, Florence, 1661. Metropolitan Museum of Art Digital Collection

The court of the Medici in Florence was an Italian Renaissance court *par excellence*. In 1589 a key event took place, not only for the small Italian duchy but for the geopolitical order of the continent. This was the marriage between Ferdinand I de' Medici and a French noblewoman, Christine of Lorraine, daughter of Charles III, duke of Lorraine, and his wife Claudia, princess of Valois. The union of the Medici and Valois-Lorraine families meant a switch in alliances for the Florentine kingdom, traditionally close to Spain, and an implicit

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<sup>37</sup> Siro Ferrone, *Attori mercanti corsari: la Commedia dell'Arte in Europa tra Cinque e Seicento*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2011); Siro Ferrone, *La Commedia dell'Arte attrici e attori italiani in Europa, XVI–XVIII secolo*, (Torino: G. Einaudi, 2014). This remains a contested topic among historians.



willingness to position the duchy as a relevant subject on the international chessboard.<sup>38</sup> Ferdinand I broadened the lines of foreign policy already set by his father, in particular with regard to power exercised along the coasts and routes of the Mediterranean. Almost 20 years earlier, his father Cosimo I had created a new Military-religious order: the Order of St. Stephen. Pragmatically, its existence allowed him to frame raids and piracy carried out against Ottoman ships in the Mediterranean within the narration of a 'holy war'.

Ferdinand I expanded his efforts to consolidate the position of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany as a maritime power throughout the Mediterranean.<sup>39</sup> The new course of maritime foreign policy discovered a key moment of *propaganda* within the spectacular programme that had been planned to celebrate the union between the houses of Medici and Valois.

The wedding became an occasion for a long and complex mythopoeic process for the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. It is perhaps one of the most studied events of spectacular history of the Renaissance:<sup>40</sup> an impressive stage programme lasting two months, worthy of a superpower eager to impose its renewed role on the international stage. Unified by the fresh ambitions of the family and the power of the Prince, a multitude of creative efforts—artistic, culinary, theatrical, spectacular, architectural—were directed toward this project. Many different public events—triumphal entries, tournaments, parades, performances, banquets, and celebrations—blended diverse communicative dynamics. However, the desire of the ruling family to create an impression of grandeur for its subjects and to spread a specific representation of privileged participants to the world recalls a form of political propaganda.<sup>41</sup> The *naumachia*, or staged naval battle, provides a topical example for exploration.

Historians have variously challenged and defended the possibility of applying the concept of propaganda to communications in an *ancien régime* society.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, given the historical context and political will of maritime expansion,

38 Harold Acton and Norman Douglas, *The Last of the Medici*, (Florence: privately printed for subscribers by G. Orioli, 1930).

39 Jan Glete, *Warfare at Sea, 1500–1650: Maritime Conflicts and the Transformation of Europe*, (London: UCL, 1999).

40 The literature here is broad. Among the most relevant are: Mulryne et al., *Europa triumphans*; Alois Maria Nagler, *Theatre Festivals of the Medici, 1539 to 1637*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1964); Zorzi Ludovico, *Il teatro e la città: saggi sulla scena italiana*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1988).

41 Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

42 Massimo Rospocher, 'Propaganda e opinione pubblica: Giulio II nella comunicazione politica europea', *Annali Dell'Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico in Trento / Italienisch-Deutsches Historisches Institut Trento* Vol. 33 (2008): 59–99; Anastasia Sturaite, 'Propaganda figurata: geometrie di dominio e ideologie veneziane nelle carte di Vincenzo Coronelli', *Studi Veneziani*, No 44, (2002): 129–55; Michael Sherman, 'Political Propaganda and Renaissance Culture: French Reactions to the League of Cambrai, 1509–10', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, No 8-2 (1977): 96.

the genre of the naval battle should not be considered an unconscious choice of communication.<sup>43</sup> Propaganda is associated with any conflict portrayed in performance. Interpretations of two different naval battles were staged at court during the wedding festivities—one in Pisa and one in Florence.

*The Naumachiae of Pisa and Florence: two uses of propaganda*

Pisa

The first battle was staged prior to the main celebration. Christine of Lorraine arrived in Florence from France by ship, having travelled from Marseilles to the port of Livorno and on to Pisa.<sup>44</sup> In Pisa, on 25 April 1588, a series of events anticipated the spectacle that would accompany the future Grand Duchess of Tuscany to Florence. A naval battle was enacted between Christian knights (Knights of St. Stephen created by Cosimo I, father of the groom) and Turks. It was staged along the canals in the city. And the battle involved the whole city, not only occupying its physical space but involving all social classes.<sup>45</sup> From a dramaturgical perspective, it may be divided into two parts. At the beginning, after a brief parade of small ships, the first action was the arrival of two Turkish boats, followed by the landing of pirates and the simulated attack and looting of some Florentine villages and vessels.<sup>46</sup> The staging of the battle was realistic: pillage and piracy against Ottoman ships were in reality a daily occurrence barely kilometres away. Following these guerrilla attacks in Pisa's canals, the Turkish ships moved on the noble palace to stage the second part of the programme. Here a group of soldiers, sent by the legendary sovereign Prete Gianni (Preter John) to pay tribute to the future Grand Duchess, was attacked by Turkish ships. Eventually, the unexpected arrival of four boats of the Grand Duke of Tuscany put an end to the fighting and drove the pirates back towards the sea.

Due to the growing threat of piracy on the coasts of Tuscany, these wedding celebrations were a symbolic way for the Duchy to reassure the township of Pisa. Through this magnificent naumachia, dangerous events that used to take place every day not far from the city of Pisa on the shores of the Tuscan

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43 Maria Alberti, 'Battaglie navali, scorrerie corsare e politica dello spettacolo le Naumachie medicce del 1589', *California Italian Studies*, No 1-1 (2010), p. 21.

44 Alberti, 'Battaglie navali'; James Saslow, *The Medici Wedding of 1589: Florentine Festival as Theatrum Mundi*, (New York: ACLS History E-Book Project, 2005).

45 Giovanni Cervoni, *Descrizione de la felicissima entrata del Sereniss. Don Ferdinando de' Medici Cardinale, Gran Duca di Toscana nella città di Pisa*. (Firenze: Giorgio Marescotti, 1588), p. 14.

46 *Ibid.*

Mediterranean were convincingly reproduced by the Christian knights of St. Stephen themselves. They were fighting in defence of the city and framing their real actions within a mythical narration. This located the Grand Duke of Tuscany in one of the most enduring myths of Christianity. The arrival of Preter John's troops could almost be read as an objectification of the Christian myth. Troops fighting the pirates during the naumachia became an object immediately clear to the mixed social groups of spectators scattered along the river banks, framing real-world actions in defence of Pisa as victorious and God-blessed.

Within this narrative, propaganda emerges as conflictual in nature. A social representation is easily constructed and shared by a group in a powerful position identifying an enemy. Furthermore, this creation of ancient myths resonates with Jacques Ellul's analysis of propaganda. He describes it as a communicative dynamic that 'seizes what springs up spontaneously and gives it a new form, a structure, an effective channel and can eventually transform ideology into myth'.<sup>47</sup> While narrating events more complex in content and more hybrid in form, they seem consistent with his definition. Events taking place beyond the sovereign's control near Pisa's shores, were thus transfigured and transposed in a 'new form', with a new 'structure' and shared through an 'effective channel' before Pisans.

### Florence

A few weeks later, during celebrations in Florence, a further sea battle occurred. On 11 May 1589, after having been the venue for a *sbarra*, or tournament between knights, one of the courtyards of Palazzo Pitti in Florence underwent a spectacular transformation (see Figures 5 and 6).<sup>48</sup>

The Pitti courtyard had been earlier prepared as a waterproofed space. Then, while the court was temporarily absent for dinner, the courtyard was flooded to host a naumachia.

During the next hours a furious battle was performed: Christian galleys with actors dressed in Roman costumes launched an assault on a Turkish fortress that had been constructed on one side of the courtyard and was defended by actors

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<sup>47</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. 117.

<sup>48</sup> Mulryne, 'Arbitrary Reality: Fact and Fantasy in the Florentine "Naumachia", 1589', in *Waterborne Pageants and Festivities in the Renaissance*, Margaret Shewring, Linda Briggs, (eds.), (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 143–75.

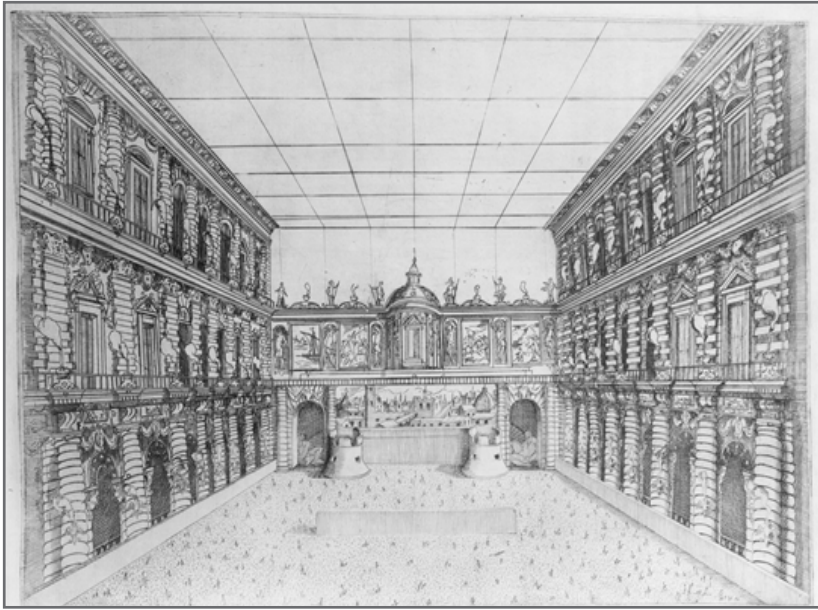
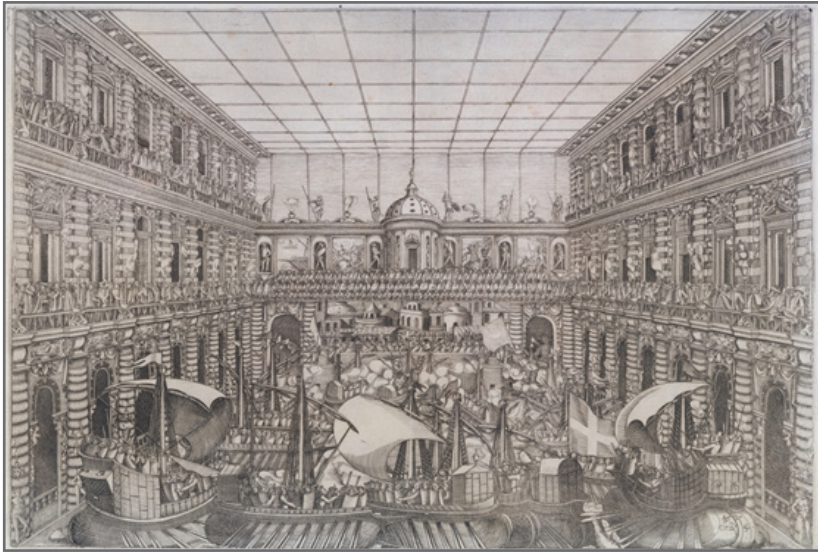


Figure 5. The courtyard of Palazzo Pitti prepared for the sbarra as portrayed by Orazio Scarabelli in *The Naumachia of Palazzo Pitti* by Bernardo Buontalenti. Engraving, 1589. Metropolitan Museum of Art Digital Collection

dressed in what was called ‘Greek costume’ (scenography shown in Figures 5 and 6). The Palazzo Pitti performance ended when Christian knights landed on the mainland, conquering the Turkish stronghold and delivering the enemy flag to the Grand Duchess.<sup>49</sup> As in the Pisan naumachia, at Palazzo Pitti ducal power projected itself to its guests: a communication intended to achieve an effect.

Through a strategic communications lens, the naumachia depicted more than a mythic transposition: not only did the naumachia portray the dominance of the in-group over an external enemy (embodied by the Greeks), it also anchored an unknown concept to known elements in the cognitive universe of the reference group. This is a basic principle of the generative dynamics of social representations. The performance evoked a precise social representation of a known element (a contemporary Mediterranean conflict), to introduce a new,

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<sup>49</sup> Alberti, *Battaglie navali*, pp. 21–22.



*Figure 6. The courtyard of Palazzo Pitti prepared for the naumachia. Scarabelli, 1589.  
Metropolitan Museum of Art Digital Collection*

unknown one. The performed battle did not reflect a past war. It was not part of the military history of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. Instead, it prefigured one of the Grand Duchy's strategic objectives in the medium and long term: the conquest of Ottoman strongholds. It is no accident that Roman knights were mentioned in chronicles as dressed in 'Greek costume'. Research shows such accounts did not refer to costumes inspired by ancient Hellenic people, as in idealised scenic representations. The term was used in a more contemporary and 'geopolitical' sense, identifying a way of dressing actors in the Ottoman style.<sup>50</sup> Hence the 'verisimilitude' of representations is perceived as an element of value and repeated more than once by authors of the chronicles: the construction of a shared social representation cannot transcend the verisimilitude of its message, in this case the current political reality of ongoing conflict between the Italian states (in particular the Grand Duchy of Tuscany) and the Ottoman empire (in particular the strongholds it had succeeded in establishing on the European Mediterranean, notably on Corsica).<sup>51</sup>

.....  
<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

<sup>51</sup> Alberti, *Battaglie navali*, p. 12.

The Palazzo Pitti naumachia presented hybrid characters (the Romans/read Italians and the Greeks/read Turks) aimed at sending a message (the Grand Duchy will consolidate power by prevailing against the Turks) to a specific social group (the Florentine court, foreign dignitaries, and other wedding guests).<sup>52</sup> Thus it is a response to propagating concepts among spectators sharing a common cultural base. At the same time, it is set up by a dominant elite whose goals transcend simple communication between peers and aim instead at constructing a possible future. Such expectations and plans, do not focus on an existing world but are ambitions the powerful wish to pre-describe for their spectators:

The conscious mind sees the representation as a unit, even though it has no immediate foundation and transcends the realms of the perceptible. It includes within a more stable system both what is present and what is absent, what exists and what is imagined to exist. Once this unified image has been established, it retroactively gives that same reality a meaning, and conditions the behaviours and attitudes of those who accept it.<sup>53</sup>

In a few years Ferdinand I would develop Tuscan naval power and expand its reach to the Mediterranean. The knights of St. Stephen would come to conquer the Ottoman Corsican strongholds, as in the naumachia of Palazzo Pitti, before becoming one of the most influential forces in the early seventeenth century Mediterranean.<sup>54</sup>

The two battles of Pisa and Florence can be better understood together. Naumachias are spectacular elaborations of conflict at sea where the narrated story is subordinate to the enactment of battles. It is evident that what is discussed here captures a mere part of the overall creative force of these spectacles. Nevertheless, each naumachia was presented so as to have the greatest effect on its public. They were designed to portray a realistic image of the enemy with whom the Grand Duchy of Tuscany is in conflict. The naumachia at Pisa portrayed a reassuring version of the conflict with the Ottoman pirates the Duke's subjects living along the coast experienced daily, announcing a promise of better days in the future. The political, economic, military, and religious decision-makers gathered at Palazzo Pitti enjoyed an equally reassuring message in familiar terms, a continuation and

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>53</sup> Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 322.

<sup>54</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II. 1*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).



strengthening of their control of their part of the world, along with the necessity of recognising a greater role for Florence as one of their number. At the same time, the naumachias were more than just great shows. Through them the Prince could order and organise a world in the present and future before the eyes of the privileged spectators summoned to witness the wonder of his sovereignty.

### Entrepreneurial Theatre: The Propagation of Ideas



Figure 7. A typical tragic scene engraved by Jacques Callot from *Il Solimano* by Prospero Bonarelli (Rome, Francesco Corbelletti, 1632). OPAL Turin University Library, Turin

Venice, since the early seventeenth century, had developed a strong awareness of its theatre.<sup>55</sup> In the same period, the notion of a specific ‘local taste’—to be identified and satisfied—soon spread among entrepreneurs, and was even mentioned in the prefaces and letters written to introduce the operas by poets, impresarios, and printers.

<sup>55</sup> Cristoforo Ivanovich, *Minerva al tavolino, lettere diverse di proposta e risposta a varij personaggi: nel fine le memorie teatrali di Venezia*, (Venezia: Niccolò Pezzana, 1681) .

The scholars Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker describe the characteristics of Venetian opera.<sup>56</sup> They argue that the success of an opera depended not so much on the style of music composition, but on ‘local taste’, which was satisfied by themes featured in the most successful-booklets. The recurring dramaturgical structure of Venetian operas did not lack imagination.<sup>57</sup> The presence of ‘local taste’ indicated the presence of a particular audience, understood as a social group united by a shared cultural awareness with a common attitude to current events. For an opera to be appreciated, therefore, a complicated balance of novelty and predictability was needed.

*Opera in war*



Figure 8. A triumphant chariot in Roman setting inspired by those used in public tournaments and for theatrical performances from *Sigismondo Primo al diadema*, drama for music, Venezia, Nicolini, 1696. Raccolta Drammatica, Braidense National Library, Milan

56 Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, ‘Production, Consumption and Political Function of Seventeenth-Century Opera’, *Early Music History* Vol. 4 (1984): 209–96.

57 *Ibid.*, pp. 248–49.



Between 1645 and 1669 Venice waged war on the Turks: the war of Candia. This was a long and arduous conflict fought on land and by sea for the defence of the island of Crete and its capital Heraklion (Iraklion). In 1669 Candia was conquered by the Turkish army. Two years later Venice signed the Treaty of Peace with the loss of all Crete.

The genre of sung opera was created to satisfy the self-image of its audience: a deeply and consciously Venetian public. Titles published in this period are affected by this new phase of the Republic. 'During the 1650s and 1660s, when legendary Roman heroes began to be featured with increasing frequency in opera librettos, their exploits invited comparison with those of Venetian military heroes in the War of Candia.<sup>58</sup> The figurative representation of Venice as the last bastion of freedom against the pressure of the barbarians from the East was adapted to the current war situation. With the outbreak of hostilities, images became explicitly linked to wars in which Venetian armies were engaged. As the clouds of war darkened the skies over the lagoon, the Roman theme was resumed in response to a change in political conditions and with tangible effects for all Venetian citizens (see Figure 8). The study of operas staged during these crisis years helps us understand how social representations changed in reaction to the threat to the state. The most enduring elements reflecting such changes were the prologues to operas. These sections were intrinsically subject to change as they were adapted for each new theatre, occasion, and dedication. The prologues evolved along with the progression of war, describing the most triumphant episodes and the blackest crises. The consolidation of this trend is noteworthy: the figurative, mythological allusions presented at the outset became, as the years passed, increasingly explicit allusions to places, episodes, and characters of the Venetian army.<sup>59</sup>

Witness the prologue to *Il Tolomeo*<sup>60</sup> (Ptolemy) recited by the deities Victoria, Vulcan, Venus, Athena, Mars (see Figure 9 for the title page published in Venice in 1658, and Figure 10 for the original translation).

Vulcan: *Forward! Fly to the Adriatic Sea to favour a positive outcome of the war; and upon your arrival the hideous moon will have to cry its bad fortune in an eclipse of blood.*

Victoria: *It quickly takes me obediently in flight towards the army of Venice, towards the Aegean Sea, towards Asia and Crete.*<sup>61</sup>

.....  
<sup>58</sup> Rosand, *Opera*, p. 144.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Il Tolomeo drama de gl'Academici Imperturbabili. Rappresentato nel theatro di S. Apollinare di Venezia, l'anno 1658. Consacrato all'illustriss.mo ... sign. Vettore Pesaro*, (Venezia: Appresso il Valuasense, 1658), [trans. by the author].

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.-



Figure 9. Title page of *Il Tolomeo*,  
*Dramma de gl'Academici Imperturbabili*.  
*Rappresentato nel Theatro di S.*  
*Apollinare di Venezia, l'anno 1658*  
[*Ptolemy. Drama by the Imperturbable*  
*Academics. Presented in the theatre of S.*  
*Apollinare di Venezia, in the year 1658*].  
*Raccolta Drammatica, Braidense National*  
*Library, Milan*

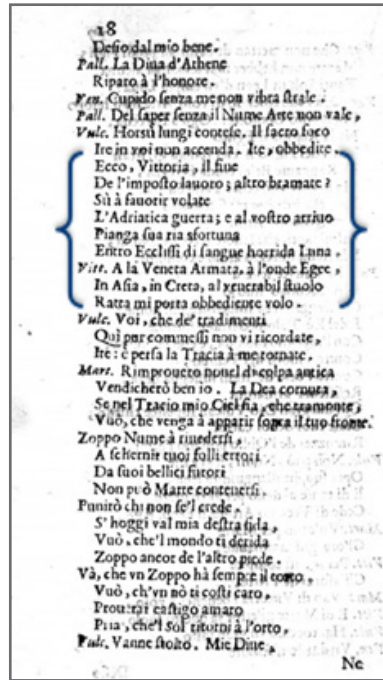


Figure 10. P. 18 from *Il Tolomeo*.  
*Raccolta Drammatica, Braidense*  
*National Library, Milan*

These deities invoke a generic reference to the war, but this prologue to the battle scene where the goddess of Victory flies in support of Venetian troops explicitly mentions 'takes me obediently in flight towards the army of Venice, towards the Aegean Sea, towards Asia and Crete.'

*Propagating shared ideas*

Venetian opera, discussed so far, is based on two pillars: 'local taste' and the ability of operas to adapt to evolving politics of the nation. 'Local taste' is a dense concept capable of evoking a specific social group, as well as the expectations of that group. Artistic operas, in fact, derive from the spontaneous demand within social groups of spectators combined with the communicative drive of the dominant social group, aligned with the perspective (or propaganda) of the sovereign state. In wartime, social representations shared in public theatre by a significant part of the population inevitably became an integral part of political action.

'Generation after generation, Venetians never seem to have got tired of hearing the mythology of their origins repeated on stage [...]. Generally, Venetian opera conveyed its political message by suggestion, by implicating the knowing audience in its world of allusion as well as illusion. Its political message, the shared celebration of Venice, was imparted with the willing collusion of the spectators.'<sup>62</sup> It is from this 'willing collusion' that an analysis of strategic communications can be drafted: it sits at the heart of the dynamics Moscovici defines as *propagation*.

In the examples cited, spectators would recognise a traditional correspondence between Venice and ancient Rome.<sup>63</sup> A simple change guaranteed continuity of the metaphor but added new meaning: Venice, as the new Rome, would be the bulwark against the advance of the contemporary barbarian gods in the war of Candia.

It is possible to recognise two implicit functions of this communicative dynamic in the simplicity of this metaphor, passed from one prologue to another over the course of the opera seasons. The first: the ability to respond to the Republic's changing geopolitical situation through familiar characters within a set of expectations shared among spectators. Characters in opera prologues more or less mirrored classical personifications and metonymies (the goddess of Victory, the Mediterranean Sea, minor deities). What changed over time as the crisis of war grew, was how explicitly characters from the operas themselves were identified with the Venetian state. The second concerns the circular dynamics

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<sup>62</sup> Rosand, *Opera*, p. 150.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

established by the reception of these operas: the presence of a paying public introduced active feedback into the communicative dynamic—orienting the discussion, but also limiting it. In this way, new elements were absorbed into social representation while the group consolidated its identity and strengthened its resilience.

### Street Performers And Information Professionals



*Figure 11. 'A street vendor offering prints for sale of the Turkish defeats, to the horror of two passers-by who have had enough of news' by Mitelli. The cartouche above reads: Those who wish can buy here the latest news on the war. They are cheap, just two bolognini. The exhausted passers-by reply: I do not want to hear any more news, no! no! no! and We've had enough, go away! British Museum*

During the sixteenth century, Italy determined the balance of power in Europe. Between 1494 and 1559, the entire Italian territory was devastated by wars and by dramatic changes in the relationship between the Italian states and the great continental actors. This was a critical period of great uncertainty and transformation. Italy went from being the home of a flourishing merchant

economy at the centre of European politics to being a battlefield ravaged by ambition, where discursive practices of theatres and plays were created in recurring exchanges among a heterogeneous public.<sup>64</sup> The birth of this new type of communication through street performance was strongly linked to the quality of the messages, the available media, and the communication practices adopted in the transmission of the message (oral compositions, handwritten and/or poor-quality printed texts intended for immediate consumption). Street entertainers mastered the complexity of this form of communication, bending it to their advantage for success and survival. It was not only a simple form of street theatre; it was also a strong means of political communication. The wars of Italy served as a catalyst. The wandering performers, such as acrobats and comedians, responded to the new need for information by adapting to the way in which they produced and disseminated social representations across different publics, eager to discover the latest events. Squares and arcades became meeting places for large audiences where the latest news was discussed.<sup>65</sup> Communication took place at multiple levels: the extemporising of the acrobats, the manuscript sheets sold alongside with the latest news, and compositions, booklets, and low-quality prints produced almost in the moment and intended for immediate consumption.<sup>66</sup> Not unlike the way we consume news today, the stories of the wandering performers and the hunger of the public for the latest news triggered a flood of low-cost informative materials.<sup>67</sup>

### Italian wars by word of mouth

On 14 May 1509, following skirmishes between the opposing armies of Louis XII and Venice, not far from Milan, the vanguard of the French army caught up with the rear of the Venetian army at a small village called Agnadello. Unprepared for battle, the Venetian army was defeated by the French. This bloody defeat marked a significant moment in Venetian history, leaving a lasting memory. Girolamo Priuli, a leading Venetian voice of the period, wrote:

64 Rospocher, *Beyond the Public Sphere*.

65 Rospocher and Rosa Salzberg, “*‘El vulgo senza’: spazi pubblici, voci a Venezia durante le guerre d’Italia*”, *Storica* Vol. 48 (2010): 83–120; Brendan Maurice Dooley and Sabrina Baron, *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe*, (London: Routledge, 2011).

66 Laura Carnelos, ‘Words on the Street: Selling Small Printed “Things”’, in *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, Raymond Joad, Noah Moxham (eds) (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 739–55; Salzberg, “‘Selling stories and many other things in and through the city’: peddling print in Renaissance Florence and Venice”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* Vol. 42, No 3 (2011): 737–59.

67 Salzberg, ‘In the Mouths of Charlatans: Street Performers and the Dissemination of Pamphlets in Renaissance Italy’, *Renaissance Studies*, No 24–5 (2010): 638–53.

So many words, so many opinions, so many different languages, so many voices and so many intentions and so many arguments were made in these days in the Venetian city ... as for the nobles, as for the citizens, as for the mob, in every square, in every lodge, in Rivoalto, in the banks, in the churches, in the streets, in the dumps and in the taverns, everyone, in the end, wanted to say his opinion.<sup>68</sup>

Massimo Rospoche studies the ‘Songs of War’ written during the ‘Horrendous Italian Wars’ (1494–1559).<sup>69</sup> These songs are among the few surviving examples of the literary and oral work of street performers. His study of these texts has revealed two key characteristics specific to these songs: ‘immediacy’ and ‘truthfulness’. Both of these elements are typical of communications in times of crisis.

Immediacy refers to the newsworthiness of the information reported in recited works. This is often emphasised by the authors of the songs—both in their titles and compositions. To give an example of the productive abilities of these professional artists, a performer from Ferrara named Bighignol was able to compose, print, and distribute a song within two weeks of the event it described—a naval battle between the Duke of Ferrara and the Venetians at the end of December 1509.<sup>70</sup> The same productive urgency can be seen in the titles of many compositions, which frequently highlighted the novelty or unprecedented quality of information they were providing. Perhaps, the most interesting aspect of this immediacy concerns the drive to communicate, responding to a thirst for the latest available news. Rospoche writes:

[...] through the widespread broadcast and distribution of these compositions, a collective consciousness of current events and of the historical moment was emerging, a perception that distinguished itself from a generic sense of history bound to a distant past [...]. These street singers’ activities were an important component of the phenomenon that has been recently described as the emergence of contemporaneity—“the perception, shared by a number of human beings, of experiencing a particular event at more or less the same time”.<sup>71</sup>

68 Girolamo Priuli, ‘I Diarii’, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, No 24/3, Vol. 4, (1938–41): p. 246.

69 Marco Mondini and Rospoche, *Narrating War: Early Modern and Contemporary Perspectives*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013), pp. 79–99.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 83.



There was a sense of urgency on the part of spectators as they observed a changing historical landscape.

The second element, truthfulness, was also crucial for war reports. Authors expressed their adherence to the facts using a variety of methods. For example, the introduction to the anonymous text *Rotta facta per li signori francexi contra li ispani* (Ferrara, 1512, see Figure 12), states that the songs were composed not for the pleasure of the performer, but to fulfil his duty to inform the audience about current events.

The public in the marketplace expected accurate information, so these works had to confront the issue of truthfulness regarding the events narrated by the street singers. The surviving works show a variety of techniques and platitudes used to certify the reliability of the information.<sup>72</sup> Song titles frequently referred to the truth. In some cases, authors claimed to have been eye witnesses or first-hand participants in the events they described. In others, they boasted of their diligent search for reliable sources (official dispatches, the testimonies of ambassadors, soldiers' tales). The street performer was a mediator of information: like his audience, he was the recipient of someone else's knowledge, which he would then pass on through his performances. Historians have called attention to accusations by intellectuals and scholars of the day reproving acrobats and street



Figure 12. Page from *Rotta facta per li signori francexi contra li ispani*, Ferrara, 1512 [Defeat of the Spaniards by the French lords].  
*Sforciato alquanto dal mio gran volere / disposi tutto de donar principio / non già per che ne prendiati piacere / ma per che habiati di tal cosa in dicio* [I was forced against my will / and then I prepare to start / not to have fun with my stories / but to make sure you can know how things went]. British Library Collection

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

performers for using false information or for mixing fantastic inventions with news to make their works more palatable.

### Diffusion: spreading information and opinion-making



*Figure 13. 'Dedicated to war enthusiasts' by Mitelli. The cartouche reads: Men avidly follow the news in papers while figures representing France and Spain brawl on the ground. British Museum*

The communicative dynamics set in motion by the activities of wandering performers and street singers are as uncertain as the nature of their work and the reliability of their testimonies. Street entertainers were information operators who spread news in an irregular way, with uncertain aims and with unpredictable results. Coming up with clear definitions of the public, the literary genre, and the type of theatrical representation or artistic production for such communication is problematic. The performer maintains a horizontal relationship to his spectators: I have briefly discussed singers who proclaimed their status as witnesses to important events, mere intermediaries serving their audience. Their artistic product was ephemeral compositions for immediate consumption from which they could earn a living. Its value lay in the immediacy, palatability, and novelty of the reported information, in the rapidity of composition, and the



truthfulness and quality of the artistic product. The communications landscape created by the activities of these information professionals is perhaps the most complex and hybrid of those discussed here. The dynamism of the *diffusion* process allowed for adaptability in the moment, it was also an opportunity to serve the Power elite<sup>73</sup> (or to be a rabble rouser), to propagate preferred content among various publics,<sup>74</sup> and to spread rumours and news of uncertain origin.

Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, street actors could fill the squares and streets of cities with their flyers<sup>75</sup> to influence city speeches with their own representations.<sup>76</sup> They also contributed to creating a sphere of public opinion.

## Conclusion

‘All the world’s a stage, or so it had become in the already intensely baroque atmosphere around 1600— a *Theatrum Mundi*, *Theatrum Naturae*, *Theatrum Europeum*, *Theatrum Belli*, *Theatrum Fortis*,<sup>77</sup> wrote Carl Schmitt reflecting on the dramatisation process marking society and shared ideas during the European seventeenth century. Public discourses of power cross spectacular forms of communication and transform the tragic history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries into a script: ‘when [...] history becomes part of the setting, it does so as script’.<sup>78</sup> At the heart of this study is the observation of dynamics that connect the strategic communications of power to citizens through the creation of shared social representations in Early Modern Europe. Serge Moscovici identifies three fundamental dynamics to the construction and dissemination of ideas among social groups: propaganda, propagation and diffusion. Each of these dynamics has specific characteristics regarding the composition of the recipients, the form of the message, the objectives of communication. All are always present, in different proportions, in the public communication of power. Spectacles as stage events have been analysed here through the prism of these three communication dynamics.

The Theatre of the Prince represents the direct extension of the will of the State. Communication is strategic, confronting a situation by strengthening the

73 Rospocher, ‘Songs of War. Historical and Literary Narratives of the «Horrendous Italian Wars»’, in *Narrating War: Early Modern and Contemporary Perspectives*, Marco Mondini, Massimo Rospocher (eds) (Bologna: Il Mulino, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2013), p. 87.

74 Rospocher et al., *El vulgo zanza*, p. 95.

75 Ezio Raimondi, *Anatomie secentesche*, (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1966), pp. 87–99.

76 Rospocher et al., *El vulgo zanza*, p. 117.

77 Paul Kottman, *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, (Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 148.

78 Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, trans. John Osborne, (London: NLB, 1977), p. 203.

unity of the social body and identifying an external enemy within a discourse of power. Propaganda emerges as the primary communicative drive whenever a dominant group or established power is faced with a threat or conflict (real or figurative). In the dramatic spectacles illustrated above, power communicates strategically with different intentions. In Pisa, the Duchy was eager to undertake military actions that conformed to a tradition recognised by its proponents, and to provide reassurance about its sovereign capacity. In Florence, one objective was to anticipate future events in the present, and so shape a 'Florentine frame' for the (target) audience, the nobility supporting the prince. Each of these cases is comparable with contemporary communications campaigns. Any power group will seek to reassure its reference group about a threat. A sovereign entity will strive to frame its own actions within the cultural tradition understood by its interlocutors. By laying out a narrative, the field for avoiding or winning a future conflict can be prepared. This ensures that power will retain its strategic and tactical advantages in determining the narrative of future events. Whenever power seeks to depict a conflict through a favourable lens, the communication campaign will be driven by the dynamics of propaganda.

For the Venetian audience, shared values expressed through opera played out before a self-reflexive community, and so captured the communicative dynamic Serge Moscovici refers to as *propagation*. As Venetian foreign policy changed over the course of the seventeenth century, opera performances adapted to the changing context. What emerges from the relationship between early modern opera productions and their paying audiences, is the ability of the performed message to adapt to the changing conditions within that context and improve the resilience of the social group engaging with it. Viewed through Moscovici's theoretical lens, two dimensions emerge in which Venetian opera-goers propagated social representations. In the first, an external idea—Rome's war against the barbarians—was translated into familiar, shared principles. Operas with a Roman imperial theme were staged with greater and greater frequency, and through them passionate spectators came to recognise themselves as citizens of Venice, developing their ability to face new challenges on the cultural horizon as a unified group. In the second, the group reinforced its existing value system, rather than welcome change. Contemporary strategic communications shares similarities whenever a broad social group anchors and objectifies in order to absorb external change and reinforce its identity. The propagation of ideas within a group is not absolute but is subject to pressures, both from outside or from within.

Finally, the most heterogeneous form of public performance is street performance and information professionals. In this setting, communication becomes a field of temporary exchange, able to stimulate momentary social gatherings around a shared need for information. The communications of charlatans and street actors live on the margins of society, bringing together temporary groups of citizens in improvised meeting places, promising immediacy, truthfulness and freshness of the information.

*Diffusion* as a communicative dynamic has proven beneficial in reorganizing and analytically outlining the main components of this changing horizon. The street actors serve as intermediaries between facts and audiences. It occurs in informal and irregular ways free of recurring location or audience; the informational horizon, instead, is created *ex novo*, periodically, in response to performance. Acrobats become operators invested with a social function. But the products of this communication are transient, conditioned by the need for novelty, reliability and speed. They are products of poor quality and immediate consumption. The irregular and hybrid aspects of this genre echo the complexity of our contemporary communications landscape. Whenever events and news are scattered across the digital informational landscape by users and accounts improvised as information professionals, we see similar effects in the news arena: uncertainty, disorder, poor reliability, fast-paced conclusions, potential misinformation and incorrect narratives.

These three genres of public spectacle in early modern Italy resonate with contemporary strategic communications. The Shakespearian metaphor of the 'great theatre of the world' also illuminates today's 'great theatre of words'. Surprisingly, the complex political landscape of a sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe in ruins<sup>79</sup> seems to reflect from a historical distance our contemporary communications horizon, made up not so much of remnants but of communicative fragments. Future research should explore the social influence and representational dynamics underlying the latest, even spectacular, acts of strategic communications. This means that the study of the ecosystem of communications should be approached from a strategic, not tactical point of view: a study of a 'theatre of ideas' that goes beyond the spectacular tirade of a few characters to deal with the wider genre and common characteristics of ideas shared between the opera and the public.

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<sup>79</sup> Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*.

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# STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AS A TOOL FOR GREAT POWER POLITICS IN VENEZUELA

Raphael Camargo Lima

## Abstract

Since the Cold War, Latin America has escaped any confrontation between the great powers. However, in the last decade, this scenario appears to have changed because of the increased presence of extra-regional actors. Recent developments in Venezuela dramatically illustrate this. China and Russia have become defining actors in Venezuela's domestic dispute, using it as a platform for their global interests. The current crisis involves not only the power resources of traditional international competition—diplomatic, economic, and military—but also new means in the informational and cyber environment. This paper analyses the balancing strategies of China and Russia in Latin America and the role of their strategic communications. It argues that China and Russia employed two divergent balancing strategies to counter US regional hegemony in the Americas, and that each state projected strategic communications particular to each type of balancing. Consequently, China employs communications to ensure resources for its economic development, and to gain influence, presenting itself as a credible and responsible non-Western great power. Russia, meanwhile, employs information campaigns as part of hybrid warfare to promote hard balancing, to pressure United States hegemony in the Americas, and to reduce NATO's influence in Eastern Europe.

**Keywords**—*Latin America, Venezuela, China, Russia, US, great powers, balancing, strategic communications*

### About the Author

**Raphael Camargo Lima** is a researcher at the Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea) in Brazil and holds an MSc in International Relations at the Graduate Program San Tiago Dantas (Unesp, Unicamp and PUC-SP). His research focuses on Latin American security and defence issues, regional governance, defence reform and military change.

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, there has been much debate around the growing competition between the great powers. Analysts tell us that we are entering an uncertain period when competition could surpass cooperation as the main trait of global governance.<sup>2</sup> For many, geopolitics has returned to centre stage in international politics<sup>3</sup> at a moment when the great powers are employing not only the power resources of traditional international competition—diplomatic, economic, and military—but also new means in the information and cyber environments. Traditional and social media have become the new battleground for old disputes among the great powers, rendering strategic communications<sup>4</sup> and cyberspace<sup>5</sup> central to current balancing strategies. Until now, few studies have connected great power politics, balancing strategies and information activities. This article seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Confrontations over the distribution of power now affect regions that have not been subject to such disputes since the Cold War. This is the case in Latin America, and Venezuela in particular, which has been experiencing an internal

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1 I would like to thank Diego Lopes, Pedro Barros, Sofia Escobar and two anonymous reviewers for helpful contributions and suggestions.

2 Michael J. Mazarr et al., 'Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition' (RAND Corporation, 2018).

3 Walter Russell Mead, 'The Return of Geopolitics', *Foreign Affairs*, 17 April 2014.

4 I understand the concept of strategic communications as a tool of grand strategy. Thus, it has a strong correlation with international action. Bolt provides the following definition: 'the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences, using words, images and actions and non-actions in the national interest of a political community'. Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* 5 (2018): 3–11.

5 According to Nye, cyberspace is a unique hybrid space of both physical and virtual properties. Joseph S. Nye Jr, 'Cyber Power' (Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, May 2010), 3.

struggle for power. Over the past decade, China and Russia have been increasing activity in the region and strengthening ties with Venezuela. This has led to gridlock with the US as the domestic crisis in Venezuela deepened. Since early 2015, the government of Nicolas Maduro has been expanding its hold on political power in the country, bypassing the legislative branch. The lack of opposition in the 2018 elections also raised doubts about their legality. It resulted in an internal struggle for power, with the leader of the National Assembly declaring himself interim president in early 2019. The US and several other Western countries claimed the elections were illegal and recognised the Assembly's president as the legal chief of state. China and Russia, however, increased their support for Maduro. The political divide has galvanised these three great powers to court public opinion both locally and globally through social media, public diplomacy, official discourses, humanitarian operations, and military manoeuvres.

This article will provide a structured and focused comparison<sup>6</sup> of the balancing strategies and strategic communications China and Russia employ in their relations with Venezuela.<sup>7</sup> My primary hypothesis is that each country has its own strategy to check the power of the US in Latin America, which is also reflected in its strategic communications. I apply the concepts of *offensive realism*, *balance of power theory*, and *strategic communications* to test my hypothesis. I analyse the grand strategies of Russia and China and their bilateral relations with Venezuela considering diplomatic, economic, military, and informational means,<sup>8</sup> and highlight their strategic communications efforts.<sup>9</sup>

The article is organised into four parts. In the first section, I discuss the theoretical framework, presenting the concepts of balance of power, balancing strategies, and alliance formation, and how these relate to strategic communications. In the second section, I present the developments of Venezuela's Chavist regime and its relationship with the US. In the third and fourth sections, I discuss the grand strategies of China and Russia and how these lead to different balancing

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6 According to George and Bennett, the method is 'structured' in that the researcher writes general questions that reflect the research objective and that these questions are asked of each case under study to guide and standardize data collection'. It is "focused" in that it deals only with certain aspects of the historical cases examined'. Alexander L. George et al., *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (MIT Press, 2005).

7 They are, in this context, theory-guided case studies, which 'aim to explain and/or interpret a single historical episode rather than generalize beyond the data', although results may raise important theoretical questions. Jack S. Levy, 'Case Studies: Types, Designs, and Logics of Inference', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* Vol. 25, No 1 (1 February 2008): 4.

8 I have employed documental analysis—mainly national security policies and defence strategies and have analysed diplomatic, economic, and military data.

9 In the realm of strategic communications, I have analysed diplomatic and military statements, interviews, and actions regarding media related to Venezuela.

strategies in Venezuela. I conclude by comparing the behaviour of the two countries and the role strategic communications plays in their relations with Venezuela, and by discussing some political and theoretical implications.

### **Great powers, balance of power, and balancing strategies: strategic communications as a grand strategy resource**

Balance of power is one of the oldest and most important concepts in international relations literature, also one of the most 'ambiguous and intractable'.<sup>10</sup> *Balance of power* might be defined as the 'conditions of power equilibrium among key states'<sup>11</sup> with outcomes at the global (systemic) and regional (subsystemic) levels. Structural realists argue that the distribution of power in an anarchic international system creates pressures in world politics,<sup>12</sup> where states can only achieve security by maximising their own power and preventing other states from realising regional or global hegemony. To do this, states employ the foreign policy strategy of *balancing*, focusing on their own military build-up or on forming coalitions.

Both liberals and realists have criticised this perspective<sup>13</sup> for its excessive emphasis on military aspects and for overlooking other manifestations of power.<sup>14</sup> Some authors have, therefore, advocated the need to rethink balance of power theory to consider alternative means of power and introduce a graduated understanding of balancing strategies that better reflect the international system after the Cold War. In 1985, Stephen Walt argued that states do not seek balance against power but rather against the most threatening power, as determined by aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intentions.<sup>15</sup> He saw threat level as one of the main drivers for alliance formation in international politics. In 2004, Randall Schweller focused on the problem of why some states do not engage in balancing strategies when faced with rising aggressors. He introduced the concepts of overbalancing, appropriate balancing, underbalancing, and non-balancing, arguing that domestic factors influence leaders'

10 Jack S. Levy, 'What Do Great Powers Balance against and When?', in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 29.

11 T. V. Paul, 'Introduction: The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory and Their Contemporary Relevance', in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 3.

12 Daniel H. Nexon, 'The Balance of Power in the Balance', *World Politics* 61, Issue 2 (April 2009): 330–59, p. 335–36.

13 Some authors criticise Eurocentrism and the bias toward the great powers in balance of power theory.

14 T. V. Paul, 'Introduction: The Enduring Axioms', p. 3.

15 Stephen M. Walt, 'Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power', *International Security* Vol. 9, № 4 (1985): 9.

decisions to balance or not to balance.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the merits of these propositions, T. V. Paul's typology has been chosen for this study because it provides a more nuanced view of balancing strategies and alliance formation<sup>17</sup> (see Table 1). Paul defines three types of balancing behaviour: (1) *hard balancing*, referring to intense interstate rivalry that represents a moment when states build formal alliances or modernise their military capabilities to deal with peer competitors; (2) *soft balancing*, describing a limited military build-up, ad hoc security cooperation exercises, and resistance in international institutions;<sup>18</sup> and (3) *asymmetric balancing*, relating to efforts to contain indirect threats from sub-national actors, such as terrorist groups or guerrillas.<sup>19</sup>

Balancing strategies might include an individual change of position or the formation of coalitions or alliances—'formal (or informal) commitments for security cooperation between two or more states, intended to augment each member's power, security, and/or influence'.<sup>20</sup> These relationships are motivated by balancing efforts to enhance security, albeit may be made more effective by intervening factors such as foreign (economic and military) aid and indirect manipulations by external powers (also known as penetration).<sup>21</sup>

Balancing strategies can also vary in their geographical reach, being either *onshore* or *offshore*. *Offshore balancing* is used by geographically distant states to affect balance of power in other regions by indirect (diplomatic, economic influence, and military support) or direct means (military intervention).<sup>22</sup> This is more difficult to achieve because it is harder to project power overseas and to build expeditionary forces due to the 'primacy of land power' and the 'stopping power of water'.<sup>23</sup>

16 Four main variables affect balancing decisions: (1) elite consensus, (2) regime/ government vulnerability, (3) social cohesion, and (4) elite cohesion. Randall L. Schweller, 'Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing', *International Security* Vol. 29, № 2 (2004): 167–69.

17 T.V. Paul, 'Introduction: The Enduring Axioms', p. 13.

18 For other perspectives that relate soft balancing strategies to unipolar systems, see Robert A. Pape, 'Soft Balancing against the United States', *International Security* Vol. 30, № 1 (2005): 7–45; Stephen M. Walt, 'Alliances in a Unipolar World', *World Politics* Vol. 61, № 1 (2009): 86–120.

19 I will focus mainly on hard and soft balancing strategies because my case study does not hold traits of asymmetric balancing. Venezuela does have groups, such as the *Militias Bolivarianas* and the *Colectivos* (Chavist state-supported paramilitary), that could become an important part of future asymmetric balancing strategies for Russia and China if a transition occurs in terms unfavourable to the current Venezuelan government.

20 Walt, 'Alliances in a Unipolar World', p. 86.

21 Walt, 'Alliance Formation', p. 27–33.

22 For a debate on the concept in US grand strategy, see: Christopher Layne, 'Offshore balancing revisited', *The Washington Quarterly* Vol. 25, № 2 (June 1, 2002): 233–48, 2; John J. Mearsheimer e Stephen M. Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing', *Foreign Affairs*, 13 June 2016; Hal Brands, 'Fools Rush Out? The Flawed Logic of Offshore Balancing', *The Washington Quarterly* 38, № 2 (April 3, 2015): 7–28.

23 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition)* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2003).

	Nature of rivalry	Key strategies
<b>Hard Balancing</b>	Intense, open, often zero sum. Relative gains matter most.	Open arms build-up, formal alliances, or both.
<b>Soft Balancing</b>	Submerged, non-zero-sum.  Relative gains of limited concern for now.	Limited arms build-up.  Informal, tacit, or ad hoc security understandings among affected states, within or outside of international institutions.  Preventive strategy.
<b>Asymmetric Balancing</b>	By state or non-state actors (e.g., terrorists). Rivalry intense, although latter are elusive actors.	Non-state actors and their state sponsors pursue asymmetric strategies; state actors follow mixture of traditional and non-traditional strategies to counter threat.

Table 1: *Balancing behaviour. Source: Paul (2004:13).*

This concept of *offshore balancing* becomes more useful for analysing the presence of extra-regional powers in Latin America when combined with the theory of *offensive realism*, which sheds light on the behaviour of the great powers<sup>24</sup> and their interactions with regional hegemony. The theory states that the great powers have a number of goals related to maintaining their place in an anarchic international system: achieving regional hegemony, controlling the largest possible percentage of global wealth, dominating the balance of land power in the region, and achieving nuclear superiority.<sup>25</sup> Once a great power achieves regional hegemony at home it will aim to protect its position and check potential aggressors in other regions,<sup>26</sup> thus influencing its foreign policy strategies.<sup>27</sup>

24 Within the realist tradition, great powers are militarily powerful and economic wealthy states. See: Mearsheimer, p. 5; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010).

25 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition)*, p. 140–47.

26 Another is buck-passing: 'attempts to get another state to bear the burden of deterring or possibly fighting an aggressor' in Mearsheimer, 158.

27 Strategies are divided into three groups: (1) *for gaining power*: war, blackmail, bait and bleed, bloodletting; (2) *to check aggressors*: balancing and buck-passing; (3) *to avoid conflict*: bandwagoning and appeasement. Mearsheimer, p. 138–64.

*Balancing* and *buck-passing* are the two main strategies used to achieve this goal. The first refers to engaging directly with an aggressive state to alter the balance of power, while the second refers to inducing another great power to check an aggressor while remaining on the sidelines.<sup>28</sup> Other strategies include *appeasement*, defined as conceding power to an aggressor in hopes of a change in behaviour, and *bandwagoning*, or joining forces with a more powerful opponent so to share the spoils together. These strategies call for ceding power to a rival state and thus increase the insecurity of the state that employs them.<sup>29</sup>

The theory of *offensive realism* offers insight for this study because, as John Mearsheimer says, regional hegemony is quite difficult to acquire and to maintain. In the Americas, for instance, the region is subject to conceptual disputes between, on the one hand, the US approach to Latin America as part of its larger sphere of influence—the Western Hemisphere—and, on the other hand, seeing Latin America as an autonomous area as do other powers such as Brazil,<sup>30</sup> China, and Russia. This conceptual dispute conceals a power struggle within the region that places the offensive realism of geopolitical localisation in the centre of the study of the offshore behaviour of the great powers.

Understanding balancing strategies also requires a solid understanding of *grand strategy*, defined as a ‘political-military means-ends chain, a state’s theory of how it can best cause security for itself’,<sup>31</sup> in other words how the great powers coordinate their economic, diplomatic, cultural, and military resources to attain political objectives in the international arena,<sup>32</sup> which may mean altering the balance of power at the global or regional levels. Hence, *balancing* might be a foreign or defence policy strategy, which is part of a larger *grand strategy* seeking to achieve (hard, soft, or asymmetric) balancing effects.<sup>33</sup>

As this more nuanced view of *balancing strategies* is still a relatively recent addition to *balance of power theory*, more work needs to be done on how non-

28 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 157–59.

29 Ibid., p. 161–63.

30 Brazil also focused on the concept of South America. See: Alcides Costa Vaz, Alexandre Fuccille, and Lucas Pereira Rezende, ‘UNASUR, Brazil, and the South American Defence Cooperation: A Decade Later’, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* Vol. 60, No 2, 18 January 2018.

31 Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 13.

32 This definition is influenced by the classic Liddell Hart formulation: ‘to co-ordinate and direct all resources of a nation, or a band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of the war—the goal defined by fundamental policy’. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (Editorial Beni Noaj, 2009), p. 353.

33 Mearsheimer and Walt, for instance, propose a US grand strategy based on the logic of offshore balancing foreign policy strategy instead of a liberal hegemony strategy. Mearsheimer and Walt, ‘The Case for Offshore Balancing’.



traditional aspects such as the cultural, cyber, and information domains relate to balancing strategies and how they affect the balance of power at the global and regional levels. Echoing Carr and Morgenthau's recognition of the role of propaganda and persuasion in balances of power, Daniel Nexon has argued that power involves a great deal more than military force, and that sometimes actors may 'lose political autonomy without organized armies firing a shot'.<sup>34</sup> For example, as a result of the rapid evolution of communications, social media, and interconnectedness between countries, the information and cyber domains are now essential to both warfare and grand strategy.

The growing concept of hybrid warfare,<sup>35</sup> which refers to the use of both asymmetric and conventional means of warfare<sup>36</sup> (i.e. information operations, cyber campaigns, proxies, and economic influence),<sup>37</sup> reinforces how important these domains are to ensuring political victory without employing military means. Hence, the *information environment*<sup>38</sup> has become an important new dimension of grand strategy building and balancing strategies. Yet terminology regarding state efforts in the information environment is still being debated. In the late 2000s, Christopher Paul noticed that the terms 'strategic communications', 'public diplomacy', and 'information operations' were being used interchangeably.<sup>39</sup> The confusion was further complicated as 'strategic communications' was also used in a number of other fields such as management and communication theory with quite broad definitions.<sup>40</sup>

Despite these conceptual difficulties, *strategic communications* must be understood as tool of grand strategies. Authors such as Paul and Farwell, for instance, relate strategic communications to the coordination of symbols, actions, words, and images towards targeted audiences in support of national interests, policies, or

34 Daniel H. Nexon, 'The Balance of Power in the Balance', *World Politics* 61, № 2 (April 2009): 343.

35 Hybrid warfare is a widely contested concept. For instance, Gray understands the concept may lead to confusion about the difference of regular and irregular war. Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (Routledge, 2013).

36 Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 2–3.

37 Christopher S. Chivvis, 'Understanding Russian' (Rand Corporation, 2017), p. 3–4.

38 Defined as the 'dynamic physical and/or virtual settings interpreted by the mind' in Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* 5 (2018): 3–11.

39 Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (ABC-CLIO, 2011), p. 33; C. Paul, 'Whither Strategic Communication? A Survey of Current Proposals and Recommendations', Occasional Paper (RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 1–3.

40 Holtzhausen and Zerfass use this approach, defining the concept as 'communicating purposefully to advance (the organization's) mission'. Derina Holtzhausen and Ansgar Zerfass, *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (Routledge, 2014), p. 4.

goals.<sup>41</sup> This approach sees the means as the defining element and does not focus on the ends. A complementary approach focuses on both ends and means, and clarifies the grand strategy goals to which these efforts should be directed. According to Bolt, *strategic communications* refers to coordinated efforts for ‘the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences, using words, images and actions and non-actions in the national interest of a political community’.<sup>42</sup>

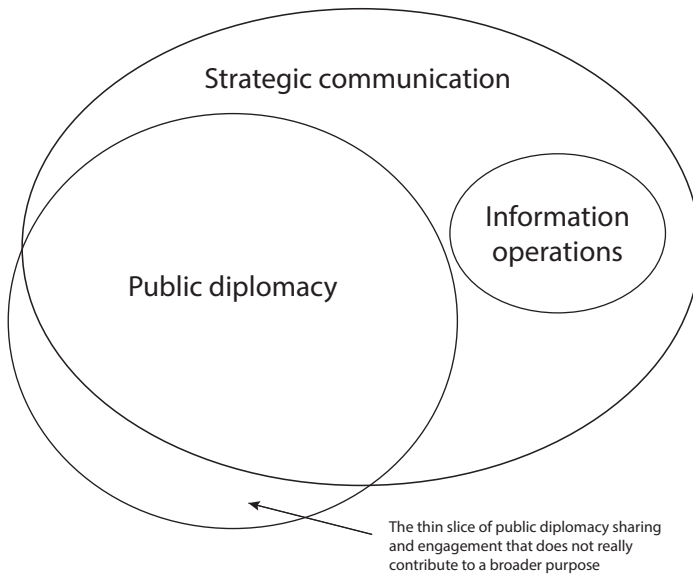


Figure 1. Diagram of the relationship between strategic communications, public diplomacy, and information operations. Source: Paul (2011).

This is quite different from public diplomacy or information operations. *Public diplomacy* can be understood as a dimension of international relations that goes beyond traditional diplomacy and involves promoting the national interests of a state through such actions as the cultivation of public opinion abroad, dialogue with private companies, and cultural and educational exchanges, although there

41 James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Georgetown University Press, 2012), p. xviii–xix; C. Paul, *Strategic Communication*, p. 3.

42 Bolt, 'Foreword'.

is no single agreed-upon definition.<sup>43</sup> The concept is deeply intertwined with soft power, defined as indirect influences such as culture, values, and ideologies.<sup>44</sup> Public diplomacy contributes to strategic communications efforts, but also contains a small aspect that does not reinforce a strategic purpose as it might foster understandings and promote engagement with foreign audiences that are not necessarily related to national policy goals,<sup>45</sup> as shown in Figure 1. *Information operations* mainly refers to military operations, although other governmental agencies use them as well. The term relates to integrating the capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations, and psychological operations to achieve political goals against an adversary.<sup>46</sup> Information operations aim to coordinate and integrate information efforts mainly at the level of the defence sector, not the whole government.<sup>47</sup>

I use the concepts of *grand strategy* and *balancing strategies*, and their connection to *strategic communications* as understood in the theoretical framework of *offensive realism* to explore the balancing strategies Russia and China have employed in their bilateral relations with Venezuela, and whether strategic communications fit coherently into those strategies. Although this is not a theoretical discussion, it may provide some insight into how actions in the information sphere may connect to balancing strategies. I base my argument on the assumption that to better understand nuanced balancing behaviour one must consider not only military, economic, and diplomatic means, but also efforts in the information environment. As Gray puts it, the character of warfare may change, but never its nature.<sup>48</sup>

### Venezuela: counter-hegemonic foreign policy and the re-emergence of great power politics in Latin America

Venezuela's large oil reserves and strategic position have always made it an interesting asset for great powers. The country has so many natural resources that it is a founding member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting

43 'Public diplomacy—what it is and is not'. [Accessed 3 April 2019].

44 Nancy Snow, 'Rethinking Public Diplomacy' in *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* (Routledge, 2008), p. 3–11; Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* (PublicAffairs, 2009).

45 C. Paul, *Strategic Communication*, p. 41.

46 Definition based on the US Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 'DoD Dictionary for Military and Associated Terms' (US Department of Defense, April 2019).

47 Arturo Munoz, *US Military Information Operations in Afghanistan: Effectiveness of Psychological Operations 2001–2010* (RAND Corporation, 2012), p. 10.

48 Colin Gray, 'Clausewitz Rules, OK? The Future Is the Past: With GPS', *Review of International Studies* Vol. 25 (1999): 161–82.

Countries (OPEC) and relies greatly on its state-owned oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.* (PDVSA). Yet since the second half of the twentieth century, it has been a close US ally in Latin America, an important oil supplier, and a significant regional outpost for the US. Unlike its neighbours in South America, Venezuela has enjoyed one of the most stable democracies in the region and was a great defender of American liberal values in Latin America from the establishment of the *Punto Fijo* pact in 1958<sup>49</sup> until the early 2000s. The US has played a significant, although controversial, role in Venezuelan governments and foreign policies over time.

Thus, foreign powers' interests in the country are deeply connected with recent changes in US-Venezuela bilateral relations, which created an opportunity for disrupting the status quo of the balance of power in the Americas. When Hugo Chávez came to power in 1998, bilateral relations with the US became subject to realignment. In the years that followed, Chávez decided to push through constitutional reform, direct nationalist and non-liberal economic policies, and a non-Western approach to participative democracy.<sup>50</sup> However, it was not until 2002, following a coup attempt to oust Chávez and replace him with Pedro Carmona, president of *Fedecamaras* business federation, that the US and Venezuela began to drift apart. Washington's recognition of Carmona as the legitimate president significantly affected bilateral relations. After Chávez returned to power and the 'Group of Friends of the Organization of the American States (OAS) Secretary General'<sup>51</sup> supported negotiations between the opposition and the government, Venezuela's new government increased its anti-American rhetoric, accused the US of interventionism, and appealed to resentment against the US domestically.

The US used this rivalry politically to push tougher anti-terrorism, narcotics, and guerrilla policies in Latin American countries in the context of the 'global war on terror', particularly in Colombia, and to pressure Venezuela for democratic change in its national politics. An important moment for this policy occurred in 2006. The US Secretary of State declared an arms embargo against Venezuela, allegedly for not cooperating fully with anti-terrorism efforts pursuant to Section

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49 *Punto Fijo* pact was a series of political and economic pacts among political elites that assured Venezuelan democratisation in 1958 and the maintenance of its democracy in the twentieth century. David J. Myers, 'The Normalization of Punto Fijo Democracy' in *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 11–13.

50 Carlos A. Romero et al., 'From Chávez to Maduro: Continuity and Change in Venezuelan Foreign Policy', *Contexto Internacional* 38, No 1 (June 2016): 171–74.

51 Brazil, the US, Chile, Mexico, Spain, and Portugal.

40A of the Arms Exports Control Act (AECA). Later, in 2008, the US Treasury Department imposed further sanctions against two Venezuelan nationals for their financial connections to terrorist groups.<sup>52</sup>

This was when extra-regional powers saw an opportunity to develop closer relations with the country, and the Chavist regime opted to develop an increasingly counter-hegemonic foreign policy. At this moment, Venezuela used the rise in petroleum prices to push forward a policy of greater influence in the Caribbean and to deepen ties with Cuba in an attempt to create a counter-hegemonic regionalism under the *Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas* (ALBA),<sup>53</sup> and provide oil to several countries through soft loans under the *Petrocaribe* agreement.<sup>54</sup> These efforts aimed to gain the support of smaller countries in the region and allies among international organisations, such as the OAS and the United Nations, thus soft balancing US influence in the area.<sup>55</sup>

Since the early 2010s, political polarisation has risen dramatically in Venezuela. After Chávez's death in 2013 and the rise of Vice-President Nicolás Maduro in the following presidential election, the country deteriorated politically and economically. In 2015, Venezuela held legislative elections. The opposition won the majority of seats in the National Assembly and yet the Supreme Court blocked several opposition legislators from taking office. Still under the Obama administration, the US was already changing its position towards the country, approving an Executive Order that imposed sanctions on persons<sup>56</sup> responsible for the erosion of human rights guarantees, the persecution of political opponents, the curtailment of press freedoms, the use of violence and human rights violations and abuses in response to anti-government protests, the arbitrary arrest and detention of anti-government protestors, and corruption.<sup>57</sup> The US, however, did not pressure Venezuela unduly as it was pursuing an agenda with Cuba, a close ally of Venezuela.

52 Clare Ribando Seelke et al., 'Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations', Congressional Research Service, Updated 21 January 2019, p. 34.

53 Established in 2006, it is composed of Antigua & Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Grenada, Nicaragua, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Venezuela.

54 Established in 2004, *Petrocaribe* involved Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Belize, Guiana, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Haiti, and Venezuela. Asa K. Cusack, *Venezuela, ALBA, and the Limits of Postneoliberal Regionalism in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Springer, 2018), p. 153–90.

55 Javier Corrales, Carlos A. Romero, and Carlos A. Romero, *U.S.-Venezuela Relations since the 1990s: Coping with Midlevel Security Threats* (Routledge, 2012), p. 15–62.

56 For more on the first round of sanctions, see: Javier Corrales and Carlos A. Romero, 'U.S.-Venezuelan Relations after Hugo Chávez' in Jorge I. Domínguez and Rafael Fernández de Castro (eds) *Contemporary U.S.-Latin American Relations: Cooperation Or Conflict in the 21st Century?* (Routledge, 2016), p. 213–35.

57 Mark P. Sullivan, 'Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions', Congressional Research Service, Updated 8 May 2019.

Two years later, in 2017, Maduro called for National Constituent Assembly elections and, as a result, the new pro-government National Assembly declared itself the official holder of legislative power in the country, banning the opposition from power and thus reducing the legitimacy of the Assembly. This movement was consistent with Trump's foreign policy to increase pressure on Cuba and Venezuela and counter extra-regional influence in the Americas.<sup>58</sup> The US even invoked the Monroe Doctrine and consistently declared that 'all options are on the table', including military intervention in Venezuela,<sup>59</sup> then gradually imposed a number of economic sanctions against the country.<sup>60</sup>

At this point, international pressure to find a solution increased significantly, but there was no consensus among the great powers as Russia and China rejected the West's approach to the problem. Latin America also faced political division, since it failed to reach consensus in such regional institutions as the OAS and the Union of South American States (UNASUR).<sup>61</sup> In 2017, twelve countries came together to pressure the Venezuelan regime for a peaceful exit from the crisis through an ad hoc organisation called the Lima Group.<sup>62</sup> These states did not recognise the legitimacy of the Constituent Assembly, condemned human rights violations in Venezuela, offered humanitarian assistance, and supported regime change.<sup>63</sup>

The crisis deepened further after the results of the presidential election in late 2018. The opposition boycotted the election and Maduro won amid allegations of fraud and manipulation. In early 2019, the president of the National Assembly, opposition leader Juan Guaidó, declared himself the legitimate president while alleging the election had been fraudulent. More than 50 countries recognised Guaidó as the legitimate interim president and increased pressure on the

58 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America' (The White House, December 2017), p. 51.

59 'Donald Trump Says Military Option for Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro on the Table', Deutsche Welle, 12 August 2017.

60 Mark Weisbrot and Jeffrey Sachs, 'Economic Sanctions as Collective Punishment: The Case of Venezuela', CEPR Report (Washington: Center for Economic and Policy Research, April, 2019).

61 Oliver Stuenkel, 'How South America Ceded the Field in Venezuela', 31 January 2019.

62 Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru; 'Joint statement on the second meeting of the Lima Group on the situation in Venezuela—New York, 20 September 2017'.

63 Elizabeth Melimopoulos, 'Venezuela: A simple guide to understanding the current crisis', *Al Jazeera*, 2 February 2019.

Maduro regime.<sup>64</sup> Since then, growing domestic polarisation, a refugee crisis, a deteriorating economy, the regional political divide, and great power gridlock with China and Russia on one side and the US and European powers on the other, have made it difficult to resolve the Venezuelan crisis.

### **China-Venezuela relations and strategic communications: traits of a soft balancing strategy**

Offensive realism theory suggests that a rising power will aim towards regional hegemony and eventually try to check potential threatening great powers through balancing strategies. If this formulation is correct, China's grand strategy would intend first to achieve hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region to counter regional competitors, and then aim to check the US and other great powers offshore. This is consistent with China's grand strategy shift in the 1990s. Since then, the country has tried to promote the image of itself as a rising power with benign intentions while creating mechanisms to assure its regional hegemony through new institutions, partnerships, and support for its energy policy. During this period, China promoted a strategic partnership policy, engaging with its neighbours and with states in other regions to develop a new cooperative, regional multilateralism through organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).<sup>65</sup>

As the country expanded economically so did its grand strategy. From 2007–08, China initiated a global campaign to extend the benefits of its economic expansion and gain political influence beyond East Asia.<sup>66</sup> As a result, Chinese grand strategy has been focusing its efforts on building a multi-polar world in which China holds a special place. Part of this agenda entails creating opportunities abroad—particularly in developing countries—to benefit both host country and Chinese entrepreneurs. Such countries become trade partners, providing resources for China's development strategy, mainly by securing

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<sup>64</sup> Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, the Bahamas, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Montenegro, Morocco, the Netherlands, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

<sup>65</sup> According to Zhongping and Jing, China has a loose policy of strategic partnerships. It did emerge as an important resource for engaging new partners. It does not necessarily reflect the country's closest friends over time.

<sup>66</sup> Feng Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 185.

Chinese access to natural and energy assets, thus reinforcing its position as a rising global power.

China's grand strategy is not openly aggressive towards the US, although it still adopts balancing strategies adapted to different regions. Globally, it has adopted a soft balancing strategy based on an interest to reform current international organisations and to build a parallel world order that boosts China's strategic autonomy, reducing its dependency on Western-led institutions.<sup>67</sup> Among these parallel efforts are: in finance, the Asian Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), the BRICS<sup>68</sup> New Development Bank (NDB), and the BRICS Contingency Reserve Agreement (CRA); in security, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA); and in infrastructure, the One Road, One Belt (OBOR) initiative, the Nicaragua Canal, and the Trans-Amazonian Railway.<sup>69</sup>

In the Indo-Pacific region, however, the characteristics of a more traditional balancing strategy have gradually appeared, such as Chinese military build-up and concerns over US 'hegemonism, power politics and neo-interventionism'.<sup>70</sup> The US 'pivot to Asia', Japan's new openness to acquiring military potential, sovereignty disputes with several neighbouring countries in the South China Sea, and the goal of reunification with Taiwan are some of the issues related to China's regional hegemony interests. These concerns were expressed in China's 2008 Defence White Paper<sup>71</sup> and in its 2015 Military Strategy,<sup>72</sup> becoming more assertive over time. Thus, China is gradually presenting itself as more willing to use military force in support of its national interests abroad, for example, safeguarding the country's security interests in new domains (including the cyber and informational domains), protecting its interests overseas, and reunifying with Taiwan.<sup>73</sup>

Both China's Indo-Pacific and global strategies have a key strategic communications component. The more global China's interests become, the more its communications strategy seems to follow. Since 2012, for example, the country developed political narratives about 'the Chinese Dream' and 'national rejuvenation', presenting a political myth to both domestic and international

67 Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order* (Wiley & Sons, 2017), p. 120–21.

68 An international coalition comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

69 Stuenkel, *Post-Western World*, p. 122–23.

70 China, 'China's Military Strategy 2015' (Chinese Government, 2015), p. 4.

71 China, 'China's National Defense in 2008' (Chinese Government, 2008).

72 China, 'China's Military Strategy 2015', p. 5.

73 Ibid., p. 9.



audiences to justify China's rise as a prosperous and powerful nation.<sup>74</sup> The myth lays out a multi-layered policy agenda in which strategic communications plays a major role, both domestically and globally. It focuses on multiple objectives, such as (1) raising the per capita income of its citizens, (2) strengthening social welfare to maintain internal stability, (3) projecting culture to promote the country's values, and (4) improving environmental conditions, all ensuring the continuity of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>75</sup> However, changing the international community's perception of China to avoid the formation of balancing coalitions in reaction to its new expansion is at least as important as achieving great power status.

Since its grand strategy shift of 2007–08 China has increasingly made inroads into other regions to fulfil its strategic intents. Latin America and the Caribbean now hold a special place in this effort as the region is where the US most directly exerts hegemony. Thus, Chinese engagement with these regions aims to ensure access to abundant natural resources and markets, to obtain support for its foreign policy objectives (the one China policy), to reshape the region's perception of Chinese hegemony as benign, and to obtain geopolitical gains in Washington's traditional sphere of influence through diplomatic, economic, and cultural means.<sup>76</sup> In the diplomatic and economic spheres, China has been boosting bilateral relations, creating joint funds with countries, and aiming towards regional institutions where the US is absent. In 2014, it supported a joint forum with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the China-CELAC Forum, aiming to deepen relations with these countries. China has chosen to move away from a traditional hard balancing strategy and adopt a soft strategy. This is consistent with the thesis that China's goals are not only economic but also geopolitical.<sup>77</sup>

Chinese-Venezuelan bilateral relations are thus part of this soft strategy towards Latin America, as can be seen in official documents in 2008<sup>78</sup> and 2016.<sup>79</sup> Chinese attitudes towards Venezuela evolved from mere diplomatic, economic,

74 Lingzi Zhong and Juyan Zhang, 'Political Myth as Strategic Communication: Analysis of Chinese Dream's Rhetoric and English News Media's Interpretation', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* Vol. 10, № 1 (1 January 2016): 56–57.

75 Timothy R. Heath, Kristen Gunness, and Cortez A. III Cooper, 'The PLA and China's Rejuvenation', Product Page, 2016.

76 Katherine Koleski and Alec Blivas, 'China's Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean', *U.S.-China Economic and Security Commission*, 17 October 2018, p. 4.

77 R. Evan Ellis, 'China's Growing Relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean', *Air & Space Power Journal* (2015): 6.

78 China, 'China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean' (Chinese Government, 2008).

79 China, 'China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean' (Chinese Government, 2016).

cultural, and military efforts to clearly separating China's position from that of the US. Venezuelan-Chinese relations grew closer as Hugo Chávez rose to power and adopted an increasingly anti-US political discourse after the coup attempt against him in 2002. Over the years, this has proven mutually beneficial: the Chavist regime receives support for its goal of retaining power, and China obtains primary resources, mainly oil, exports products with high added value, and gradually gains geopolitical leverage in an important region.<sup>80</sup>

Between 2007 and 2018, Venezuela became China's most important partner in Latin America, where it made major diplomatic, economic, and military efforts. On the economic side, China has made several infrastructure investments in Venezuela, especially in oil extraction, automobile manufacturing, and construction. One of the main pillars of this relationship was bank loans. Venezuela was China's number one borrower in Latin America, accounting for approximately \$67 billion in Chinese lending between 2005 and 2018, far ahead of Brazil, in second place with \$27 billion.<sup>81</sup> These loans had no macroeconomic conditions attached and were commodity-guaranteed to collateralise China's banking policy; with each new loan, the Venezuelan government increased its oil supply commitments.<sup>82</sup> Although Chinese banks have recently been more cautious towards Venezuela, Beijing still supports the government politically, and continues to renegotiate repayment of its loans over the long term.

On the military side, since the US arms embargo in 2006, China has grown to be the second most important arms supplier to Venezuela, increasing both the complexity and the volume of defence material exported. From 1998 to 2018, Venezuela accounted for 88.7% of Chinese arms exports to Latin America; these exports occurred mainly from 2006 to 2016.<sup>83</sup> The two countries strengthened diplomatic ties. Venezuela recognised China as a market economy in 2004 and the countries formed a 'strategic alliance' in 2006, while China considered elevating the country to 'comprehensive strategic partnership' status in 2014.

Like other Chinese activities in Latin America, China-Venezuela relations seem to fit into the category of a soft balancing strategy, albeit with greater engagement

80 Yanran Xu, *China's Strategic Partnerships in Latin America: Case Studies of China's Oil Diplomacy in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela, 1991–2015* (Lexington Books, 2016), p. 63–64.

81 Margaret Myers and Kevin Gallagher, 'Cautious Capital: Chinese Development Finance in LAC, 2018' (The Dialogue, February 2019), p. 3.

82 Stephen B. Kaplan and Michael Penfold, 'China-Venezuela Economic Relations: Hedging Venezuelan Bets with Chinese Characteristics' (Wilson Center. Latin American Program. Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, February 2019), p. 18.

83 Data from SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

than with the rest of the region. China also holds a tacit security understanding with Venezuela supported by a limited arms build-up, substantial foreign (economic and military) aid, and diplomatic support. Although these are the traits of a loose alliance, China's strategy is still that of a (soft) offshore balancer because the country does not engage in direct confrontation with the US, but rather aims to affect the Latin American balance of power in a gradual and indirect manner.

This is demonstrated by China's position as the Venezuelan crisis deepened. China's diplomatic manifestations demonstrated that strategic communications followed a soft balancing strategy. Discourses, interviews, and position statements in international organisations all reinforced China's indirect goal of presenting itself more as a veto player than as a hard balancer. Indirect foreign aid was a more important strategic activity than direct military involvement or consistent alliance building. Since early 2019, for instance, the Chinese government consistently refused to recognise Juan Guaidó's claim to the presidency and defended a non-interventionist solution, opposing economic sanctions. According to Beijing, 'history has taught us that external interference or sanctions, instead of helping solve problems, can only complicate matters'.<sup>84</sup>

Beijing also spread this message by opposing US-led coalitions in international organisations as expected from a soft balancer. China opposed attempts to pass Security Council resolutions against Venezuela, blocked Juan Guaidó's nomination to the board of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB),<sup>85</sup> and rejected the actions of the Lima Group, which aimed to oust Maduro. The Chinese foreign spokesperson consistently maintained that 'Venezuela's affairs should be resolved by the Venezuelan people under the framework of its Constitution and laws and through peaceful dialogue and political means'.<sup>86</sup> Another example of strategic communications being used as part of a soft balancing strategy was the case of a humanitarian aid delivery supported by the US and the Lima Group in late February 2019. China responded by stating that the US was using 'the so-called humanitarian aid to serve political ends and stir up instability and even turmoil',<sup>87</sup> and then reduced the pressure on the Maduro regime by offering its own share of humanitarian aid.<sup>88</sup>

84 China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on January 29, 2019'.

85 James Politi, 'IDB Scraps Annual Meeting after China Excludes Venezuela', *Financial Times*, 23 March 2019.

86 China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Remarks on the Inaugural Conference of the International Contact Group on Venezuela', 8 February 2019.

87 China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Remarks on the Situation in Venezuela', 25 February 2019.

88 CGTN, 'China Provides 65 Tons of Medical Supplies for Venezuela', 30 March 2019.

These examples show that Chinese strategic communications have been consistent with changes in China's grand strategy and its balancing strategies in Latin America and Venezuela; strategic communications is not employed aggressively but rather preventively, and as a loose alliance, combined with an understanding regarding mutual security. These positions become even clearer when compared to Russian strategies regarding the same issues.

### **Russia-Venezuela relations and strategic communications: traits of a hard balancing strategy**

Russian strategic concerns differ substantially from those of China. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has been gradually losing influence in Eurasia, in contrast to China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region. This is the result of the defeat of Serbia (supported by Russia) and the fall of Milošević in the Kosovo War, the NATO military intervention in Yugoslavia (1999–2001),<sup>89</sup> the colour revolutions in Eastern Europe, and NATO's military transformation process<sup>90</sup> and expansion eastward, embracing several former Warsaw Pact members<sup>91</sup> (a process widely debated in the scholarly literature).<sup>92</sup>

This is a textbook case of offensive realism. Theory proposes that states first seek regional hegemony in order to then be able to check aggressors in other regions. Thus, as the US and European great powers expanded eastward, Russia had four possible strategies: balancing, buck-passing, bandwagoning, or appeasement. Since there was no other great power to 'pass the buck' to, and bandwagoning and appeasement are strategies to avoid because they signal subordination, balancing was Russia's only option for enhancing its security. Moscow began to move forward with this strategy in the early 2000s, when Vladimir Putin came to power. Like China, Russia adopted a grand strategy to develop a multi-polar world and protect its borders from wars and territorial claims.<sup>93</sup> This process gained momentum following the Russo-Georgian war

89 Augusto W. M. Teixeira Júnior, 'Postura Estratégica da Rússia e Uso da Força no Século XXI', *Centro de Estudos Estratégicos do Exército: Análise Estratégica* 10, No. 4 (14 November 2018): 7.

90 This refers to reform focused on new operational concepts, organisational reforms, and informational capabilities. Theo Farrell, Terriff Terry, and Osinga Frans, *A Transformation Gap?: American Innovations and European Military Change* (Stanford University Press, 2010).

91 Since the end of the Cold War the following countries have become NATO members: the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland (1999), Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia (2004), Albania and Croatia (2009), Montenegro (2017).

92 Russia alleges that the US broke a no-NATO enlargement pledge sealed during the German reunification negotiations. Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, 'Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion', *International Security* 40, No 4 (April 1, 2016): 7–44; Mark Kramer, 'The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia', *The Washington Quarterly* 32, No 2 (April, 2009): 39–61.

93 The Russian Federation, 'Russian National Security Concept' (Russia, 2000).

in 2008, when the country announced its goals of ‘transforming the Russian Federation into a world power’ and of ‘active participation in the development of the multipolar model of the international system’ while achieving ‘strategic deterrence’ through a range of political, diplomatic, military, economic, and informational measures.<sup>94</sup>

In contrast to China, Russia was facing greater security threats and, consequently, reacted in a tougher manner. Russia perceived itself as not fully able to realise its national interest because of the West’s stance on the European integration process,<sup>95</sup> and feared its borders might be threatened by military aggression.<sup>96</sup> Its main concerns were aggression from a state or group of states (the US and NATO), and from separatist groups (such as the Chechen separatists) or separatists supported by other states. Thus, it was imperative for Russia to maintain strategic parity with NATO and to ensure a credible deterrence capability. To do this, it invested in transforming its armed forces into high mobility, high speed units with precision-guided munitions, and adopted tactics of disorganising, confusing, and affecting enemies’ will to fight instead of eliminating them.<sup>97</sup>

These processes are synonymous with traditional military build-up and characteristic of hard balancing strategies in a dispute over regional hegemony and geopolitical limits (Eurasia for Russia, and an extended Europe for NATO and the European Union). Strategic communications was comprehensively integrated into the kind of balancing strategy the Kremlin chose to employ. Russia’s, more aggressive, military posture has also resulted in more offensive strategic communications—weaponising the information sphere for military intent and opposing narratives from the West. Although information and psychological operations had been central to Soviet geopolitical thinking,<sup>98</sup> their role diminished in the 1990s, only to be reintroduced into military schools, warfare techniques, and Russia’s grand strategy under Putin’s administrations.

94 The Russian Federation, ‘Russia’s National Security Strategy to 2020’ (The Russian Federation, 19 May 2009), Sections 21, 24, and 26.

95 Russia had the following documents on this period: National Security Strategy (2000, 2009, and 2015), Military Doctrine (2010, 2014), Foreign Policy Concepts (2013, 2016), Information Security Doctrine (2000, 2016).

96 Katri Pynnöniemi, ‘Russia’s National Security Strategy: Analysis of Conceptual Evolution’, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31, № 2 (3 April 2018): 249.

97 Andrey Sushentsov, ‘The Russian Response to the RMA: Military Strategy towards Modern Security Threats’, in *Reassessing the Revolution in Military Affairs: Transformation, Evolution and Lessons Learnt* (Springer, 2015), 112–13.

98 Jolanta Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study* (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, 2014).

This was done to balance a new generation of Western military concepts,<sup>99</sup> and to counter what Russia perceived as the spread of disinformation surrounding its foreign and domestic policies.<sup>100</sup>

From 2008, after information operations and strategic communications failed to create favourable conditions for its military operations, Russia changed the way in which it operated in the information sphere. The outcome of the Russo-Georgian war triggered military reforms that introduced an 'asymmetric approach' into Russia's official position,<sup>101</sup> what Western analysts called hybrid warfare.<sup>102</sup> In other words, the current Russian hard balancing strategy towards NATO combines both military and non-military approaches, such as the use of informational and cyber measures, to achieve its political goals.

This revised approach was put into practice during Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and was central to Russia's ensuing grand strategy documents. In its 2015 National Security Strategy, the Kremlin declared the need for a hard balancing strategy by arguing that the 'role of force as a factor in international relations is not declining'<sup>103</sup> and restated the need to develop new forms of power in its Foreign Policy concept of 2016:

Alongside military might, other important factors allowing States to influence international politics are taking centre stage, including economic, legal, technological and IT capabilities. Using these capabilities to pursue geopolitical interests is detrimental to efforts to find ways to settle disputes and resolve the existing international issues by peaceful means on the basis of the norms of international law.<sup>104</sup>

99 According to Darczewska, Russia taught the subject 'special propaganda' in the Military Institute for Foreign Languages from 1942 to 1990 when it was removed from the curriculum. In the early 2000s, the country reintroduced it after the reorganisation of the institute. Jolanta Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study* (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, 2014), p. 7–9.

100 The Russian Federation, 'Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation', 9 September 2000.

101 From the Russian perspective, an asymmetric approach employs 'interrelated political, military, military-technical, diplomatic, economic, informational, and other measures' to achieve strategic deterrence and avoid military conflict. Pynnöniemi, 'Russia's National Security Strategy', p. 252–53.

102 Sushentsov criticises the Western focus on Crimea on the combination of non-military methods in achieving political and strategic goals since Russia had imitated Western approaches in Europe, at the Colour Revolutions in the post-Soviet sphere, and in the Middle East. Sushentsov, 'The Russian Response to the RMA: Military Strategy towards Modern Security Threats', p. 124.

103 The Russian Federation, 'Russian National Security Strategy', 31 December 2015.

104 The Russian Federation, 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation', 5 December 2016.

In other words, a more aggressive use of the informational sphere accompanied the construction of a hard balancing strategy from a Russia increasingly prone to respond decisively to security threats.

As it adopted this more substantially hard balancing foreign policy strategy towards the US and its NATO allies in the Eurasian space, Russia also began to show an interest in regaining its influence in the Baltic states and in other territories offshore. Disrupting the balance of power in countries where the US and NATO hold interests was a means of diverting Western efforts and of reinforcing Russia's goal of achieving greater influence in Eurasia. Thus, Russia adopted a more assertive relationship with countries that could help advance its grand strategic goals in areas such as the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, especially with those states that had anti-US foreign policies.<sup>105</sup> Russian engagement in Latin America was not as deep as that of the Chinese, and was concentrated mainly on: (1) allies of the former Soviet Union, such as Cuba and Nicaragua; (2) states that did not play a major role in the Soviet era but were ready to assume political risk by countering US influence in Latin America, such as Venezuela and, to a lesser degree, Ecuador and Bolivia (these states share an anti-US foreign policy discourse and aim to soft-balance the US presence in their region); (3) countries neither opposed to the US nor allied with Russia but of great commercial interest, such as Brazil and Mexico.<sup>106</sup>

Venezuela, with its anti-American foreign policy discourse, was of special interest as a potential centre for Russia's balancing strategy in Latin America, where the US enjoys regional hegemony. Applying pressure there could lead to gains in the European theatre, a movement Russia would embrace from 2006 onwards by tightening its relations with Venezuela. When the US imposed an arms embargo on Caracas forcing it to acquire elsewhere spare parts for its F-16 fighter aircrafts, Russia stepped in to become Venezuela's major arms supplier. Over time, it exported a variety of military equipment to Venezuela, including SAM systems, mortars, tanks, anti-tank missiles, missile systems, and fighter aircraft.<sup>107</sup> From 1998, when Chávez first came to power, to 2018, Venezuelan imports accounted for 76.5% of all Russian arms exports to Latin America;

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105 Paul Stronski and Richard Sokolsky, 'The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 2017, pp. 5–6.

106 R. Evan Ellis, 'The New Russian Engagement with Latin America: Strategic Position, Commerce, and Dreams of the Past', 2015, p. 10.

107 SIPRI Arms Transfer Database.

an impressive number compared to the second and third largest arms importers in the region, Peru and Mexico, with 8.1% and 4.1%, respectively.<sup>108</sup>

Venezuela has also demonstrated its willingness to support Russia's grand strategy interests on several occasions: the Chavist regime recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, defending Russia's position against the Western powers. Venezuela also allowed Russian military naval and aerial manoeuvres in its territory on several occasions, a tactic Russia has used to pressure the US and divert attention during times of crisis and growing pressures on it in the European theatre. In 2008, after the war with Georgia, Russia sent warships and two *Tupolev Tu-160* strategic bombers (aircraft capable of transporting nuclear devices) to Venezuelan territory as part of its military exercises.<sup>109</sup> In the same year, Venezuela became the first Latin American country (followed by Cuba and Nicaragua) to receive a Russian flotilla led by the nuclear-powered cruiser Peter the Great, for naval exercises.<sup>110</sup> In 2009, Russia was the only extra-regional country to participate in the annual meeting of Chávez's regional project, ALBA, seeking support for independence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In 2014, following the Crimean war, Russia sent bombers for a second time, and then a third time in late 2018 when the US imposed sanctions on Venezuela again.<sup>111</sup> In March 2019, following increasing international pressure on the Maduro regime, Russia sent a military cargo plane and a smaller jet to Venezuela carrying military specialists who, according to the Kremlin, were linked to the discussion of cooperation in the military-technical sphere.<sup>112</sup> The country thus has been using its military assets to demonstrate support to Venezuela.

These events show that Russia has successfully adopted a strategy of offshore balancing in Latin America, using the traditional hard balancing strategy. Although Russia and Venezuela have not made a formal alliance, offensive realism and alliance theory suggest they have formed a *de facto* alliance. Their mutual interest in balancing US power in the Americas to gain security and influence led them to make informal mutual security commitments and, in the case of Russia, to mobilise military assets to communicate support. Other

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108 Ibid.

109 Mark Tran and agencies, 'Russia Sends Warplanes on Venezuela Training Mission', *The Guardian*, 10 September 2008.

110 BBC News, 'Russian Navy Sails to Venezuela', 22 September 2008.

111 BBC News, 'Spat over Russian Bombers in Venezuela', 11 December 2018, Latin America & Caribbean.

112 Tom Balmforth and Maxim Rodionov, 'Russia Says It Sent "Specialists" to Venezuela, Rebuffs Trump', *Reuters*, 28 March 2019.



factors indicating an alliance are also present. For instance, thanks to Russia's investments in the oil sector, Venezuela has received military and economic aid. For years, the commercial losses Russian oil and gas companies suffered outweighed their gains. In the early 2010s, *Lukoil* and *Gazprom* expressed their desire to leave Venezuela. Nevertheless, the Russian government chose to reinforce its economic commitment to the country and to concentrate efforts on the 50% state-owned oil company, *Rosneft*, which invested a net of 17 billion US\$ in Venezuela from 2006 to 2018.<sup>113</sup> Thus, in addition to providing arms in support of the informal alliance, Russia has also been using its state-owned oil companies to provide direct economic aid to the Venezuelan government, reinforcing its offshore balancing strategy through this extra-regional outpost.

Russian mobilisation of military assets to alleviate US pressure on Venezuela and to use it as an outpost to divert tensions against Russia in Europe are already important evidence of a hard-balancing position. Other evidence of an alliance, indicating more aggressive behaviour, is *penetration*. Defined as 'the covert or indirect manipulation of a state's political system',<sup>114</sup> this intervenient factor can reinforce the effectiveness of alliances in various ways, such as lobbying and foreign propaganda. If the hypothesis that strategic communications is a resource for a Russian hard balancing strategy in Venezuela stands correct, then Russia should also be engaging in more aggressive informational actions there, as it does in Europe.

The expansion of the Moscow-based and government-supported media company RT (formerly *Russia Today*) on YouTube is striking evidence of Russia's penetration into Venezuela. RT operates its original English-language internet news channel and seven other channels targeting different audiences with different content—*RT America*, *RT UK*, *RT France*, *RT Español*, *RT на русском*, *RT Deutsch*, *RT Chinese*, and *RT Arabic*. A recent study has concluded that RT mixes professional journalism with support for Russia's interests while disseminating negative coverage of the West, undermining and portraying as hypocritical the very values the Western powers, especially the US, NATO, and the European Union, are built upon.<sup>115</sup> RT's Spanish channel, intended for a Latin American audience, has one of the fastest growing subscriber bases (from approximately

113 Vladimir Rouvinski, 'Venezuela: A Dead End for Russia?', *The Moscow Times*, 25 January 2019.

114 Walt, 'Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power', p. 30.

115 Elizabeth Nelson, Robert Orttung, and Anthony Livshen, 'Measuring RT's Impact on YouTube', *Russian Analytical Digest*, № 177 (December 2015): 8.

348,000 in 2015 to 2.3 million in 2019).<sup>116</sup> Both Venezuela and Russia have been using the digital space to advance their cooperation agendas. In early 2015, the Venezuelan state-owned media company *TeleSUR* joined RT in a joint venture to present international news about Russia and Venezuela.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, Russia's penetration into Venezuela can also be seen in the fact that relations between the two countries are widely present in the political system, and media coverage of this relationship has grown over time. For example, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been increasingly mentioning Venezuela in statements and interviews. The Ministry website registered 58 mentions from 2009 to 2018 compared with only 10 from 2000 to 2008.<sup>118</sup>

On the diplomatic side, the hard balancing strategy and the alliance with Venezuela affected Russia's positions on the issue, and Russian use of strategic communications to reinforce them. Russia has consistently positioned itself against military intervention, and against the positions of the US and the Lima Group towards Venezuela. Ever since Juan Guaidó declared himself acting president, Russia has accused the US of 'clearly trying to apply a tried and tested regime change scenario in Venezuela' and has rejected foreign interference there.<sup>119</sup> This echoes the position adopted after the US, Brazil, and the Lima Group attempted to provide humanitarian aid. At the time, Brazil and the US delivered an aid truck convoy to the Brazilian border and faced a blockade by Maduro's security forces; only some of the foreign aid made it through to Venezuelan territory.<sup>120</sup> Responding to these movements, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs adopted a tougher stance in its official statements, opposing aid and US sanctions. In early 2019, a Russian spokesperson compared the efforts to the American delivery of arms to the Contras disguised as aid in Nicaragua in 1986.<sup>121</sup> Russia then responded by sending its own humanitarian aid to Venezuela in late March 2019,<sup>122</sup> along with military experts.<sup>123</sup> These efforts aimed to

116 The 2015 issue is based on the Elizabeth Nelson, Robert Ortung and Anthony Livshen study, published in December 2015. The 2019 issue is based on a visit to the channel on 7 April 2019.

117 *Russia Today*, 'RT and Venezuela TeleSUR Journalists Unite to Provide Fresh Perspective on News', RT International, 30 March 2015.

118 In 2019, the website already registered 11 mentions to Venezuela. See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

119 The Russian Federation, 'Foreign Ministry Statement on the Developments in Venezuela', 4 April 2019.

120 Nicholas Casey, Albinson Linares, and Anatoly Kurmanaev, 'Some Aid From Brazil Pierces Venezuela's Blockade, but Deadly Violence Erupts', *New York Times*, 23 February 2019.

121 The Russian Federation, 'Statement by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova', 18 February 2019.

122 The Moscow Times, 'Venezuela Accepts Shipment of Russian Humanitarian Aid—Reports', *The Moscow Times*, 20 February 2019.

123 The Russian Federation, 'Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova Regarding US Policy towards Venezuela', 30 March 2019.

show up the contradictions of Washington's position, at the same time, provide ambiguous signs of Moscow's military willingness to support the Venezuelan regime, ensuring that Russia remains a key actor in Venezuela in the future.

Considering this evidence, one can argue that Russian strategic communications follow their balancing strategies as they reinforce the formation of an informal alliance, indicating hard balancing behaviour. Over the years, Russia emerged as an offshore balancer in Venezuela aiming to disrupt the balance of power in the Americas, to re-emerge as a great power, and to counter NATO efforts on its borders. Thus, Venezuela became an important new ally in achieving this end and evolved to become Russia's main outpost in Latin America. As Russian grand strategy resources grew to include informational capabilities in a more aggressive manner, so did its alliance with Venezuela. As a result, strategic communications became central to both Russia's balancing efforts in Europe and its offshore balancing strategy in Latin America.

## Conclusion

Great power politics is on the rise and gridlock in the Venezuelan crisis is a symptom of this new moment in international politics. In the current state of the world order, national power and grand strategy resources are based not only on traditional economic, military, and diplomatic dimensions, but include cyber and informational capabilities as primary resources. This article set out to analyse what kind of balancing strategies China and Russia have been employing in their bilateral relations with Venezuela, and how strategic communications and the information sphere speak to their strategies. I have observed how these two countries employ different offshore balancing strategies towards the US, albeit with a similar goal of changing the balance of power in the Americas.

For China, bilateral relations with Venezuela are part of a soft balancing strategy that aims to check the US in the Americas and support China's rise. China pursues soft, not hard balancing, because it aims to affect the balance of power in a gradual and indirect manner. Although the country has become more assertive in its positions since early 2019, it appears intent on communicating to the global community an image of a responsible and credible emerging great power, while rejecting external intervention. There is more of an informal and tacit security understanding with the Chavist regime, intended to advance Chinese balancing goals in Latin America, than an alliance. Strategic communications presents itself as an effort to shift Latin American and international public

opinion towards China's view, and simultaneously to counter the US position in the region. It forms, nonetheless, part of a larger toolkit for grand strategies, along with economic, military, and diplomatic relations.

Russia has also employed an offshore balancing strategy with the US in the Americas. The country has deliberately used its national resources to provide economic aid and military support, and to penetrate the Venezuelan regime, not to mention offering ambiguous signs about its willingness to use its military capabilities to maintain its position and support an ally against the US, while also seeking political leverage in Eastern Europe. Russia intends to weaken NATO allies' positions in its immediate neighbourhood, and to maintain geopolitical space for its growing stature through strategic communications that embrace ambiguous military signals, diplomatic messages, and social media efforts to change the narrative about its actions. Russia's relationship with *TeleSUR* and the *RT Español* YouTube channel are but a few examples of its engagement in the region. Overall, strategic communications is a key element in today's Russian toolkit in support of its grand strategic goals.

The findings of this article have two policy implications and one theoretical implication. First, it contributes to the understanding of the actors' interests in the Venezuelan crisis and shows that, even in the long term, states will have to deal with the opposing interests of China and Russia as offshore balancers with risks of miscalculation in the great power game. Second, it illustrates how even a region that is not traditionally involved in great power politics can be used as leverage for great power interests in the current context of rising competition. Finally, it has theoretical implications regarding how strategic communications might provide important insights to balancing strategies. According to this study, hard balancing strategies may result in a more aggressive effort, such as information campaigns and hybrid warfare, whereas soft balancing results in a more cautious communication position, trying to change narratives and perceptions. These conceptual relationships might prove fruitful for future research.

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# THE BEGINNING OF WARFARE ON THE INTERNET: ZAPATISTA STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

**Tássio Franchi**  
**Leonardo Perin Vichi**

## Abstract

This article discusses the development of the strategic communications of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the EZLN, between 1994 and 1996. During this period, the Zapatista movement transformed from a group focused on armed struggle into a social movement. The EZLN used rhetorical and communications strategies, not only to construct group identity but as a way to pressure the Mexican government into guaranteeing their rights as citizens and as an indigenous minority. The article also reflects on the discursive strategies employed by the group's main leader, Subcomandante Marcos, and on the Zapatistas' narratives and the structure of the communications they disseminated to their worldwide network of committees connected through the internet.

**Keywords**—*strategic communications, speech and power, Zapatistas, EZLN, guerilla*

## About the Authors

**Dr Tássio Franchi** is a Lecturer at the Brazilian Army Command and Staff College (ECEME). He holds a PhD in Sustainable Development, University of Brasília (UnB), and is the coordinator of the Frontier Borders and Emerging Threats Project.

**Dr Leonardo Perin Vichi** is an Associate Researcher at the Naval War School (EGN) with a PhD in Social History from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)/Freie Universität Berlin (FUB). He is the Coordinator of the line of defense in the Nucleus of Strategic Studies in Defense and Security of the Department of Physics of the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar).

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## Introduction

**Gabriel García Márquez:** Do you still have time to read in the middle of all this mess?

**Subcomandante Marcos:** Yes, because if not...what would we do? In the armies that came before us, soldiers took the time to clean their weapons and rally themselves. In this case, our weapons are our words, so we have to depend on our arsenal all the time.<sup>1</sup>

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation—EZLN—is a *guerrilla* group with indigenous roots. It emerged on 1 January 1994 in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Its primary aim was the preservation of land rights, constituted under Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution of 1910. Hence, it did not seek the overthrow of the government, nor even to change the political regime, a common ambition among Latin American revolutionary movements.

Five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1994, the members of the newly formed Zapatista Army of National Liberation came together to stage an armed insurrection against the Mexican state. This action had a great impact on national and international public opinion. However, early on in its operations the EZLN shifted from the classic strategy of ‘revolutionary focus’ (*foco*) by means of guerrilla warfare, popularised by Che Guevara, to one based on communication, using the internet as a vehicle for disseminating their demands. In doing so they were hugely successful in reaching beyond the geographical limits of the Lacandon Jungle in Chiapas, where they were based, by networking their ideas across the internet.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from ‘Gabriel García Márquez interviews Subcomandante Marcos’, *The Nation*, 2 July 2001.

**Gabriel García Márquez:** *¿Todavía, en medio de todos esos rollos, tiene tiempo para leer?* **Subcomandante Marcos:** *Sí porque si no... ¿qué hacemos? En los ejércitos de antes, el militar aprovechaba el tiempo para limpiar su arma y rebacerse de parque. En este caso, como nuestras armas son las palabras, tenemos que estar pendientes de nuestro arsenal a cada momento.*

This article analyses EZLN documents and communications, and the group's decision to focus on strategic communications instead of armed conflict in their early years.

When the novelist Jorge Castañeda wrote *La Utopía desarmada: Intrigas, dilemas y promesas de la izquierda en América Latina*<sup>2</sup>—using the same title as for his article of 23 April 1993 in the newspaper *El País*<sup>3</sup>—he did not suspect that he would soon see an armed rebellion waged by the EZLN in his own country. Nor that the Zapatista movement would prove wrong his prediction that post-Cold War leftist politics would no longer engage in armed combat. In the preface to the Brazilian edition, he would contradict himself, stating that he had been misunderstood at the time, that he had not denied the possibility of new armed conflicts, merely the idea of a new revolution. He would classify the EZLN as an armed reformist movement. Twenty-five years later the EZLN remains both operational and active in the media.<sup>4</sup>

Whether the EZLN was a revolutionary or reformist movement, its success was largely due not to armed struggle but to its strategic communications.<sup>5</sup> While its military power was inferior to that of the Mexican Federal Army, its early use of the internet in creating a communications network won a key advantage in an asymmetrical conflict that contested the physical, not the virtual, domain.

The architecture of EZLN strategic communications would be based on a system organised through networks. The first level of this network was formed by the EZLN's Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee. Historically, some ethnic Maya (Tzeltales, Tzotziles, Tojolabales, Choles) joined together to form the biggest group in Zapatista movement.<sup>6</sup> Other small ethnic groups were also represented in their ranks. Solano described the Lacandona Jungle as a complex ethnic space, with many different languages and native identities.<sup>7</sup> The second level was composed of numerous civil, local, regional, and international committees,

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2 In English the article was titled 'Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War'. In the Brazilian Portuguese edition it was 'Utopia Unarmed: Intrigues, Dilemmas, and Promises of the Left in Latin-America'.

3 Jorge Castañeda, 'La utopía desarmada', *El País*, 23 April 1993.

4 Alberto Nájjar, 'EZLN y Marcos: ¿cuál es el principal aporte del zapatismo a México a 25 años de su levantamiento armado?', [EZLN and Marcos: What have the Zapatistas contributed to Mexico 25 years after the uprising?], *BBC News Mundo*, 1 January 2019. México. [Accessed 14 April 2019].

5 Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture. The Rise of the Network Society*. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), Vol I, p. 82.

6 Neil Harvey, *La Rebelión de Chiapas: La lucha por la tierra y la democracia* [The Chiapas Rebellion: The struggle for land and democracy] (México: Ediciones Era, 1998).

7 Xochitl Leyva Solano, 'Lacandonia Babilonia' in Xochitl Leyva Solano and Gabriel Ascencio Franco, *Lacandonia al filo del agua* [Lacandonia on the Edge of the Water]. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), p. 95–103.

providing a concentrated communications channel for easy dissemination of texts produced by the Zapatistas.<sup>8</sup> This information infrastructure was generated by multiple communications networks of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. It represents not only the transformation of the Latin-American Left, departing from armed revolution to seek reform through dialogue, but also characterises the creation of communicative spaces directed at challenging power and mediating conflict.<sup>9</sup> The EZLN was established on 1 January 1994. In a quick operation that began at dawn, the EZLN occupied the *cabeceras municipales* [municipal seats] of Altamiro, Chamula, Chanal, Larrainzar, La Libertad, Las Margaridas, Ocosingo, Palenque, and Simojovel of Allende, as well as the former capital of Chiapas State, San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The Zapatistas seized a radio station from which they transmitted their demands and the reasons for the armed uprising.

The First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle [*I Declaração da Selva Lacandona*]<sup>10</sup> and The Mexican Alarm [*O Despertador Mexicano*],<sup>11</sup> the EZLN's first documents, rapidly circulated in the press along with several photos of armed indigenous people walking the streets of the occupied areas. Before the end of the week, pictures appeared in some of Mexico's leading journals showing encounters between the EZLN and the Mexican Federal Army—and summary executions.<sup>12</sup> The rebel army that had been in gestation for more than ten years in the interior of the Lacandón Jungle had come into being.

One characteristic of the EZLN was the ethnic appeal that permeated its rhetoric. Although the movement had tried over years to build a more pluralist and open discourse to win support from other sectors of Mexican society, its words and actions demanded legal rights for indigenous communities. The texts of the San Andrés Accords [*Los Acuerdos de San Andrés*]<sup>13</sup> addressing indigenous law and

8 Tássio Franchi, 'O Movimento Zapatista e a Constituição de Redes Intelectuais ao seu redor' [The Zapatista Movement and the Construction of the Intellectual Networks Around It], *Revista UNIVERSUM* № 18 (2003): 285–86.

9 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic narratives: communication power and the new world order*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), p. 209–10.

10 Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena del EZLN, (CCRI-CG del EZLN) 'I Declaração da Selva Lacandona' [First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle] 1 January 1994, *EZLN, Documentos y Comunicados* (México: Ediciones Era, 2000) Vol. I. p. 33–36; Subcomandante Marcos, 'I Declaração da Selva Lacandona', 1 January 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I.

11 Idem, *O Despertador Mexicano* [The Mexican Alarm], 1 December 1993, p. 36–48.

12 'Sublevación in Chiapas' [Rebellion in Chiapas], *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 2 January 1994. For bombing in the south of San Cristóbal: an investigation will be conducted to ascertain whether 5 rebels were executed; the guilty will be punished. In: 'Sublevación in Chiapas', *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 5 January 1994 in Pedro Henrique Ortiz Falco. *Z@patismo on-line* (São Paulo: PROLAN-USP, 1997), 2 Vols., p. 574–77.

13 'Acuerdos de San Andrés' [San Andrés Accords] in José Ramón Cossío Díaz et al., *Derechos y cultura indígena* [Indigenous rights and culture] (México: Miguel Angelo Parrúa, 1998). p. 294.

culture sought to change the relationship between the Mexican nation state and indigenous communities,<sup>14</sup> and to protect the latter from the globalisation process. This characteristic of celebrating indigenous culture and ethnicity, while asserting the fundamental difference between indigenous societies and modern society, positions the EZLN in a group of movements that resist neoliberal reforms in their countries through the construction and affirmation of an ethnic identity free of any separatist or revolutionary project.<sup>15</sup> The Zapatistas say: 'We do not want to separate ourselves from the Mexican nation, we want to be part of it, we want them to accept us as equals, as dignified beings, as human beings.'<sup>16</sup>

Miskimmon *et al.* argue that relations between actors do not occur in a vacuum but in spaces of encounter.<sup>17</sup> The San Andrés Accords, based on acceptance of identity and equal rights for the natives, exemplified the EZLN's use of communications strategies and indirectly generated a further form of inclusion for their communities and soldiers (most of whom were indigenous). In the early 1990s, the internet was not widely used to communicate across social groups. By adopting communications through worldwide computer networks, the Zapatistas acquired communicative autonomy and a way to present the immediacy of the plight of impoverished and uneducated Indians in the remote south of Mexico in social spheres hitherto inaccessible to them, namely, the Mexican intellectual and academic communities, and the political elites.

This innovation had an impact on Mexico's politics and economy, influencing the country's foreign relations, while at the same time preventing the use of large-scale repression by the Mexican government.<sup>18</sup> In their communication on 6 January 1994 the EZLN accused the Mexican Army of repression. Mexican President Carlos Salinas Gortari responded by ordering a cease-fire against the EZLN. From that moment, the Zapatistas began reporting the growing repression against the movement, which continued during the cease-fire.<sup>19</sup>

.....  
14 Note the tension: 'Context of the new relationship talks about the need for a State policy that must be developed by the Federal Government in the framework of State reform, and the need for society to be involved in the desire to banish the discriminatory mentality that is maintained towards the natives.' Cossio Díaz *et al.*, *Derechos y cultura indígena*, p. 51.

15 By revolutionary we mean a movement that seeks radical change in the institutions of power in the country. As the Zapatistas claim they do not intend to change the Mexican political regime, we understand them not to be revolutionaries in the strict sense of the term. See Saint-Pierre on revolutionary war as 'only that phase in which the historical process seems to engage all its forces looking for an institutional rupture'. Héctor Luis Saint-Pierre, *A política armada fundamento da guerra revolucionária* (São Paulo: Editora UNESP, 2000), p. 33–34.

16 Massimo di Felice and Cristóbal Muñoz, (org.) *A Revolução Invencível* [The Invincible Revolution] (São Paulo: Boitempo, 1998), p. 21.

17 Miskimmon *et al.*, *Strategic narratives*, p. 209.

18 Castells, *The Information Age*, Vol. II, p. 84.

19 CCRI-CG del EZLN, 'Alto al Fuego' [Stop the Fire], 23 February 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I, p. 81.



This article analyses the architecture of the discursive strategies of the Zapatistas. It examines how they created, implemented, and disseminated their strategic communications to advance their struggle to gain social and economic equality for indigenous communities in Chiapas in opposition to the influence of neoliberalism. The central figure in this new strategy was the man known only by his *nom de guerre*, Subcomandante Marcos. ‘Marcos was a major component of the EZLN’s propaganda machine and was responsible for many of the group’s communiqués,’<sup>20</sup> writes Blake Burgess.

We also interrogate the Zapatistas’ use of the internet as part of their communications infrastructure and their media ecology, which otherwise relied on local, less international means of communication. The potential of strategic non-state actors in cyber-warfare is real. David Betz identifies this as a cause for change in strategic affairs:

[There is now a] vast increase in the number and type of potential strategic actors as more and more people and organisations find ways of using cyberspace to mobilise contention globally for causes which would likely have failed to find a constituency in a less densely networked age.<sup>21</sup>

We highlight here one of the most relevant aspects in the contest for power in cyberspace, namely the narrative element of communications strategy, or the effort to describe values rooted not in actual information but in symbolic representations. Thus, they make history and create a story. The enduring existence of the EZLN may be explained by its continuous modifying and re-writing of EZLN materials. This strategy is apparent in how Subcomandante Marcos responded in an interview to the writer Gabriel García Márquez: ‘What’s in play here is what Subcomandante Marcos is, and not what he was.’<sup>22</sup>

### Limits, concepts, and methods

Reflecting on the Information Revolution, Joseph Nye writes: ‘The diffusion of information means that power will be widely distributed, and informal

20 Blake Burgess, ‘People of the Sun: The EZLN in an Age of Mass Media’, *The Forum: Journal of History* Vol. 8, Issue 1 (2016): 7–17, p. 9.

21 David Betz, ‘Cyberpower in Strategic Affairs: Neither Unthinkable nor Blessed’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 35, No 5, (2012): 689–711.

22 ‘Gabriel García Márquez interviews Subcomandante Marcos’.

networks will weaken the monopoly of traditional bureaucracy.<sup>23</sup> It is precisely the egalitarian distribution of power among EZLN committees that we believe enabled the dissemination of information aimed at gaining international support for the Zapatista cause. The process of revolutionary transformation from armed combat to the use of discourse and dialogue as weapons was consolidated through the construction of a networked society—an extensive community connected by the need to communicate and to build on the content of that communication. We conclude that what ‘characterizes the current technological revolution is not the centrality of knowledge and information’,<sup>24</sup> rather, it is the diffusion of information that neutralises the asymmetries of power, ‘flattening the bureaucratic hierarchies’ and replacing them with a network of organisations.<sup>25</sup> We adopt James Farwell’s definition of strategic communications as ‘the use of words, actions, images or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences seeking to shape their behaviours in order to introduce interests or policies or to achieve objectives’.<sup>26</sup>

For this study we systematically analysed some 400 documents relating to the Zapatista movement. Of these, 361 were letters and statements from the EZLN; seven were joint statements of the EZLN and the Mexican federal government; and six were unilateral proposals of the federal government or its organs and political parties. Not all are quoted in full; we have extracted only relevant and recurring passages to identify them.<sup>27</sup>

The time frame for the study begins on 1 January 1994 with the emergence of the EZLN, and ends on 24 January 1997, a few months after the Zapatistas officially withdrew from peace talks with the Mexican federal government on 3 September 1996.

The discourse of the Zapatista movement plays a fundamental role. EZLN communications spread through the internet became the ‘spearhead’ in conflict, thus replacing kinetic weapons, and transforming the group’s discourse into its main instrument of the struggle. This feature makes the EZLN unique compared to other *guerrilla* movements, all of which rely or have relied on violence.

23 Joseph Nye, *O Futuro do Poder* [The Future of Power] (São Paulo: Benvirá, 2011) p. 155.

24 Castells, *The Information Age*, Vol. I, p. 31.

25 Nye, *O Futuro do Poder*, p. 152.

26 James Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012), p. xix.

27 This study did not seek to correlate the impact of daily internet use by the Zapatistas with the actions of the Mexican Army. We do not include Mexican army reports to check direct responses to each EZLN communication, nor daily changes in tactical planning of armed forces.

We do not argue that other guerrilla movements do not use communiqués and declarations to express their demands, only that this is not their primary means of action. The Zapatistas changed the game, also for groups that continue to use violence, as Burgess points out: ‘The ELZN’s use of eloquent rhetoric and the Web provides a useful tool for other revolutionary groups.’<sup>28</sup>

We emphasise that the use of media in war is not a new strategy for governments or revolutionary movements. The EZLN’s innovation was to make the internet their theatre of operations, the arena where they fought, won audiences, and connected with supporters. With this choice, they avoided conventional media vehicles and escaped government censorship. Internet use was effectively the heart of the Zapatista movement.

Zapatista reports gained prominence almost immediately because of widespread media coverage. Numerous periodicals reproduced the reports in full,<sup>29</sup> bearing the agonies and hopes of the indigenous people of Chiapas to their readers. Widespread media coverage garnered popular support for the Zapatistas from both ordinary people and intellectuals around the world.<sup>30</sup> This support exerted pressure on the Mexican federal government; after the ‘March of the Hundred Thousand’ in the Zócalo of Mexico City,<sup>31</sup> it called off its military offensive and started a process of dialogue with the rebels. Once talks were established, the Zapatistas found institutional channels open and their words reinvigorated. According to Subcomandante Marcos, the use of discourse had not been considered the Zapatistas’ primary operating concept prior to 1 January 1994:

We have moved very quickly to a phase for which we were not prepared: dialogue. We were prepared for a long process of war of attrition, of military clashes, of political disputes over villages, of ideological struggle...<sup>32</sup>

28 Burgess, ‘People of the Sun’, p. 8.

29 PROCESO: *semanario de información y análisis* [PROCESS: Information and Analysis Weekly], México, Special Edition, 1 January 1999; PROCESO: *semanario de información y análisis*, ‘Memoria gráfica La marcha indígena’ [Graphic Memory: The Indigenous March], México, Special Edition, 8 April 2001; Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, ‘Na clareira da revolução’ [In the Glade of Revolution], *Folha de S. Paulo*, 4 September 1999; Pedro Ortiz (interviewer), ‘¡Ya Basta! Atención!’ [Enough already! Listen!], *Revista Atención*, (Año 2, Nº 8), 1996.

30 Prominent personalities who have written or demonstrated support for the Zapatista cause include: José Saragago, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Oscar Oliva, João Cabral de Melo Neto, Antonio García de León, Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira, Adolfo Gilly, Eduardo Galeano, Luis Hernández Navarro, Marco Antonio Bernal, Frei Betto, Carlos Montemayor, Carlos Monsiváis, among others.

31 The ‘March of the Hundred Thousand’ took place on 12 January 1994 in the Zocalo in Mexico City, and provoked a unilateral ceasefire by the Mexican government.

32 C. De Lela and A. M. Escurra (comps), *Chiapas: entre la tormenta y la profecía* [Chiapas: Between Torture and Prophecy] (Buenos Aires: Lugar, 1994), p. 162.

Using words as weapons assumed greater significance as they grew to become one of the movement's most identifiable characteristics.

### Cyber-militancy or internet warfare?

‘¿Guerra de Internet?’ [‘Internet warfare?’]. Pablo Espinosa, a columnist for the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*, began his article with this question on 10 August 1995.<sup>33</sup> ‘War’ on the internet began with EZLN sympathisers and people searching for information about the movement. Later the Zapatistas used the internet as a means to obtain external support for the region where they were surrounded by the military, and also to publish communications and alerts regarding events inside the conflict zone. In an era when almost all information was transmitted by fax, television, or print, Zapatism enjoyed the benefit of a networked infrastructure available only to the few.

Initially created for NGOs in Chiapas, this network became known as *La Neta*. According to Maria Elena Martínez-Torres, former delegate of *La Neta*, the network was a communications channel, created to facilitate NGO communication with the capital and to spread the vision of the minorities they represented.<sup>34</sup> In the early days of the rebellion, *La Neta* was the main Zapatista vehicle for communication and access point to what would become its new theatre of operations: cyberspace. As Manuel Castells explains, the Zapatista’s internet use can be divided into two moments. First, in 1990, when *La Neta* was supported by the Catholic Church and used as an alternative network for NGOs. Second, from 1994, with Ford Foundation funding, *La Neta* was supported on a private Internet provider.<sup>35</sup> Henceforth, there were no longer constraints on the proliferation of the Zapatistas’ words.

EZLN use of *La Neta* and the internet became a cyberwar conducted against the Mexican government. Cyberspace was used to pursue their political aims, and virtual campaigns (‘internet warfare’) subverted military campaigns on the ground (Zapatista and Government). We argue this kind of action may be defined as Information Warfare, consistent with its *modus operandi* when transmitting strategic information. Thus, it initiated a new information warfare with more

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33 Pablo Espinosa, ‘Mi página en Web no es la voz oficial del EZLN: Justin Paulson’ [My Web Page Is Not the Official Voice of the EZLN], Cuaderno Cultura, *La Jornada*, 10 August 1995 in Pedro Henrique Falco Ortiz, *Z@patismo on-line* (São Paulo: PROLAN-USP, 1997), 2 vols., p. 585.

34 Maria Eleno Martínez-Torres, ‘Civil Society, the Internet, and the Zapatistas’, *Peace Review* Vol. 13, Issue 3 (2001): 347–55, p. 351.

35 Castells, *The Information Age*, Vol I, p. 84.

effective outcomes than EZLN might otherwise have achieved through armed combat.<sup>36</sup> RAND analysts attribute the first Netwar to the Zapatistas: use of strategic communications was essential.<sup>37</sup>

We will later demonstrate that cyberspace became the primary theatre of operations, targeting both society and the Mexican government. The goal directed at Mexican society was to recruit supporters and create a militancy to pressure the Mexican Government. The goal aimed at the government was to exert their claims and establish limits to the Mexican Army's actions. Their weapons were their words, documents, and reports, used strategically to gain support, to denounce, and to construct a proper narrative for the conflict, as discussed by Burgess:

Everything from EZLN communiqués to official government reports to mainstream news articles is disseminated across the net, thus subverting official channels and biases. The use of the Internet has allowed for a more informed and capable audience in assessing the situation in Chiapas.<sup>38</sup>

The first webpage to release information about EZLN was posted online in March 1994 by Justin Paulson. Recently graduated in English literature from the University of Pennsylvania, Paulson explained why he created it:

Think: if I am looking for information about it and I find so little material, why not share with the world all that, even if little, of what I found? So I started a file on the network, with news communicated and everything related to the EZLN. That was at the end of March and beginning of April 1994.<sup>39</sup>

Paulson's page was the first of a series that appeared over the following months and years. The Zapatistas, and especially their sympathisers, soon began to use the internet strategically, reporting allegations of abuse by government troops or major landholders, organising meetings, public mobilisations, and discussion groups by e-mail,<sup>40</sup> and disseminating documents, letters, and reports produced

36 David Ronfeldt, John Arquilla, Graham E. Fuller, and Melissa Fuller, *The Zapatista 'Social Netwar' in Mexico* (RAND Corporation, 1998). p. 55

37 John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, 'The Advent of Netwar (revisited)' in *Networks and Netwars: The future of terror, crime, and militancy* (RAND Corporation 2001): 1–25, p. 17.

38 Burgess, 'People of the Sun', p. 8.

39 Paulson as quoted in Espinosa, 'Mi página en Web' in Ortiz, *Z@patismo on-line*, p. 585.

40 In Brazil, one of these lists is organised by the Zapatista Avante Committee—CAZ.

by the movement. This intense use of the internet was a coincidence that gradually became a necessity and increased when the EZLN replaced its strategy of armed struggle with dialogue. By drawing the struggle into the theoretical field via discussions on ethics and law, the Zapatistas fought their adversaries as equals, contrary to what had taken place in the ‘real world’ where the Federal Army was disproportionately stronger and better armed. Héctor Saint Pierre pointed out that: ‘At the tactical level, the use of symbols is incorporated to maximize the effect of weapons used—and sometimes replace it—and the large-scale application of the Internet communication system as a way of contrasting the effect of the completely adverse force relationship.’<sup>41</sup>

The use of the internet was crucial for the Zapatistas to reach a wide audience. This can be seen in the number of internet-support committees and online sites created by those keen to support the EZLN cause. Table I shows some of these committees and sites.

Country	Committee’s Name
Brazil	Avante Zapatista Committee
Brazil	EZLN Archive
Spain	Aragon Zapatista
Spain	Ellokal
Spain	Madrid’s Solidarity Platform with Chiapas
USA	Acción Zapatistas
France	Collectif ¡Ya Basta!
Italy	Comitato Chiapas – Torino
Mexico	FZLN
Mexico	Enlace Civil
Switzerland	Direkte Solidarität mit Chiapas

*Table 1 – Zapatista committees that use the internet to disseminate materials linked to EZLN through web pages or groups of emails.*<sup>42</sup>

.....  
41 Saint-Pierre, *A política armada*, p. 208.

42 Franchi, ‘O Movimento Zapatista’.

The Zapatistas created a network of information pages and support committees via the internet where they contacted people and non-governmental organisations around the world. These contacts produced e-mails and letters addressed to the Mexican government asking them to respond to EZLN demands or cease military offensives (see February 1995 attack). For Saint-Pierre, the Zapatistas' use of the internet made a significant difference during the confrontation:

The Zapatistas were able to set up an international communication network by internet that made the difference in the war. The military use of these elements of action by a *guerrilla* group seems to indicate that we are faced with another type of war, 'this war'—as Yvon Le Bot said—after the fall of the Berlin Wall, where symbols matter more than weapons, communications matter more than the correlation of forces.<sup>43</sup>

The EZLN was the first *guerrilla* force to use the internet in a systematic way to publicise its written materials and to create space for debates in which the movement itself was the central theme. The widespread use of a worldwide computer network to link the Zapatista movement to Mexican and international public opinion provided significant support for the EZLN.<sup>44</sup> The webpage <<http://www.enlacecivil.org.mx>> was linked to the entity called Enlace Civil or Civil Liaison, and was intended to be a bridge between indigenous communities and civil society.<sup>45</sup> It has been replaced by the webpage Enlace Zapatista <<http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/>>, where all the group's announcements can be found up to the present. The webpage Zapatista National Liberation Front <<http://www.fzln.org.mx>> was active in publishing denunciations of activities that occurred in Chiapas and articles on various topics affecting indigenous communities, but has now been replaced by Zeztainternacional <<https://zeztainternacional.ezln.org.mx>>, which continues to circulate a variety of information to the communities. The diversity of internet pages linked to the cause bears witness to the enduring support for the movement.

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<sup>43</sup> Saint-Pierre, *A política Armada*, p. 211.

<sup>44</sup> Today several webpages link to them directly. They are updated weekly. The official page of the movement is: <http://www.ezln.org>. Here we found communiqués issued by the movement since 1994; some translated from Spanish to English, Portuguese, Italian, French, and German. The virtual memory of the entire movement is collected in the webpage <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx>.

<sup>45</sup> Here we read: 'Enlace Civil A.C. arose from a request from a group of indigenous communities from the Altos, Selva and North regions of the southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas. The objective of ENLACE CIVIL is to serve as a bridge between the indigenous communities of Chiapas and national and international civil society in a common project to improve the living conditions of the indigenous peoples.' [www.enlacecivil.org.mx](http://www.enlacecivil.org.mx) [Accessed 7 December 2003].

Constructing power through discourse depends on a communications strategy. Here, discursive strategies are adjusted to different individuals and groups, both foreign and local. As Neville Bolt states: ‘power is constructed around the opposition between the local and the global, and is centred on networks, no longer on individual units of organisation’.<sup>46</sup>

### Forms of discourse

Zapatista discourse is diverse in form. We sort it into six categories below. Some communications are pragmatic and efficient, providing information or expressing demands, while other letters and reports are permeated with imaginary characters: the little indigenous girl Tonita, Don Durito de Lacandona the talking beetle, the Zapatista children, *guerrilla* companions, and *Viejo Antonio* [Old Antonio]. We cannot ascertain whether or not these characters are based on real individuals. Although certain short communications had only an informative function, Subcomandante Marcos occasionally used post-scripts to insert a comment or story that would make a text more attractive.<sup>47</sup>

#### *Informational or Coordination Reports*

These are reports of an informative character about an event or organisation, or provide practical information such as how to get a press badge or why a newspaper failed to receive a copy of the latest EZLN communiqué; in short, practical considerations aimed at resolving or reporting an immediate problem.

#### *Denunciation Reports*

These denounce the actions of the Federal Army or White Guards during periods of peace.<sup>48</sup> Their purpose is to draw public attention to military manoeuvres conducted in the conflict zone, as well as to demonstrate to the military that the Zapatistas have intelligence on their activities (air patrols, trains crossing territory, and detachments camped in the jungle). These communiqués sometimes have

46 Neville Bolt, ‘Unsettling Networks’, *The RUSI Journal* Vol. 154, Issue 5 (11 January 2010): 34–39, p. 35.

47 An analytical investigation classifying and differentiating between various forms of writing found in letters, communiqués, and other Zapatista documents would be a valuable contribution to thematic studies of the sort we have undertaken in the present article. A literary analysis of the creation and use of apparently fictitious personages who link the images constructed around the movement and associate it with a historical past would be of interest to researchers trained in the social sciences, most of whom might hesitate to engage in such work themselves.

48 The White Guards are armed groups usually financed by important landowners—‘[...] war mercenaries [...] commonly known as *Guardias Blancas*, paramilitary groups, death squads, among others’. Alejandro Buenrostro y Arellano and Arioaldo Umbelino de Oliveira, ‘Chiapas: construyendo a esperanza’ [Chiapas: Building Hope] (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2002), p. 319.



a political stamp: they report on the government militarising the region during periods of peace talks where such actions have been prohibited by agreement.

### *Claim Reports*

These are usually the longest form of communication, with demands accompanied by explanations. They include not only demands directly related to social issues but seek minimal conditions for dialogue or a return to it, as in the period following the February 1995 'betrayal', when the government suspended the cease-fire. Reports containing the movement's social demands appear in the form of proposals presented to the negotiations. Witness the First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle:

**To the People of Mexico:** We, the men and women, full and free, are conscious that the war that we have declared is our last resort, but also a just one. The dictators have pursued an undeclared genocidal war against our people for many years. Therefore, we ask for your participation, your decision to support this plan that struggles for work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace. We declare that we will not stop fighting until the basic demands of our people have been met by forming a government of our country that is free and democratic.<sup>49</sup>

Over time, the demand 'for work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace' was simplified with some documents adopting the expression: 'Democracy! Freedom! Justice!'<sup>50</sup> Sometimes the insurrection is justified by presenting social economic indices of the State of Chiapas, citing the infant mortality rate, malnutrition, and basic sanitation rates in contrast to the production of oil, electricity, and grain.

### *Letters*

These are usually addressed to a specific person as a response or question. However, they are made public to all and published in the press. The letters do not conform to a set pattern but deal with a variety of subjects. When Mexico's

49 Subcomandante Marcos, '1 Declaração da Selva Lacandona', 1 January 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I.

50 Idem, 'Segunda Declaración de La Realidad' [Second Declaration of Reality], 3 August 1996, *Documentos y Comunicados*. Vol. III.

President Ernesto Zedillo took office, he received a letter of ‘welcome to the nightmare’. In his first letter addressed to the new president, Subcomandante Marcos wrote: ‘Mr. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León: Welcome to the nightmare. In this letter I am addressing your inauguration speech.’<sup>51</sup>

### *Reports with Stories*

Characters created by Subcomandante Marcos appear in various communications, both in documents and long reports. The intention of these stories varies according to the characters involved or the legends they are addressing. There are also combat narratives that tell of *guerrilla* actions, containing mixed exaltations of confrontation featuring the fear and death of comrades, besides offering many comic stories showing the misadventures and privations of life in the jungle. Some of these tales have since become books, as in the case of *A História das Cores*<sup>52</sup> [The Story of Colours] and *A Caverna do Desejo*<sup>53</sup> [The Cave of Desire]. The main characters in several communiqués have specific themes attached to them. Don Durito of Lacandona says he is a scholar of neoliberalism and so in communiqués where he meets Marcos, the theme of neoliberalism is addressed. Don Durito’s speech adopts a more academic tone and demonstrates the vision that the Zapatistas—or Marcos—have of neoliberalism, and how they perceive its impact on their lives.<sup>54</sup>

### *Reports of Zapatista Children*

Tonita and Heriberto are usually the protagonists of this type of report. They describe the children’s routines and how they behave in different situations. The image of purity and innocence captured in the characters of these children reminds us of the values of innocence, kindness, and joy that Marcos associates with the indigenous way of life. The character Heriberto appears for the first time in a July 1994 report. ‘Heriberto (3-year- old Tojolabal<sup>55</sup> boy) smiles toothlessly when he consoles his sister Eva (5-year-old Tojolabal girl) who woke up crying

51 Idem, ‘A Ernesto Zedillo, 31 December 1994’, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II, p. 141.

52 Idem, *A História das Cores* [The Story of Colours]. Transl. Marcelo Brandão n.p. 2003, compare *Veja Magazine* (Edição 1810, Ano 36) No 27, 9 July 2003.

53 Idem, ‘Cómo el Jolmash se entró en la cueva del deseo’ [How Jolmash Entered the Cave of Desire] 17 March 1995, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II, p. 277–83. This communication was later transformed into a book by Erica Chappuis: *The Cave of Desire*. Illustration by Erica Chappuis. Text by Sub. Marcos. 1999.

54 Subcomandante Marcos, *Conversations with Durito: Stories of the Zapatistas and Neoliberalism* (Canada: Autonomedia, 2005).

55 Tojolabal is a Mayan language spoken in Chiapas, Mexico by an indigenous group of the same name.

because she dreamed that the cat did ‘mau’ [bad] and not ‘miau’ [meow].<sup>56</sup> The main point is to show the brother actively comforting his sister Eva, with care and love while giving her his chocolate. The tale builds the image of a kindly, indigenous child who protects his sister. A few paragraphs later, we read:

At the dawn of a year, an army formed by indigenous people declares war against the government, they fight for ‘utopias’, that is, for democracy, freedom, and justice in THE MEXICO WE WANT. On a wall of a Chiapanecan city hall—the caciques’ palace—is painted ‘YA BASTA!’ [Enough already!] in dull red, from dried blood. The employees will uselessly try to erase it. ‘Just knocking down the wall,’ the employees keep saying. Someone, anywhere in the country, begins to understand ... THE MEXICO WE WANT.

Heriberto wears only a red bandana for clothing. At three years of age the bandana covers his navel and little finger of sex. When Heriberto falls in the mud, he quickly turns to see if someone is observing him or laughs, if there is nobody in his sight, he gets up again and goes to the stream to bathe; he will tell his mom that he bathed because he went fishing. If someone makes fun of him when he stumbles, Heriberto reaches for a machete of his size and, wielding it, attacks everything around him. Heriberto cries not because the fall hurts. Because mockery hurts more, that’s why Heriberto cries.

In THE MEXICO WE WANT, Heriberto will have good shoes for the mud, trousers for scrapes, a shirt so that the hopes that normally nest in the chest do not escape; a red bandana will be only a red bandana, and not a symbol of rebellion. His stomach will be satisfied and clean and there will be a great hunger to learn in his thinking. Crying and laughing will be just that, and Heriberto will not have to become an adult anytime soon.<sup>57</sup>

The first paragraph locates the characters in Chiapas after 1 January 1994. In the second paragraph, we learn more about the thinking and personality

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56 Subcomandante Marcos, ‘El México que queremos’ [The Mexico We Want] 17 June 94, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I, p. 162.

57 Ibid.

of Heriberto, whose characteristics anyone can easily identify with. The last paragraph associates Heriberto's desires with the demands of the Zapatista movement in a subliminal message based on a child's need for well-being. Again, the writing deliberately invites people to identify with Heriberto and the Zapatista movement. Different forms of Zapatista discourse may appear merged in the same communiqué, either in the text itself or as a post-script. It is unusual, however, to find short stories in informative communications. An important point to highlight is that both statements in which descriptions of children appear and those containing short stories and other forms of fictional writing are, without exception, signed by Subcomandante Marcos. Documents signed by the Comitê Clandestino Revolucionário Indígena Comando Geral<sup>58</sup> (CCRI-CG) and other members of the EZLN do not share this characteristic.

### **A taxonomy of EZLN discourse**

While acknowledging the six forms of discourse described above, for a useful taxonomy we further cluster them into three groups. The first group includes only informational and coordination reports. Their primary aim is to preserve relations with the press and the public. The Zapatistas were careful with professional communications outlets since they considered them important to their success in disseminating documents across national and international audiences.

The second group includes fictional stories and reports from the Zapatista children; these fulfil other functions. Their aim is to generate public empathy, to communicate the values of indigenous communities and explain the effects of government actions on them, and to connect the EZLN to today's Mayans. A few stories featuring the *Viejo Antonio* character connect contemporary Zapatistas to those historical Zapatistas who followed Emiliano Zapata in 1910 in support of his fight for land rights. Here we also find conversations between Subcomandante Marcos and Don Durito de Lacandona, in which the beetle performs a didactic role, explaining how the Zapatistas undermined the globalisation process (and NAFTA agreement) from the perspective of Chiapas.

.....  
<sup>58</sup> Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee General Command, hereafter referred to as CCRI-CG.

Old Antonio took from his backpack a little bag of nylon. Inside there was a very old picture from 1910 of Emiliano Zapata.

In his left hand Zapata had his sword raised to his waist. In his right hand he had a pistol, two cartridge belts of bullets crossed his chest, one from left to right, the other from right to left. His feet are positioned as though he's standing still or walking and in his gaze there is something like 'here I am' or 'there I go'. There are two staircases. One comes out of the darkness, and there are dark-skinned Zapatistas as though they were coming out of something. The other staircase is lit but there is no one and one can't see where it goes or where it comes from. I would be lying if I told you that I noticed all those details. It was Old Man Antonio who told me. On the back of the picture, it said:

*'Gral. Emiliano Zapata, Jefe del Ejercito Suriano.*

*Gen. Emiliano Zapata, Commander in Chief of the Southern Army.*

*Le General Emiliano Zapata, Chef de l'Armée du Sud.*

*C. 1910. Photo by: Agustin V. Casasola.'*

Old Antonio says to me 'I have asked a lot of questions of this picture. That is how I came to be here.' He coughs and tosses the cigarette butt. He gives me the picture. 'Here', he says, 'So that you learn how to ask questions...and to walk.'<sup>59</sup>

This story portraying a meeting between Subcomandante Marcos and Viejo Antonio is one example. In this particular scene, Viejo Antonio gives Marcos a photo of Emiliano Zapata (representing the connection between today's struggle and that of 1910) and a word of advice (representing knowledge of the indigenous people). It seems a simple literary construction; however, its meaning is more elaborate. By creating a bridge between the current struggle and the Mexican Revolution of 1910, so important to the formation of Mexican national identity, the story tries to create a connection between Marcos and all Mexican citizens who feel they are represented by Emiliano Zapata, a symbol of national heroism. By using the character of an indigenous old man, Old Antonio, to advise the young leader, the story creates a connection between

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<sup>59</sup> Idem, 'Carta de Marcos a remitentes que aún no obtienen respuesta' [Letter from Marcos to Senders Who Still Have No Answer], 13 December 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II, p. 162.

the wisdom of maturity and indigenous ancestry and the new spokesperson, making him a legitimate representative of the movement.<sup>60</sup> David Betz offers some context to discursive strategies evidenced by the ‘power of stories’:

Clausewitz included ‘passion’ amongst the famous trinity that he argued constituted war, because he grasped that war requires society to cohere around the project that violence is aimed at achieving. [...] Myth construction is an aspect of power that the West has taught itself to mistrust (because of its experience of wars of mass mobilisation) and, by and large, to abjure, for ill and for good.<sup>61</sup>

We could compare this form of discourse to literary devices used by magic realists such as the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez. Or as Claire Yorke states, ‘Empathy in strategic communications is not about better understanding an audience in order to tailor a message more accurately. If used correctly, it should reinforce processes of critical thinking in the initial stages of strategy development.’<sup>62</sup> During their first years, the ability to transform fictional stories into a tool (or weapon) generated empathy and support for the EZLN.

The third group includes claim reports, letters addressed to politicians, and denunciation reports. These form the core of Zapatista communications—where they reveal their intentions and where negotiations are held. These provide important source materials and allow us to establish changes in Zapatista strategies. In this article, we address those points in greater detail as the primary evidence for our analysis. However, all types of discourse were analysed to build an understanding of their achievements.

### The shift from the rifle to the word

A recurring feature of the documents produced during the early months of the Zapatista Rebellion was the argument that the EZLN was a military force capable of responding effectively to the Mexican Army, and consequently able to return to the fight at any moment. Before February 1995, threat of military

60 John Womack Jr., *Zapata e a Revolução Mexicana* [Zapata and the Mexican Revolution] (Lisboa: Edições 70, 1980), p. 10.

61 David Betz and Vaughan Phillips, ‘Putting the Strategy Back Into Strategic Communications’ in *Defence Strategic Communications* Vol. 3, (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Autumn 2017): 41–69, p.48

62 Claire Yorke, ‘The Significance and Limitations of Empathy in Strategic Communications’, *Defence Strategic Communications* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017): 137–60, p. 152.

action was used to intimidate the government, demonstrating a willingness to fight. Public opinion exerted considerable pressure, seeking a peaceful way out of the conflict.<sup>63</sup> The public understanding that emerged around the conflict was one of poorly-armed Indians facing a heavily-armed Mexican Federal Army with overwhelming numerical superiority. The Mexican magazine *Proceso* reported that 12,000 soldiers had been deployed in the first days of fighting. Faced with this, the population foresaw a massacre that had to be avoided. Popular demonstrations calling for the cessation of hostilities occurred in several places throughout the country. The most significant was the ‘March of the 100,000’ in Zócalo Square, Mexico City, on 12 January 1994. Any return to hostilities would entail the loss of popular support so important to the government.

It is instructive to review some of the documents addressed to the federal government, in which the threat of civil war is made explicit:

Advance to the capital of the country, defeating the Mexican federal army, protecting the civilian population in its liberating progress, and allowing liberated peoples to choose, free and democratically, its administrative authorities.

JOIN THE INSURGENT FORCES OF THE ZAPATISTA  
ARMY OF NATIONAL LIBERATION.<sup>64</sup>

This text from the First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle is the first public document of the EZLN. This is an example of a *Claim Report* and should therefore be interpreted with caution. The threat of a warlike attitude with its ‘strong determination to act’ can be interpreted as a way of provoking a reaction and drawing national attention to the problem without any real intention of putting words into practice. Consequently, the phrase: ‘Advance to the capital of the country’ is mere allegory with little real intent. At the time, the EZLN was aware of its limited military capabilities in both human and material resources.

On 23 February 1994, the CCRI-CG published a document referring to the first cease-fire: ‘All regular, irregular, and urban units of the different weapons in the service of the Zapatista National Liberation Army, must remain in their positions and should answer firmly and decisively if attacked by ground troops

63 PROCESO: *seminario de información y análisis*. México, Special Edition, 1 January 1999.

64 The formatting of this paragraph follows the original, centralised and uppercase. CG-CCRI del EZLN, ‘I Declaración da Selva Lacandona’, 1 January 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I, p. 34–35.

or federal army air force.<sup>65</sup> This document suggests the choice of a military option. The Zapatistas were, however, poorly armed compared to the Mexican Federal Army, so could only face them in asymmetrical combat; their advantage lay in the protection of and benefits offered by forested terrain.

Denunciation reports appear in communications dating back to the inception of the movement. An intention to use military force and threats forms part of their statements. In a communiqué dated 6 January 1994, coinciding with a military confrontation, the Zapatistas accused the army of indiscriminate repression and threatened to retaliate:

The present conflict unmasks, once again, the nature of the federal army, and presents it in its true essence: indiscriminate repression, the violation of all human rights, and the total lack of ethics and military honour. [...] We have respected the lives of soldiers and police who surrender to our forces; you summarily execute the Zapatistas who are injured, prevented from fighting, and those who surrender. If you start attacking our families and do not respect the lives of wounded and prisoners, then we will begin to do the same.<sup>66</sup>

On 8 December 1994 at 09:45, the CCRI-CG of the EZLN formally broke the ceasefire<sup>67</sup> and ordered the beginning of a military campaign called 'Peace with Justice and Dignity to Indigenous Peoples'.<sup>68</sup> In subsequent releases, we find reports of units that participated in the declared military campaign. These units are the 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, 1<sup>st</sup> Southeast Army Corps, and 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division. The existence of several groups subdivided within the overall organisation of the EZLN is feasible. But the existence of several rebel divisions within the Lacandon Jungle force seems less so due to the number of combatants we estimate the Zapatistas had in January 1994, and the number of combatants needed to form a division. In military organisation, a classical division has approximately 25,000 men divided into regiments and companies. If the Zapatistas had three divisions, they would have numbered

65 CCRI-CG del EZLN, 'Alto al Fuego', 23 February 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I, p. 81.

66 Subcomandante Marcos, 'Composición del EZLN y condiciones para el diálogo' [Composition of the EZLN and Conditions for Dialogue], 6 January 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I, p. 77.

67 See: 'The Zapatista Army of National Liberation terminates, at this time, its commitment to respect the cease fire' in CCRI-CG del EZLN, 'Da por terminado el compromiso de cese al fuego' [He Regards the Commitment to Cease Fire as Being terminated], 8 December 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II, p. 169.

68 Ibid.



some 75,000 men. A more realistic estimate is three thousand combatants, the approximate number of indigenous people who fought on 1 January 1994.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, the argument of returning to armed struggle that had been losing momentum over the course of 1994, practically disappears from Zapatista discourse after 9 February 1995 when the Mexican Federal Army launched a major military operation against the region under the pretext of arresting Subcomandante Marcos. The offensive failed to achieve its anticipated success, and Marcos evaded the Mexican Army. However, even though the attack failed to neutralise the EZLN, the Zapatista's position changed. They realised that fighting the Mexican Federal Army was no longer an option, and their use of weapons as the main strategy for challenging the government, diminished. A greater appeal to reason emerged, a search for dialogue (they did occasionally express a continuing willingness to die in combat, but for the purpose of becoming martyrs for their cause, not as a way to achieve military and political goals). In a document addressed to Esteban Moctezuma, Secretary of the Mexican Government, Subcomandante Marcos wrote: 'If everything is a pretext for military action, I regret that Mr. Zedillo's regime has decided to stain his hands with indigenous blood, and you are an accomplice to this barbarism.'<sup>70</sup> Rather than a declaration of armed resistance, it more poignantly represents a protest against a government that has chosen to sacrifice the lives of its own people. A week later, a further *Denunciation Report* announces:

Brothers, the Ernesto Zedillo government is killing us, killing children, beating women and raping them. We ask the Mexican people and the peoples of the world to do something to stop this war. We ask you brothers once again, do not leave us alone.<sup>71</sup>

Subsequently, we observe a new tone in Zapatista discourse. No longer is there a strong military ideal behind the words but a plea for the war to be interrupted and for dialogue to return. Communications with a bellicose tone no longer

69 The Zapatistas speak of 5000 natives taking up arms. Emilio Zebadúa identifies 3000; several authors oscillate between 3000 and 5000, Compare: Alejandro Buenrostro, *As raíces do fenómeno Chiapas* [The Roots of the Chiapas Phenomenon], (São Paulo: Alfarrábio, 2002), p.15 and Emilio Zebadúa, *Breve história de Chiapas*. [A Brief History of Chiapas], São Paulo: Alfarrábio, 2002, p.15.

70 'Si todo es un pretexto para la acción militar, lamento que el régimen del señor Zedillo haya decidido mancharse las manos con sangre indígena, y usted sea cómplice de esta barbarie. Es todo.' Subcomandante Marcos, 'Carta de Marcos a Esteban Moctezuma' [Letter from Marcos to Esteban Moctezuma], 2 February 1995, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol III, p. 212.

71 CCRI-CG del EZLN, 'Denuncia acciones del Ejército Federal mexicano y llama a detener la guerra' [Denouncing the Actions of the Mexican Federal Army and Calling to Stop the War], 11 February 1995 *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. III, p. 226.

appear as before. Increasingly weapons become adornments while words become weapons. Between 1994 and the beginning of 1997 the Zapatistas issued more than 400 media releases. These were in addition to actions by the movement's support groups in the form of public demonstrations in the capital and media appearances during the San Andrés dialogue process, mediated by the Catholic Church. In the text of the San Andrés Accords they appeal to the government to:

Expand political participation and representation. The State must impose legal and legislative changes that broaden the participation and representation of local and national politics of indigenous peoples, respecting their diverse situations and traditions, and strengthening a new federalism in the Mexican Republic.<sup>72</sup>

Zapatista proposals are directed at the pursuit of legal equality and respect for ethnic differences. This direction can also be seen in a statement produced during the negotiations in San Andrés in 1996:

Pluralism. The agreement between peoples and cultures that make up Mexican society must be based on respect for their differences, under the assumption of their fundamental equality. [...] The recognition and promotion of the pluricultural nature of the nation means that, in order to strengthen the culture of diversity and tolerance in a framework of national unity, the action of the State and its institutions must be carried out without making distinctions between indigenous and non-indigenous, or before any collective sociocultural option. The development of the nation must be based on plurality, understood as a peaceful, productive, respectful, and equitable coexistence of the diverse.<sup>73</sup>

Nevertheless, the Zapatistas failed to secure reforms to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which they had striven for in their written appeals. The search for equal treatment along with recognition of cultural differences was based on the idea of consolidating a new social pact, rooted in diversity and tolerance as fundamental principles for the construction of a more pluralistic Mexican State (evident in the passage above). Criticism is levelled against the

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<sup>72</sup> 'Acuerdos de San Andrés' in Cossío Díaz et al., *Derechos y cultura indígena*, p. 291–92.

<sup>73</sup> 'Acuerdos de San Andrés' in Cossío Díaz et al., *Derechos y cultura indígena*, p. 294.

Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and its consequences for indigenous communities. Continuing poverty and misery of communities were to underscore differences between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government. Subcomandante Marcos writes:

‘Die as a social group, as a culture and, above all, as a resistance. Then you can be part of modernity’, says big capital from the seat of government to the indigenous peasants. These indigenous people irritate the modernising logic of neomercantilism. It is not only their rebellion, their defiance, their resistance, that irritates. The anachronism of their existence also irritates within a project of globalisation, an economic and political project that suddenly discovers that all the poor people impede it ....<sup>74</sup>

Mexico’s entry into the FTA was seen as a death sentence. Neoliberal politics became rhetorically associated with Nazism, creating a strong image of genocide. An ethnic extermination is suggested in the following *Denunciation report* also written by Marcos:

Neoliberalism, as a theory of modern chaos, of the destruction of humankind, is the ideological heir of Nazism and the theoretical foundation of wars for ‘ethnic purity’ and intolerance. [...] Its objective is, as in any war, the destruction of its enemy: physical and moral humanity.<sup>75</sup>

By adopting the term Nazism and by associating it with the neoliberal system, they not only connect it indirectly to the Mexican government but classify the militarisation of the State of Chiapas as an ‘ethnic war’ waged against the indigenous people, who had once again been made victims. The construction of Zapatista discourse is based on maintaining the ethnic factor and the construction of group identity. Zapatistas present themselves as different from other Mexican citizens due to their ethnic-social exclusion that, according to their texts, dates back to the period of the Spanish Conquest. This association paints them as underprivileged compared to other Mexican citizens; hence the justification for their claims. This is celebrated in the San Andrés Accords

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74 Subcomandante Marcos, ‘Carta a John Berger’ [Letter to John Berger], 12 May 1995, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II, p. 355.

75 Idem, ‘Fin de la consulta nacional’ [End of the national consultation], 29 September 1995, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II., p. 458.

texts, where they demand from the government the recognition that they are ‘descended from populations that inhabited the country at the time of the conquest or colonization’.<sup>76</sup> Later they claim that ‘The State must promote juridical and legislative changes that broaden the participation and representation of local and national policies of indigenous peoples’.<sup>77</sup> The equality perceived by them takes two forms: sometimes they present themselves as the same as minority groups in order to seek their support; sometimes as equals before the laws of the Mexican State. Here, once again, we see the search for legal rights for indigenous people as the driving force of the EZLN with the same concepts captured in their documents.

## Discussion

We have evaluated the importance of Zapatista discourse, recalling elements present in its formation. We have indicated its diverse make-up and characteristics. We demonstrated how the question of war disappeared as an argument between 1994 and 1996. And, finally, we observed how the Internet emerged as the primary space for disseminating this discourse. We asked: What happened to the rebel army that in 1994 promised ‘Advance towards the capital of the country, overcoming the Mexican federal army’? What prompted the armed group founded and rooted in Ernesto Che Guevara’s revolutionary *foco* theory<sup>78</sup> to choose to use communication over confrontation? In short, they were ill-prepared for this change of strategy, as Subcomandante Marcos suggests:

We have gone very quickly to a phase for which we were not prepared: dialogue. We were prepared for a long process of war of attrition, of military clashes, of political dispute over villages, of ideological struggle.<sup>79</sup>

Zapatista communications between 1994 and 1996 reflect the shift from military strategy to communications strategy. In other words, during this period the group broke from the ideals of armed struggle. Our study notes that using arms as a viable means of realising their claims remained in the Zapatista discourse between 1 January 1994 and 9 February 1995. This, in spite of the movement’s

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<sup>76</sup> ‘Los Acuerdos de San Andrés’ in Cossío Díaz et al., *Derechos y cultura indígena*, p. 291.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>78</sup> Yvon LeBot, *Subcomandante Marcos, el sueño zapatista* [Subcommander Marcos: Dream of the Zapatistas] (México: Plaza & Janés., 1997), p. 135.

<sup>79</sup> C. De Lelle and A. M. Ecurra, (comps). *Chiapas: Entre la tormenta y la profecía* [Chiapas: Between the storm and the prophecy] (Buenos Aires: Lugar, 1994), p. 162.

military inferiority and a civil society calling for peace. However, after the military offensive of February 1995, a sharp change took place within Zapatista discourse and actions. Bellicose argument disappeared from their reports, giving place to constant requests for dialogue. The war came to be portrayed as a form of extermination of innocents or even martyrdom. This change of rhetoric promoted a dual gain for the Zapatistas. First, their pacifist speeches raised greater support among civil society. And later, the pacifist argument inhibited the Mexican Federal Army's justification of a third direct military offensive against the EZLN, since constant calls for peace and dialogue would keep the Federal Army from attacking a group that was proposing to negotiate peacefully rather than waging war on peace. Thereby they ensured the continuity of the movement, while national and international pressure on the government brought the direct actions of the Mexican Federal Army to a halt. Using this strategy, the EZLN began to shape its discourses to increase credibility, formerly limited, so that it would no longer be considered a *guerrilla* group. Instead it would be seen as a social movement with strong international support.<sup>80</sup>

The Zapatistas used the Internet and urged media to focus international attention on their grievances, arouse support, and forge solidarity, helping to bring about a settlement. Setting aside violence was important. But by turning to language as a key tool of strategic communication, the Zapatistas rebranded themselves and circumvented the might of the Mexican military with an effective communication campaign. Between 1994 and 1998, they put the Mexican government on the defensive as the country evolved from an authoritarian to a more open system.<sup>81</sup>

Without being prepared for this, the Zapatistas were the first non-state group to use the internet extensively to publicise their claims, seek sympathisers, and pressure the government not only to negotiate but also to disrupt ongoing military campaigns. The use of communications has become the most effective weapon of the EZLN, and the internet has become its space of greatest resonance due to the possibility of reaching other countries and continents by creating and mobilising networks of support.<sup>82</sup>

80 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 70.

81 Ibid.

82 Franchi, 'O *Movimento Zapatista*'.

The emergence of the Internet in the early 1990s coincided perfectly with the rise of the EZLN. The Zapatistas utilized the fledgling technology to take their local news to the international stage and their survival was more than likely tied to this ability to communicate with a global audience.<sup>83</sup>

This alignment of a popularised internet with the EZLN's internal character and set of well-written communications (to win over important and distinct audiences) are important aspects that may explain the success and longevity of the movement.

## Conclusion

The EZLN can be considered the first instance of insurgents using the internet as a space to disseminate critical communications and help an armed movement achieve its political objectives. After February 1995 the virtual *guerrilla* campaign became the central thrust of the movement. Two points demonstrate the use of communications as a weapon. Direct actions supplemented by the publication of reports against and denunciations of the Mexican Government and Army; and the promotion of cyber-activism through committees spread over several countries, rippling across national and international communities. The information structure used by the Zapatistas—namely radio broadcasts, videos, telecommunications, and especially the internet—was vital to the success of two aspects of the movement: their transformation from a *guerrilla* group into a national social movement; and their change of strategy from direct military confrontation to narrative construction and communications as the central element with which to confront the Mexican nation state.

Finally, to understand how, in that context, a minority indigenous group could reverse its position of kinetic inferiority to become an actor with the power to influence the politics and economy of its country using international pressure, it is necessary to compare the potential impact of the technological structure available to that group from the 1990s onward, following the creation of *La Neta*, an alternative computer network linking Chiapas to Mexico with the support of NGOs and the Catholic Church.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Burgess, 'People of the Sun', p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> Castells, *The Information Age*, Vol. II., p. 83.

Three main factors led to the success of the strategic communications employed by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. First, access to a technological structure that provided the space to construct and disseminate their own version of the facts, free of censorship. In *La Neta* and later on the internet, the EZLN managed to bypass media outlets biased towards the government and access larger national and international audiences. Although the struggle for hearts and minds is nothing new, the effective use of the internet by a non-state actor was new in the 1990s.

Second, identifying key actors to act as bridge-builders between the movement and its supporters; in fact, the EZLN had some indigenous leaders and one council (CCRI-EZLN). But Subcomandante Marcos was more than just a solitary leader, more than a spokesman, he was *the* bridge-builder. Marcos signed the majority of documents at the outset of the struggle. With each threatened attack, he managed to effect strategic retreats while countering the government with communications.<sup>85</sup> His ability to write and disseminate communications to inform and influence audiences was impressive.

Finally, the modification of EZLN's strategy brought about a transformation in the main theatre of operations. The crucial element in this transformation was the exchange of assault rifles and military confrontation in the jungle for messages spread on the net targeting Mexico's citizens. The power of the Zapatistas to disseminate their ideas and gain support across social classes came as a surprise to the Mexican Army and to the government, who were inadequately prepared for this new cyber battlefield—the new *locus* for disseminating information and ideals, for creating identity and spreading *zapatismo* across the globe. Twenty-five years later Zapatism does not find itself stuck in the past: its support network remains on duty and on-line.

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85 Ibid.

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# MEASURING THE EFFECT OF RUSSIAN INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY INFORMATION OPERATIONS IN ONLINE CONVERSATIONS

John D. Gallacher and  
Marc W. Heerdink

## Abstract

The Internet has given new opportunities to those who wish to interfere and disrupt society through the systematic manipulation of social media. One goal of these cyber-enabled information operations is to increase polarisation in Western societies by stoking both sides of controversial debates. Whether these operations are successful remains unclear. This paper describes how novel applications of computational techniques can be used to test the impact of historical activity from the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) on two social media platforms: Twitter and Reddit. We show that activity originating from the Russian IRA had a measurable effect on the subsequent conversations of genuine users. On Twitter, increases in Russian IRA activity predicted subsequent increases in the degree of polarisation of the conversation surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement. On Reddit, comment threads started by Russian IRA accounts contained more toxic language and identity-based attacks. We use causal analysis modelling to further show that Russian IRA activity in existing threads caused measurable changes in the conversational quality of the following 25-100 posts. By developing methods to measure the impact of information operations in online conversations and demonstrating a measurable effect on genuine conversations, our study provides an important step in developing effective countermeasures.

**Keywords**—*information operations, social media, social psychology, group polarisation, disinformation, strategic communications*

### About the Authors

**John D. Gallacher** is a Cyber Security DPhil student at the University of Oxford working with the department of Experimental Psychology and the Oxford Internet Institute.

**Dr Marc W. Heerdink** is an Assistant Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Amsterdam, where he also obtained his PhD, and a former visiting postdoc at the University of Oxford.

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### Introduction

The rapid development of the Internet has enabled people everywhere to connect, communicate, and distribute information globally at an unprecedented scale. However, some use this opportunity for connection to divide rather than to bring people together. In recent years, a great deal of attention has been focused on groups that conduct deliberate social media activities to divide and polarise societies. These activities include the use of artificial social media accounts, paid advertisements, and automated scripts designed to spread disinformation.<sup>1</sup> These activities are constituents of wider information operations campaigns that seek to gain a competitive international advantage over traditional adversaries.<sup>2</sup> While the approach itself is not new—similar methods targeting the psychology of civilian populations can be traced back to the Roman, Persian, and Chinese empires<sup>3</sup>—these methods have transformed in the digital age and now increasingly rely on social media platforms that provide global reach and can target individuals directly for a fraction of the cost of traditional methods.<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon is characterised by sustained and pervasive efforts<sup>5</sup>, which

1 Joshua A. Tucker, Andrew Guess, Pablo Barberá, Cristian Vaccari, Alexandra Siegel, Sergey Sanovich, Denis Stukal, and Brendan Nyhan, 'Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature', The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2018.

2 Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, 'The Russian "Firehose of Falschhood" Propaganda Model,' 2016

3 Jen Weedon, William Nuland, and Alex Stamos, *Information Operations and Facebook*, Facebook, 2017.

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5 John D Gallacher and Rolf E Fredheim, 'Division Abroad, Cohesion at Home: How the Russian Troll Factory Works to Divide Societies Overseas but Spread pro-Regime Messages at Home', in *Responding to Cognitive Security Challenges* (Riga, Latvia: NATO StratCom CoE, 2019), 60–79.

peak around election cycles, although elections are not the sole focus. This persistent engagement, short of traditional thresholds for conflict, makes it difficult to construct robust responses.<sup>6</sup>

In 2014, the World Economic Forum identified the rapid spread of misinformation online as one of the top 10 threats to society.<sup>7</sup> Since this warning, the deliberate spread of misleading information has been linked to political earthquakes such as the 2016 US Election<sup>8</sup>, the 2016 UK Brexit referendum<sup>9</sup>, and the rise of populist parties across Europe<sup>10</sup>, as well as to political violence in Brazil<sup>11</sup>, Myanmar<sup>12</sup>, and India<sup>13</sup>. All these events are connected by one consistent trend—an increase in social polarisation, defined as the process of increased segregation into distinct social groups, separated along racial, economic, political, religious or other lines.<sup>14</sup> Hostile information operations on social media show no evidence of slowing down<sup>15</sup>, while social media platforms stand accused of failing to act decisively in combatting this threat<sup>16</sup>. Understanding the consequences of these activities is essential to developing effective defences. In-depth knowledge about the consequences of these hostile narratives should inform policy decisions aimed at countering them, yet very little is known about the effect these activities have on the online conversations of genuine citizens, and whether or not they achieve their goals.

In this study we developed methods to address this question and to measure the effect of artificial social media manipulation on subsequent human conversations, using publicly attributed information operations from the Russian state as a case study. Recently, evidence shows that the Russian government has been engaged in a substantial effort to sway public opinion on a number of

6 Lucas Kello, *The Virtual Weapon and International Order* (Yale University Press, 2017).

7 Lee Howell et al., 'Outlook on the Global Agenda 2014' (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014).

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9 'Disinformation and "Fake News": Interim Report', UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2018.

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15 Kanisk Karan, Donara Barojan, Melissa Hall, and Graham Brookie, '#TrollTracker: Outward Influence Operation from Iran', Medium, That Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab, 31 January 2019.

16 'Disinformation and "Fake News": Final Report', UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019.

key topics, at home and abroad, through a prolonged information campaign.<sup>17</sup> This campaign includes disinformation, artificial social media accounts imitating a grass-roots movement, paid advertisements, and automated scripts designed to hijack filtering algorithms in order to disseminate content to the widest possible audience.<sup>18</sup> These accounts also promoted real-world protests and demonstrations, often encouraging both sides of controversial topics. While the 2016 US presidential election seems to have been one important focus for these activities, the wider intention appears to have been to polarise online conversations and sow social division along social as well as political lines.<sup>19</sup>

### *The relationship between disinformation and polarisation*

People increasingly use social media as their primary source for news and information, with two-thirds of Americans and half of adults in the developing world getting their news from social media platforms.<sup>20</sup> Ideological alignment with specific groups and ideas is often more obvious in online environments than it is offline,<sup>21</sup> either due to structural features, such as profile pictures or group memberships, or because of the content shared by users. For this reason, separation into groups of likeminded people is more likely to occur online than offline. This facilitates group polarisation, a social-identity-based phenomenon where individuals endorse more extreme ideological positions following a discussion with other in-group members.<sup>22</sup> This increased polarisation may encourage group members to take a more extreme position on certain issues, or may result in an increased dislike of members of other groups without a change in their position on that issue.<sup>23</sup>

17 Weedon et al., *Information Operations and Facebook*; Intelligence Community Assessment, 'Assessing Russian Activities'.

18 Renee DiResta, Jonathan Albright, and Ben Johnson, 'The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency', New Knowledge Disinformation Report Whitepaper, 2018; Philip N Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Liotsiu, John Kelly, Camille Françoise 'The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018', University of Oxford Computational Research Project, 2018.

19 Sebastian Bay et al., *Responding to Cognitive Security Challenges*, (Riga, Latvia: NATO StratCom CoE, 2019); DiResta et al., 'Tactics & Tropes'.

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21 Tom Postmes, Russell Spears, and Martin Lea, 'Building or Breaching Social Boundaries? SIDE Effects of Computer Mediated Communication', *Communication Research* 25, № 6 (1998): 689–715; Eun Ju Lee, 'Deindividuation Effects on Group Polarization in Computer-Mediated Communication: The Role of Group Identification, Public-Self-Awareness, and Perceived Argument Quality', *Journal of Communication* Vol. 57, Issue 2 (2007): 385–403.

22 J. C. Turner, B. Davidson, and M. A. Hogg, 'Polarized Norms and Social Frames of Reference: A Test of the Self-Categorization Theory of Group Polarization', *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* Vol. 11, № 1 (1990): 77–100.

23 Lilliana Mason, "'I Disrespectfully Agree": The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization', *American Journal Of Political Science* Vol. 59, Issue 1 (2014): 128–45.

Messages emphasising inter-party conflict have been shown to reinforce social polarisation and are easy to distribute in online environments. Messages containing strong partisan cues that match an individual's beliefs can encourage them to accept and share inaccurate information,<sup>24</sup> while messages that agree with pre-held stereotypes can facilitate an individual's acceptance of inaccurate information about an out-group.<sup>25</sup> Equally, polarised conversations can lead to increased dissemination of disinformation. People are more likely to trust inaccurate information if it elicits anger and aligns with their existing opinions.<sup>26</sup> Content that is highly controversial or elicits greater moral outrage is more likely to be shared by social media users,<sup>27</sup> while erroneous content can be made more sensational than true content and therefore more likely to inspire fear and disgust, which in turn encourages sharing the content faster and farther.<sup>28</sup>

Online environments may create 'echo chambers'—networks of like-minded people who confirm each other's opinions instead of promoting critical thinking<sup>29</sup>—exacerbating these effects. Disinformation spreads more quickly within these closely connected groups due to a lack of dissenting voices.<sup>30</sup> This may facilitate the creation of a society that is increasingly polarised and misinformed<sup>31</sup> as people are more likely to be affected by inaccurate information if they see it more frequently, especially in cases where fresh exposure influences decision-making.<sup>32</sup>

24 R. Kelly Garrett, Brian E. Weeks, and Rachel L. Neo, 'Driving a Wedge Between Evidence and Beliefs: How Online Ideological News Exposure Promotes Political Misperceptions', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* Vol. 21, Issue 5 (2016): 331–48.

25 James N. Druckman, Erik Peterson, and Rune Slothuus, 'How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation', *American Political Science Review* Vol. 107, Issue 01 (2013): 57–79; R. Kelly Garrett, Shira Dvir Gvirsman, Benjamin K. Johnson, Yariv Tsfati, Rachel Neo, and Aysenur Dal, 'Implications of Pro- and Counterattitudinal Information Exposure for Affective Polarization', *Human Communication Research* Vol. 40, Issue 3 (2014): 309–32; Brian E. Weeks, 'Emotions, Partisanship, and Misperceptions: How Anger and Anxiety Moderate the Effect of Partisan Bias on Susceptibility to Political Misinformation', *Journal of Communication* Vol. 65, Issue 4 (2015): 699–719; Spee Kosloff, Jeff Greenberg, Toni Schmader, Mark Dechesne, and David Weise, 'Smearing the Opposition: Implicit and Explicit Stigmatization of the 2008 U.S. Presidential Candidates and the Current U.S. President', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* Vol. 139, No 3 (2010): 383–98.

26 Weeks, 'Emotions, Partisanship, and Misperceptions'.

27 William J. Brady, Julian A. Wills, John T. Jost, Joshua A. Tucker, and Jay J. Van Bavel, 'Emotion Shapes the Diffusion of Moralized Content in Social Networks', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Vol. 114, No 28 (2017): 7313–18.

28 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, 'The Spread of True and False News Online', *Science* Vol. 359, Issue 6380 (2018): 1146–51; M. J. Crockett, 'Moral Outrage in the Digital Age', *Nature Human Behaviour* Vol. 1 (2017): 769–71.

29 M. Conover, J. Ratkiewicz, and M. Francisco, 'Political Polarization on Twitter', *Proceedings of the Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, Conference Paper (2011): 89–96; Sarita Yardi and Danah Boyd, 'Dynamic Debates: An Analysis of Group Polarization over Time on Twitter', *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30, No 5 (2010): 316–27.

30 Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

31 Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

32 Adam J. Berinsky, 'Rumors and Health Care Reform: Experiments in Political Misinformation', *British Journal of Political Science* Vol. 47, Issue 2 (2017): 241–62; Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D Cannon, and David G Rand, 'Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* Vol. 147, No 12 (2018): 1865–80.



Recent evidence suggests that echo-chambers may not be forming as often as first expected<sup>33</sup>, and users are, in fact, exposed to more cross-cutting information online than they would select purely based on choice.<sup>34</sup> Even so, this cross-cutting information may not have a positive effect. Users with more extreme ideological positions are more active on social media<sup>35</sup> and exposure to opposing views online can also increase polarisation by highlighting areas of disagreement.<sup>36</sup> Both situations provide opportunities for those who wish to leverage the polarising effects of social media, either through infiltrating echo chambers to spread negative messages about an out-group without opposition, or by engaging with someone while posing as an out-group member in order to antagonise and create a negative impression of the out-group as a whole.

### *The St. Petersburg Troll Farm and Online Polarisation*

From as early as 2012, information operations conducted over social media have been targeting citizens in the West.<sup>37</sup> These operations originate from the St Petersburg ‘troll farm’ run by the Russian Internet Research Agency (Russian IRA). The agency aims to influence online conversations about regional, national, and international issues that affect Russian foreign and domestic policy interests.<sup>38</sup> Online manipulation can take the form of ‘trolling’ orchestrated from human-controlled accounts or political communications spread by automated accounts (bots).<sup>39</sup> Since 2012, these campaigns have grown steadily in number and scale,<sup>40</sup> and have gained much international attention, particularly surrounding the 2016 US presidential election.<sup>41</sup>

33 Pablo Barberá, John T. Jost, Johnathan Nagler, Joshua A. Tucker, Richard Bonneau, ‘Tweeting From Left to Right: Is Online Political Communication More than an Echo Chamber?’, *Psychological Science* Vol. 26, № 10 (2015): 1531–42; Jonathan Bright, ‘Explaining the Emergence of Echo Chambers on Social Media: The Role of Ideology and Extremism’, *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (2016).

34 Etyan Bakshy, Solomon Messing, and Lada A. Adamic, ‘Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook’, *Science* Vol. 348, Issue 6239 (2015): 1130–32.

35 Pablo Barberá and Gonzalo Rivero, ‘Understanding the Political Representativeness of Twitter Users’, *Social Science Computer Review* Vol. 33, № 6 (2015), 712–29; Daniel Preotjuc-Pietro, Ye Liu, Daniel J. Hopkins, and Lyle Ungar, ‘Beyond Binary Labels: Political Ideology Prediction of Twitter Users’, *Proceedings Of the 55th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics*, 2017, 729–40.

36 Christopher Bail, Lisa Argyile, Taylor Brown, John Bumpus, Haohan Chen, M.B. Hunzaker et al., ‘Exposure to Opposing Views Can Increase Political Polarization: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment on Social Media’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2018, 1–6.

37 Howard et al., ‘The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization’.

38 Theodore P. Gerber and Jane Zavisca, ‘Does Russian Propaganda Work?’, *The Washington Quarterly* Vol. 39, Issue 2 (2016): 79–98; Sergey Sanovich, ‘Computational Propaganda in Russia: The Origins of Digital Misinformation’, University of Oxford Computational Propaganda Research Project, 2017.

39 Samuel C Woolley and Philip N Howard, ‘Political Communication, Computational Propaganda, and Autonomous Agents’, *International Journal of Communication*, 10 (2016): 4882–90; Rolf Fredheim, ‘Robotrolling 2019, Issue 1’ (Riga, Latvia, NATO StratCom COE, 2019); Srijan Kumar, Justin Cheng, Jure Leskovec, V. S. Subrahmanian, ‘An Army of Me: Sockpuppets in Online Discussion Communities’, *Proceedings of the 26th International Conference on World Wide Web* (2017), 857–66.

40 Howard et al., ‘The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization’; DiResta et al., ‘Tactics & Tropes’.

41 Intelligence Community Assessment, ‘Assessing Russian Activities’.

Over the course of 2018, large, open-source datasets detailing posts from accounts attributed to the Russian IRA were published, making it possible to conduct a detailed analysis of how Russia ran these information campaigns.<sup>42</sup> The data showed that the campaign was not restricted to the 2016 US election but rather sought to divide online groups along racial, ethnic, social, and political lines, and continued long after the election was decided.<sup>43</sup> Both sides of numerous controversial debates were inflamed by Russian IRA activity, especially conversations surrounding provocative race issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States.

*Measuring the effect of these information operations*

While the intention behind this activity is clear, measuring its impact is complex. Trolls have been shown to manipulate the opinions of users in online forums<sup>44</sup> and to steer conversations on blogging platforms.<sup>45</sup> While at times these accounts have garnered greater popularity than those of organic users,<sup>46</sup> the impact they have on the wider online ecosystem is hard to measure. Some calculations show that Russian IRA accounts were influential in spreading targeted URLs across Twitter,<sup>47</sup> but that this activity did not carry over to other web communities (Reddit, 4Chan).<sup>48</sup> Twitter's key role in these campaigns is also illustrated by the fact that in the run-up to the 2016 US Election, more hyperlinks to websites hosting disinformation were shared on Twitter than across the top sixteen mainstream media outlets combined.<sup>49</sup> What is not clear from this evidence however, is what effect the Russian IRA accounts have had on more subtle areas such as promoting ideas in line with Russian interests, engaging other users to sway opinion, and fuelling both sides of controversial online discussions.

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42 Darren I. Linvill and Patrick L. Warren, 'Troll Factories: The Internet Research Agency and State-Sponsored Agenda Building', (in press), 2018; Matthew Hindman and Vlad Barash, 'Disinformation, "Fake News" and Influence Campaigns on Twitter', 2018.

43 Gallacher and Fredheim, 'Division Abroad, Cohesion at Home'; Linvill and Warren, 'Troll Factories'.

44 Todor Mihaylov, Georgi Georgiev, and Preslav Nakov, 'Finding Opinion Manipulation Trolls in News Community Forums', *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Conference on Computational Natural Language Learning*, No July (2015): 310–14.

45 Anton Sobolev, 'Fantastic Beasts and Whether They Matter: How pro-Government "Trolls" Influence Political Conversations in Russia', (In Prep).

46 Howard et al., 'The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization'.

47 Savvas Zannettou et al., 'Who Let the Trolls out? Towards Understanding State-Sponsored Trolls', (2019); Savvas Zannettou et al., 'Characterizing the Use of Images by State-Sponsored Troll Accounts on Twitter', (2019).

48 Savvas Zannettou et al., 'Disinformation Warfare: Understanding State-Sponsored Trolls on Twitter and Their Influence on the Web', (2018).

49 Pablo Barberá, 'Explaining the Spread of Misinformation on Social Media: Evidence from the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election', *Comparative Politics Newsletter* Vol. 28, Issue 2 (2018): 7–11.

In this paper we use a two-part strategy to measure the effect of information operations on online conversations. In Part 1 we focus on a case study of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement which was targeted by Russian IRA accounts. This social movement has spread both online and offline to protest the systematic violence perpetrated against African-Americans, particularly by police officers.<sup>50</sup> Opposition movements to BLM (#BlackLivesMatter) have criticised it for failing to appreciate the value of all races (#AllLivesMatter) or for failing to respect the value of police officers and the risk they take in course of their work (#BlueLivesMatter).<sup>51</sup> These hashtags can shape how information flows through the wider network and therefore play a significant role in the spreading of ideas.<sup>52</sup> Russian IRA accounts imitated authentic users on both sides of this debate to disseminate provocative messages to various target audiences and to foster antagonism between opposing groups.<sup>53</sup> This is likely to have contributed to the polarisation of the #BlackLivesMatter conversation online; Russian IRA accounts were in the top percentile of retweeted accounts in both supporting and opposing sides of the Twitter conversation.<sup>54</sup> We investigated the global effect of the Russian IRA tweets on the entire #BlackLivesMatter conversation by testing whether the daily degree of polarisation of the Twitter conversation correlated positively with earlier Russian IRA activity surrounding the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag.

In Part 2 we look at the impact of Russian IRA activity on Reddit using natural language programming, text analysis measures, and causal impact modelling to analyse the effect of >16,000 Reddit posts attributed to the Russian IRA. Following revelations about the scope of Russian IRA manipulation of social media platforms in 2016, Reddit was the only social media company to keep this activity publicly visible on the platform rather than removing it, so it is the only platform where the immediate response to Russian IRA content can be analysed directly. We measure the response to known artificial activity and predict that

50 Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain, and Meredith Clark, 'Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklives-matter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice', *SJRN Electronic Journal*, (2016).

51 Leo G. Stewart, Ahmer Arif, A. Conrad Nied, Emma S. Spiro, and Kate Starbird, 'Drawing the Lines of Contention: Networked Frame Contests within #BlackLivesMatter Discourse', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* Vol. 1, Issue CSCW, Article № 96 (2017): 1–23.

52 Leo G. Stewart, Ahmer Arif, and Kate Starbird, 'Examining Trolls and Polarization with a Retweet Network', *Proceedings of WSDM Workshop on Misinformation and Misbehavior Mining on the Web (MIS2)*, 2018; Ryan J. Gallagher et al., 'Divergent Discourse between Protests and Counter-Protests: #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter', *PLoS ONE* 13, № 4 (2018): 1–23.

53 Ahmer Arif, Leo G. Stewart, and Kate Starbird, 'Acting the Part: Examining Information Operations within #BlackLivesMatter Discourse', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* Vol. 2, Issue CSCW, Article № 20 (2018): 1–26.

54 Stewart et al., 'Examining Trolls and Polarization'.

Russian IRA activity causes a measurable decrease in the quality on discussion threads.

In this study we do not make any attributions to which accounts were operated from the Russian IRA. Instead the accounts were identified and attributed by the social media platforms themselves using information that is not available to the public.

## Methods

*How does the degree of daily polarisation of the #BlackLivesMatter conversation on Twitter correlate with Russian IRA activity?*

### Data collection and sampling

Twitter is a popular social media platform built on a microblogging format. Users can share short messages, or 'tweets', with their followers who can in turn 'retweet' these messages to their own followers. Tweets can sometimes contain hashtags indicating that it is part of a broader conversation. In late 2018 Twitter averaged 321 million active monthly users.<sup>55</sup>

We obtained Twitter data relating to the Black Lives Matter conversation from an archive compiled by the digital chronicling organisation 'Documenting the Now' (DocNow).<sup>56</sup> The dataset contains 17,292,130 tweet IDs for tweets collected from the Twitter streaming API for #BLM and #BlackLivesMatter between 29 January 2016 and 18 March 2017.<sup>57</sup> Twitter's terms of service do not allow public redistribution of tweets; however, they do allow datasets of tweet IDs to be shared. We then recovered the full tweet from each tweet ID by performing a search through the Twitter search API (also known as 'hydration') using DocNow's Hydrator software.<sup>58</sup>

Only tweets which were still publicly available at the time of the search could be recovered; we could not recover tweets that had been deleted by Twitter or by the users themselves.

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<sup>55</sup> Statista, 'Number of monthly active Twitter users worldwide from 1st quarter 2010 to 1st quarter 2019 (in millions)', 2019, accessed February 25, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Documenting the Now.

<sup>57</sup> Ed Summers, *Black Lives Matter Tweets 2016*, *The Internet Archive*, 17 October 2017.

<sup>58</sup> DocNow Hydrator on GitHub.

We hydrated the dataset of tweet IDs on 24 November 2018, which led to a collection of 9,531,526 tweets, or 55% of available tweet IDs (45% of the original tweets had been deleted since publication). While our dataset, therefore, does not represent the full conversation, it is the best approximation available given the limits that Twitter places on data sharing. Importantly, this dataset does not contain the tweets from Russian IRA, as this information was removed from the platform at the point of attribution by Twitter, prior to collection. Therefore, our measure of polarisation reflects the polarisation of the conversation of genuine (i.e. non-Russian IRA) accounts without potential artificial inflation from Russian IRA tweets.

Data on the activity of known Russian IRA accounts were collected by Linvill and Warren<sup>59</sup>, and made publicly available by the team at [fivethirtyeight.com](https://fivethirtyeight.com).<sup>60</sup> This dataset contains 2,973,371 tweets from 2,848 Twitter accounts spanning the period from 2015–2018.

### Measuring polarisation

We measured the degree of daily polarisation on Twitter using a novel technique known as correspondence analysis, implemented in the FactoMineR package for R.<sup>61</sup> Correspondence analysis is a statistical method that makes it possible to map contingency tables to expose underlying relationships between objects in the data.<sup>62</sup> All analyses were performed in R (version 3.4.4, R Core Development Team 2017).

For each day of the dataset, we used a retweet matrix as the contingency table to show the relationship between active users within the dataset (rows) and popular tweets (columns) (see Table 1). A retweet matrix is a good starting point for discovering the structure of Twitter conversations as retweets have been shown to closely represent the expression of agreement with a particular message and, under certain conditions, support of the messenger.<sup>63</sup> Given this, we assumed that if a user retweets messages expressing support or opposition for a given position, this reflects the user's own beliefs.

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<sup>59</sup> Linvill and Warren, 'Troll Factories'.

<sup>60</sup> Oliver Roeder, 'Why We're Sharing 3 Million Russian Troll Tweets', *FiveThirtyEight*, 31 July 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Francois Husson et al., 'Package "FactoMineR"', *CRAN*, 2018.

<sup>62</sup> H. O. Hirschfeld and J. Wishart, 'A Connection between Correlation and Contingency', *Mathematical Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society* Vol. 31, Issue 4 (October 1935): 520.

<sup>63</sup> Panagiotis Metaxas and Twittertrails Research Team, 'Retweets Indicate Agreement, Endorsement, Trust: A Meta-Analysis of Published Twitter Research', *ArXiv Preprint*, 2017.

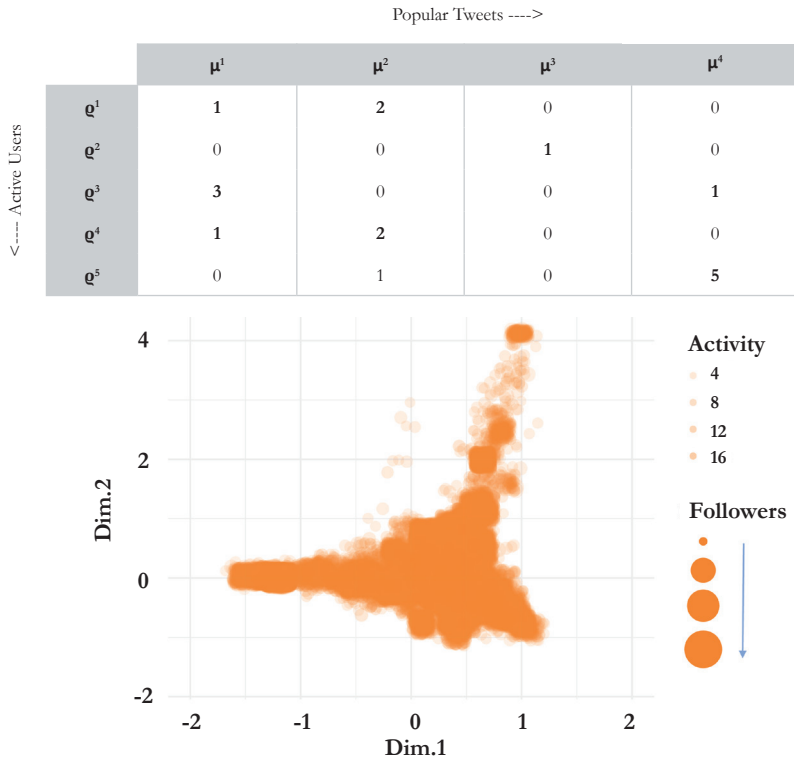


Table 1 and Figure 1 – Simplified retweet matrix for popular tweets and active users for the #BlackLivesMatter Twitter conversation on 07/07/2016 and the correspondence analysis results placing users on dimensions one and two.

Correspondence analysis interprets the retweet matrix across a number of dimensions whereby the largest amount of variability in the data is captured in dimension 1, the next largest amount of variability is captured in dimension 2, the third largest amount of variability is captured in dimension 3. The scores for dimension 1 were used to calculate the position of each tweet on the dimension 1 scale in relation to the other tweets for that day. As explained below, dimension 1 generally distinguishes between tweets that were either for or against the #BlackLivesMatter movement; the greater the score in dimension 1 the stronger the support or criticism. Opposition tweets were often framed as part of a counter-movement, such as #BlueLivesMatter, co-opting BLM-related hashtags (#BlackLivesMatter or #BLM) to inject opposing opinions into the conversation.

We focused only on the dimension that demonstrated the greatest variance in the daily activity, dimension 1, because it was the most stable across multiple days and was the most reliable indication of the level of support or opposition for the Black Lives Matter movement indicated by the tweet. We verified the consistency of this dimension by taking a random sample of 50 days from the dataset and selecting the tweets with the highest and lowest scoring days on dimension 1. We manually coded whether the messages presented in these tweets represented opposing sides. This was the case for 85% of the days. Manual inspection of the remaining 15% of days showed that these tended not to have a polarised debate, and so the dimension was absent rather than missed.

To perform a successful a correspondence analysis, the contingency table had to represent a well-connected subgraph of the retweet network to avoid a small subset of users, peripheral to the main conversation, generating large scores on the important dimensions (similar to the k-core within network theory). We therefore used thresholds to filter out less popular tweets (as assessed by the number of retweets) and ‘inactive’ users (who did not retweet many popular tweets). These thresholds depend on daily conversation size and are shown in Table 2. After ranking all popular tweets along dimension 1, we used the results to estimate the dimension 1 score for each user compared to all other users, based on the average of all the tweets they had retweeted. This last step could be performed for all users, not only those defined as ‘active’ in the correspondence analysis.

Selecting the correct values for these thresholds is important for achieving stable results. We selected suitable thresholds dynamically for each day according to two rules: (a) thresholds should not produce extreme scores for a subset of users on dimension 1 ( $|z| > 10$ ), and (b) when applying back to scores from the subgraph to all users, thresholds should allow for >25% of daily users in the conversation to be classified as belonging to dimension 1. In rare cases the standard thresholds did not fit; for these days slightly lower/higher thresholds were applied. This was necessary as for some days certain tweets went ‘viral’, changing the relationship between conversation size and the overall activity of the average user. While setting the thresholds appropriately improved results for each given day, taken overall changing these thresholds did not alter results substantially.

The distribution of users across dimension 1 reflects how their opinions are distributed, and whether users formed distinct ‘camps’—something

we would expect if the conversation were polarised. We were able to measure the degree of this polarisation using Hartigans' dip test,<sup>64</sup> which measures how bimodal a sample is, with higher scores indicating higher bimodality. We operationalised polarisation as the bimodality of each daily distribution of user scores on dimension 1 (Figure 2).

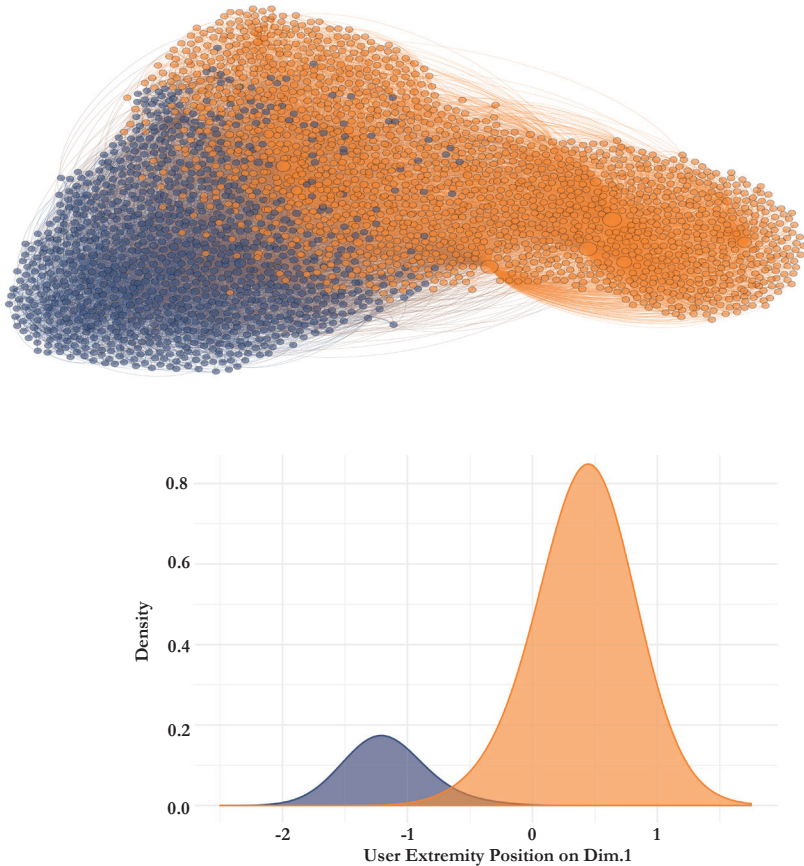


Figure 2(a) and (b) – Visualisation of the polarised retweet network and matching bimodal distribution for dimension 1 for the #BlackLivesMatter conversation on 07/07/2016

64 Martin Maechler, Package “Diptest”, CRAN, 5 December 2015.



## Total conversation size (nb of Tweets)

	>200.000	>100.000	>10.000	>5.000	<5000
Re-Tweet threshold	10	6	4	2	1
Active user threshold	5	3	2	1	1

*Table 2 – Thresholds selected for the number of retweets needed for a tweet to be ‘popular’, and the number of these tweets a user needs to interact with to be considered ‘active’.*

### Relation to Russian Troll Farm Activity

After measuring the degree of polarisation in the daily conversation from genuine accounts, we related it to the artificial activity originating from accounts associated with the Russian IRA using (lagged) Pearson’s correlations. Russian IRA activity is measured as the number of posts using a BLM-related hashtag from the public dataset released in summer 2018.

Russian IRA activity is unlikely to have an immediate effect on the degree of polarisation of the conversation, especially as the direct responses to this activity were unavailable. To measure the correlation between Russian IRA activity and the subsequent level of polarisation in the conversation, taking into account cumulative effects of sustained activity over time and delayed effects in the changing dynamics of the conversation, we compared the cumulative Russian IRA activity for a period of 1–7 days prior to each focal day in the dataset with the mean degree of polarisation over the subsequent 1–20 days.

To test if the association between Russian IRA activity and subsequent polarisation was significantly higher than expected by chance, we used a permutation test. For each given level of lag in polarisation (1–20 days) and cumulative period of Russian IRA activity (1–7 days), we simulated a new dataset where Russian IRA activity for each day was paired with a level of polarisation randomly sampled (with replacement) from our real dataset. We then calculated the correlation coefficient between the Russian activity and the lagged polarisation. This was repeated for 10,000 iterations. This circumvented the problem of autocorrelation associated with the lagged time-series as the lagged polarisation was calculated after the randomisation. To avoid biased coefficients arising from right-skewed distributions of activity and polarisation, we normalised the data using box-cox transformations in the R package ‘MASS’.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> G. E. P. Box and D. R. Cox, ‘An Analysis of Transformations’, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* Vol. 26, No 2 (1964): 211–43; Author Brian et al., ‘Package “MASS”’, CRAN, 2018.

We measured effect sizes for each cumulative period and lag period combination by taking the mean for the total 10,000 simulations. Significance values were calculated as the proportion of simulations where the simulated correlation was higher than the observed correlations.<sup>66</sup>

## **Measuring the direct effect of Russian IRA activity on Reddit conversations**

### *What is Reddit?*

Reddit is a social media platform that focuses on news aggregation and discussion. Content is crowd-sourced, with members submitting text, images, or external hyperlinks, which are then voted up or down by other members. This content is organised into specific ‘subreddits’, user-created boards covering a wide variety of topics. In February 2018, Reddit had 542 million monthly visitors, ranking as the third most-visited website in the US and the sixth most-visited globally.<sup>67</sup>

### *Data collection and sampling*

Reddit released the identity of Russian IRA accounts in the summer of 2018. This totalled 16,821 Reddit posts from 944 accounts.<sup>68</sup> We extracted our dataset in November 2018 from a publicly available repository of historical Reddit data on pushshift.io.<sup>69</sup> The data are available in the form of a Google Big Query Database, which can be queried by users to download specific sections of the entire database. Here we study the period from January–December 2016, the period during which the Russian accounts were most active. We selected subreddits on which Russian IRA accounts posted at least 50 submissions during 2016. These span a range of topics, allowing us to explore differential effects in different areas of the social media platform. Previous research<sup>70</sup> has demonstrated that some of these subreddits were used by the Russian accounts for political manipulation, while others were used for more mundane purposes such as generating realistic account histories or ‘karma’ (platform specific credits that give a user more credibility in their comments). We selected the followed

66 Anthony J. Bishara and James B. Hittner, ‘Testing the Significance of a Correlation with Nonnormal Data: Comparison of Pearson, Spearman, Transformation, and Resampling Approaches’, *Psychological Methods* Vol. 17, No 3 (2012): 399–417.

67 ‘Reddit, Com Traffic, Demographics and Competitors—Alexa’, accessed 25 February 2019.

68 ‘Reddit’s 2017 Transparency Report and Suspect Account Findings’, Reddit, accessed 25 February 2019.

69 <https://files.pushshift.io/reddit/comments/>

70 Gallacher and Fredheim, ‘Division Abroad, Cohesion at Home’.

12 subreddits; *r/funny*, *r/uncen*, *r/Bad\_Cop\_No\_Donut*, *r/AskReddit*, *r/PoliticalHumor*, *r/news*, *r/worldnews*, *r/aww*, *r/gifs*, *r/politics*, *r/The\_Donald*, *r/racism*. Of these, the subreddit *r/uncen* had received only submissions from Russian IRA accounts and no comments on the posts and was therefore not included in the analysis. Pushshift collects data at the point that it is posted to Reddit.<sup>71</sup> This means that the dataset is unaffected by subsequent deletion of posts, however it also means that it does not capture edits made to comments after they are posted (a feature available on Reddit but not on Twitter).

### *Text Analysis Measures*

The impact of Russian IRA activity on the conversational quality on Reddit was operationalised using three text analysis measures, which were applied to each post included in the analysis: Integrative Complexity, Toxicity and Identity Attack.

Integrative Complexity (IC) is a social-psychological measure of how much an individual presents the ability to think and reason with input from multiple perspectives.<sup>72</sup> Higher IC is associated with more accurate and balanced perceptions of other people, lower prejudice, the use of more information when making decisions, as well as less extreme views.<sup>73</sup> Lower IC in discussions is associated with prediction of future violence and intergroup conflict.<sup>74</sup> We used AUTO IC<sup>75</sup> to get IC scores for each Reddit post. The system produces a score from 1 to 7 for each comment, with lower scores representing lower levels of complexity. AUTO IC has been used successfully for the study of online terrorist content, demonstrating the validity of applying the measure to the digital domain.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Pushshift, Reddit.

<sup>72</sup> S. Streufert and P. Suedfeld, 'Conceptual Structure, Information Search, and Information Utilization', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 2, № 5 (November 1965): 736–40.

<sup>73</sup> Allison Smith, Peter Suedfeld, Lucien G. Conway III, and David G. Winter, 'The Language of Violence: Distinguishing Terrorist from Nonterrorist Groups by Thematic Content Analysis', *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* Vol. 1, Issue 2 (July 2008): 142–63; Philip E. Tetlock, Randall S. Peterson, and Jane M. Berry, 'Flattening and Unflattening Personality Portraits of Integratively Simple and Complex Managers', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 64, № 3 (1993): 500–11.

<sup>74</sup> Karen Guttieri, Michael D. Wallace, and Peter Suedfeld, 'The Integrative Complexity of American Decision Makers in The Cuban Missile Crisis', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 39, № 4 (1 December 1995): 595–621; Peter Suedfeld and Susan Bluck, 'Changes in Integrative Complexity Prior to Surprise Attacks', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 32, № 4 (1988): 626–35.

<sup>75</sup> Lucien G. Conway III, Kathrene R. Conway, Laura Janelle Gornick, and Shannon C. Houck, 'Automated Integrative Complexity', *Political Psychology* Vol. 35, № 5 (2014): 603–24; Shannon C. Houck, 'Automated Integrative Complexity: Current Challenges and Future Directions', *Political Psychology* 35, Issue 5 (2014): 603–24.

<sup>76</sup> Shannon C. Houck, Meredith A. Repke, and Lucian G. Conway III, 'Understanding What Makes Terrorist Groups' Propaganda Effective: An Integrative Complexity Analysis of ISIL and Al Qaeda', *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* Vol. 12, Issue 2 (2017): 105–18.

We measured the level of Toxicity of each Reddit post with the Google Perspective API.<sup>77</sup> This classification tool was designed by Google's 'Project Jigsaw' and 'Counter Abuse Technology' teams with the aim of promoting better discussions online.<sup>78</sup> The tool uses machine learning models to score the perceived impact a comment might have on a conversation. Comments defined as being ruder, more disrespectful, or more unreasonable receive a higher Toxicity score. The model gives a Toxicity score for each comment on a scale ranging from 0 to 1.

The Google Perspective API also provides additional classifiers that are more specific and can provide further insight into the nature of comments. The Identity Attack option measures the degree to which a comment demonstrates negative or hateful comments targeting someone because of their identity. This is especially useful in the current study as it measures specific intergroup aggression and conflict based on who people are perceived to be. As with Toxicity, the model provides an Identity Attack score for each post on a scale ranging from 0 to 1.

#### *Analysis of submissions and comments*

Russian IRA activity consisted of submissions and comments. A *submission* is the starting post for a new conversation—i.e. threads started by Russian IRA accounts—while a *comment* is a post made on an existing conversation thread started by a genuine user. We analysed submissions and comments separately. We tested whether threads started by Russian IRA posts differed from those started by genuine users, and if Russian IRA comments injected into an existing thread had an impact on the subsequent conversation.

To measure the impact of submissions from Russian IRA accounts, we collected all comments made on threads started by Russian IRA accounts, including the initial submission starting the conversation, from the eleven subreddits identified above. In total this included 2,368 submissions and 30,112 comments. To test whether these conversations differed from genuine conversations, we collected a similar number of random 'control' submissions to the same subreddits within the same time frame. As with the Russian IRA submissions, we collected all the responses to this sample of genuine submissions, with a resulting total of 1,872

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<sup>77</sup> Google Project Jigsaw, 'Perspective', accessed 23 March 2018.

<sup>78</sup> Ellery Wulczyn, Nithum Thain, and Lucas Dixon, 'Ex Machina: Personal Attacks Seen at Scale', *Proceedings of the 26th International Conference on World Wide Web*, 2017, 1391–99.

submissions and 22,503 comments. The lower number of genuine submissions is due to the exclusion of some submissions which received no subsequent comments. We then compared the conversation qualities for these two types of threads (those started by Russian IRA posts versus genuine submissions). As each subreddit was likely to include both types of conversation, we compared like-for-like conversations in each subreddit independently. For each comment in a thread we calculated a number of metrics relating to the measures used to determine the quality of the conversation, namely Integrative Complexity, Toxicity and Identity Attack.

To measure the impact of Russian IRA comments on existing genuine threads (rather than on new threads), we collected the comments from all threads that received at least one comment from a Russian IRA account. The sample of unmanipulated comment threads above was also used as the control for this sample. This dataset contained 455,300 comments from 826 threads, 1,253 of which came from Russian IRA controlled accounts. For each thread we numbered all comments in chronological order, with the injected Russian IRA post numbered as index position zero, subsequent posts incremented positively and previous posts negatively. We limited our analysis to threads containing  $\geq 20$  comments and to the 100 posts either side of the injected Russian IRA post. For each of these 200 comments we calculated the three text analysis measures and averaged these for each position in the thread across all threads, to show the average trend of the conversations. The data were then analysed using a causal analysis model (see details below) to detect changes in the three metrics after the injection of a Russian IRA comment. The analysis was performed across all subreddits for each metric. To explore whether the effect differed between political and non-political conversations, it was then run separately on political and non-political subreddits (Political\_Subreddits; 'The\_Donald', 'politics', 'Bad\_Cop\_No\_Donut', 'PoliticalHumor', 'racism', 'news', 'worldnews', Other\_Subreddits; 'aww', 'gifs', 'funny', 'AskReddit'). We investigated both the immediate and the overall impact of a content injection by running the analysis on the first 25 comments as well as on all 100 comments post-injection.

### *Statistical Methods*

We investigated differences between conversations started by Russian IRA accounts compared to controls by using linear mixed models (LMMs) with the lme4 package. We investigated differences in Integrative Complexity, Toxicity, and Identity Attack between the Russian IRA-started and genuine threads,

including subreddit ID as a random effect. Significance levels of fixed effects were obtained by comparing the full model to the null model with an  $\chi^2$  test. The difference between Russian IRA-started and genuine threads was also compared in each of the 11 individual subreddits using Welch two sample  $t$ -tests comparing the differences in mean conversation qualities. Toxicity and Identity Attack measures were square-root-transformed to ensure normality. Integrative Complexity could not be normalised, and so a Wilcoxon rank sum test with continuity correction was used. We corrected for multiple comparisons by adjusting the  $p$ -values with a Bonferroni-Holm correction.

We calculated the impact of a single artificial comment on an existing thread using the `CausalImpact()` package for R.<sup>79</sup> This package constructs a Bayesian structural time-series model to estimate the causal effect of a specific event on a time-series. In this case the time-series is the conversation quality (taken as the three text analysis measures) as it progresses over time along the thread, and the event is the Russian IRA comment injection at index position zero. This method allowed us to make causal inferences even though performing a randomised experiment was not possible. Through the construction of a time-series model this method predicts a counterfactual of how the response metric would have evolved after the intervention if the intervention had never occurred.<sup>80</sup> This method requires a control time-series of similar data unaffected by the intervention—here we used the unmanipulated threads. By calculating the relationship between the control and response time-series trends on the 100 posts prior to the intervention, the model then predicted the response time-series over the subsequent 100 posts, had there been no injection of Russian IRA comment. We then calculated the observed pointwise differences between manipulated and predicted threads after the intervention occurred. Summing these pointwise differences over a given time window, the model could provide a measure of the size of this cumulative difference over time, which was tested for statistical significance with a Bayesian one-sided tail area probability test.

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79 Kay H Brodersen and Alain Hauser, 'Package "CausalImpact"', *CRAN*, 2017, 1–8.

80 Kay H. Brodersen, Fabian Gallusser, Jim Koehler, Nicolas Remy, and Steven L. Scott, 'Inferring Causal Impact Using Bayesian Structural Time-Series Models', *The Annals of Applied Statistics* Vol. 9, No 1 (2015): 247–74.

## Results

### *Polarisation of Twitter conversations*

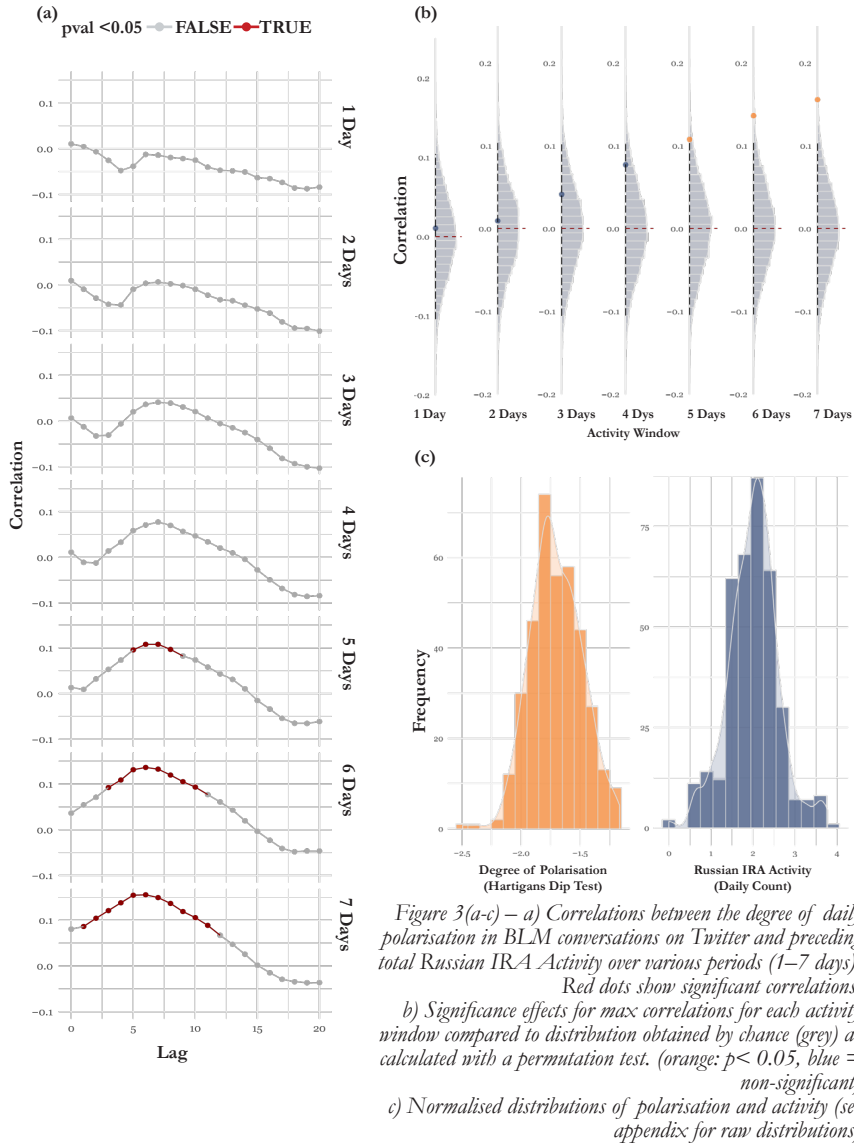
Correlations between Russian IRA activity and subsequent polarisation of the Twitter conversation related to Black Lives Matter were significantly higher than expected by chance (permutation test, Figure 3b). This effect did not occur immediately following Russian IRA activity, but rather occurred predominantly between 3 and 10 days after the conversation manipulation had taken place. More specifically, it increased over time until reaching a peak around 7–9 days following the activity, and then gradually returned to the initial base level (Figure 3a). The effect started earlier, lasted longer, and was more pronounced when we considered Russian IRA activity over a longer time window (Figure 3, Table 3, see Table S1 for individual significance scores and correlation effect sizes). When looking at the longest period of cumulative activity—seven days—this trend appeared to last for almost two weeks from day two until day 14. Importantly, there was no general increasing or decreasing trend over time for either Russian IRA activity or polarisation and so our results were not due to long-term matching trends between the two variables.

The distributions of daily Russian IRA activity showed a long right tail (Appendix Figure 1c), suggesting this activity was uncommonly large on certain days. We tested whether these spikes in Russian IRA activity had an especially large effect on subsequent conversation polarisation by taking the top 10 days with the highest degree of polarisation, and testing whether each of these days had been preceded by a spike in Russian IRA activity (defined as a day with over 100 tweets) within a period of 10 days. We found that in 80% of these most polarised days, a spike in activity had preceded the polarisation.

The highest peaks in Russian IRA activity were fairly evenly distributed throughout the period studied. The mean Russian IRA activity across all days was 27 tweets, but this spiked as high as 592 tweets in a single day and 16 days had over 100 posts.

### *Reddit submissions*

The conversation quality on threads started by Russian IRA-operated accounts differed substantially from that of genuine conversations, but the direction of these differences varied between subreddits and thus between topics of conversation. Overall, posts on threads started by Russian IRA accounts had higher Toxicity (IRA:  $0.48 \pm 0.001$  vs genuine:  $0.47 \pm 0.002$ ,  $n = 56,249$ ,  $\chi^2 =$





	Number Significant Days	Start Day (Lag)	End Day (Lag)	Day of Max Correlation	Max Correlation	p
1	0	NA	NA	1	0.011	0.419
2	0	NA	NA	1	0.009	0.428
3	0	NA	NA	7	0.041	0.217
4	0	NA	NA	7	0.078	0.069
5	4	5	8	7	0.107	0.019
6	8	3	10	6	0.136	0.005
7	11	2	11	6	0.156	<0.001

Table 3 – Statistical results for the highest correlation in the lagged permuted test across each activity window. For full results see annexe Table 1.

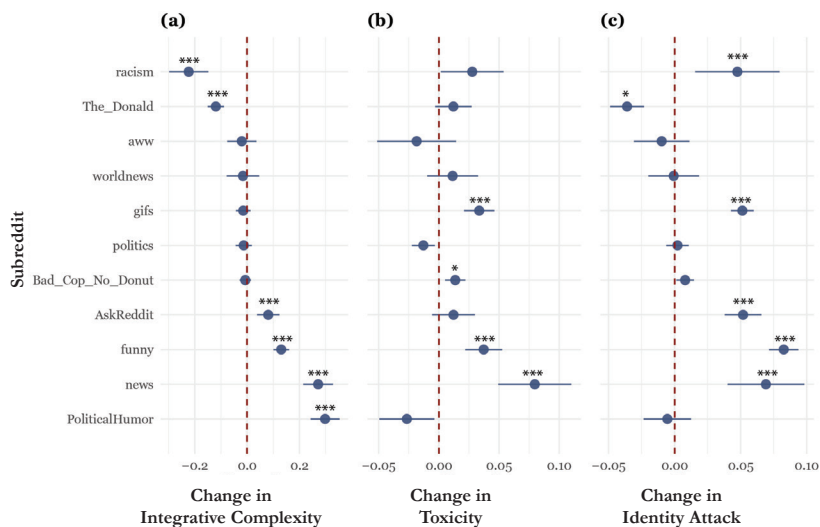


Figure 4(a-c) – Differences in mean conversation quality scores for threads started by Russian IRA Reddit accounts compared to genuine comment threads within the same subreddit. Higher values indicate Russian IRA started conversations scored higher on that conversation metric.

28.34,  $p < 0.001$ ) and Identity Attacks (IRA:  $0.42 \pm 0.001$  vs genuine  $0.40 \pm 0.001$ ,  $\chi^2 = 85.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) but showed no overall change in Integrative Complexity (IRA:  $1.37 \pm 0.004$  vs genuine  $1.36 \pm 0.004$ ,  $\chi^2 = 2.39$ ,  $p = 0.122$ ).

Further analyses performed on individual subreddits showed that threads started by Russian accounts within r/news, r/gifs, r/funny and r/Bad\_Cop\_No\_Donut had higher average Toxicity scores than genuine threads in the same subreddits (Figure 4b, Table 4). Other subreddits showed no differences. We found a similar pattern with regard to levels of Identity Attack. Threads started by Russian accounts within r/racism, r/news, r/gifs, r/funny and r/AskReddit had higher average Identity Attack scores than genuine threads in the same subreddits (Figure 4c, Table 4), while artificial comment threads started within r/TheDonald by comparison had a lower average Identity Attack scores than genuine threads. Other subreddits showed no differences. While we found no difference in Integrative Complexity overall, artificial threads started by Russian IRA accounts received comments with lower IC scores in r/TheDonald and r/racism, but higher IC scores in r/PoliticalHumor, r/news, r/funny and r/AskReddit (Figure 4a, Table 4).

Text Analysis Measures

	Integrative Complexity					Toxicity					
	Mean IRA Started	Mean Genuine	W	p	d	Mean IRA Started	Mean Genuine	df	t	p	d
r/racism	1.18±0.02	1.40±0.03	132938	< 0.001	0.318	0.55±0.01	0.52±0.01	987	-2.09	0.037	0.127
r/The_Donald	1.15±0.01	1.27±0.01	1626926	< 0.001	0.149	0.48±0.01	0.47±0.01	3646	1.56	0.471	0.051
r/aww	1.09±0.02	1.11±0.02	32751	1	0.064	0.36±0.01	0.38±0.01	292	-1.11	0.541	0.103
r/worldnews	1.41±0.03	1.43±0.02	426810	1	0.024	0.46±0.01	0.45±0.01	1023	1.06	0.541	0.033
r/gifs	1.22±0.01	1.23±.01	3296930	1	0.029	0.45±0.004	0.42±0.01	4900	-5.22	< 0.001	0.145
r/politics	1.44±0.01	1.45±0.01	9524468	1	0.018	0.45±0.004	0.46±0.002	4083	2.66	0.06	0.06
r/Bad_Cop_No_Donut	1.38±0.01	1.39±0.01	18150512	1	0.011	0.53±0.003	0.51±0.003	11,717	-3.16	0.013	0.058
r/AskReddit	1.34±0.02	1.26±0.01	858343	< 0.001	0.149	0.43±0.01	0.42±0.01	2413	1.34	0.541	0.054
r/funny	1.29±0.01	1.16±0.01	1690132	< 0.001	0.259	0.46±0.004	0.42±0.001	2143	4.75	< 0.001	0.164
r/news	1.42±0.001	1.15±0.03	1296950	< 0.001	0.406	0.49±0.002	0.41±0.02	186	-5.18	< 0.001	0.334
r/PoliticalHumor	1.53±0.02	1.23±0.02	664965	< 0.001	0.405	0.44±0.002	0.41±0.01	726	4.75	0.136	0.164

Table 4 – Statistical results for pared sample t-tests comparing differences in mean conversation quality scores for threads started by Russian IRA Reddit accounts compared to organic comment threads within the same subreddit

		Identity Attack					
Subreddits		Mean IRA Started	Mean Genuine	df	t	p	d
	r/racism	0.61±0.01	0.56±0.01	984	-2.92	0.022	0.177
	r/The_Donald	0.39±0.01	0.43±0.01	3792	5.5	< 0.001	0.178
	r/aww	0.29±0.01	0.30±0.01	294	-0.92	1	0.085
	r/worldnews	0.42±0.01	0.42±0.01	991	-0.07	1	0.004
	r/gifs	0.36±0.003	0.31±0.003	5208	-11.7	< 0.001	0.314
	r/politics	0.42±0.003	0.42±0.002	3766	0.5	1	0.012
	r/Bad_Cop_No_Donut	0.43±0.003	0.42±0.003	11,644	-2.35	0.095	0.043
	r/AskReddit	0.37±0.01	0.32±0.004	2112	-7.31	< 0.001	0.3
	r/funny	0.40±0.004	0.32±0.004	3155	-14.6	< 0.001	0.429
	r/news	0.44±0.002	0.34±0.02	185	-4.7	< 0.001	0.314
	r/PoliticalHumor	0.39±0.003	0.40±0.01	735	-0.6	1	0.031

*Table 4 – Statistical results for pared sample t-tests comparing differences in mean conversation quality scores for threads started by Russian IRA Reddit accounts compared to organic comment threads within the same subreddit (continued)*

### Results – Reddit comments

Across all subreddits and comment threads, Russian IRA comments led to a small drop in the Integrative Complexity of the subsequent conversation over a period of 100 comments by a factor of  $1\% \pm 0.51$  (Figure 5a-c).

For the period after a Russian IRA comment injection, the average Integrative Complexity was  $1.41 \pm 0.004$ . In the absence of any intervention, the causal analysis model predicted an average value of  $1.42 \pm 0.006$ , significantly higher than the observed value (Bayesian one-sided tail area probability  $p = 0.035$ ). In other words, on average a Russian comment caused a 0.01 decrease in IC compared to predictions.

Additionally, Russian IRA comment injections lead to short term increase in the Integrative Complexity of conversations in non-political subreddits by a factor of  $2\% \pm 0.77$  over the subsequent 25 comments ( $p = 0.005$ ).

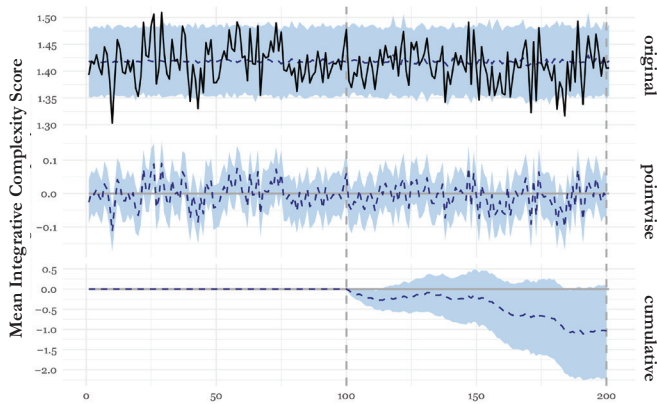


Figure 5(a-c) – Causal Impact analysis of Artificial Russian Reddit account comment injection on the Integrative Complexity of the conversation. Panel (a) - the observed trend for average IC over the course of the conversations, along with the counterfactual prediction period after the intervention if it had not occurred. Panel (b) - the pointwise difference this counterfactual prediction and the observed data. Panel (c) - the cumulative pointwise difference overtime, giving an indication of the overall effect of the intervention on the IC of the conversation.

There were no measurable differences in the effect of Russian IRA comment injection on Integrative Complexity in political subreddits when considered in isolation, or in non-political subreddits over longer periods of time (Table 5).

		Text Analysis Measures											
Subreddits	Time Span (Comments)	Integrative Complexity				Toxicity				Identity Attack			
		Mean Observed	Mean Predicted	P	Cumulative Change	Mean Observed	Mean Predicted	P	Cumulative Change	Mean Observed	Mean Predicted	P	Cumulative Change
All	100	1.41±0.004	1.42±0.006	0.035	-1%±0.51	0.26±0.004	0.27±0.001	0.148	-1%±0.77	0.20±0.001	0.20±0.001	0.064	-1%±0.51
	25	1.41±0.003	1.42±0.002	0.152	-1%±0.77	0.27±0.0005	0.27±0.002	0.303	0%±0.77	0.20±0.001	0.21±0.002	0.379	0%±1.02
Political	100	1.43±0.006	0.143±.01	0.373	0%±0.77	0.27±0.0003	0.27±0.002	0.301	1%±1.28	0.21±0.0002	0.21±0.002	0.085	2%±1.28
	25	1.42±0.02	1.43±0.03	0.178	-1±1.02	<b>0.28±0.001</b>	<b>0.27±0.002</b>	<b>0.019</b>	<b>3%±1.53</b>	0.21±0.001	0.21±0.004	0.137	2%±2.6
Non-Political	100	1.23±0.005	1.24±0.007	0.329	0%±0.77	0.23±0.003	0.23±0.002	0.378	0%±1.28	0.13±0.0002	0.13±0.002	0.482	0%±1.53
	25	<b>1.26±0.007</b>	<b>1.23±0.002</b>	<b>0.005</b>	<b>2%±0.77</b>	0.22±0.001	0.23±0.004	0.118	-2%±1.80	<b>0.14±0.001</b>	<b>0.13±0.002</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>10%±2.04</b>

Table 5 – Statistical results for causal impact analysis across the three conversation measures; Integrative Complexity, Toxicity and Identity Attack and across two time periods; 100 and 25 comments

Russian IRA comment injections also affected the Toxicity of subsequent conversations, but these effects occurred only in political subreddits and for short periods. While there was no significant effect of Russian IRA comment injection on Toxicity if considered over the entire post-intervention period of 100 comments, comment injections did increase Toxicity of the conversation over the next 25 comments by a factor of  $3\% \pm 1.53$  ( $p = 0.019$ ), but this effect subsequently disappeared over the following 75 comments (Figure 6).

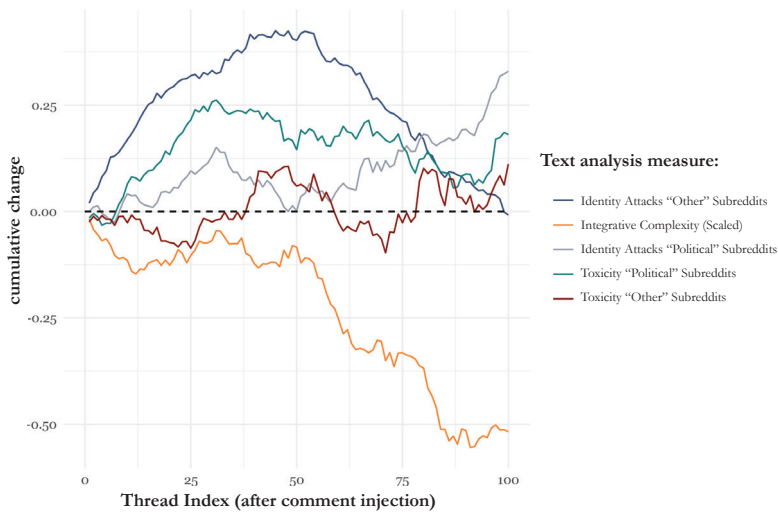


Figure 6 – Cumulative impact of artificial Russian IRA comment injections on the Toxicity, Identity Attack (IA), and Integrative Complexity (IC) of subsequent conversation on Reddit in political and non-political subreddits.

Similarly, the impact of the degree of Identity Attacks taking place in conversations after a Russian comment injection also depended on whether the comments occurred in political or non-political subreddits. In non-political subreddits, comment injection was followed by a marked short-term increase in Identity Attacks over the next 25 comments by a factor of  $10\% \pm 2.04$  ( $p = 0.001$ ), and this effect subsequently dissipated over time. There was no change in the degree of Identity Attacks following a Russian IRA comment injection in a political subreddit.

## Discussion

In this study we examined whether social media activity from artificial accounts run by the Russian IRA led to measurable changes in the conversation of genuine users on Twitter and Reddit. Our results show that Russian IRA activity indeed predicted changes in the conversations taking place on both platforms, but the exact effects differed between platforms and the type of manipulation taking place.

On Twitter, higher amounts of Russian IRA activity in the Black Lives Matter conversation predicted increases in the subsequent conversational polarisation of genuine Twitter users. This increase in polarisation peaked approximately one week after the injection of Russian IRA content and the association was most pronounced around the periods of highest Russian activity, suggesting that large spikes in Russian IRA activity had the greatest influence on the subsequent conversation. The gradual build-up of these effects over a week may reflect a structural property of Twitter—that more a tweet is retweeted, the more influence it gains on the network.<sup>81</sup> On days with higher numbers of tweets from Russian IRA accounts there was a greater likelihood that one of the tweets would go ‘viral’ and be exposed to a much larger audience—either by simply manually increasing the number of tweets or by mass (automated) retweeting through the use of connected bot accounts.<sup>82</sup> Earlier research has found that Russian IRA accounts embed themselves into both for and against sides of the Black Lives Matter debate;<sup>83</sup> our results show that this may have contributed to the polarisation of both sides of the debate. It is noteworthy that we find this effect despite the high attrition rate within our Twitter data; 45% of Tweets were deleted before data collection. Deleted tweets are more likely to contain negative sentiment or profanity<sup>84</sup> or to be ‘regretted’ by their author,<sup>85</sup> and so the exclusion of these tweets likely muted the observed effects of Russian IRA activity on polarisation.

On Reddit we found that threads started by Russian IRA accounts were generally more Toxic than conversations started by genuine users whilst also showing more instances of Identity Attacks. Higher Toxicity reflects that these conversations

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81 Ee-Peng Lim, Palakorn Achananuparp, and Feida Zhu, ‘On Modeling Virality of Twitter Content’, *ICADI*, 2011, 212:221.

82 Kumar et al., ‘An Army of Me’; Fredheim, ‘Robotrolling’.

83 Anif et al., ‘Acting the Part’.

84 Parantapa Bhattacharya and Niloy Ganguly, ‘Characterizing Deleted Tweets and Their Authors’, *Insom*, 2016, 10–13.

85 Lu Zhou, Wenbo Wang, and Keke Chen, ‘Tweet Properly: Analyzing Deleted Tweets to Understand and Identify Regrettable Ones’, *Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on World Wide Web - WWW ’16*, 2016, 603–12.

were more rude, aggressive, or disrespectful, and more likely to inflame other users (both targets and observers), while conversations with higher Identity Attack scores contained a greater number of hostile comments made against people due to group membership, including race and political affiliation.<sup>86</sup> Both of these measures indicate that Russian IRA activity was effective in promoting hostile conversations among other users, likely increasing divisions among group lines.

The effect of Russian IRA activity on Integrative Complexity was more complicated. While there was no overall difference in the Integrative Complexity of threads started by the Russian IRA compared to genuine threads, there were differential effects of Integrative Complexity depending on the subreddit in which a conversation was started. Conversations started by Russian IRA accounts in r/racism and r/The\_Donald showed reductions in Integrative Complexity, (less complex conversations with less nuance, demonstrating reasoning from fewer viewpoints)<sup>87</sup>, while conversations started in r/AskReddit, r/funny, r/news and r/PoliticalHumor displayed higher Integrative Complexity compared to genuine conversation threads in these subreddits. One interpretation of these results is that they are related to the partisan nature of the political subreddits, which may facilitate a reduction in complexity due to a lack of opposing voices,<sup>88</sup> compared to the 'general interest' subreddits, which may enable greater intergroup discussion because of their non-partisan nature. These and other explanations need direct testing, however, and merit further research.

We also found evidence suggesting a causal relationship between Russian IRA activity and conversation quality by studying the impact of comments from Russian IRA accounts injected into existing genuine conversations. Across all subreddits, Russian IRA comment injections led to a decrease in the Integrative Complexity of the conversation over the subsequent 100 comments. Additionally, there was a shorter-lived effect, detectable on the 25 subsequent comments, which led to an increase in Toxicity in political subreddits and an increase in the level of Identity Attacks in non-political subreddits. Although these findings are less clear-cut than those described above, they similarly demonstrate that any measurable effects of Russian IRA activity are in the direction of undermining conversational quality. Cumulatively, these small effects have the power significantly to shape a conversation. They also suggest that different dynamics unfold in political and

86 Google Project Jigsaw, '[Perspective](#)'; Wulczyn et al., '[Ex Machina](#)'

87 Streufert and Suedfeld, '[Conceptual Structure](#)'.

88 Sunstein, *#Republic*; Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*.

non-political online conversations, which is in line with previous findings,<sup>89</sup> and that distinguishing between these conversational domains remains important in future research. We found that in the absence of manipulation, the control threads within political subreddits had higher Integrative Complexity, Toxicity and Identity Attacks than non-political subreddits, suggesting that political conversations are characterised by both increased engagement and increased hostility. These characteristics may relate to findings that echo chambers form primarily in the political domain,<sup>90</sup> but whether these are causes or effects remains to be tested.

Comparing the results across platforms, we found that the effects of Russian IRA activity manifested more quickly on Reddit than on Twitter. On average, the effects detected over 25 and 100 Reddit posts following manipulation peaked around 3.5 days and 5 days after submission respectively, while on Twitter the association between Russian IRA activity and polarisation peaked after 7 days. This is likely due to the structural differences between the platforms. On Twitter the impact of content is measured by popularity—how many people react to it—and therefore tweets that go viral can have a large effect on the overall conversation.<sup>91</sup> On Reddit a single comment cannot go viral and impact results from the cumulative effect of many posts or of many users ‘upvoting’ a thread.<sup>92</sup> On Twitter, tweets can take longer to go viral, compared to the direct responses which occur on Reddit threads, that have a shorter-lived visibility. Given these considerations, it would also be interesting to study the consequences of more sustained periods of Russian activity in a single Reddit thread. Our analytical procedure did not allow us to identify these consequences as we could only model a single intervention at a time, but we expect that repeated co-ordinated activity within a single thread would lead to increased cumulative effects.<sup>93</sup> Including this co-ordinated behaviour may mean that the consequences of comments in existing threads more closely resemble the observed differences in total conversations following genuine submissions and Russian IRA submissions.

89 Barberá et al., ‘*Tweeting From Left to Right*’; Kiran Garimella, Gianmarco De Francisci Morales, Aristides Gionis, and Michael Mathioudakis, ‘*Political Discourse on Social Media: Echo Chambers, Gatekeepers, and the Price of Bipartisanship*’, *International World Wide Web Conference 2* (2018).

90 Barberá et al., ‘*Tweeting From Left to Right*’; Garimella et al., ‘*Political Discourse on Social Media*’.

91 Ee-Peng Lim, Palakorn Achananuparp, and Feida Zhu, ‘*On Modeling Virality of Twitter Content*’, *ICADI*, 2011, 212:221.

92 Amir Salihfendic, ‘*How Reddit Ranking Algorithms Work*’, Hacking and Gonzo, *Medium*, 8 December 2015.

93 J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, ‘*The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter*’, *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, 5 March 2015; Emilio Ferrara, ‘*Manipulation and Abuse on Social Media*’, *SIGWEB Newsletter*, Spring 2015.



By increasing the polarisation of conversations on Twitter and undermining the quality of conversations on Reddit, Russian IRA activity is likely to be effective in increasing the distance between social groups, fuelling both ideological and affective polarisation.<sup>94</sup> This in turn provides ideal circumstances for the distribution of disinformation<sup>95</sup> because it increases the acceptance of (inaccurate) information that confirms prior views—a phenomenon known as ‘confirmation bias’<sup>96</sup>—and facilitates repeated exposure to the same inaccurate information because alternative perspectives are eliminated from discussion by design.<sup>97</sup> Western societies that focus more on internal strife from polarised domestic communities tend to focus less on international issues, illustrating that this activity may be part of a larger geopolitical strategy.<sup>98</sup>

In this study we focused on activity originating from publicly attributed Russian IRA accounts and their effect on two key social media platforms. Future research should consider including other platforms, and also other groups engaged in information operations. Russian IRA activity accounts for a fraction of all possible information operations activities worldwide, and many other groups produce similar content for a range of different purposes. This includes pursuing international strategic goals (as demonstrated by Iranian actions),<sup>99</sup> focusing attention on perceived domestic concerns (utilised by far-right groups),<sup>100</sup> and quashing dissent (a tactic favoured by China).<sup>101</sup> Our study only begins to unveil the negative effect of information operations globally. If fuelling arguments on both sides of controversial topics works to increase polarisation in these conversations, then pushing only a single side may work to decrease polarisation or even to stifle active debate. This might be the goal for a regime that wishes to quash dissent or opposition. For example, evidence of Chinese government involvement in online discussions shows that across ~450 million social media posts per year the strategy is not to engage with controversial topics or with sceptics of government, but rather to change the subject

94 Mason, ‘I Disrespectfully Agree’.

95 Garrett et al., ‘Driving a Wedge Between Evidence and Beliefs’; Michela Del Vicario, Sabrina Gaito, Walter Quattrociocchi, Matteo Zignani, and Fabiana Zollo, ‘Public Discourse and News Consumption on Online Social Media: A Quantitative, Cross-Platform Analysis of the Italian Referendum’, arXiv.org, February 2017.

96 Raymond S Nickerson, ‘Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises’, *Review of General Psychology* Vol. 2, № 2 (1998): 175–220.

97 Pennycook et al., ‘Prior Exposure Increases’; Berinsky, ‘Rumors and Health Care Reform’.

98 P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *Likewar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2018); James Kirchick, ‘Russia’s Plot against the West’, *Politico*, 17 March 2017.

99 Karan et al., ‘#TrollTracker’.

100 Nathaniel Gleicher, ‘Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from the UK and Romania’, Facebook Newsroom, 7 March 2019.

101 Gary King, Pan Jennifer, and Roberts Margaret E, ‘How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument’, *American Political Science Review* Vol. 111, Issue 03 (2017): 484–501.

of conversations with vocal cheerleading for pro-China positions to overwhelm opposition voices.<sup>102</sup> The Kremlin takes a similar approach towards domestic audiences, using troll farms such as the Russian IRA to produce vast quantities of pro-regime messages in Russian for local consumption.<sup>103</sup>

While it remains to be seen whether these online effects translate into offline actions, there is evidence that online activities can have substantial effects on real world behaviour ranging from exercise and smoking to consumer trends.<sup>104</sup> Our research also shows that online interaction between groups predicts offline violence,<sup>105</sup> while other research demonstrates how online aggression towards disadvantaged groups can lead to offline hate crimes.<sup>106</sup> By demonstrating that information operations promote social polarisation and can have measurable impacts on online conversations more broadly, our study also highlights the risk of potential future vulnerabilities. The ability of hostile actors to create polarising content is increasing at pace, thanks to advances in machine-generated text that closely resembles human speech.<sup>107</sup> If this technology is paired with malicious intent to drive communities apart using social media platforms, then the volume of content may well expand and increase the severity of the challenge to detecting inauthentic content and oppose it.<sup>108</sup>

It is therefore essential to design solutions that address and counter the negative effects of hostile information operations. Identifying the impact of information operations is only the first step in creating counter measures. Evidence suggests that organised attempts to challenge the veracity of disinformation on Twitter

102 King, Jennifer, and Margaret E. 'How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument' *American Political Science Review*, 2017, 111, 3, 484–501

103 Gallacher and Fredheim, 'Division Abroad, Cohesion at Home'.

104 Tim Althoff, Pranav Jindal, and Jure Leskovec, 'Online Actions with Offline Impact: How Online Social Networks Influence Online and Offline User Behaviour', *WSDM Proceedings of the Tenth ACM International Conference on Web Search and Data Mining*, 2017, 537–46; Jacob B. Depue, Brian G. Southwell, Anne E. Betzner, and Barbara M. Walsh, 'Encoded Exposure to Tobacco Use in Social Media Predicts Subsequent Smoking Behavior', *American Journal of Health Promotion* Vol. 29, No 4 (2015): 259–61; Sidharth Muralidharan and Linjuan Rita Men, 'How Peer Communication and Engagement Motivations Influence Social Media Shopping Behavior: Evidence from China and the United States', *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* Vol. 18, No 10 (2015): 595–601.

105 John David Gallacher, Marc W Heerdink, and Miles Hewstone, 'Online Contact between Opposing Political Protest Groups via Social Media Predicts Physical Violence of Offline Encounters', (*under review*), 1–44.

106 Karsten Müller and Carlo Schwarz, 'Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime', *SJRN Electronic Journal*, 7 December 2017.

107 Alec Radford, Jeffrey Wu, Rewon Child, David Luan, Dario Amodei, Ilya Sutskever, 'Language Models Are Unsupervised Multitask Learners', 2018.

108 Miles Brundage et al, 'The Malicious Use of Artificial Intelligence: Forecasting, Prevention, and Mitigation', February 2018

are generally ineffective,<sup>109</sup> while spontaneous fact-checking on Facebook is rare and generally unsuccessful.<sup>110</sup> Other technical solutions should therefore focus on the early detection of artificial content before it can manipulate online conversations,<sup>111</sup> or educational methods which may mitigate the effects of disinformation through inoculation of citizens.<sup>112</sup> Structural changes to social media platforms promoting positive exposure to members of opposing groups will also likely reduce and dilute the impact of efforts to divide these same groups through negative content injections.<sup>113</sup> Addressing the challenge of disinformation is so broad that designing effective interventions will require interdisciplinary efforts at multiple levels of analysis.<sup>114</sup>

## Conclusion

Our study reveals that the malicious use of social media by ‘fake’ accounts can measurably affect the subsequent conversations held by genuine users. Using the activity of the Russian Internet Research Agency on Twitter and Reddit as case studies, we have shown that this effect differed between social media platforms. The effect of Russian activity on Twitter was to increase polarisation after a one-week delay, while there was a more immediate effect on Reddit, immediately altering the quality of subsequent conversations. By developing methods to measure the impact of information operations in online conversations, our study provides an important step in developing effective countermeasures.

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109 Jieun Shin, Lian Jian, Kevin Driscoll, and François Bar, ‘Political Rumoring on Twitter during the 2012 US Presidential Election: Rumor Diffusion and Correction’, *New Media and Society* Vol. 19, No 8 (2017): 1214–35; Drew B. Margolin, Aniko Hannak, and Ingmar Weber, ‘Political Fact-Checking on Twitter: When Do Corrections Have an Effect?’, *Political Communication* Vol. 35, 2 (2018): 196–219.

110 Adrien Friggeri, Lada A. Adamic, Dean Eckles, and Justin Cheng, ‘Rumor Cascades’, *ICWSM 2014 International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, 2014, 101–10.

111 Jordan Wright and Olabode Anise, ‘Don’t @ Me: Hunting Twitter Bots at Scale’, *Black Hat*, 2018, 1–43.

112 Jon Roozenbeek and Sander Van Der Linden, ‘The Fake News Game: Actively Inoculating Against the Risk of Misinformation’, *Journal of Risk Research* 9877 (2018): 1–11.

113 Rupert Brown and Miles Hewstone, ‘An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Contact’, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* Vol. 37 (2005): 255–343; Thomas F Pettigrew and Linda R Tropp, ‘How Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Meta-Analytic Tests of Three Mediators’, *European Journal of Social Psychology* Vol. 38, Issue 6 (2008): 922–34. the 21st century has not begun auspiciously. As we enter only its fifth year, we have already seen unprecedented incidents of international conflict and terrorism (e.g., Afghanistan, 2002; Iraq, 2003; Spain, 2004; USA, 2001).

114 David M. J. Lazer, Matthew A. Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J. Berinsky, Kelly M. Greenhill, Filippo Menczer et al., ‘The Science of Fake News’, *Science* Vol. 359, Issue 6380 (2018): 1094–96.

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## Appendix

		Lag Period (Days)	Correlation	P
Sum Period (Days)	1	0	0.011	0.419
		1	0.005	0.467
		2	-0.006	0.548
		3	-0.026	0.688
		4	-0.048	0.820
		5	-0.038	0.768
		6	-0.013	0.599
		7	-0.014	0.610
		8	-0.019	0.648
		9	-0.022	0.665
		10	-0.025	0.690
		11	-0.040	0.784
		12	-0.047	0.821
		13	-0.049	0.822
		14	-0.051	0.832
		15	-0.063	0.887
		16	-0.065	0.894
		17	-0.074	0.920
		18	-0.086	0.951
		19	-0.088	0.955
		20	-0.084	0.945
Sum Period (Days)	2	0	0.009	0.428
		1	-0.009	0.564
		2	-0.029	0.709
		3	-0.043	0.788
		4	-0.044	0.798
		5	-0.010	0.573
		6	0.003	0.473
		7	0.006	0.451
		8	0.002	0.484
		9	-0.001	0.514
		10	-0.009	0.575
		11	-0.022	0.663
		12	-0.032	0.728
		13	-0.034	0.740
		14	-0.045	0.803
		15	-0.053	0.841
		16	-0.062	0.878
		17	-0.081	0.934
		18	-0.095	0.962
		19	-0.095	0.964
		20	-0.101	0.971
Sum Period (Days)	3	0	0.007	0.441
		1	-0.012	0.594
		2	-0.032	0.739
		3	-0.031	0.723
		4	-0.006	0.544
		5	0.020	0.354
		6	0.037	0.242
		7	0.041	0.217
		8	0.039	0.227
		9	0.031	0.280
		10	0.021	0.348
		11	0.006	0.459
		12	-0.005	0.541
		13	-0.014	0.611
		14	-0.025	0.680
		15	-0.040	0.772
		16	-0.059	0.864
		17	-0.082	0.936
		18	-0.093	0.960
		19	-0.100	0.969
		20	-0.103	0.971
Sum Period (Days)	4	0	0.011	0.409
		1	-0.011	0.581
		2	-0.012	0.590
		3	0.014	0.394
		4	0.033	0.264
		5	0.059	0.131
		6	0.071	0.087
		7	0.077	0.069
		8	0.070	0.092
		9	0.057	0.141
		10	0.047	0.184
		11	0.034	0.259
		12	0.020	0.345
		13	0.010	0.416
		14	-0.004	0.527
		15	-0.028	0.691
		16	-0.049	0.816
		17	-0.068	0.893
		18	-0.082	0.930
		19	-0.085	0.940
		20	-0.084	0.940
Sum Period (Days)	5	0	0.013	0.405
		1	0.009	0.438
		2	0.032	0.279
		3	0.053	0.156
		4	0.073	0.080
		5	0.095	0.035
		6	0.108	0.020
		7	0.108	0.020
		8	0.096	0.033
		9	0.082	0.058
		10	0.073	0.082
		11	0.058	0.136
		12	0.043	0.209
		13	0.031	0.283
		14	0.010	0.422
		15	-0.015	0.613
		16	-0.034	0.741
		17	-0.054	0.848
		18	-0.065	0.890
		19	-0.065	0.894
		20	-0.061	0.877
Sum Period (Days)	6	0	0.036	0.248
		1	0.054	0.151
		2	0.071	0.087
		3	0.092	0.040
		4	0.109	0.018
		5	0.131	0.006
		6	0.136	0.005
		7	0.133	0.006
		8	0.120	0.010
		9	0.105	0.023
		10	0.093	0.037
		11	0.077	0.073
		12	0.061	0.125
		13	0.043	0.208
		14	0.020	0.360
		15	-0.003	0.534
		16	-0.023	0.674
		17	-0.041	0.785
		18	-0.048	0.823
		19	-0.046	0.814
		20	-0.047	0.814
Sum Period (Days)	7	0	0.081	0.058
		1	0.086	0.049
		2	0.104	0.023
		3	0.121	0.009
		4	0.138	0.003
		5	0.155	0.001
		6	0.156	< 0.001
		7	0.150	0.002
		8	0.137	0.004
		9	0.119	0.012
		10	0.106	0.022
		11	0.089	0.046
		12	0.067	0.101
		13	0.047	0.185
		14	0.026	0.313
		15	0.002	0.489
		16	-0.015	0.611
		17	-0.029	0.705
		18	-0.035	0.734
		19	-0.037	0.749
		20	-0.036	0.747

Table Appendix 1 – Statistical results for the lagged permutation test across activity window and lag period. Bold indicates statistical significance at the  $p = 0.005$  level

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# REVERSE ENGINEERING RUSSIAN INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY TACTICS THROUGH NETWORK ANALYSIS

Charles Kriel  
Alexa Pavliuc

## Abstract

In mid-October of 2018, Twitter released a dataset containing both the contents and information for accounts on their platform related to the Internet Research Agency. These accounts were used to influence the 2016 US Presidential election, as well as elections and referenda in several other countries, including the UK and Venezuela. This article documents a data analysis of these tweets, and through data visualisation demonstrates a rigorous methodology of practice at work in Russia's online interference in foreign democracies, particularly through St. Petersburg's Internet Research Agency (IRA). This research will also show that many previous visualisations of this data have failed to factor for time, and therefore overemphasise certain trends. Finally, we question whether Twitter released the entire Internet Research Agency dataset, as claimed.

**Keywords**—*strategic communications, social media, Russian interference, data visualisation, network analysis, Internet Research Agency*

## About the Authors

**Dr Charles Kriel** is the Founder of Kriel.Agency, a strategic communications, research and policy agency with a portfolio including the Persian Gulf, Northern Asia, the Baltics, Balkans, Caucasus and Caribbean.



He is Special Advisor to the UK House of Commons Select Committees on disinformation, and addictive technologies, and to the Trinidad and Tobago Joint National Security Committee.

**Alexa Pavliuc** is an MSc student in Data Science at City, University of London, following her studies in Professional Communication at Ryerson University, Canada. She has conducted research in human-robot-interaction, and on mal-information in provincial elections on YouTube through the employment of network visualisations at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC).

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In mid-October of 2018, Twitter released a dataset containing both the contents and account information of Internet Research Agency-related accounts on their platform, including tweets, images, and account 'bios'. These were accounts that Twitter claimed were used to influence the 2016 US Presidential election, as well as elections and referenda in several other countries, including the UK. According to Twitter, the accounts were also used to influence public sentiment around issues of national importance in other countries, including Ukraine.

Earlier in 2018, the US Congress criticised Twitter, concerned with lack of oversight of the platform. Twitter executives committed to 'provide regular updates and information regarding [their] investigation into foreign interference in political conversations on Twitter'.

The dataset Twitter released in October included '3,841 accounts affiliated with the IRA, originating in Russia, and 770 other accounts, potentially originating in Iran.' This included more than 10 million tweets and more than 2 million images, GIFs,<sup>1</sup> videos, and Periscope broadcasts,<sup>2</sup> including the 'earliest on-Twitter activity from accounts connected with these campaigns, dating back to 2009'.<sup>3</sup> The IRA tweets spanned both English and Russian.

In the press, the Russian troll farm, Internet Research Agency, has become synonymous with influencing global public opinion, interference in foreign elections, and specifically with supporting the campaign of Donald Trump in

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1 GIF's are animated (moving) images that can be shared in tweets in the same way images, videos, and live videos can be.

2 A Periscope broadcast is a live video shared on Twitter.

3 Vijaya Gadde and Yoel Roth, 'Enabling further research of information operations on Twitter', Twitter Blog, 17 October 2018. [Retrieved 16 December 2018]; Natalie Gagliardi, 'Twitter Says 50,000 Russia-linked accounts Tweeted During 2016 US Presidential Election', ZDNet, 19 January 2018. [Retrieved 10 December 2018].

the November 2016 US Presidential election. The agency began targeting the United States in 2014. Based in St. Petersburg, the IRA is funded by a Russian oligarch, Evgeny Prigozhin, who maintains close ties to the Kremlin.<sup>4</sup>

According to Robert Mueller's indictment against the agency (United States of America v. Internet Research Agency LLC A/K/A Mediasintez LLC A/K/A Glavset LLC A/K/A Mixinfo LLC A/K/A Azimut LLC A/K/A Novinfo LLC, et al.) operatives would pose as US citizens, creating US Twitter and Facebook personas, and comment on 'divisive U.S. political and social issues, falsely claim[ing] to be controlled by U.S. activists when, in fact, they were controlled by' the IRA.

Defendant ORGANIZATION<sup>5</sup> had a strategic goal to sow discord in the U.S. political system, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Defendants posted derogatory information about a number of candidates, and by early to mid-2016, Defendants' operations included supporting the presidential campaign of then-candidate Donald J. Trump ('Trump Campaign') and disparaging Hillary Clinton. Defendants made various expenditures to carry out those activities, including buying political advertisements on social media in the names of U.S. persons and entities. Defendants also staged political rallies inside the United States, and while posing as U.S. grassroots entities and U.S. persons, and without revealing their Russian identities and ORGANIZATION affiliation, solicited and compensated real U.S. persons to promote or disparage candidates. Some Defendants, posing as U.S. persons and without revealing their Russian association, communicated with unwitting individuals associated with the Trump Campaign and with other political activists to seek to coordinate political activities.<sup>6</sup>

*The Atlantic* magazine called it an operation straight from the Soviet-era playbook, and, quoting Adrian Chen from a 2015 *New York Times Magazine* article, named it 'the biggest trolling operation in history whose target is nothing less than the

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4 Krishnadev Calamur, 'What Is the Internet Research Agency?', *The Atlantic*, 16 February 2018. [Retrieved 22 December 2018].

5 'Defendant ORGANIZATION' refers to the Internet Research Agency in Robert Mueller's 2018 indictment.

6 *Internet Research Agency Indictment*, United States District Court for the District of Columbia Case 1:18-cr-00032-DLF Document 1 Filed 16 February 2018.

utility of the Internet as a democratic space'.<sup>7</sup>

More than two years after the American presidential election, and after much political and legal pressure, Twitter released their IRA dataset, as well as simultaneously releasing a dataset from accounts related to Iran but used to influence the US election. The dataset included tweets in several languages, and as this article will show, covered many topics, encompassing original, copied, and retweeted content.

We undertook an analysis of the IRA dataset, with an emphasis on tracing the Twitter activity timelines, in an attempt to demonstrate working methodologies of the Internet Research Agency related to Twitter bots, online influence campaigns, and Russia's malicious interference in foreign affairs.

The following are timelines of findings on the structure of Internet Research Agency bots deployed between 2014 and 2018 to infiltrate and influence English- and Russian-speaking Twitter communities world-wide. This is an attempt to discern the tactics of the agency, establishing that most account operations begin as bot operations, that accounts are often taken over manually once they gain enough followers, and that a law of survival-of-the-fittest operates amongst the IRA's accounts. We show, using the English-language dataset, that the IRA uses innocuous hashtags to inject themselves into larger Twitter conversations and threads, and that their tactics and methods change over time, often obscuring goals and motivations.

Using the Russian-language dataset, we show that accounts with the most followers posted only retweeted content; accounts with more than 1,000 followers tended to target the same users and hashtags; different groups of hashtags and targets changed over time; and tweeting tapered off at the start of 2016. Furthermore, we show that the most tweeted moment in the Russian-language dataset occurred the day after Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 was shot down over Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> And finally, through data visualisations, we show that the Russian dataset is highly organised, with distinct patterns of behaviour across time.

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<sup>7</sup> Calamur, 'What Is the Internet Research Agency?'; Adrian Chen, 'The Agency', *New York Times Magazine*, 2 June 2015.

<sup>8</sup> MH17 was a scheduled passenger flight travelling from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur and was shot down on 17 July 2014, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew.

This pattern of organisation and strategy extends across both the Russian- and English-language datasets. Related to this, we demonstrate that analysing Twitter datasets while factoring out time leads to false conclusions, particularly when visualising the data. Often small and very short-lived operations appear disproportionately important when visualised without a time axis.

Finally, we ask whether Twitter released the full dataset from the Internet Research Agency, and whether Twitter has also not included all the IRA tweets they are clearly aware of in the IRA dataset released to media organisations, governments, the research community, and the public.

### Literature review

The Digital Forensic Research lab (DFR) has also conducted an analysis of the tweets, with an emphasis on the second wave of accounts, active after 2017—indeed after the actual election itself. DFR’s goal was to ‘promote shared understanding of the vulnerabilities exploited by various types of online influence operations, as well as social media’s role in democracy’. They also maintain that this data archive is unique because it is complete: ‘What sets this archive apart is Twitter’s consolidation and release of all accounts the platform maintains high confidence are associated with the Russian Internet Research Agency and separate Iranian accounts.’<sup>9</sup> As we will show, we question whether the dataset is complete.

The Oxford Internet Institute has conducted an analysis of global organised interference campaigns. They analyse ‘the new trends of organized media manipulation, and the growing capacities, strategies and resources that support this phenomenon’, but do not focus on examining the work of the Internet Research Agency through the lens of the Twitter dataset.<sup>10</sup>

Rizoiu, Graham, Zhang, Zhang, Ackland, and Xie completed a network analysis of tweets during the presidential debates. They defined the influence of the tweets, modelled latent diffusion structures, used partisan hashtag analysis to quantify user political polarisation and engagement, and found that social bots are both 2.5 times more influential than humans on Twitter, and are more

9 @DFRLab, [‘#TrollTracker: Twitter’s Troll Farm Archives’](#), Digital Forensics Research Lab on Medium, 17 October 2018. [Retrieved 20 December 2018].

10 Philip N. Howard and Samantha Bradshaw, [‘Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation’](#), The Computational Propaganda Project (Oxford Internet Institute, 2018).

politically engaged. However, their study limited itself to tweets around the debates.<sup>11</sup>

Sear and Jensen explored how covert foreign influence operates, specifically in Australia, using the same Twitter dataset.<sup>12</sup>

Howard, Kollanyi, Bradshaw, and Neudert analysed Twitter data over a 10-day period in 2016, and found that 'nationally, Twitter users got more misinformation, polarizing and conspiratorial content than professionally produced news. Users in some states [...] shared more polarizing political news and information than users in other states. [And] average levels of misinformation were higher in swing states than in uncontested states, even when weighted for the relative size of the user population in each state.' However, the study focused on swing state data.<sup>13</sup>

Demos' Alex Krasodomski-Jones conducted an analysis of the same dataset as this study but focussed on the UK.<sup>14</sup>

Stewart, Arif, and Starbird examined the relationship between political homophily and organised trolling efforts through an analysis of Russian troll accounts retweeting the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Their analysis showed that 'these conversations were divided along political lines, and that the examined trolling accounts systematically took advantage of these divisions'. However, they limited themselves to a single subject, and reached the conclusion that 'research can help us better understand how to combat systematic trolling'.<sup>15</sup>

## Methodology

Using the IRA dataset released by Twitter on 17 October 2018, we built network visualisations of user-to-user and user-to-hashtag relationships. The original dataset contained 9 million tweets. We made a subset using the three million English-language tweets.

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11 For a network analysis of tweets during the presidential debates see Rizioiu, Marian-Andrei, Timothy Graham, Rui Zhang, Yifei Zhang, Robert Ackland, and Lexing Xie, '#DebateNight: The Role and Influence of Socialbots on Twitter During the 1st 2016 U.S. Presidential Debate', *arXiv.org*, 2018.

12 Tom Sear and Michael Jensen, 'Russian trolls targeted Australian voters on Twitter via #auspol and #MH17', *The Conversation*, 22 August 2018.

13 Philip N. Howard, Bence Kollanyi, Samantha Bradshaw, and Lisa-Marie Neudert, 'Social Media, News and Political Information during the US Election: Was Polarizing Content Concentrated in Swing States?', *arXiv.org*, 2018.

14 'New Demos Analysis Finds Russian Influence Operations on Twitter Targeted at UK Were Most Visible. When Discussing Islam', Press Release, *Demos*, 1 November 2018.

15 Leo G. Stewart, Ahmen Arif, and Kate Starbird, 'Examining Trolls and Polarization with a Retweet Network', paper presented at *MIS2: Misinformation and Misbehaviour on the Web Workshop 9 February 2018, Los Angeles, C.A.*, p. 6.

We also analysed 4.6 million (4,583,000) Russian-language tweets posted by 1,534 accounts in the same IRA dataset of 9 million tweets. Countries which may have been targeted by Russian-language tweets include: Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus.

To visualise the English-language mention network (or networks of retweets), a random subset of 500,000 tweets was created. Multiple subsets were designated and subsequently visualised; the structure of the one shown in this report is representative of the structure of the others. Networks were coloured by account creation date and were run in two-month intervals showing the evolution and growth of the network over time. Metadata was derived from the tweet- and user-data to provide further layers of insight throughout the report. To do this, we used Gephi.

An open-source software package for network and graphing analysis, Gephi utilises a 3D render engine, displaying networks in real time. According to Bastian, Heymann, and Jacomy, the software uses ‘a flexible and multi-task architecture [to] bring new possibilities to work with complex data sets and produce valuable visual results.’<sup>16</sup>

We used Gephi to render graphic temporal animations of the Twitter datasets.

Our visualisation of the English-language mention network, across time, can be seen [here](#)<sup>17</sup>.

Our visualisation of the hashtag network, across time, can be seen [here](#)<sup>18</sup>.

We pursued a similar methodology in the analysis of the larger, Russian-language dataset, with an emphasis on form, distribution, and methodology, excluding analysis of content, which is an area for future exploration.

Our time-based visualisations of the IRA datasets constitute our primary contributions. From these visualisations a number of unique conclusions are drawn when examining the activity of Twitter accounts over time.

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16 Bastian, M., Heymann, S., and Jacomy, M., [Gephi: An Open Source Software for Exploring and Manipulating Networks](#), 2009.

17 <https://vimeo.com/305925342/d7a66ceb9>

18 <https://vimeo.com/305932857/c9ca929fe0>

Breaking down and analysing the networks, in the context of the visualisations, we find the following:

*English-Language Dataset*

- The Internet Research Agency built and automated bot networks using accounts originally created in 2012 and 2013, but only fully activated sometimes years later.
- Tweets, retweets and mentions were often run automatically—sometimes exclusively automatically—until they were taken over manually. During this automated period, the bots are set to function in a way that will maximise the number of followers. This is often through a process of retweeting popular banal content, or sports, or local news content.
- There is a kind of survival-of-the-fittest at play in the Internet Research Agency's bot networks. Many bots are used for only a brief period of time; as many bots again are abandoned should they fail to gain enough followers.
- The Internet Research Agency prefers the use of banal, trending hashtags, such as #ifgooglewasagirl, or #myamazonwishlist, to inject themselves into popular conversations.
- The Internet Research Agency also tested spam bots, using them to spread high volumes of URL links in 2015.
- Different bot types and bot behaviours were created in different years:
  - Bots created in 2013 were used to polarise conversations. They were key network tweeters in the US election. We've coloured them purple
  - Bots created in 2014 were used to retweet often banal, but always trending, hashtags. We've coloured them blue
  - Bots created in 2015 tweeted prolifically, but were short-lived, rarely tweeting more than two months. We've coloured them green
  - Very few bots were created in 2016 (navy blue)
  - Bots created in 2017 were used only in August of that year. They posted hashtags but did not try to engage with other Twitter users through mentions. We've coloured them orange
- The animated centres of both network visualisations look like magnets with two opposing polarities

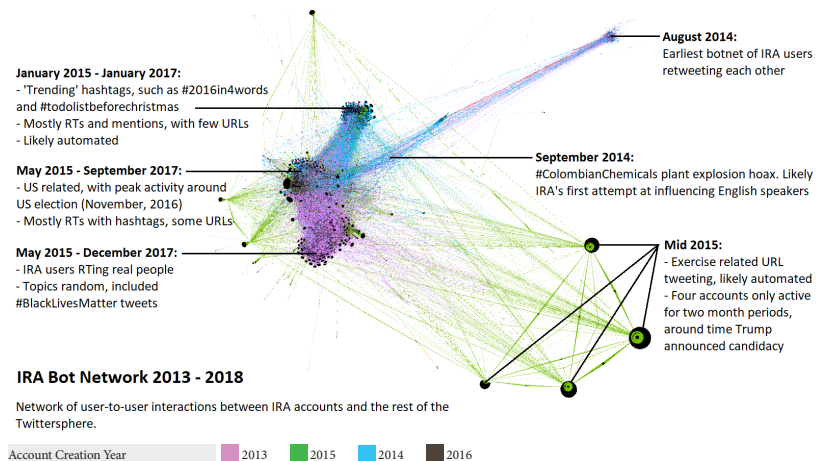
- This means that the IRA bots in each section were retweeting different people and using different hashtags
- One side of these polarities is more related to the US election, and the other side to the IRA's manipulation of #BlackLivesMatter

### *Russian-Language Dataset*

- The most tweeted moment in the Russian-language dataset occurred the day after Flight MH17 was shot down.
- There was an interesting community of bots directing tweets towards a group of accounts September 2014 – October 2015. They began by retweeting other accounts, then changed strategy, sending original tweets by mid-2015
  - In January 2019, we manually searched a random subset of users in the sub-network who were targeted by tweets. Each of these accounts has been suspended by Twitter
- Russian-language tweeting tapered off at the start of 2016.

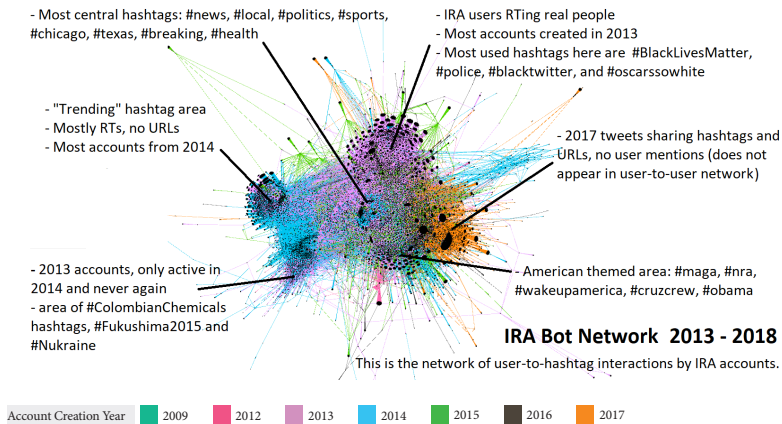
### Maps of the User-to-User and User-to-Hashtag Networks

The following illustrations can be used as a guide to understanding the animated visualisations linked to [here](#)<sup>19</sup>.



<sup>19</sup> <https://vimeo.com/305925342/d7a66ceb9>





### *Timeline of the visualisation*

The data and visualisations are better understood when broken down across time. In fact, without a time breakdown, the visualisations can be deceptive, lending weight to relatively insignificant 'players', as we shall see in the illustrated still screen captures below:

#### August 2014

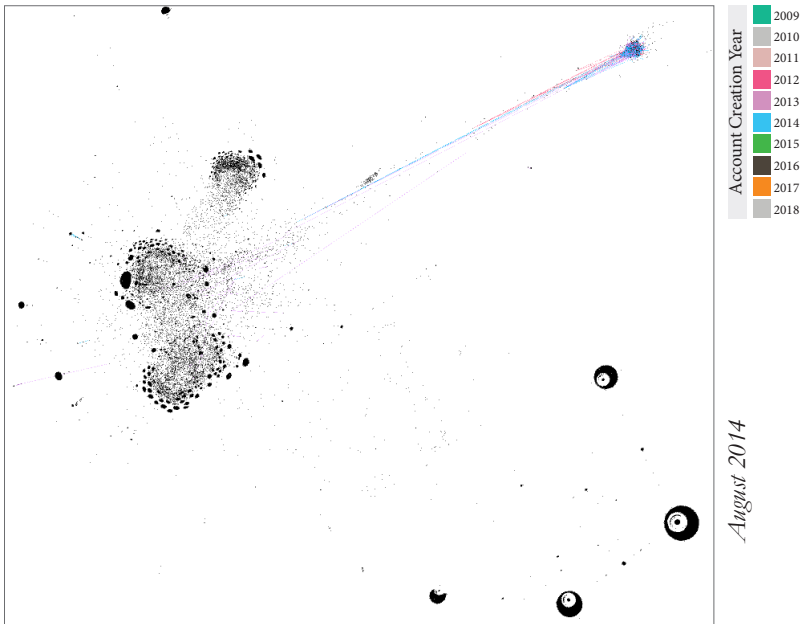
Accounts created in 2012 and 2013 began retweeting one another in August 2014. They would also occasionally direct tweets at non-Internet Research Agency accounts. This is visible at the bottom left of the video. Most of the content was made up of retweets containing URL links and multiple mentions of other Twitter accounts, sometimes with the hashtag #AmericanPower (next page).

#### 11 September 2014

The first solid 'burst of activity' we see occurred on the thirteenth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center. It was also the day of the Columbian Chemicals Plant explosion hoax.

On that day, reports of an explosion near Centerville, Louisiana spread through social media. They were also sent to individuals in the region via text messages.<sup>20</sup>

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20 Fedrigon, Timothy L., 'Statement on Hoax Regarding Toxic Gas Release from Birla Carbon's Columbian Chemicals Plant near Centerville, Louisiana', Press Release 11 September 2014. Lafayette, LA: KATC. Birla Carbon. [Archived from the original on 12 September 2014. Retrieved 3 May 2015].



The explosion was purported to have taken place at the facilities of the Columbian Chemicals Plant, although the company and officials of St. Mary's Parish announced the explosion was a hoax.

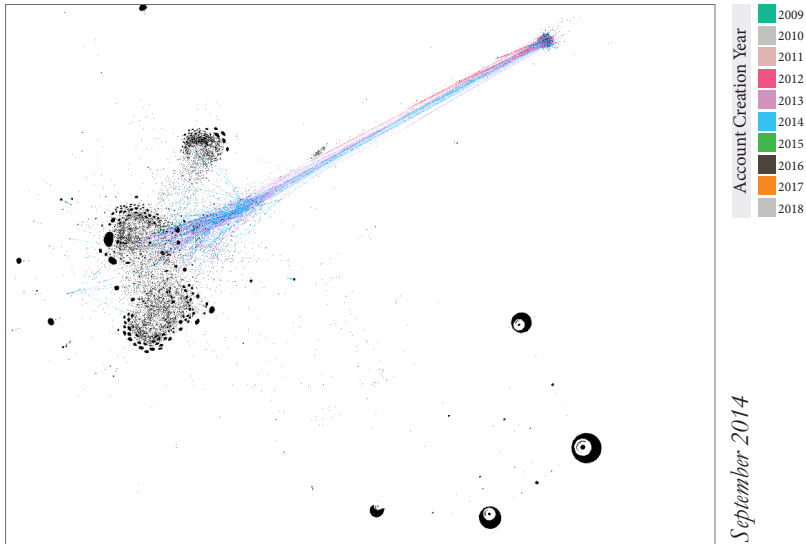
According to an investigation by *NYT Magazine*, among others, the hoax could be traced to a 'coordinated disinformation campaign' by the IRA. '[D]ozens of fake accounts [...] posted hundreds of tweets for hours, targeting a list of figures precisely chosen to generate maximum attention. The perpetrators didn't just doctor screenshots from CNN; they also created fully functional clones of the websites of Louisiana TV stations and newspapers.'<sup>21</sup>

It is worth noting that this was not only an early attempt by a state-sponsored Russian actor at shifting the conversation via social media, it also showed signs of 'faking' local media, which became a hallmark of Internet Research Agency activity.

This may have been the Internet Research Agency's first attempt at persuading an English-speaking population to embrace St. Petersburg agency-created

<sup>21</sup> Chen, 'The Agency'.

disinformation via Twitter, as the organisation had previously focused elsewhere. All mention of #ColumbianChemicals ceased by 15 September 2014, and this network went silent until mid-January 2015.<sup>22</sup>



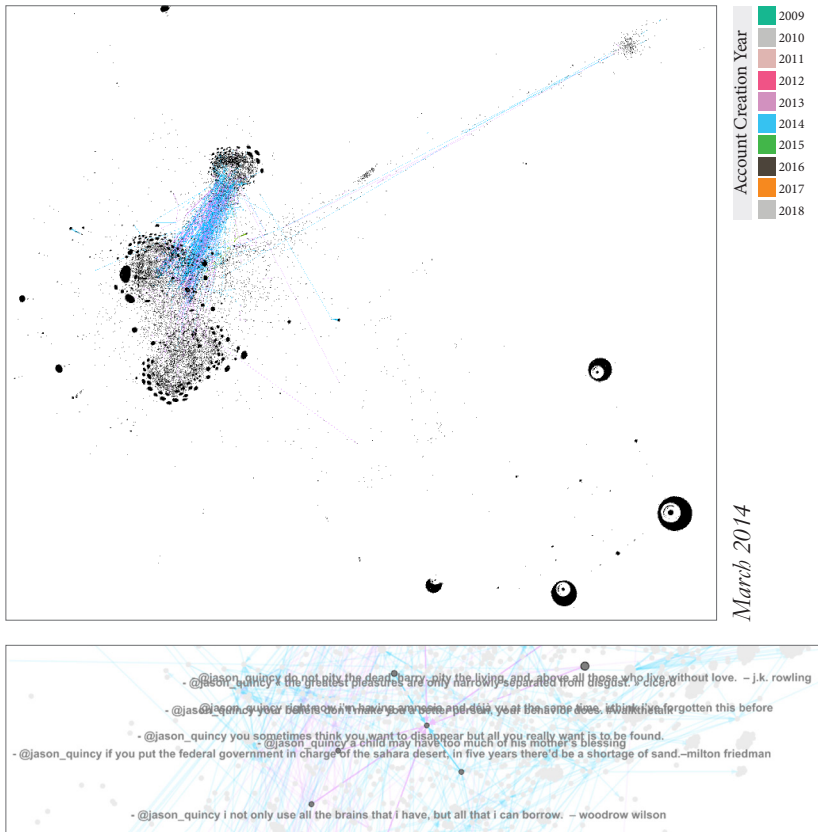
IRA 'user's' tweet to Richard Rainey, a real person and journalist for a New Orleans newspaper:



#### January - March 2015

A small burst of tweets appears between January and March 2015. Uncharacteristically, they contain very few hashtags, not many retweets, and few URLs. The tweets are banal; they seem like 'regular' tweets about mundane things, for instance eight accounts all tweet a random sample of inspirational quotes at @jason\_quincy (@jason\_quincy was an account that is not in the IRA user dataset; it has been suspended by Twitter).

<sup>22</sup> We believe the 11 September 2014 Internet Research Agency activity revolving around Centerville, Louisiana, St. Mary Parish, and the Columbian Chemicals Plant explosion hoax was likely a very short-lived experiment in disinformation for an English-language audience, executed as a precursor to more complex operations at a later date.



### Early 2015

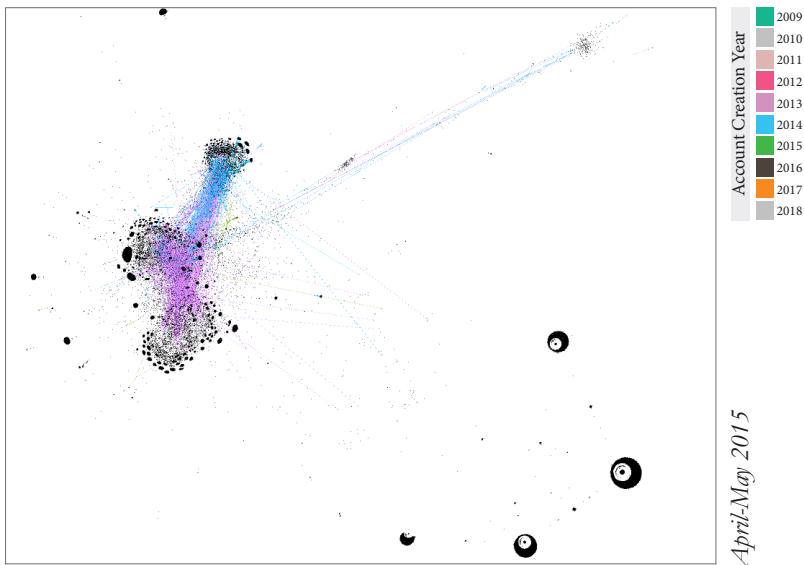
The year begins with a ramping up of activity that would continue through the presidential election. Simultaneously, Trump publicly contemplated his candidacy, finally announcing on 16 June 2015.

### April – May 2015

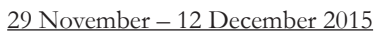
In the Spring of 2015, the sleeper accounts created in 2013 went live. They joined the 2014 accounts (blue), which had been active since January. Suddenly, there was wide US topic coverage, as well as some UK topic coverage. Notable hashtags included #searchesgoogleisashamedof, #news, #reasonsmymomisbetter, and #sports.

We also begin to see action amongst inauthentic ‘local news’ accounts, which became a hallmark tactic of the Internet Research Agency. These local inauthentic accounts include @todaypittsburgh (included in the Internet Research Agency dataset), @onlinehouston (not included in the dataset, but probably Internet Research Agency, as it falls directly next to @todaypittsburgh), @kcitvnews (again, not in the IRA dataset, but likely because the Twitter account has since been deleted), @detroitpost (not in the IRA dataset, Twitter account deleted), and @norleansdaily (not in the IRA dataset, but also clustered with the other four, Twitter account deleted).

We conclude that these non-inclusions could indicate that Twitter has not released the complete data set from Internet Research Agency operatives. This opinion about the English-language dataset is supported by conclusions following the analysis of the Russian-language dataset, below (and is further qualified near the end of the paper).

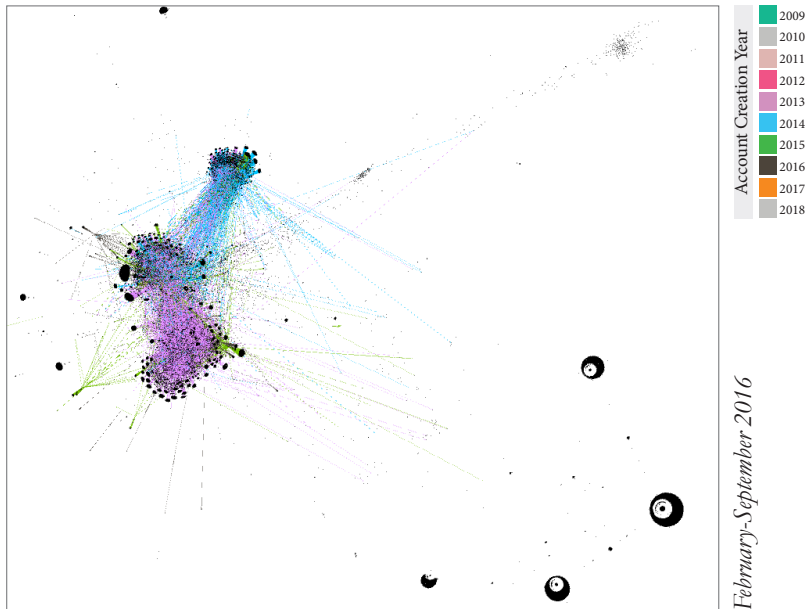


Noticeable in the centre of these clusters are retweets of several Internet Research Agency accounts by @info24us. This is a news aggregation Twitter page. @info24us joined Twitter in 2014, yet has 1.47M tweets—roughly one tweet every two minutes for five solid years. It is not included in the IRA dataset and is still active today.



### 1 February – 25 September 2016

Internet Research Agency account activity stabilised. An ebb and flow of tweets can be seen between the 2013-created (purple, at the bottom) retweeting bots, and the 2014 (blue, at the top) bots, occupied with retweeting and pushing trending hashtags.

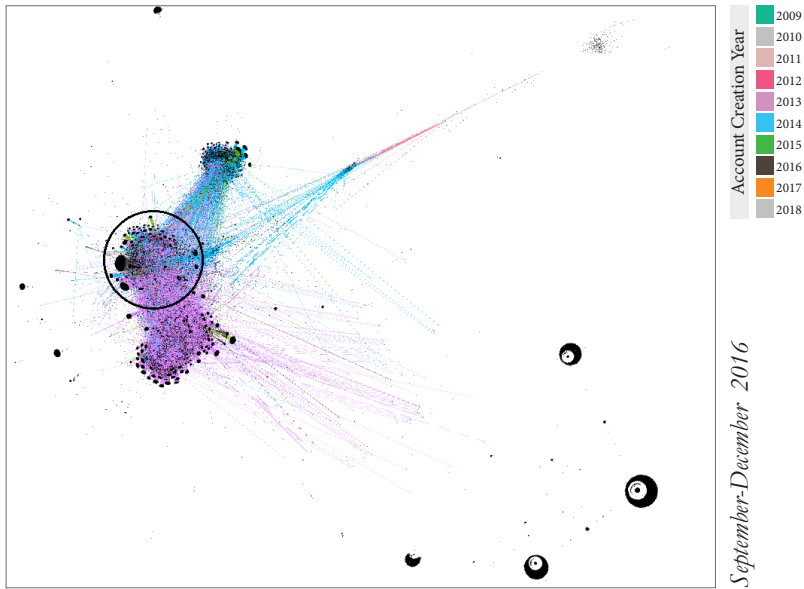


### September – December 2016

This is the US presidential election period, with the election taking place on 8 November. We observe a gradual build-up of tweets across the network with a jump up in October—best observed on the [animated timeline](#)<sup>23</sup>.

This increase continues into November and peaks on election day. Internet Research Agency tweets containing US-related topics were primarily concentrated in the circled area below.

<sup>23</sup> <https://vimeo.com/305925342/d7a66ceb9>



## 2017

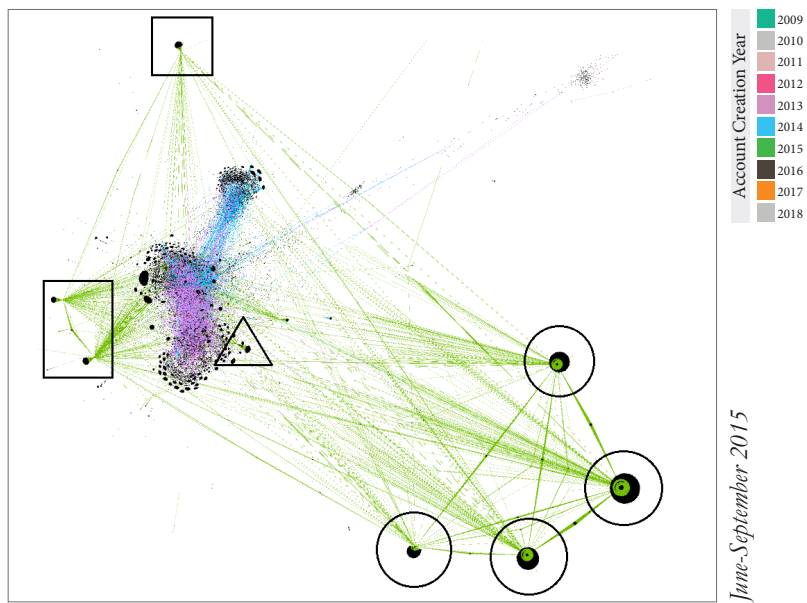
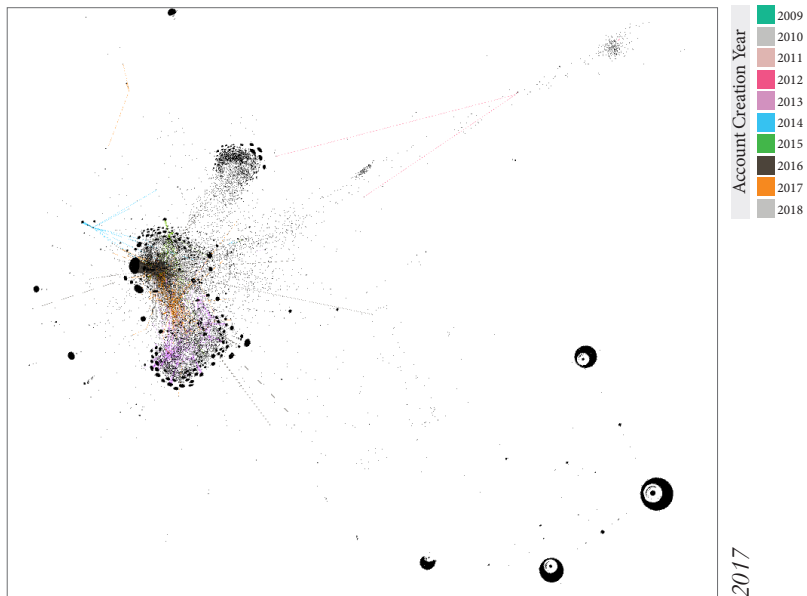
Things begin to wind down. The first top-trending hashtag cluster began to die down in April. The US-related cluster toward the centre died down in May. The non-US related clusters near the centre lingers before it stops tweeting around August. A 2016-created account (navy blue), very vocal throughout the election season, takes one figurative last breath—a burst of tweets around 8 November, Trump’s one-year anniversary of being elected—and ‘dies’ late in the month (see next page).

### **Survival of the fittest**

#### 1 June – 1 September 2015

By June 2015, Trump had announced his candidacy, and over 150 million Americans had seen IRA content on social media. A small group of new accounts was deployed between the beginning of June and the end of August, eight of which can be seen below in green. In their short life-span they made considerable noise, but simultaneously gained few followers. In fact, all seven of those seen to the right were never used again.





The green user that continued to be used was @gloed\_up, a pro #BlackLivesMatter ‘person’ who gained 28,943 followers. @gloed\_up’s footprint is recorded in the little green burst outlined by the triangle in the centre of the network, just beneath the purple area.

The two accounts outlined in squares were active only in June and July, retweeting other accounts’ tweets, which were exclusively about the US, with no hashtags, but sometimes with URL links. These were the only accounts in the network to tweet exclusively about the US. All eight accounts claimed to be located in Washington, DC — two biographies mentioned ‘Free Talk’ (it is possible the Russian creators meant to write ‘free speech’). The accounts followed about two other accounts each and were created on 11, 12, and 13 June. They gained nearly 60 followers during their two-month life span.

Four accounts were active in August and September only (outlined in circles above), and tended to tweet about ‘exercice en masse’.<sup>24</sup> These four accounts alone tweeted huge numbers of original URLs about ‘working out’.<sup>25</sup> They followed around three other accounts each. They managed less than 460 followers each before being shut down by Twitter. These accounts were created between 22 June and 9 July 2015.

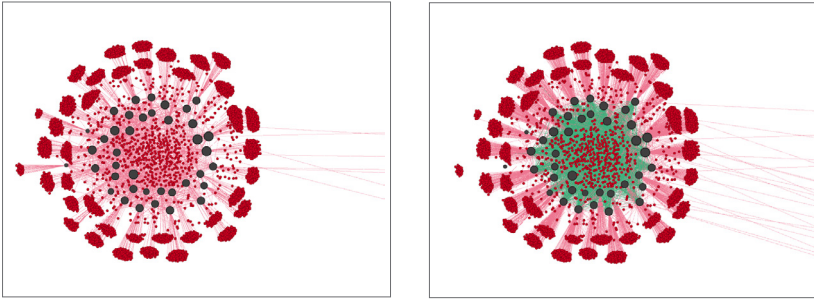
### Timeline of Russian-language tweets in the IRA dataset

The Russian-language data we analysed was created from a randomly selected group of 450,000 tweets, a subset of the 4.6 million (4,583,000) Russian-language tweets posted by 1,534 accounts in the same IRA dataset of 9 million tweets provided by Twitter (see illustrations on the next page).

There are 39 IRA trolls (the black dots) in this burst who are very clearly communicating with different users to the rest of the network. (Note: this network was derived from a 450,000-tweet subset of the 5 million Russian-language tweets.) The left burst is from September 2014, and is only retweets (pink). The right burst is from October 2014—October 2015, when users began sending original tweets *only* to Twitter users who were mentioned by more than one IRA account (this is known because there are no green edges—retweets—leading to red nodes in the outer ring).

.....  
24 These circled accounts tweeted a large number of similarly structured tweets (a URL, exercise-related sentence, and multiple account mentions).

25 For example, one tweet from a circled account was ‘<http://t.co/qpl7nbflsr> abs workout done motivated @\_bigdaddybyrce @\_joneee @buzzzzzzzy11 @boomitzash @wizsnazzy @kaileyking2 @ethan\_regal’.



*The Burst in the Mention Network*

*Left image: September 2014 (the first month of interaction with the red users)*

*Right image: October 2014 – October 2015 (one year of steady interaction – retweeting the outer users, sending original and retweets to the inner users)*

The 39 users were all created on either 2, 3, or 4 September 2014, had an average of 455 followers, and were following about 441 people. These users also had no biographies, reported locations, or links to profile image URLs recorded. This begs the question of how ‘real’ these profiles would have looked due to the lack of personal content.

A deeper look into the mentioned users (red dots) who are not in the IRA dataset in this organised sub-network showed that they are also suspended accounts. Usernames checked ranged from real-sounding names such as @LaurenElliot and @AndrewDevon1 to random letter combinations such as @ahcdbhrjqfsg. Users from the outer edges of the burst and from the middle selection were randomly selected and searched on Twitter by hand, and every single one tested is now a suspended account.

For example, a non-IRA user named @ahcdbhrjqfsg who was mentioned in the burst was searched on Twitter. The account was suspended, but searching their name in the Twitter search bar showed tweets which mentioned them:

These tweets contain no hashtags or URLs, but some are clearly ‘copy and paste’ headlines.<sup>26</sup> This leads us to suspect two things. First, that the suspended

.....  
<sup>26</sup> Lauren Eads, ‘Suntory Acquires Beam in \$16BN Deal’, *The Drinks Business*, 13 January 2014; Staff, ‘Ukraine Ex-minister Injured as Terror Trial Protesters Clash with Riot Police’, RT, 11 January 2014; Slavic Nationalist Forum, *Ukraine Thread*, October 2013.

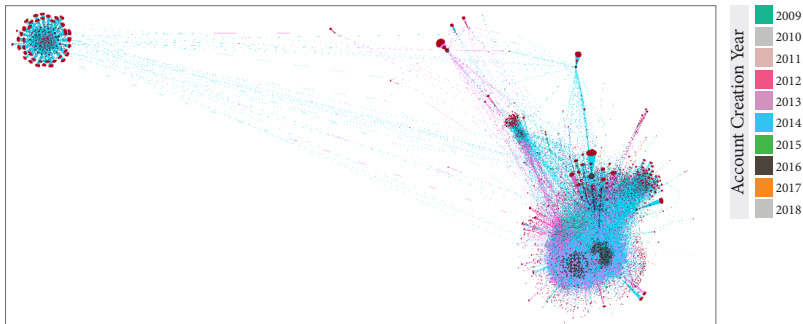


users who were mentioned by the IRA accounts are also part of the IRA (or a related Russian) troll farm. Second, users who are still active on Twitter (like the ones in the above screenshot) may also be IRA or Russian trolls who have not been taken down yet due to the inauthenticity of their tweets (which were all published during the time the organised burst was active), and follow the same format of tweets (without URLs or hashtags).

The detailed planning and execution of this burst exemplifies the organisation and strategy that the IRA puts into their operations.

This screenshot of, presumably, a network of IRA users tweeting to Russian IRA accounts (like @ahcdbhrjqfsg) further underscores our hypothesis that Twitter's work on cleaning up IRA bots is far from complete. Active users who match the profile of an IRA bot are present in the English-language dataset, as we'll also see in the Russian-language dataset.

### *The Russian-language Mention Network*



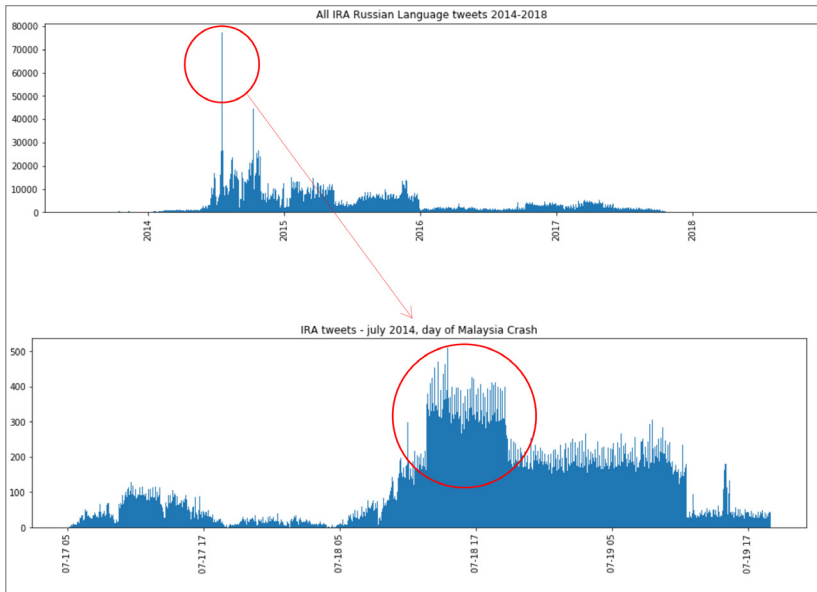
Visualised here is the entire user-to-user (mention) network of Russian-language tweets. The black nodes or dots are IRA bots. The red nodes are not IRA bots and are presumably regular Twitter accounts.

Where an IRA bot or account (often trolls) mentions a non-IRA account using that account's Twitter @handle, a line is drawn between the two. The colour of the line connecting the two denotes the bot account's creation year. We found that ninety-five percent of IRA interactions with Twitter users were undertaken by bots created in 2013 and 2014. The top left visualises an organised burst of IRA trolls mentioning Twitter users. The right side contains the rest of the interactions between IRA accounts and other accounts.

#### *A Closer Look at the Timeline – MH17 tweets*

On 17 July, 2014, during the Battle of Shakhtarsk in the War in Donbass, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) was downed by a Buk surface-to-air missile launched from pro-Russian separatist-controlled territory in Ukraine. MH17 was a passenger plane, scheduled to fly from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. All 283 passengers and 15 crew on board were killed.

The governments of Australia and the Netherlands held Russia responsible for the attack, based on results from an investigation by the Dutch Safety Board and a Dutch-led joint investigation team, who concluded that a missile had been fired at MH17 from a Russian Federation 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade Buk, transported from Russia on the day of the crash.



After firing on MH17 from a rebel-controlled area, the launcher was returned to Russia.<sup>27</sup>

The incident, and the pro-Russian separatists presumed responsible, were roundly condemned in the Western press; one Dutch tabloid ran a photo-collage of pro-Russian rebel commanders with a single-word headline: ‘Moordenaars’ (Murderers).<sup>28</sup> Reports in Russia differed, and as early as August 2014, 80% of Russians polled believed the Ukrainian military had downed the plane, with only 3% blaming pro-Russian separatists.<sup>29</sup>

Our analysis and visualisation of Russian-language IRA Twitter data shows that within 48 hours of the attack, Russian-language IRA accounts experienced their highest volume of activity, spiking with hundreds of tweets per hour. This surge of activity continued until 19 July, when it markedly subsided.

27 Crash of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 (PDF) (Report). Dutch Safety Board. 13 October 2015. Archived from the original (PDF) on 13 October 2015; Matthew Weaver, ‘MH17 Crash Report: Dutch Investigators Confirm Buk Missile Hit Plane—Live Updates’, *The Guardian*, 13 October 2015. [Retrieved 13 October 2015].

28 Adam Withnall, ‘Malaysia Airlines MH17 Crash: Dutch Newspapers Respond with Anger and Despair as Wait for Return of Bodies continues—Europe—World’, *The Independent*, 21 July 2104. [Retrieved 22 July 2014].

29 Alec Luhn, ‘MH17: Vast Majority of Russians Believe Ukraine Downed Plane, Poll Finds’, *The Guardian*, 30 July 2014. [Retrieved 2 August 2014]

Eventually, all Russian-language tweeting from the IRA dataset released by Twitter tapered off at the start of 2016.

As evidenced earlier, a high level of tactical organisation, planning and coordination between accounts is demonstrated.

### **Patterns and Conclusions**

The aim of this piece of data analysis and visualisation is to glean a few of the tactics of the Internet Research Agency with regard to interference in foreign affairs and elections, using Twitter as a platform. With the English-language dataset, we have focused on the United States presidential election, with the occasional note concerning the United Kingdom. As stated earlier, for the Russian-language dataset, our focus has been on form, format, and distribution, rather than content. We conclude:

- The Internet Research Agency prefers to use trending hashtags like #ifgooglewasagirl, and #myamazonwishlist to get in on conversations. This allows both bot- and manually-operated accounts to gain followers from a broad spectrum of Twitter users.
- The Internet Research Agency tested spam bots (the green ‘exercise’ and US-topic accounts), spreading high volumes of URLs in 2015. They subsequently abandoned this strategy within four months when these accounts failed to gain more than 700 followers (the number is arbitrary; the volume is key).
- The year a Twitter account was created played a significant role in the bot type created:
  - 2013 (purple) bots were in on potentially polarising conversations in the centre of the network, and were the key US election tweeters in the network
  - 2014 (blue) bots were used to retweet trending hashtags
  - Except for a small number of accounts, 2015 (green) bots never tweeted for more than two months. Although they all posted large volumes of content, they never gained sufficient popularity or influence, which perhaps explains why they were never used again
  - There were few 2016 (navy blue) bots, but one continued tweeting long past the first anniversary of Trump’s election, despite not gaining great popularity (> 5,000 followers)

- 2017 (orange) bots were only used in August 2017 and posted hashtags, but did not try to engage with other Twitter users through mentions
- The centre of both English-language networks resembles a magnet with two opposing forces
  - This means that the Internet Research Agency bots in each section were retweeting different accounts, and using different hashtags
  - One side appears to be weighted toward the US election, while the another is more related to #BlackLivesMatter tweets
- It would appear that all Internet Research Agency accounts (released by Twitter) were disposable, and would not be reused if they were unsuccessful accounts
- 2014 (blue) bots appear to be more automated than 2013 (purple) bots (it is possible the 2013 bots have more advanced algorithms for targeting specific content—this bears further research, should the data be made available)
  - The blue trending topic net was non-polarizing, and simply retweeted trending hashtags (this is automatable), and only deployed towards the centre of the network at pivotal times—early 2015 (the time of creation), and the end of 2016 (the US election)
  - The purple centre cluster was polarized by the directions of the bursts, and the accounts seldom interact with one other until the approach of the US election (November 2016)
- There were distinct locations within the visualisations for certain types of tweets, as those accounts tended to form ‘communities’ around their tweeting habits (or algorithms)
- In both the Russian-language mention and hashtag networks, accounts with more than 1,000 followers tended to target the same users and hashtags
- Usage of different groups of hashtags changed over time, as did targeted users over time
- Russian-language tweeting tapered off immediately at the start of 2016
- The most tweeted moment in the entire Russian-language dataset was the day after Flight MH17 was shot down over Ukraine (July 2014)
- The highly organized Russian-language subset:
  - There is an interesting community of bots tweeting at a group of accounts from September 2014 – October 2015.



They begin with retweeting the non-IRA accounts, then begin sending original tweets mid-2015

- This sub-network was active for 13 months. The first month showed distinct interaction patterns (only retweets), then the following twelve months showed a different pattern (retweets of some accounts, original tweets being sent to other accounts). This is another example of the IRA testing one idea (in the first month), then changing it (the subsequent 12 months), and keeping it active if it meets certain criteria.
- A random subset of accounts being tweeted at in the sub-network was manually searched on Twitter in January 2019, and each of these accounts has been suspended by Twitter.
- The work resulting from Russian Twitter influence strategy is highly organised. We observed this when IRA trolls faked the #ColumbianChemicals explosion in English, and when the trolls engaged in organized communication in the subset of Russian-language retweets and original tweets to targeted accounts.
- The Russian-language tweet analysis underpins a finding in the English-language analysis—that Twitter has not yet shut down all IRA accounts (some are still active, see screenshot of tweets to @ahcdbhrjqfsg below). Twitter has likely also not included all IRA tweets of which they are aware in the IRA dataset, as some suspect accounts tweeted to by IRA bots are currently suspended by Twitter, but not in the dataset.

We have learned through analysis of the English-language dataset that flattening the time component of a network visualization omits important details; this dataset has adopted a time-based analysis:

- Flattening gives regions that were active over a short time period the same level of visual importance as regions that were only active for a long period of time (like the green exercise URL sharers on the right of the user-to-user network).
- Viewing region growth over time allows for new patterns to be spotted, and makes it clear that highly-active, short-lived campaigns are typically of a different order of importance than longer-lived campaigns.

The dataset provided contained 9 million tweets from just under 4000 suspected-IRA accounts. Based on what we have seen, we must call into question whether

Twitter has successfully shut down all related accounts, and whether they have provided the public with all of the IRA accounts of which they are aware of. We have observed accounts that are currently active on Twitter that are connected to IRA accounts through one degree of separation (IRA tweeted to @ahcdbhrjqfsg, and so did accounts which are active today), which have themselves tweeted according to similar inauthentic tactics (copy-pasted news headlines) during the same time that IRA accounts were active (mid-2015). We have also noted accounts which are currently deleted who were tweeted to by IRA accounts, and whose usernames follow similar patterns to IRA tactics such as names of realistic-sounding local news sources: @kcitynews and @detroitpost, for example.

First widely exposed in the West in 2014,<sup>30</sup> the Internet Research Agency has proven formidable in Middle East, Ukrainian, post-Soviet, European, and American elections, and affairs of national importance. Although we examine only Twitter here, in nearly every exposure of the IRA's activities the common element of each campaign is social media amplification. As we've shown, the IRA's work is highly organised, sophisticated, and well-resourced, with as many as 1,000 employees working for them in 2015.<sup>31</sup> Whether the agency has been instrumental in swinging elections or shifting public opinion is a subject for further research, but the tactics and strategies of the IRA and other Russian troll farms are without doubt well worth the attention of Western civil society.

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# FROM SWORDS TO PLOUGHSHARES: TIME FOR A CVE STEP-CHANGE?

A Review Essay by Paul Bell

*Don McCullin photographic retrospective*  
Tate Britain, London 2019

**Keywords**—*strategic communications, CVE, resilience, narrative, development, influence, civil society*

## 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, and today continues to consult and write.

*The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author and do not purport to represent those of any organisation.*

On a London Sunday in May, spring still struggling through, I took myself down to the Tate Britain gallery on the Embankment and joined the queue of people waiting to view the work of Don McCullin, the photographer whose dark imagery spans 60 years of conflict—martial and social—or as *The Guardian* described him, ‘the man who has seen too much’.

From his working-class roots in Finsbury Park to the destitution on the streets of London’s East End, to Vietnam, Northern Ireland, Biafra, Beirut, and the first Gulf War—McCullin’s 250-photograph exhibition captures a life spent observing more human misery than anyone should ever have to witness. His therapy is to photograph the tranquillity of the landscape around his home in rural Somerset: ‘I dream of this in battle, I dream of misty England’, says McCullin—these words blocked out on the wall above his pictures.

What I saw caused me to ask, as I have before on learning of the deaths in or after conflict of photographers I knew: What is it about this work that so compels a man such as McCullin, carrying only a camera, or a woman like Marie Colvin, armed only with a laptop, to continually expose themselves to immense danger? Both have spoken of being driven to bear witness, and indubitably they did—but is there a point along the way at which conscience is overtaken by the physical chemistry of living at the edge of death?

In the end, it seems, nothing McCullin photographed could escape the darkness that settled on him. Even splendid desert ruins—he went to Palmyra after the Islamic State dynamited it—appeared to him as ectoplasms of misery: these ancient buildings evoked, not the splendour of their former beauty, nor even rage at their destruction, but the cruelty and enslavement he imagined had been the physical engine of their construction. I watched the visitors—and myself—filing safe and solemn past these images of built and human ruin. It was ineffably depressing, the black of the photography almost stygian, the white offering the viewer little light. I could find no hope in his work. Even his photographs of Somerset looked like the Somme. Was it the same for him? In his career, he will have taken tens of thousands of pictures. And yet for this exhibition he had distilled his life’s work into 250 images of unrelenting despair. Was that the sum of it? Was there no hope at all?

McCullin says the label ‘war photographer’ haunts him. ‘He has never been content with the impact made by images he has produced’, says the exhibition pamphlet. ‘He feels they have had an insufficient role in ending the suffering of

the people they depict. For McCullin, photography is about feeling. “If you can’t feel what you’re looking at”, he says, “then you’re never going to get others to feel anything when they look at your pictures.”

Perhaps I have some idea of what he means. Late in my own (less illustrious) career as a practitioner of strategic communications in conflict, social and martial, I’ve come to ask similar questions about my own work. Questions about the relationship between imagery and experience, between messages and the lived reality of those who receive them. Questions about whether strategic communications aimed at ending conflict or reducing social tensions is not too often distanced, or even entirely divorced, from the most powerful and immediate concerns of those on which it is intended to have an effect—a gap into which its credibility can fatally fall when its messages too obviously reflect not the concerns of the receiver, but the fears and imperatives of the sender.

But to McCullin—how to situate his task in the grim, complex roil of conflict? His was to send a message via Western media to Western audiences about the horror and carnage for which their governments were responsible in one or another degree—be it prosecuting a war in Vietnam, or supplying arms and other assistance to one or another combatant in some foreign war, or failing to intervene—and, by bearing witness to the horror, shame or shock his audiences into action that would end a conflict or bring relief to the innocents caught up in it. He has his place in a partial success story; the American media’s nightly portrayal of the war in Vietnam and its divisive impact on political opinion at home helped nudge the United States towards its eventual withdrawal from a war its generals had long known was unwinnable. The first Chechen war happened at a time when pre-Putin Russia was still sufficiently anarchic to permit a momentarily free media to portray the brutality with which Chechnya’s bid for independence was being crushed, leading to protests and to public opinion turning against it. Chechnya wasn’t so lucky the second time around.

But with partial success there is also partial failure; the media doesn’t always get it right, sometimes with disastrous consequences. NATO’s badly judged intervention in Libya was preceded by hand-wringing in the Western media and the meretricious argument that ‘something must be done’—while displaying no appreciation of the underlying realities of social division and governance in the country. In the event, the Anglo-French-led intervention turned Libya into a battleground for rival militias, a playground for jihadists, an arsenal for the Sahel, a hell for civilians and refugees. (How many times have citizens who



have been caught up in internal war or regime change been heard to say, ‘It was better under Gaddafi’, or ‘Bring back Saddam?’) Did the almost weekly press coverage of military corteges from RAF Lyneham bearing the coffins of British dead through the picturesque Wiltshire town of Wootton Bassett, serve to underline for the British government the risk of putting boots on the ground, therefore limiting the intervention in Libya to an air war that left the ground to the militia? Or in Iraq, did a war-weary American public, gorged on a media diet of failure and illegitimate war, persuade Barack Obama to withdraw before time—when with hindsight, 20,000 US troops might have prevented the ISIS rout of Iraqi forces two years later and the devastation that followed? Yes, the argument of legitimacy had been lost even before the invasion but even so, in the face of media hostility, were the consequences of premature withdrawal given insufficient weight?

All this to the point that media reportage on conflict is not an unalloyed good; its messages to its own audiences, largely remote from conflict, and received in a media environment that is open and free, can stir public emotions and political pressures that are not always conducive to good decision-making.

There are no easy answers. Democracies hold the freedom of their media as a bastion of the values and freedoms on which they depend. If there are questions, these can at best, and by implication, acknowledge that the pervasiveness and speed of modern communication throws up immense challenges and a concomitant responsibility, as conflict responses are calculated, to better understand and project context and complexity so as to better inform public opinion and the decision-making of the political class. In a world dominated now by still and moving imagery, whose emotive force and speed of impact so easily overwhelm the political senses, such responsibility is doubled and redoubled.

So much for McCullin. If his object was to influence audiences ‘at home’, which he fulfilled heroically, then the rather more prosaic job of strategic communications has been to influence the subjects of his photography, left ‘out there’, and the fragile, conflict-affected peoples they represent. If his job was to show the world the wounds of conflict by ripping off the bandage, ours has been to try to put one on, using communication plasters in the absence of political plaster of Paris.

I first became involved in this field 15 years ago, spending the years 2004–11 travelling back and forth to Iraq leading a large information operations team

whose purpose was to discredit al-Qaeda, discourage sectarian violence, stabilise the country, and promote an enduring political and constitutional settlement. We were ambitious then, and we had the budgets to back us. We had real operational power. We were availed of ground-breaking psychological insights into the nature of terrorism. We drove our comms within a framework based on building a new foundation for social and political order. We thought and worked in ‘long-arc’ 18-month cycles. We aimed in our messaging to make clear what was needed to achieve critical changes in specified target audiences and in the wider social system to support the settlement process. Of course, it was always going to be a work in progress.

After the US withdrawal from Iraq, I went on to work in seven more countries—Algeria and Egypt (which I just touched), Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Nigeria, Tunisia, and Yemen. During that time a great deal changed. The internet had become pervasive, enabling populations to break through state-imposed barriers to access information but also exposing them to the dangers of disinformation and deception aimed at exacerbating multiple lines of social and political division. The Arab Spring came and went in a welter of violence and repression, leaving Libya chaotic, Syria a bloodied wreck, and economies weakened. Governments across the region—institutionally ossified, in thrall to national elites, incapable of responding to popular expectations—became fearfully skittish of civil society-based movements and campaigns for human rights and reform. In Europe, a flood of refugees from violence and economic stagnation in the Middle East and Africa, and a wave of terrorist attacks in France, Britain, and Germany, were major spurs to nationalist populism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism.

With warfare now largely a psychologically-based enterprise in which civilian populations were the centre of gravity, the ability to influence those populations once more became a preoccupation for governments globally, in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) and along major geopolitical fault lines such as Europe-Russia and US-China. Along the way a new government-controlled industry sprang up called, first, countering, then preventing, violent extremism—a subtle and not unimportant strategic shift from confronting extremist narratives (either a fool’s errand or something wicked) to trying to get at and address the deeper grievances beneath them. But budgets were small and results were patchy, raising questions about their value, and if using counter-narratives was about winning the argument against violent extremism (VE), there’s little evidence to suggest that it did. At the risk of stating the

obvious, in the years before ISIS, counter-narratives seem to have done little to insulate significant numbers of young people in the Middle East, North Africa, or Europe against recruitment and the desire to fight in Syria.

Various factors have been at play. I would point to three, the first being an inordinate waste of time and money on efforts to re-engineer 'religious correctness' and re-indoctrinate Islamist extremists whose views depart from the orthodoxy of 'state religion'. It's no more than a truism that recruits to Islamist-inspired VE know little about religion and care even less. Religious belief has little to do with violent extremism; extreme doctrinal interpretations may provide it with a political language and moral justification, but they are not its primary drivers. Yet many governments determinedly characterise it as a perniciously twisted strand of Islam, an 'alien import' like a weed blown across the border from some foreign state of mind, and the reason young people turn to violence. They prescribe state-approved doctrine, control mosques, license imams, and provide guidance on Friday sermons. They do it because religious extremism is a metaphor for political resistance and dissatisfaction with the status quo and it's easier to blame terrorism on distorted religious ideas than to account for breakdowns in the social contract. Which is why some countries so firmly insist on religious re-indoctrination in their countering violent extremism (CVE) programming.

The second factor is that VE is the preoccupation of governments—governments facing security threats and struggling to contain the discontent and disaffection that arise in the gap between popular expectations and societal means. But for young people, the bulk fodder for radicalisers of any political hue, it is not. They are far more worried about finding jobs, or putting their degrees to work in meaningful employment, earning money, having sex, affording a wife, getting out from under the heel of domineering fathers. Across the Middle East and North Africa, all significant analysis suggests this; the same demographics and behavioural patterns appear everywhere: struggling economies; a youth bulge; poverty and (quite particularly) relative deprivation; joblessness, especially among young people; corruption, the entrenchment of elites, a casual contempt for the views of young people; institutional weakness; deep fractures between citizens and the national security apparatus; the exploitation of sectarian division for political advantage; and high levels of societal violence. In Europe the dynamics of Islamist extremism centre on the impacts on immigrant minorities of cultural displacement, economic and social exclusion, and Islamophobia. These are the

real preoccupations of young people, who struggle daily under the weight of it all, and which provide the space in which extremist ideology exploits grievances, nurtures the sense of victimhood, identifies ‘the enemy’, encourages the fantasy of ‘striking back’, and legitimises violence.

And this is where the old-fashioned counter-narrative approach to CVE programming was, and remains, flawed. It has *not* focused on young people’s preoccupations. Instead it stigmatises. It tells its young target audiences that they are perceived, not as the future of their nation, but as a threat to its national security. This makes counter-narrative programming very hard to deliver. In many target communities it is difficult, even dangerous, and often counterproductive, to speak openly about CVE. Young people feel targeted, misunderstood, threatened, suspicious, resentful—and do not engage. These failures translate into disappointing, limited, unverifiable outcomes that call into question the value of CVE programming in general. I have watched diplomats responsible for overseeing such programmes quietly shake their heads and dismiss it all as mumbo jumbo. They’d switch it off if they could, but what to (affordably) replace it with? And yet they’re disappointed when the evidence of success is so threadbare—because it makes it that much harder to account to the suit upstairs, who may understand it even less but is holding the budget. Change on the cheap gets cheap results.

A third factor is that governments that host CVE programmes sponsored by international (largely Western) agencies are very sensitive about how these actors engage with their fractured, struggling, and restless young populations. They don’t want them stomping around in this space unsupervised because it’s a political and ideological minefield. After 9/11 they watched with alarm as donor organisations poured billions of dollars into civil society movements and human rights programming designed to drive social change and democracy in the Middle East and North Africa. Instead, as they see it, it unleashed chaos. That’s hard to argue with. Today, following the post-2011 crackdown, civil society and government across the region fear and distrust each other deeply. There is a strong host-state-driven emphasis on security and religion—especially in states whose leaders derive their legitimacy from the latter—and governments are drawing parameters around internationally financed CVE programming ever more tightly. They grasp the need for ‘youth engagement’, even if only in the *appearance* of ‘consultation’. However, approaches continue to be dominated by the top-down nature of national power; approaches that appear to challenge it

by focusing on bottom-up initiatives and greater collaboration with civil society quickly butt up against bad memories. For international actors, therefore, progress is tentative at best. It's a sort of buzz-wire game; to operate credibly, responsibly, and effectively while not triggering domestic sensibilities, they need a steady hand to thread the wire while not touching it.

As for output, this remains largely confined to messaging, increasingly through social media where you've got 10 seconds to grab consumers who 'snack' on product. Subject matter deals with the dangers of radicalism and discrediting extremist groups or in hopes and promises that do not resonate with their experience of daily life. The messaging is repetitive, it lacks credibility, and it is tired. An Iraqi colleague recently described to me the foreign-sponsored CVE content currently focused on communities battling to recover from the depredations of ISIS. He called them 'Botox stories'. Viewers don't relate to 'success stories' and 'happy talk' that bear no resemblance to their lived reality, or to exhortations to 'patriotism and unity' when their experience at the hands of a sectarian-majoritarian authority is the opposite. That Botox image said it: it's become a 'good' version of 'fake news', puffed up by its own idea of what makes a message effective, and audiences have stopped listening. Good news was always a hard sell; this is even harder.

It stands in contrast to how FCAS governments that can afford CVE programming and control the media environment, might be playing it. In May 2019, as the start of Ramadan initiated the annual peak for television soap opera viewing across the Middle East and North Africa, the *Times of London* reported that of 24 soaps planned for this period in Egypt, 15 were made by a company linked to the intelligence services. 'Programme makers [had] been ordered to produce scripts that glorify the military and promote conservative family values.' This is powerful influence programming but it's a no-go area for foreign CVE actors unless they are prepared to underwrite the political imperatives of the host government.

We need to rethink this. A step-change is needed.

One step might be to pay more attention to the dual nature of the effects of the socio-economic aid and development programming that donor governments have undertaken on a vast scale, and to learn to capitalise on that duality. Value here resides in both the material impact that programmes can deliver to their beneficiaries, and on their ability to *influence* those beneficiaries—through the

experience of engagement—and encourage in them the thought processes and behaviours that are more conducive to sustainable societal and political development. In this sense, aid and development programming is also *influence* programming—with a message that is both implicit yet also inherently stickier than current CVE programming, because it involves issues and experiences that are more directly relevant to beneficiaries. Aid and development programming is endlessly diverse, its budgets are massive in comparison to strategic communications or CVE, and its impacts, even if not specifically targeted at young people, include them anyway because the latter are so large a proportion of target communities. Such programmes are also a source of rich experience in how to engage beneficiaries, enabling them to make a difference in their lives, ensuring that difference is sustainable, and to build—at both the individual and community levels—the human and social resilience and capital that enables progress. Strategic communications has a great deal to learn from this richness, if only it can find its way past the thicket of government security imperatives. Aid and development programmes should be the carthorse on which strategic communications can ride to market—and yet, with some exceptions, strategic communications is an afterthought in these programmes.

Another step—self-evident, I would suggest, in the context of the psychological war that is the chief battle space of modern conflict—would be to place due weight on the psychological significance of experience itself. As we recognise it in trauma, so we recognise it in healing. If we compare the sense of engagement and accomplishment derived from the experience of participating in and benefiting from a socio-economic programme to the brief enjoyment of watching and liking videos on a mobile phone, surely the former is more likely to induce attitudinal and behavioural changes conducive to positive social change and transformation? Surely a message of change and hope is more likely to be received through the experience of change, and of its material effects and benefits?

It is through experience that an alternative pathway is opened up to people, especially young people vulnerable to the attraction, glamour, sense of belonging and purpose, and economic incentives offered by VE groups that operate at the most immediate levels of community life. Along this experiential pathway comes that crucial psychological shift from negative to positive emotion and makes an alternative, more positive option or opportunity, and even an alternative future, more plausible to the young mind searching for meaning, purpose, support, and a way out.

People arrive at their place in life and society by the pathway of their experience—and can be encouraged by further experience towards an alternative pathway. A new and better experience generates the emotions that make the alternative pathway visible and possible. A new narrative flows naturally from here. In this way, experience becomes a new pathway, and that pathway becomes a changing narrative.

A third step would be to accelerate the emphasis on ‘resilience programming’. Resilience—at both the individual and community levels—is about being braced for shock, able to absorb, adapt to, and overcome challenges and obstacles. Where conflict and development conjoin, the resilience theme has come increasingly to define the European Union’s strategy and desired outcomes for its aid and engagement among its near neighbours in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Its support is focused on enabling its neighbouring states, communities, and even individuals, to adapt to social, economic, and political pressure; to grow sustainably; to maintain cohesion; to improve security; and to manage risks and opportunities peacefully and stably. We also see resilience now becoming the theme of other major aid packages; in 2018, for example, USAID made \$50m available for a five-year package for Tunisia.

Why might resilience do better? Is there a better chance of preventing young people from becoming violent extremists if, rather than force-feed them a prescribed religion or press-gang their loyalty to a state they believe is failing them, they are provided with experiences and skills that enable them to see themselves and their life-chances more positively?

First, it would help assuage the acute sensitivity of host governments towards foreign CVE interventions. Indeed, CVE’s licence to operate is coming increasingly to depend on it being repositioned *away from* the overtly securitised space it has hitherto occupied, and towards the youth development space, which is politically more anodyne and supported by new global/multilateral policy frameworks such as those of the EU and the United Nations. As an approach to influence programming, resilience easily accomplishes this repositioning and, in my experience, FCAS governments are a great deal more comfortable with it.

Second, resilience is a *state of mind*. Its core psychological elements are meaning and purpose, confidence, adaptability, and the ability to secure the support of others. These elements are the stock-in-trade of recruiters on every side; they are the same psychological buttons that violent extremist recruiters push, while

also acting to plug service gaps that governments cannot fill, as they win the hearts and minds of young people.

In the context of CVE, the key to the effective application of resilience-based methodology in aid and development programming would be to provide an experience that enables young people to find a positive alternative pathway, rather than choose a negative one through frustration and desperation. It would enable them to experience through action the impact of particular behavioural and attitudinal values such as tolerance, openness, and the willingness to negotiate—values that also happen to provide the glue of well regulated, responsive, and functioning polities. Moreover, properly formulated, resilience programming can support the development of improved relations between civil society and government without appearing to overtly challenge established centres of authority, which is where foreign aid prior to the Arab Spring may have overlapped its hand.

I have worked on resilience programming in two different settings. From 2015 to 2018 I was involved in programming across five countries in the Middle East and North Africa. And since 2010 I have been privileged to work with one of the world's leading non-formal education brands, The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award for Young People, which has more than 1.3 million participants entering its programmes each year across 130 countries.

The Award, an education programme, has been running for 61 years, and about 30 years ago it began to internationalise. Delivered through schools and youth organisations, it provides a direct and individual experience for each participant. Like any good resilience programme, the Award allows young people aged 14–24 to choose their own pathway to progress, builds their confidence in themselves, imbues their lives and pursuits with greater purpose, teaches them to adapt to and overcome challenges, and improves their links to, and relationships with, the communities in which they live. It does this, not by 'delivering a message' but by providing an *experience* that engages its participants, enabling them to improve their skills, often with very little to hand, and helping them discover they are capable of things they couldn't imagine before they began. Its impact is highly significant, indeed for countless thousands of participants, even transformative. Where the Award reaches into marginalised communities, that effect is more than merely enhancing, its impact can be exponential.

In general terms, government-aided socio-economic development work will always offer a scope and scale that far outreaches anything conventional CVE



programming could aspire to, which suggests that this is where the future of CVE and resilience programming might lie. CVE can make that strategic shift to aid and development work, and specifically youth development, using its activity base to generate the stories that amplify its impact to that wider audience beyond the immediate reach of the programmes themselves, providing evidence that change, improvement, and hope really are possible, rather than a Botox distortion of their lived reality. Moreover, such programming can bring to life for young people those small-d democratic and civic values and collaborative behaviours on which social harmony, progress, and order depend.

What does good resilience programming look like? The following would probably be useful departure points.

1. Identify areas where levels of radicalisation, recruitment to VE groups, or for that matter other forms of political violence, have been notably high.
2. Keep focus local where effects and impacts are more easily discernible.
3. Build relationships with credible local civil society actors, engage target audiences through them, and work through them to understand local upstream drivers of recruitment.
4. Create programme spaces in which participants are supported in identifying for themselves the issues and obstacles they confront, working out solutions, and drawing in other local stakeholders who can help.
5. Encourage participants to build more collaborative relationships with local civic and security authorities, or with people of other ethnic or sectarian backgrounds.
6. Keep local authorities informed and encourage civil society participants to do the same. The aim is to build those relationships, break down mutual antagonism and distrust, and replace these with greater trust. This is about seeking to shift existing terms of exchange between civil society actors and local authorities; to shift these from mutual antagonism towards the mutual advantage that is to be discovered

in getting something done locally that makes a positive difference in the immediate community.

7. Use strategic communications to reach parts of the target audience that programmes cannot reach directly. It amplifies the effects being delivered, showcasing the work of the programme and its effects on individual participants and projecting their stories of self-discovery and accomplishment to a wider audience—with the implicit message: ‘See, change is possible *if we do what we can, where we are, with what we have.*’

We do what we can, where we are, with what we have: I developed that phrase early on in my recent work and it came to capture the spirit of the programme’s intent. It’s a take-out, really; what one would want one’s participants and target audiences to feel and think about their engagement and its outcomes. It draws together ingredients that are key to programme success: the pride of self-reliance (rather than reliance on a state that cannot provide); a greater sense of self-worth (especially in societies that generally talk down to young people and regard them as a problem); a greater sense of realism about what it actually takes to achieve longer-term change; and a determination to use what is to hand (which is often very little) in order to make a difference to their own lives and those of their communities.

To be effective as a youth-development methodology, resilience programming needs only to serve CVE purposes *simultaneously*, as opposed to specifically. It’s the *effect* of the programming that is important—an effect that is *not* served by slavishly pandering to, and reinforcing, what has been a persistent failure in strategic communications practice—a common, indeed dominant confusion that messages and effects are the same thing; they are not. Persuading young people away from violent extremism should not have to rely so heavily on subject-specific ‘education’ and exhortation. Indeed, such over-reliance can engender radicalising effects that are precisely the opposite of those intended. The extent to which this confusion is maintained among security-minded officials who fail to grasp how youth development and resilience work at the social and psychological levels is quite remarkable.

Resilience programming avoids this trap. To give its methodology due heft in CVE strategic communications, governments might consider reviewing their aid and development packages with a view to understanding and enhancing

their parallel potential as implicit CVE instruments. At least part of such enhancement would derive from drawing further from resilience methodology and communicating more effectively around those packages. That would be a major fillip to resilience, whose budgets are still relatively small and whose practitioners must (usefully) learn to do more with less. Gathering evidence of change is challenging—data emerges slowly and sample sizes are often small—but an early, sharp, and localised focus on research, measurement, and evaluation should provide a better understanding of where to look for indices of success.

Given the things programme commissioners might start, there is also something they should stop, i.e. insisting, in the face of its impossibility, that outcomes should prove a negative. *How many young people didn't become violent extremists because you opened up an alternative pathway to them?* It's a question that will never be answered. Give it up, learn to ask different questions.

I began with Don McCullin; let me end with him. In pursuit of peace he gives us images of violence—humanity at its worst. His exhibition is a howl of savagery, fear, pain, destruction, and death. Connected for that instant with his subjects, he leaves them frozen forever in the horror and hopelessness of the images they inhabit. Yet, beyond that frozen moment, life goes on; so much more is still demanded. Including hope.

It calls to mind the words of Margaret Schlegel, heroine of EM Forster's *Howards End*: 'Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted...?.'

In here somewhere is how I might express an ambition for strategic communications. The imagery is no longer enough; neither the pictures of the war photographer nor the war-of-ideas audiovisual content being pumped into the digital ether by techno-savvy desk jockeys. No, beyond combat operations, strategic communications is at its best when, through depiction of *the real*, of *action on the ground* by actors in contexts of conflict or fragility, we can connect audiences with people who, given the chance and some support, are taking it, running with it, trying to make that difference in their own lives and those of the embattled, marginalised communities in which they survive. It is propaganda of the deed, but with swords beaten to ploughshares. Outcomes may be uncertain, success precarious, failure always threatening. But for wider audiences it's the slog, the do-learn-do, the trial-and-error, the little wins and setbacks, the up-and-down-and-up-again of human effort—that gritty reality with which they themselves are vitally connected—which is the real stuff of hope and influence.

It is available to us across a universe of aid and development, and through the flexibility of resilience-based interventions. Better yet, it means we need no longer tell young people that the only reason we are doing this is because they might be a security threat. No, we are doing it because they deserve our support. Because we need them to succeed. Because that, in its own right, is work worth doing.



# ON FINDING THE ETHICAL IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL BATTLE SPACES

A Review Essay by M.R. Dahlan

*Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*

Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich. RAND Corporation, 2018

*Exploding Data: Reclaiming Our Cyber Security in the Digital Age*

Michael Chertoff. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2018

*LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*

P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018

**Keywords**—*Ethics, ethical, positive space, negative space, The Hijaz, digital, social media, digital battle spaces, weaponization data, AI, sharp power, truth, facts, disinformation, fake news, warfare, narrative, discourse, strategic communications, Truth Decay, RAND, Rich Kavanagh, Exploding Data, Chertoff, LikeWar, Singer, information*

## About the Author

**Prof. Dr. Malik R. Dahlan** is Senior Mediation Fellow at the Harvard University Davis Center Negotiation Task Force. He is Professor of International Law and Public Policy at Queen Mary University of London.

The familiar distinction between hard and soft power, which seemed a useful way to simplify the multidimensional dynamics of interstate influence in the century gone by, seems hopelessly insufficient to describe what is happening in the one we are in now. The reason is, of course, the comprehensive breakdown of the post-war order and the apparent return to Bismarckian competition between nation states. Future historians looking for the cause of this return to Realism will not be short of suspects, but perhaps in retrospect it was unfortunate that globalisation was carried forward under the banner of neoliberalism, given the role of deregulated financial markets in the crash of 2008.

Alongside this return to more anarchic relationships among nation states, we also have an increasing breakdown in the economic, cultural, and political order within them. The old alternation between centre left and centre right parties within political systems, bounded and ballasted by mixed economies and relatively generous welfare states, is eroding and European elections are able to produce results that would have been unthinkable a generation ago. That political motility reflects a dissolving of the old sources of authority within the media: the digitisation and socialisation of mass communication has created many competing sources of fact and opinion, with the result that societies are losing their common ground, both in terms of the mutually agreed facts, and in the way those facts can reasonably be interpreted. We are living in a period where technological progress is creating an ‘age of anger’. In the words of one recent book that attempted to summarize the zeitgeist, our current era is characterised by ‘a loss of cohesion and confidence and a greater willingness to accept the remedies put forward by populist politicians’.<sup>1</sup>

So, if the idea of soft power no longer seems to explain how one state affects another using its forces of attraction and engagement, what will replace it? One suggestion is ‘sharp power’—a term coined in November 2017 by the National Endowment for Democracy and published in an article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine. Sharp power refers to the ability of state and non-state actors to combine the time-honoured methods of the public relations industry with micro-marketing made possible by data mining techniques, using social media as the individualised delivery platform. The story that tends to be told after the 2016 US elections is of the vulnerability of democratic states to the aggressive and subversive policies employed by authoritarian governments as a projection

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<sup>1</sup> Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (Macmillan, 2017).

of state power. The attraction of sharp power is clear, and the list of states that have been accused of employing it on the global scale includes China and Russia, of course, but there is no shortage of actors in the regional arenas. In the Middle East, for example, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, and the UAE have all been accused of sharp practices.

As an illuminating aside, this issue of interstate influence has been one of the hallmarks of Islam's relationship with the Judeo-Christian West. I recently concluded a study of the relationship, in which one of the most profound conclusions was that particular spaces—in this case sacred spaces—have become a source of contention and wilful misinterpretation and are transformed from positive into negative spaces. Historically, Jerusalem, Mecca, and Medina were the home of God—shared sacred spaces where peace was institutionalised. The Hajj pilgrimages were a kind of Islamic internet, where the tide of humanity washing in and out of holy places created a vast market for the exchange and elaboration of ideas.<sup>2</sup> Now we have the *neo-medievalists* of Daesh and the post-modernists of al-Qaida who, like the Wahhabists before them, are intent on filling an ethical positive space with negative darkness.

Before the advent of the sharp power narrative, another concept that shed even more light on erosion of the public realm was put forward in a report by the RAND Corporation—the idea of 'truth decay'. This notion is intended to convey 'the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life'. The extent to which this decay makes Western liberal democracies vulnerable to being sold a bill of goods has already been apparent in the UK's decision to leave the EU after a campaign that illustrated, to most people's complete satisfaction, the effectiveness of sharp power and truth decay; we also have the various intrusions into the 2016 US elections. RAND's study, the first book I discuss in this essay, is a work of self-examination intended to set out what a think tank can do to maintain quality research and analysis. I will also consider two other recent books, *Exploding Data: Reclaiming Our Cyber Security in the Digital Age*, written by Michael Chertoff, a former US Secretary of Homeland Security, and *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* written by P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking. Each of these books represents a significant attempt to survey the field of strategic communications in the disinformation age. Lawyers such as myself can find themselves left out of the conversation. Partly, I think, because

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2 Malik R. Dahlan, *The Hijaz: The First Islamic State* (Oxford University Press, 2018).



laws and constitutional norms no longer seem to safeguard the validity of political processes such as elections and referendums in the way that they once did. National security now seems more vulnerable than it ever did in the era of mutually assured destruction, and the ethical horizon that lends perspective to that security has never seemed more occluded.

Before I begin my commentary on the three books, I would like to note that artificial intelligence (AI) was a fourth contending theme for discussion because of the importance of AI and machine learning to the way states can interact with their citizens. However, such books have been reviewed extensively elsewhere and it is somewhat to the side of the questions of security and the strategic communications world.<sup>3</sup>

### Truth Decay

*Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, by Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, is a 300-page RAND Corporation report that alerts us to the way our ability to rely on facts is diminishing as our reliance on that ability is growing. The book refers to this phenomenon as the ‘truth decay paradox’.

As defined, truth decay turns out to be the interrelation of four trends: an increasing disagreement about facts and their analytical interpretations; a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; an increase in the relative volume and resulting influence of opinion and personal experience over fact; and lowered trust in formerly respected sources of facts. This theory offers a more sophisticated taxonomy than the fake news narrative. And, as the book notes, many American sectors—military, technology industry, and organised sports, among others—increasingly rely on facts and data as essential to survival or necessary for success. One point we can surely all still agree on is that it is bad practice to make decisions without first searching for and establishing the facts necessary to calculate the consequences of those decisions, whether one is in the army, in business, or voting in an election.

It comes as no surprise that political discourse has been hospitable to this multiform blurring of facts. If one is in the persuasion business, success comes to those who deal in partial truths or outright falsehoods that appeal to

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<sup>3</sup> An example is this recent book by the head of Google China: Kai-Fu Lee, *AI Super-Powers: China, Silicon Valley and the New World Order* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

the prejudices and biases of your target audience. The RAND report is truly worrying in that it casts doubt on the availability of an objective discourse, which might serve as a corrective to these half-truths and outright fabrications. In the past a reservoir of commonly accepted facts and well-supported analyses was provided by government, academia, and accredited experts, which meant that there was general acceptance of, say, the benefits of vaccinating children. Now such authorised knowers are increasingly treated with scepticism. These developments drive a wedge between policymakers and the public, as well as between the groups that make up the public.

This report also describes RAND's findings about the causes of truth decay, which turn out to be due partly to the fallibility of human information processing and partly to the inability of that processing to cope with the sheer volume of information available to us, much of which is opinion posing as fact. Then there is the inability of cash-strapped schools to arm their pupils with the tools needed for critical thinking and the wider polarisation in politics, society, and the economy—a staple concern of op-ed pages around the world.

It comes as no surprise that cultures subject to this deterioration are more vulnerable to groups that wish to amplify the effects of truth decay drivers for their own political or economic ends. RAND's list of possible bad actors includes foreign states and domestic groups lobbying for particular policies. The most spectacular example, of course, was the controversy over who exactly was bankrolling and finagling the pro-leave campaign in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Now we have to deal with the possibility that democratic processes can be decisively influenced by shadowy groups pursuing hidden agendas and financed by dark money.

To what extent is all of this new, and to what extent have campaigns of influence been part of the political environment in earlier eras? Kavanagh and Rich comment that whenever new forms and styles of communication arise, especially when coupled with social, political, and economic unrest, one tends to see a blurring of the distinction between facts and opinions, as well as the increased relative volume of opinion over fact. RAND researchers also found some evidence of declining trust in institutions as sources of factual information in two of these historical periods. That said, the contemporary era stands alone in possessing the full spectrum of causes: the result of the concatenation of new technologies, social media, 24-hour news coverage, and the removal of the possibility of debate and compromise as a result of political polarisation.

Kavanagh and Rich maintain that the consequences of truth decay are direct and severe, both to American democracy and to the concept of liberal democracy in general. More specifically, they damage America's civic and political institutions and its societal and democratic foundations through the erosion of civil discourse, political paralysis at the federal and state levels, the disengagement of citizens from political and civic life, and uncertainty in the formation and implementation of national policy.

An absence of a common store of fact and opinion causes a vicious circle of mistrust among citizens. It can lead them to narrow their sources of information, to cluster with people who agree with them, to avoid meaningful discussions about core issues, and to feel alienated from local and national policy debates. Politics drifts into dysfunction when debate lacks a shared factual basis. In governance, that can lead to delayed decisions, deferred economic investment, and reduced diplomatic credibility.

Part of the issue is that liberal democracies rely on systems of checks and balances that are often prone to gridlock if politicians lose interest in cooperating with each other, at least enough to ensure that the system functions. Meaningful and lasting reform is usually the result of some level of bipartisan collaboration between the two major parties. That applies to reforming a major entitlement programme, modernising US military forces, or completing a major trade deal. This is only possible when both parties agree on the facts. When they don't, the result can be policy oscillation—a sequence of repeal-and-replace zigzags.

As US policy-makers argue over basic facts, legislative processes have become increasingly dysfunctional, and this has prevented decisions on consequential issues such as immigration and health care, leaving millions in limbo. One example of this political dysfunction and stalemate—the October 2013 US Federal government shutdown—produced serious consequences for military veterans awaiting medical care and job retraining, limited the creation of private-sector jobs, and undermined action to ensure food and transportation safety.<sup>4</sup>

This policy whiplash creates uncertainty about the long-term direction and consistency of American policy and has serious consequences for individuals and corporations. Uncertainty about the future of the Affordable Care Act, for instance, has contributed to rapidly rising insurance premiums. Facts matter.

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<sup>4</sup> US White House Office of Management and Budget report 'Impacts and Costs of the October 2013 Federal Government Shutdown', 7 November 2013.

RAND's researchers reviewed more than 250 articles and books in an attempt to show how sources of fact-based analysis, such as the RAND corporation itself, can make a contribution to the struggle against truth decay. Four streams of inquiry were identified:

First, how has truth decay manifested itself in the past, and how was it overcome?

Second, what are the vectors that spread truth decay? This line of inquiry includes questions regarding how media content has changed over time, how the speed and nature of information flows have evolved, what the latest developments in the education system and curriculums are, how polarisation and political gridlock have (or have not) worsened, whether or not civil discourse and engagement are eroding, and how the level of uncertainty about US policy has changed.

Third, we must investigate how information is disseminated, processed, and consumed, as well as the roles played by interested institutions, authorities, and intermediaries, and the benefits and challenges of technological advancement. The scale of the challenge is apparent.

The final item on the agenda is, of course, the need to develop and evaluate solutions. Priority areas include educational interventions, improving the information market, developing and rebuilding institutions, bridging social divides, and harnessing new technologies, behavioural economics, psychology, cognitive science, and organizational self-assessment. The scale of the solutions is equally impressive and will require quite an effort from those responsible at a time when such efforts are becoming increasingly difficult to mobilise.

Moving forward, the RAND Corporation itself plans to continue investigating three areas: the changing mix of opinion and objective reporting in journalism, the decline in public trust in major institutions, and initiatives to improve media literacy in light of 'fake news'. Media literacy will be its first area of focus—that is, the ability to apply critical thinking to evaluate the reliability of what we are being told or sold.

One potential quick win for which there is already a vocal constituency is action to increase transparency in social media. Platforms could provide clarity on where their advertising money comes from. They could open their application programming interfaces and work to identify and monitor the existence of bots on their systems. Kavanagh and Rich also argue that social media users need to

be part of the answer. ‘We can implement all the regulations that we want, but if people aren’t willing to look for facts and take the time to identify what is a fact, then I don’t think it makes a difference’, the authors note. ‘There has to be an understanding of why facts matter—and why it’s important to be an informed participant in democracy—if democracy is what you want.’<sup>5</sup>

## Exploding Data

*Exploding Data* explores the profound changes wrought by the digitisation of more and more elements of modern life. Chertoff’s central argument is that current legal and policy notions about privacy, freedom, and security must be reformulated in light of this technological revolution.

The book begins with an explanation of how the data revolution that grew out of the internet came to involve much more than just digital infrastructure. The growth of the internet spurred the explosive growth of data storage capacity, and of the computer processing power necessary to understand and make use of this vast store of data. The development of wireless technology radically increased the number of endpoints that could connect to a network, culminating in an internet of things that allows almost any device to be configured to connect to a network and supply it with data. An outgrowth of this has been the increasing number of physical control systems that are managed and regulated through internet connections. This inevitably raises the risk of network-based attacks against critical infrastructure such as energy, transportation, and health care. The disruption to the electric grid in Ukraine and the damage done by ransomware are examples used to illustrate these impacts.

Among the consequences of this revolution is the need to consider whether rules striking a balance between government surveillance and individual rights need to be recalibrated. Similarly, there is the question of whether the US should follow Europe in conferring on individuals the right to control their data by requiring clear notice and affirmative consent before it can be harvested. Also critical is the need to resolve how national laws interact with a technology in which data is global.

The book argues that the ability of adversaries to use data maliciously to conduct

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5 Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (RAND Corporation, 2018) and a short article by Laura Hazard Owen, ‘The era of “truth decay”: 12 things we still don’t know about our weird time’, *Nieman Lab*, 26 January 2018.

‘information operations’, as Chertoff calls it, and even to carry out cyber-attacks with destructive consequences, means that cyber conflict is on the horizon. The novel policy problems now facing us include exactly what status to accord a cyber-attack carried out by a hostile state: where does such an attack stand as a *casus belli*, for example?

Chertoff’s view is that NATO should adopt a multilateral approach to setting policy focus. NATO must develop an understanding of the doctrines, tactics, and techniques used by adversaries in their attempts to undermine the West’s social cohesion and the trust citizens of Western countries place in their governing institutions. This includes the realisation that ‘information operations’ are designed to promote disunity within the Western alliance, to encourage mistrust of government, and to generate confusion that interferes with responding to aggression.

Naturally, an open society is at something of a disadvantage when it comes to tackling these threats, since responding with Chinese-style internet censorship would be like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. As discussed in the book, ethical issues raised by influence operations stem from the complex interplay between the need to defend against malicious propaganda and to uphold the principle of free speech. However, some level of action is certainly justified: for example, he says:

It should be permissible to expose and/or block orchestrated campaigns to manipulate search engines through botnets or troll farms. Similarly, media platforms should bar agents who impersonate others or conceal their identities as foreign agents. On the other hand, I think we must resist the temptation to censor content with which we disagree, even if we believe it to be incorrect. To do the latter would run the risk of undermining the free speech which is fundamental to western democracies.<sup>6</sup>

## LikeWar

P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, two national security experts, have titled their analysis in homage to nineteenth-century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, author of the ten-volume series *On War*. The aim is to bring

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<sup>6</sup> From a private interview with Michael Chertoff, author of *Exploding Data: Reclaiming Our Cyber Security in the Digital Age* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2018) on 20 October 2018.

a similar level of analysis to the new battle space presented by social media. If cyberwar is about hacking networks, *LikeWar* is about hacking the people who make up the nodes of the networks. This is a space where military units influence elections using the techniques of information warfare and where teenage digital marketers change the course of military battles wielding self-taking smartphones.

Singer and Brookings were moved to begin their study after seeing how the Arab Spring revealed the power of social media to drive major political change. In societies where the public realm was almost entirely closed to dissenting opinion, Twitter and Facebook made it possible for democratically minded protesters to share information, to organise protests, and, ultimately, to topple institutionally entrenched dictatorships. This is a Western position that arguably puts too much emphasis on the technology at the expense of social forces. After the democratic gains across the Arab world proved unsustainable, or curdled into violence, another facet of the technology emerged. Within a few years, Daesh was using the internet with great sophistication to mobilise recruits, spread propaganda, and encourage attacks in the US and elsewhere. Then came an actual attack on Western democracy conducted via social media itself—the spread of Russian disinformation as part of efforts to sway the UK Brexit vote and the 2016 American presidential election.

*LikeWar* argues that in the space of a decade, the internet has been transformed from a positive space into a battlefield where information itself is weaponised. The online world is now just as indispensable to governments, militaries, activists, and spies as it is to advertisers, shoppers and those looking to find love. And whether the goal is to win an election or a battle, or just to sell a music album, the same tactics are used. Whether what is shown is battlefield footage of a tank being destroyed or a Nazi-sympathising cartoon frog, the aim is to grab attention. Once that has been done, ideologues are able to make contact with a few dozen sympathisers out of a population of millions and then groom them to attack their fellow citizens. Voices from around the globe can stir the pot of hatred and resentment between rival ethnic groups. Foreign actors can influence a country's politics from afar, realising the political objective of a war without arms. *LikeWar* explains how these scenarios are no longer hypothetical. Each has already happened and will happen many more times in the years to come.

The book describes an abrupt and momentous development in war and international politics that has transformed how quickly information spreads,

how far it travels, and how easy it is to access. It explains how information has reshaped everything from military operations to the news business to political campaigns. Singer and Brooking suggest that no country has better mastered the possibilities of this new form of warfare than Russia, a state that has become a master of *maskirovka*. Russia has currently taken the lead in weaponising social media, using its online strength to substitute for its relative decline in military power. This is, perhaps, an essential element of its sharp power strategy. But Russia is leading a crowded field: Singer and Brookings argue that states across the globe have similar programmes under way, from crackdowns in Turkey to China's bold new social credit system that is priming an entire society for digital management of everyone's online activity and turning it into a single 'trustworthiness score'.

The internet has given governments not just new ways of controlling their own people but also a new kind of global reach through the power of disinformation. In many ways, Russia's far-reaching strategy to influence other countries' domestic politics through social media is not limited to sending targeted messages to people in particular micro-marketing categories. It also aims to jam the entire democratic political process by flooding the digital and political space with division, dissension, and distrust, pushing conspiracy theories and lies and supporting the most extreme voices in any debate using its army of trolls and bots.

One explanation for the potency of this new battle zone and the way it has been revolutionising warfare is its congruence with newly evolving forms of information capitalism. We are most familiar with this from Facebook, but in reality, information is the common currency of the influence industries. As Singer and Brooking point out, social media now form a human-made environment run by for-profit companies. Its platforms are designed to reward not ethics or veracity but 'virality'. Online battles may be about politics and war, but they are propelled by the financial and psychological needs that underly the algorithms of the attention economy, as calibrated by clicks, interactions, engagement, and immersion time. This changes what it takes to win, whether the fight is a marketing war, a real one, or a strange hybrid of the two. Figure out how to make something go viral and you can overwhelm the truth itself.

There is also a consensus as to what works in this battle space: Singer and Brooking examined the tactics of a top Daesh recruiter, Taylor Swift's marketing team, Donald Trump's campaign managers, and neo-Nazi trolls, and they found consistent patterns. For all the seeming complexity, there are certain dynamics



that govern virality: narrative, emotion, authenticity, community, inundation, and experimentation. Those who prevail are those able to shape the story lines that frame public understanding, provoke the responses that impel people to action, connect with followers at a personal level, build a sense of fellowship, and do it all on a global scale, repeatedly, using individual reaction to each tweet or post as feedback data for future refinements.

A powerful claim by the authors is that the laws of this new space have been re-set by a small number of people who can instantly shift an information war in one direction or another. *LikeWar* uses Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey as examples of how concentrated digital power has become. Unfortunately, it seems to be the case that these social media giants have failed to think through the political, legal, and ethical dimensions of the once-positive information space they were among the first to colonise. Nor have they planned contingencies for how bad actors might abuse, and good actors misuse, this space. They turn to technology as the answer, above all the burgeoning fields of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and automation. They believe this might solve the crises of the negative space problems of censorship and content moderation. But, as Singer and Brookings explain, it is not difficult to foresee that AI systems will also be weaponised.

It should be added that there is an opportunity cost to this abuse and misuse of social media. The extent to which social media has led to the force-draft enrolment of every digitised individual into a new kind of continuous online battle space means we have lost sight of the possibilities of social media to accomplish positive change. Access to social media can allow people to form new kinds of networks, expose crimes, save lives, and prompt far-reaching reforms. When it is used to foment violence, spread lies, spark wars, and even erode democracy itself, all those benefits are eroded.

As with Kavanagh and Rich's work, the authors of *LikeWar* see public policy playing a major role in helping to improve the quality of citizens' online environment. Indeed, corporate and state action is essential: there are important things individuals can do, but they won't matter unless actions can be taken by companies and by governments. Digital literacy is one part of the puzzle, as are regulation and the employment of AI to police digital social space.

*LikeWar* is a book about how the internet changed war and politics. It is also a story about how war and politics changed the internet. Because the internet is always evolving, our response must evolve with it. In the words of P.W. Singer:

‘Social media may have started out as a space for fun, but it has also now become a new kind of battlespace. And it is one that has threatened NATO like the alliance has never been before.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> From a private interview with P.W. Singer, co-author of *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018) on 30 January 2019.



# TOMORROW'S INTERNET— THE JELLO IS ON THE WALL

A Review Essay by  
Tara Flores and Philip Hall

*AI Super-Powers: China, Silicon Valley and the New World Order*

Kai-Fu Lee. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018

*The Great Firewall of China: How to Build and Control  
an Alternative Version of the Internet*

James Griffiths. Zed Books, 2019

*Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era  
is Transforming Politics in Kenya (African Arguments)*

Nanjala Nyabola. Zed Books, 2018

**Keywords**—*Africa, closed networks, data privacy, Splinternet, strategic communications, China, internet regulation, Facebook, Great Firewall*

## About the Authors

**Tara Flores** is an Associate Consultant at Portland Communications where she advises governments and multinational companies across Africa on strategic communications campaigns and crisis management.

**Philip Hall** is a Partner at Portland Communications and leads the company's specialist disputes practice. A former lawyer, Philip advises clients involved in crises, conflict, or complex litigation across the world.

*In the new century, liberty will spread by cell phone and cable modem. Now there's no question China has been trying to crack down on the Internet. (Chuckles.) Good luck! (Laughter.) That's sort of like trying to nail jello to the wall.'*<sup>1</sup>

Bill Clinton, 2000

*Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.*<sup>2</sup>

John Perry Barlow, 1996

*Over the last 15 years, Facebook and Instagram have helped people connect with friends, communities, and interests in the digital equivalent of a town square. But people increasingly also want to connect privately in the digital equivalent of the living room.*<sup>3</sup>

Mark Zuckerberg, 2019

## The new new media

When a right-wing gunman recently opened fire on a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, the massacre was streamed live and uncensored on Facebook to a community of like-minded zealots. Condemnation of the attack was swift. It was followed almost as quickly by condemnation of the role Facebook had played.

'To give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected' was Facebook's original mission statement. It reflected the optimistic thinking of most internet pioneers: information could not be contained; it wanted to be free and would lead to freedom. Events like those in New Zealand have now demanded a rethink of this attitude. Facebook's new mantra is 'Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.'<sup>4</sup> The company and its social and digital media peers in the West are moving towards a different model that will have profound implications for strategic communications: a model that is regulated, not free; and ever more closed, not

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Clinton, *Speech on the China Trade Bill*, 9 March 2000.

<sup>2</sup> John Perry Barlow, *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, Electronic Frontier Foundation, 8 February 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Zuckerberg, Mark, *A Privacy-Focused Vision for Social Networking*, Facebook Notes, 6 March 2019.

<sup>4</sup> *About Facebook*, Facebook, founded 2004, latest update 2019.

open. It is also a model that is fully-formed in China. In this current period of uncertainty, it is far from clear which internet model—West or East—will prove more influential. An examination of internet infrastructure and regulation in East Africa is, however, instructive.

### Information wants to be free-ish

When Tim Berners-Lee invented the world wide web in 1989, it was conceived as an open, information-sharing tool; a utopian facilitator of democracy that would help people win freedom across the globe, like a hyperlinked version of the photocopied pamphlets that helped undermine communist regimes. In the last few years, however, this vision has shifted and concerns about the internet's current and future model abound.

The idea that 'open always wins out'<sup>5</sup> is now considered to be verging on 'glib'.<sup>6</sup>

Berners Lee used his annual letter this year to reinforce his opinion that legislation is now a required safety pin to ensure that the internet does not rip apart the fabric of society.<sup>7</sup> The letter went so far as to compare this current era to the period of history when the Law of Sea and the Outer Space Treaty were created. For Berners-Lee, the internet is not an abstract concept that cannot be tamed. Rather, it is as tangible a terrain as any other that has been conquered by mankind. Just as in the past it has been possible to 'preserve new frontiers for the common good',<sup>8</sup> he calls on the world to preserve and legislate this new global territory with which we are all still grappling. John Perry Barlow's 'weary giants of flesh and steel' are newly reenergised.

This shift towards closed and regulated networks is not only being called for by Silicon Valley elites. It also reflects the demands of online users themselves.

Governments are now revving their regulatory engines.<sup>9</sup> After the tragic terrorist attack in New Zealand, there was a widespread demand that Facebook and other tech giants such as Google (who own YouTube) take responsibility for removing

5 Ram Shriram, Netscape executive, cited in Tim Berners-Lee, '[30 years on, what's next #ForTheWeb?](#)', Web Foundation, 12 March 2019.

6 Ibid.

7 Tim Berners-Lee, '[30 years on, what's next #ForTheWeb?](#)', Web Foundation, 12 March 2019; Alex Hern, 'Tim Berners-Lee on 30 years of the world wide web: 'We can get the web we want'', *The Guardian*, 12 March 2019.

Notably, at last year's Web Summit in Lisbon, Berners-Lee called for a 'contract for the web'.

8 Berners-Lee, '[30 years on, what's next #ForTheWeb?](#)', Web Foundation, 12 March 2019.

9 Cecilia Kang, 'F.T.C. Is Said to Be Considering Large Facebook Fines', *New York Times*, 18 January 2019.

the offensive footage.<sup>10</sup> Facebook, hit hard by this and other incidents,<sup>11</sup> announced a new policy of banning content that supports white nationalism and white separatism,<sup>12</sup> and called for governments around the world to consider regulating the digital realm.<sup>13</sup> This is a giant leap for a company whose first steps on the global stage were firmly against any attempt to constrain its behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

The structural shift towards closed networks is also accelerating. Facebook was always essentially walled off from the rest of the web, but now—spurred on by concerns around the sharing of personal data<sup>15</sup>—it is making walls a core feature of its business offer. In a blog post published on 6 March 2019, Mark Zuckerberg used the word ‘private’ 29 times, the word ‘privacy’ 22 times, and announced Facebook’s new commitment to creating a ‘privacy-focused vision for social networking’.<sup>16</sup> Wholly-closed networks such as WhatsApp or Telegram are on the rise.<sup>17</sup> Even old-school media outlets are now explicitly basing their business models on closed networks. Reaching nationwide populations (and bringing advertisers along with them) is no longer the goal of newspapers such as the *New York Times*; instead it is to monetise a silo of subscribers.

The tech giants of Silicon Valley were conceived with the belief that ‘information is for sharing’. They have, until very recently, been perceived as reluctant to be tamed by any form of regulation or legislation. A different way of thinking is now seen as essential.<sup>18</sup>

## The alternative universe

The concept of attempting to ‘contain’ the internet is not new. Back in 2000, Bill Clinton lauded the democratising potential of the web, claiming freedom would

10 Issie Lapowsky, ‘Why tech didn’t stop the New Zealand attack from going viral’, *Wired*, 15 March 2019.

11 This is not the first incident in which tech companies have been asked to bring down violent footage. Other recent incidents of violent footage online include the murder of Robert Godwin in the US in 2018, the violent killing of an 11-month-old by her father in Thailand and the murder of a young Danish woman in Morocco in 2018–19. Sarah Ashley O’Brien, ‘Facebook hit with lawsuit over murder posted online’, *CNN Money*, 30 January 2018; Steve Almasy, ‘Thailand baby killing: Facebook removes video’, *CNN*, 25 April 2017; Jack Guy, ‘Denmark prosecutes 14 people who shared murder video’, *CNN*, 7 March 2019.

12 Lois Beckett, ‘Facebook to ban white nationalism and separatism content’, *The Guardian*, 27 March 2019.

13 Mark Scott, ‘Facebook’s Clegg: Politicians must regulate to avoid ‘Balkanized’ internet’, *Politico*, 31 March 2019; Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook post, Facebook, 30 March 2019.

14 Laura Kayali, ‘Inside Facebook’s fight against European regulation’, *Politico*, 23 January 2019.

15 Staff, ‘Cambridge Analytica Files’, *The Guardian*, article series starting 17 March 2018; Staff, ‘Facebook fined £500,000 for Cambridge Analytica scandal’, *BBC*, 25 October 2018.

16 Some remain sceptical of the authenticity of Zuckerberg’s claims. Indeed, at the same as Zuckerberg wrote his blog on the importance of privacy laws, Facebook appealed the £500,000 fine imposed against it by the UK Information Commissioner’s Office for contravening the UK’s privacy laws.

17 Josh Constine, ‘WhatsApp hits 1.5 billion monthly users. \$19B? Not so bad’, *TechCrunch*, 31 January 2018.

18 Editorial Board, ‘Global standards on Big Tech are sorely needed’, *Financial Times*, 1 April 2019.

be spread by mobile phones and cable modems. He famously chuckled at the idea of China trying to ‘crack down’ on the internet. It was, he thought, ‘sort of like trying to nail jello to the wall.’<sup>19</sup> Nineteen years later, it is clear that China had a bespoke hammer up its sleeve.

Over 1.3 billion people in China have a completely different online experience to those in other similarly technologically advanced countries. Most Chinese teenagers have never heard of Google or Twitter.<sup>20</sup> As James Griffiths outlines in his recent book, *The Great Firewall of China*, China has, from the start, treated cyberspace as any other territory or commodity—and indeed, has regulated it as such.

Contrary to the original utopian, trans-border conceptualisation of the internet, China has followed the strict concept of ‘cyber-sovereignty’.<sup>21</sup> China’s internet ecosystem, protected by the Great Firewall, is renowned for being one of the most tightly controlled censorship systems in the world. This system essentially reflects and ‘emanates from a stance of deep suspicion about the web and its potential risk to state power.’<sup>22</sup> However, as Griffiths astutely highlights, this alternative vision of cyberspace is one ‘that is far more coherent and persuasive than many of us would like to admit.’<sup>23</sup> While there are many reasons not to laud the Chinese model,<sup>24</sup> there is certainly no denying that it has been successful in achieving its objectives. It has also rapidly caught up with, and is now potentially on the verge of superseding, the Western model.

In his 2018 book, *AI Super-Powers: China, Silicon Valley and the New World Order*, Hai-Fu Lee sets out the extent to which China has caught up with America over the last five years. The book analyses in great detail the technological, economic, and human trajectory that has brought both the US and China to where they are today, while providing predictions on the future of the current ‘great race’. In particular, Lee details how China has leapfrogged America when it comes

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<sup>19</sup> Bill Clinton, *Speech on the China Trade Bill*, 9 March 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Li Yuan, ‘A Generation Grows Up in China Without Google, Facebook or Twitter’, *New York Times*, 6 August 2018. A Chinese teenager did recognise the name Facebook, but only due to its likeness to Baidu.

<sup>21</sup> Griffiths is not the first to discuss the concept of cyber-sovereignty. However, his recent book juxtaposes neatly the bifurcation of the cyberlibertarians in the West and the cyber-authoritarianism of China.

<sup>22</sup> James Griffiths, *The Great Firewall of China: How to Build and Control an Alternative Version of the Internet* (Zed Books, 2019), p.8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, ‘The great firewall of China: Xi Jinping’s internet shutdown’, *The Guardian*, 29 June 2018.



to data gathering, transforming into the ‘Saudi Arabia of Data’.<sup>25</sup> China is the world’s largest producer of digital data and it is extending its lead by the day. Key to the author’s argument on the future of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is that deep learning algorithms require computing power, technical talent, and data. The latter, he contends, is the most important. And the more of it the better.<sup>26</sup>

Crucially, China’s data points are not just superior in their quantitative, but also in their qualitative nature. Chinese apps are able to collect data not just on people’s online lives, but on their offline lives as well. To an extent, Facebook does this by tracking what people have ‘liked’, what they have searched for, and which sites they have visited. Chinese apps however relate to ‘real-world’ decisions and data (as we discuss in more detail below): how much money users handle per day, their transportation choices, and even their meals. This is, crucially, where China has been able to jump ahead and create a truly closed network, impermeable to the naively idealistic forces of the outside world.

Despite the country’s rapid progress, a wilful blindness—and perhaps arrogance—lingers in many government quarters about how far China has come.

When Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, gave testimony to the US Congress in April 2018, a sympathetic senator tried to set up an easy question by praising the company and saying ‘Only in America, would you agree? ... you couldn’t do this in China.’ Zuckerberg replied, ‘Well ... there are some very strong Chinese Internet companies.’ The Senator was flabbergasted: ‘You’re supposed to answer yes to this question!’ he exclaimed—perfectly capturing a lack of understanding that the Western online hegemony is not the inevitable status quo.

That status quo is being challenged at two levels: the ‘app layer’ that sits as software on top of existing operating systems and, as the online world we know increasingly splinters, at the foundations of the internet itself.

### The app layer

One of Zuckerberg’s ‘very strong Chinese internet companies’ is Tencent, whose remarkable success is based on their all-consuming app, WeChat.

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<sup>25</sup> Kai-Fu Lee, *AI Super-Powers: China, Silicon Valley and the New World Order* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> Lee, Chapter 1.

WeChat has a similar look and feel to Facebook's WhatsApp. It has evolved however to facilitate far more than just messaging. In China, it is now also relied upon—in fact, often required—to book taxis, order food, transfer money, make appointments, organise dates, and more. It is often said that it is nearly impossible to operate in some Chinese cities without using WeChat.

WeChat's goal—and its business model—is to become the most embedded app in its users' lives, central to the 'mobile lifestyle'.<sup>27</sup> At the heart of this model is its payment system. The integration of a payment system within the app has enabled WeChat to harvest a wealth of data on its users' preferences and habits, and to leverage this data to provide a tailored online ecosystem. Ultimately, the app has created a network that a user has no need or reason to leave.<sup>28</sup> As Griffiths writes, this has created a 'privacy nightmare' for users of an app that can simultaneously access everything from selfies and inane status updates to utility bills and doctor's appointments.<sup>29</sup>

Critically, WeChat is a comprehensive closed platform that can be layered upon existing online infrastructure, and that its users rely on continuously throughout the day. It does not depend on a specific operating system or handset, and fundamentally bypasses the world wide web as it was originally created. Berners-Lee, its founder, sees this shift as worrisome. As he recently stated 'The crucial thing is the URL. The crucial thing is that you can link to anything...if, from the user's point of view, there's no URL, then we've lost.' In this protected space, it is possible to retain far greater control of users and content.

## Splinternet

At the other end of the spectrum is the Chinese Great Firewalled internet. There is, clearly, a consensus that China has developed a distinct 'alternative' cyber-sphere. This divergent model has led to speculation as to whether we will ultimately be faced by a 'splinternet'.<sup>30</sup>

The 'splinternet' concept is based on the idea that the internet is on a trajectory to divide into different models, determined by varied national standards of privacy

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<sup>27</sup> Griffiths, p. 279.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 279–80.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>30</sup> Staff, 'What is the "splinternet"?', *The Economist*, 22 November 2016; Evgeny Morozov 'The case for publicly enforced online rights', *The Financial Times*, September 2018. Some also refer to this as 'digital Balkanisation' although Eugene Kaspersky, the founder of his eponymous company, denounced the 'Balkanisation' of the internet in November 2018.

and digital rights. Recently, the Head of Global Policy and Communications of Facebook argued that there is a need for a global consensus on digital regulation if we are to avoid the ‘Balkanization’ of the internet. If each country imposes different regulations onto the tech companies, then internet usage will differ greatly across the world.

As the senator’s question revealed, there is perhaps an assumption that Western norms would nonetheless remain the de facto gold standard should such Balkanization take place. It is far from clear that this is the case.

Benedict Evans, an analyst for Andreessen Horowitz, an American venture capital firm, recently pointed out that it is likely that content regulations will be passed in major countries where big platform companies must operate, and that some of these regulations will conflict with the American constitution. Evans notes that ‘...those countries will not know or care. For at least some of these regulations, big platform companies might decide that they have to apply these new rules across their entire global operations. The fact a US court wouldn’t uphold them means nothing. Other countries have courts too.’<sup>31</sup>

Evans concludes with an insightful twist on a well-known saying: ‘Old: War is how god teaches Americans geography. New: Internet regulation is how god teaches Americans geography.’

Google’s recently reported business plan for China neatly illustrates how this could play out. Considered to be perhaps the epitome of the Western internet, the company was founded on the utopian ideas of an ‘anarchic egalitarianism’<sup>32</sup> and very publicly withdrew from China in 2010 due to concerns regarding censorship.<sup>33</sup> In the last year however, evidence of ‘Project Dragonfly’ has leaked and it has emerged that Google is in the development stages of an entirely separate model to launch in China.<sup>34</sup> It is not inconceivable that, one day, the Dragonfly model will become the Google norm—not, as the techno-optimists once hoped, the other way around.

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31 Benedict Evans, [Twitter thread](#), Twitter, 8 April 2019.

32 Evgeny Morozov ‘The case for publicly enforced online rights’, *The Financial Times*, 27 September 2018.

33 Kaveh Waddell, ‘Why Google Quit China—and Why It’s Heading Back’, *The Atlantic*, 19 January 2016.

34 Alexia Fernández Campbell, ‘The employee backlash over Google’s censored search engine for China, explained’, *Vox*, 17 August 2018. In December 2018, Google announced that it had ‘effectively ended’ this project and had no immediate plans to launch a Chinese search engine, largely due to internal pressure from Google employees who disagreed with the company’s conformity with censorship. Jen Copestake, ‘Google China: Has search firm put Project Dragonfly on hold?’, *BBC*, 18 December 2018.

## China in Africa: One Belt, One Road, One Internet?

In these discussions over future internet models, there is little mention of the world's most rapidly expanding digital population—in Africa.

As Lee argues in his book, analysts have been blind once before to world-class innovation led by China. When American tech companies were trying but failing to enter China, foreign analysts focused on why this was the case. As introspective questions were asked, China was busy developing Weibo, Didi, and Toutiao—platforms that rival and often out-perform their American equivalents of Twitter, Uber, and BuzzFeed.<sup>35</sup>

There is perhaps the risk of a similar blindness today. Discussions of the potential splintering of the internet are typically framed as the US-led world standard vs China. In the meantime, Africa is quickly adopting a Chinese-based telecommunications infrastructure.

At the latest Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, China pledged to invest a total of \$60 billion in the African continent.<sup>36</sup> This investment is part of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative.

Much of this investment is specifically for the burgeoning communications sector. According to the telecommunications trade body, GSMA, there is a \$700 billion opportunity for African countries over the next five years if the mobile gender gap is closed.<sup>37</sup> By next year, GSMA also estimates that there will be 500 million mobile internet users in Africa.

Chinese companies have not only spotted the huge business opportunity of the telecommunications market across Africa, but they have also developed bespoke offers for these markets. In contrast to American companies, which have simply attempted to market their products to different audiences, Chinese companies have tailored their products to each audience.<sup>38</sup> Their approach is paying off.

Transsion is not a company many in Europe will have heard of. It is Chinese owned and run but does not have a single store in China. Since launching in

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35 Lee, p. 40.

36 Shannon Tiezzi, 'FOCAC 2018: Rebranding China in Africa', *The Diplomat*, 5 September 2018.

37 *Connected Women. The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019* (London: GSMA, 2019).

38 Lee, p. 39.

2006, it has left both Samsung and Apple trailing in its wake across Africa.<sup>39</sup> Following the company motto of ‘think global, act global’, Transsion products (often sold under their flagship brand, Tecno) have been specifically tailored to the needs of different African markets.<sup>40</sup>

This bespoke approach includes popular features such as multiple SIM cards in each phone (to avoid charges for calling different networks) and a focus on ample battery life (as states often deliberately shut down electricity supply to conserve power). In addition to this, keyboards for regional African languages have been added,<sup>41</sup> and cameras have been optimised for darker skin complexions. Finally, Transsion phones also sell for \$15 – \$200, which is significantly less than Apple and Samsung and a reflection of the average annual income in Africa of \$2,041.

As a result, Transsion controls over 50% of the African telecommunications market. And it is not just commercially successful. It is also the seventh most admired brand in Africa.<sup>42</sup>

The Chinese influence on telecommunications infrastructure is equally impressive. The investment is not just R&D funding, but the development of physical assets such as telecommunications cables.<sup>43</sup>

To an extent, therefore, we can transpose the debates around the One Belt, One Road initiative to Chinese investment in Africa.<sup>44</sup> On the one hand, China’s opponents are suspicious of the high levels of funding and are concerned about how indebted developing countries are becoming. This debt is a concern due to its scale,<sup>45</sup> but there is also a latent fear of repossession and talk of a new kind of colonialism.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, many African leaders are grateful for the funding from the East and claim that it is desperately needed, especially when other sources are

39 Jenni Marsh, ‘The Chinese phone giant that beat Apple to Africa’, *CNN Business*, 10 October 2018.

40 Other well-known Transsion brands include Infinix and Intel.

41 These include Amharic, Hausa, and Swahili.

42 According to the 2017–18 Brand Africa 100 report, published by *African Business* magazine.

43 Enguérand Renault, ‘Djibouti, un micro-État ultraconnecté’, *Le Figaro*, 30 November 2018.

44 It is important to note that the debate around OBOR investments is not only relevant to Africa. It is a debate occurring around all Chinese investment. Most recently, it was evident following Chinese investment in Italy.

45 Staff, ‘Reality Check: Is China burdening Africa with debt?’ *BBC*, 5 November 2018.

46 In 2018, Sri Lanka handed over the port of Hambantota, following a debt of over \$1 billion to China. Maria Abi-Habib, ‘How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port’, *New York Times*, 25 June 2018.

not so forthcoming.<sup>47</sup> In a period in which the budgets of IMF and World Bank are under increasing scrutiny, they have a point.

As we have seen, the physical infrastructure of the internet—cables and phones—also underpins policy decisions. In September 2018, Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google, directly equated these issues. He stated that there is a ‘...real danger that along with ... products and services comes a different leadership regime from government.... Look at the way [OBOR] works... It’s perfectly possible those countries will begin to take on the infrastructure that China has with some loss of freedom.’

### On the verge

East Africa is often seen as one of the most progressive regions of the African continent. The economies of Tanzania, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Rwanda are cited as among the most dynamic in Africa, and the region frequently features in discussions around the future of the continent.

At the same time, however, this region is arguably at the sharp end of the debate around what online communications should look like: free or regulated, open or closed.

In her recent book, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics*, Nanjala Nyabola highlights the transformative effect that the digital ecosystem has had on politics, and on Kenya specifically. She paints a broader picture of the African continent where 12 countries shut down the internet at some point during 2016.<sup>48</sup> Of the four East African states we look at below, all but one has seen its position in the World Press Freedom Index drop in the last year. The only one to improve its ranking is Rwanda, which sits in the lowest position of the four, at 156 out of 180.

Across different countries, the change has come in different forms: regulatory, political, and physical. One tool in particular has been brought to bear—the letter of the law.

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<sup>47</sup> Ben Blanchard and Christian Shepherd, ‘China says its funding helps Africa develop, not stack up debt’, *Reuters*, 4 September 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Nanjala Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya (African Arguments)*, (Zed Books, 2018), pp. 8–9. This is out of a total of 27.

## *Rwanda*

In the recent revision of its penal code, Rwanda imposed a law that banned any writings or cartoons that ‘humiliate’ lawmakers, cabinet members, or security officers. The content is not only banned but there are severe punishments for anyone brave or foolish enough to step over the line. Any content that is deemed offensive could lead to two years in prison, or a fine of up to one million Rwandan francs. Anything considered defamatory towards the president could lead to an even stronger sentence, up to seven years in prison and a fine of seven million francs.

This latest legislative move is not the first sign of a worrying media space in Rwanda.

According to Freedom House’s *Freedom of the Press 2016*, Rwanda is classified as ‘Not Free’ in regard to its press freedom and has been a site of increasing government censorship over the last few years. Outlets that are not overtly pro-government or are actively aligned with the opposition have struggled to stay open and accessible. Websites such as *Inyenyeri News*, *Veritas Info*, *The Rwandan*, and *Leprophete* are among those to have been closed down.

When considering the media context in Rwanda, the recent tragic history of the country cannot be ignored. Some journalists self-censor and have even accepted that censorship is a necessity to avoid the sectarianism that destroyed the country 20 years ago.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, this trend can also be seen in other countries, which benefit from a less tragic recent history.

## *Tanzania*

The Tanzanian government has taken a strong legislative approach to tackling what it perceives as a dangerously exploding communications market.

The government announced sweeping new communications regulations in March 2018. The Electronic and Postal Communications Regulations gave the government unprecedented control over the internet, requiring all online content creators in the country to be certified and to pay \$930 US in licencing and registration fees.<sup>50</sup> In a country where the gross national income per capita

49 Harber, Anton, ‘[Legacy of Rwanda genocide includes media restrictions, self-censorship](#)’. Committee to Protect Journalists, 2014.

50 *Tanzania: Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations 2018*. (London: Article 19, April 2018).

is \$900 US, this fee most affects independent bloggers.

The regulations further demand that all bloggers or news sites must store the details of any contributors for 12 months and must be able to identify any financial sponsorship sources. Similarly, cyber cafes were required to install surveillance equipment to identify anyone posting remotely and supposedly anonymously. Failure to comply with these regulations incurs a fine of TZS 5 million (\$2,200 US), imprisonment for a minimum of 12 months, or both. In September 2018, Tanzanian legislators also passed amendments to the 2015 Statistics Act. The act seeks to govern the collection, analysis, and dissemination of any data without the prior authorisation from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS).

The legislative crackdown against open communications in Tanzania has been roundly condemned. Six human rights groups, media platforms, and independent publishers filed a joint case in Tanzania's High Court against the communications regulations.<sup>51</sup> The World Bank publicly stated that it was 'deeply concerned' about the amendments to the 2015 Statistics Act.<sup>52</sup>

### *Kenya*

In May 2018, President Kenyatta signed into law the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act 2018. According to Clause 12 of this law, the publication of false or fictitious information can result in a 5 million shilling fine (\$50,000 US), or a two-year jail term. The law also criminalises abuse on social media and cyber bullying. President Kenyatta has defended the law, stating that it provides a legal basis on which to prosecute cybercrimes including child pornography, fraud, and identity theft. However, it has been roundly condemned by journalist unions and the media sphere as an infringement on freedom of expression and a threat to the right to privacy, property, and a fair hearing.

### *Uganda*<sup>53</sup>

The Ugandan parliament passed the Excise Duty (Amendment) Bill 2018 in May 2018. This law, which has become popularly known as the 'social media tax', introduced a levy of 200 shillings (\$0.05 US) per day for access to online

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<sup>51</sup> They lost this appeal.

<sup>52</sup> Staff, 'Tanzania law punishing critics of statistics "deeply concerning": World Bank', *Reuters*, 3 October 2018.

<sup>53</sup> For a more extensive overview of President Museveni's hostility towards social media, see Griffiths, pp. 285–305.



services and applications including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Google Hangouts, YouTube, and Skype. The tax was implemented by the country's telecommunications companies as of 1 July 2018.

President Museveni proposed the tax on social media, saying the revenue would help the country 'cope with consequences of *olugambo* [gossiping]'. Nonetheless, the tax has been criticised by Ugandans, international human rights activists, and economic analysts. The law is largely viewed as a way of silencing free speech and reducing the number of Ugandans operating in spaces where information is freely exchanged. In the face of heavy criticism and a lawsuit, the Constitutional Court was petitioned to overturn the government's unpopular tax. However, lawmakers voted to maintain the tax in October 2018.

### Looking through the wrong lens

Western commentators are clearly concerned about the technology and communications model being exported by China. There is a clear Chinese presence in African telecommunications infrastructure. There are also increasingly worrying trends in how African governments are treating their media environments and their social media users.

It is important to note, however, that it is not our intention to draw a causal link between current trends on the continent and Chinese investment,<sup>54</sup> or to criticise China's conception of the internet.

There is a strong case to be made for Chinese investment in Africa. Many argue that Chinese companies provide investment flows that have slowed elsewhere.<sup>55</sup> As outlined by the *New York Times* bureau chief in West and Central Africa: 'At least for the time being, Africa doesn't have any other cost or competency alternatives.'<sup>56</sup> Chinese companies are also clearly investing in the local African market. Transsion reportedly has around 10,000 local employees, compared to 6,000 in China.<sup>57</sup> Since 2011, every phone it sells in Ethiopia has been assembled in the suburbs of Addis Ababa.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> There is an argument that suggests the equivalent is happening in the opposite direction. Reporting on Chinese investment in Africa has hardly been neutral from the likes of CNN and the *Wall Street Journal*.

<sup>55</sup> By comparison: China pledged \$60 billion in investments in Africa this year. In 2017, the UK gave Africa £2.6 billion.

<sup>56</sup> Amy Mackinnon, 'For Africa, Chinese-Built Internet Is Better Than No Internet at All', Foreign Policy, 19 March 2019.

<sup>57</sup> 'Chinese phone giant'

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

On a more fundamental level, it is also important to consider that much of the criticism of Chinese influence in the digital sphere stems from a uniquely Western value system that prioritises the individual.<sup>59</sup> The early idea of the internet being an egalitarian force was heavily based on the equation of egalitarianism with a lack of state interference.<sup>60</sup> While it is appropriate to critique Chinese technology, that critique is often driven by geopolitical concerns. As Griffiths writes: ‘criticism of Chinese policies should not be misconstrued as an implicit endorsement of the policies sought by the Western nations, nor should democratic governments have their failures overlooked...’<sup>61</sup>

The future of Africa, and of its communications model, should not solely be viewed through the US-Sino mirror. The latest US Strategy in Africa has been heavily criticised for being just this—a strategy for Africa concerned solely with China.<sup>62</sup>

The internet, or more particularly the communication platforms that it supports, are at a moment of potentially profound change. However, the analysis of any one model must not be shaped solely by support for the other. As a former US ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso said, this just increases suspicion for Africans: ‘If the Americans are peddling this argument, they have their own vested interests.’<sup>63</sup>

### **Conclusion: the jello is on the wall**

Western online communications models face a moment of profound uncertainty. A culture historically based on freedom is increasingly calling for regulation. A structure that was built to promote openness now finds itself increasingly comfortable slipping into closed silos.

This uncertainty and change are being driven by many different considerations. The ability for anyone to broadcast their ideas is liberating—but unsettling or even dangerous when those ideas undermine our ability to cohere as a community. Similarly, the ability to create a community of like-minded people

59 Haidt, Jonathan, *Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon, 2012).

60 Evgeny Morozov ‘The case for publicly enforced online rights’, *The Financial Times*, 27 September 2018.

61 Griffiths, p. 290.

62 Editorial Board ‘America’s scrambled approach to Africa’, *Financial Times*, 17 December 2018; Cornelia Tremann, ‘The new US Africa strategy is not about Africa. It’s about China’, *The Interpreter*, 20 December 2018, Lowy Institute.

63 ‘For Africa, Chinese-Built Internet Is Better’.

online is inspiring—until that community becomes an echo chamber for hatred or misinformation. Who should manage this, and how?

The answer is likely to be a mix of the structural—hardware and software—and the regulatory—government intervention. China has, for its own purposes, seemingly perfected this. Having nailed the jello to the wall, it is now looking to export its hammer. We should be mindful of who is buying—and why.

This does not mean the Great Firewall will—or should—prevail. But nor does it mean the Western digital status quo will last.